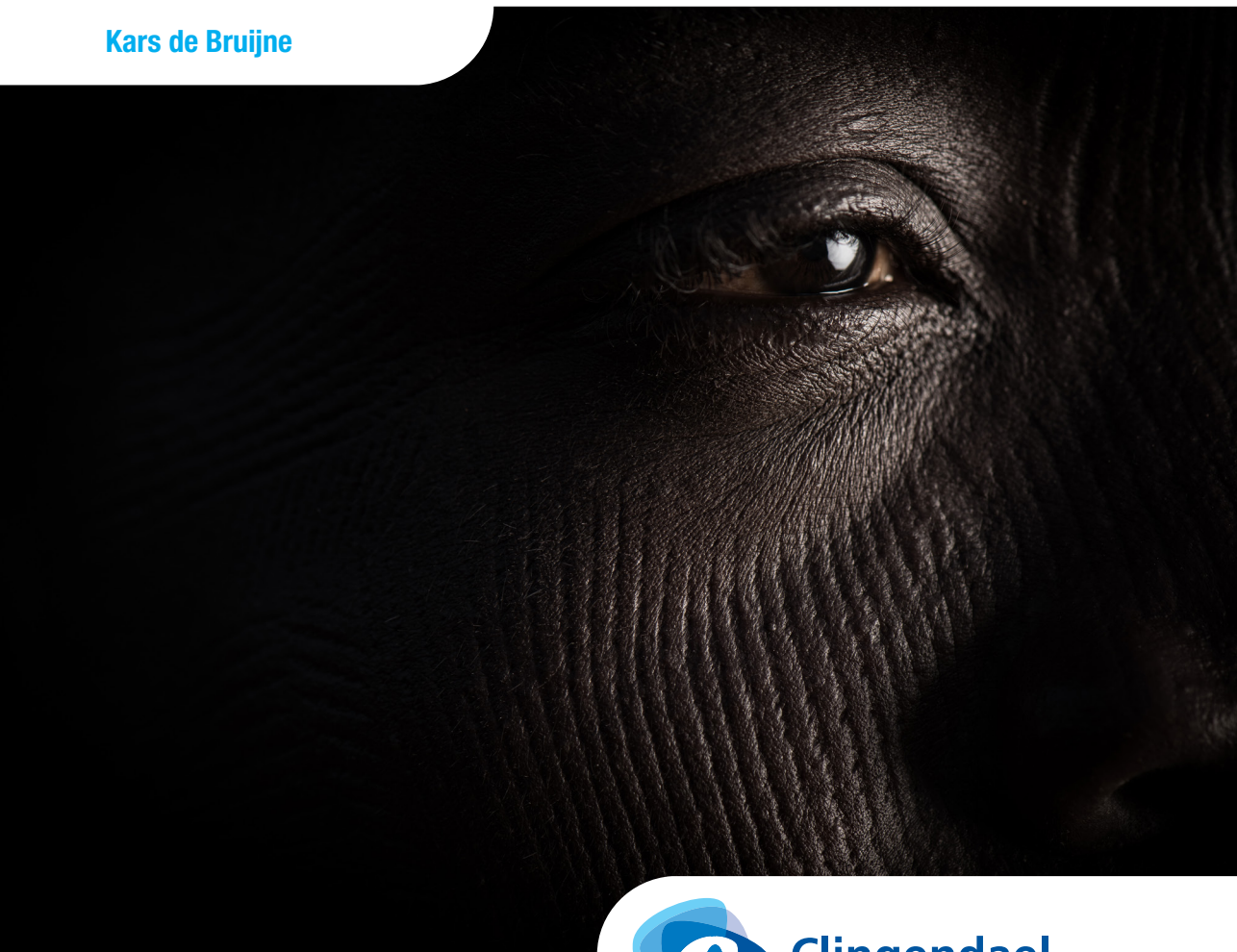


Conflict in the Penta-Border Area

Benin's Northern Jihad from the
perspective of its neighbours

Clingendael Report

Kars de Bruijne



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Introduction

Since December 2021, Benin has suffered an increasing number of armed conflicts linked to violent extremist groups. The Beninese government publicly acknowledges that there have been around 20 violent events in the period between December 2021 and May 2022.¹ This report records 43 discrete violent events involving Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) from December 2021 to September 2022 (92 when including non-violent activities).

The geographical area of activity in Benin is also expanding. Initially, activity was restricted to Benin's borders with Burkina Faso, the interior of the "W park" and the Pendjari National Park (although the latter to a lesser extent). Since June 2022, incidents increasingly occur in populated areas around the parks.

There are generally two explanations for the surge of activity in Benin.

One explanation is pent-up tensions in Northern Benin's villages. In this understanding, the entry of VEOs is facilitated by pull factors such as local tensions which they strategically exploit. VEOs make gestures towards local leaders and the population, promising to resolve tensions around land ownership, access to natural resources, social schisms and conflicts between farmers and herders. There is ample evidence of how they are drawn to Benin and overlapping interests are developing as evidenced by four studies.²

The problem with this pull factor explanation, however, is that it discounts the fact that VEOs come from outside Benin where they face serious push factors. VEOs operating in Benin stage their activities from Burkina Faso, Niger and, to a lesser extent, Togo and Nigeria. Their fates there – e.g. military pressure, success-changing strategies (e.g. plans to isolate the capital and to cut off supply routes), and social and economic developments – strongly influence their behaviour in Benin.

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- 1 TV5 Monde avec AFP (2022). *Le Bénin cible d'une vingtaine d'attaques de groupes terroristes*. TV5 Monde Info. <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/le-benin-cible-d-une-vingtaine-d-attaques-de-groupes-armes-458231>.
 - 2 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. (2021). North of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea: The new frontier for jihadist groups? *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. <https://www.kas.de/documents/261825/13432629/North+of+the+countries+of+the+Gulf+of+Guinea+-+The+new+frontier+for+jihadist+groups.pdf/97cbceda-85c1-33fc-45fd-50f8ddaaa0ab?version=1.2&t=1625138447487>; de Bruijne, K. (2021). Laws of Attraction. *The Clingendael Institute*. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/laws-of-attraction/>; ELVA. (2021). Tracking VEO Spill-over from the Sahel into Littoral West Africa: 2nd Situation Report; Institute for Security Studies (2022), Upcoming report on spillover in the coastal states, *Institute for Security Studies*.

This report seeks to better understand a second explanation; push factors. What has been the impact of developments in Benin's neighbouring countries on the security situation in Alibori and Atactora (the Northern Provinces of Benin)?

This question is relevant for two reasons.

First, the dominant line of thought in Benin security circles is that they are primarily facing a threat from outside of Benin. To be clear, there is ample evidence of an emerging Beninese Jihad – and it is dangerous to deny and underestimate its emergence. Yet, there is real merit in better understanding why the Beninese government believes that it is subject to developments that are partly beyond its control. As this report shows, the Beninese government is rightly also pointing to its neighbours.

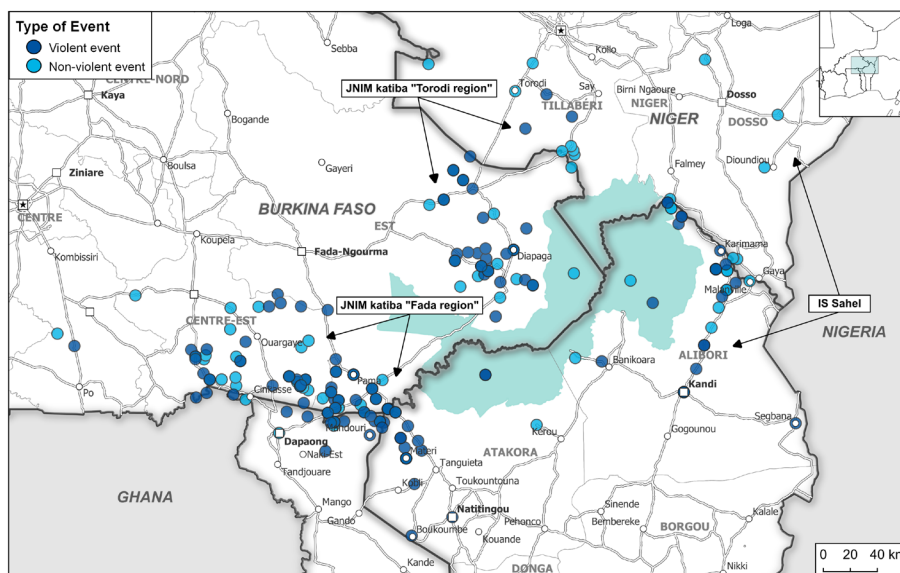
A second reason to better understand violence in Northern Benin as a threat from the outside is that it has important programming consequences. The spread of violence in the Sahel towards the Littorals has led to specific programming on addressing root causes in the Littorals. Yet, if 'spillover' occurs because of security developments outside of the Littorals, there are two resulting consequences: a) there might be a need to better account for hard security developments (not because it is the solution, but because it sets the context where root causes can be addressed); b) there is a need to engage in programming transcending the Littorals and instead to truly connect to programming in the Sahel.

In advancing this perspective, this report is not only advocating considering violence in Northern Benin as an outside threat. Rather, it seeks to complement present insights on local grievances as driving forces. Indeed, the pace of violence in Northern Benin is presently determined outside the country.

The report concentrates on four main groups (see figure 1). The biggest is the long-running JNIM presence around Kompienga (Burkina Faso). This group is under the command of Mouslimou, the Emir of the East, and has expanded in all directions (including Atacora, Benin). Closely related is the JNIM presence in Tapoa (Burkina Faso). This group is also under Mouslimou's command and has a stated goal to gain control over Tapoa Province. It also controls the Burkina Faso side of Park W.

Another group has a presence around Torodi (Niger) – possibly Katiba Serma – a split from Katiba Macina. The leader of this group is the Emir of Torodi, Abu Anifa. The group has some influence in the Tapoa Province of the East region, but concentrates on the northern Komondjari Province of the East region, in Burkina Faso. This group also has a presence in Park W in Niger (and Alibori Benin). These three groups are all units of JNIM and coordinate their activities, especially in operations against the Burkinabe military.

Figure 1 Suspected VEO activity (June – September 2022)



Source: ACLED, Supplemental data

A final group is the Islamic State of the Greater Sahel (ISGS). The ISGS presence in Benin stems from Niger but it remains unclear where and who leads this group. Since 2019, ISGS has been known to treat Alibori as a resting area from the tri-border/Liptako-Gourma area. While the group was believed to have disappeared in the past couple of years, it re-emerged in September 2022 when it claimed responsibility for attacks in early July in Benin.

To assess these groups, this report relies on various sources (in addition to some interviews). ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo and Benin. ACLED collects information on the dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and protest events. ACLED events in these countries derive from a mixture of international, national and local sources. Events are thoroughly vetted through well-established procedures and date back to 1997.

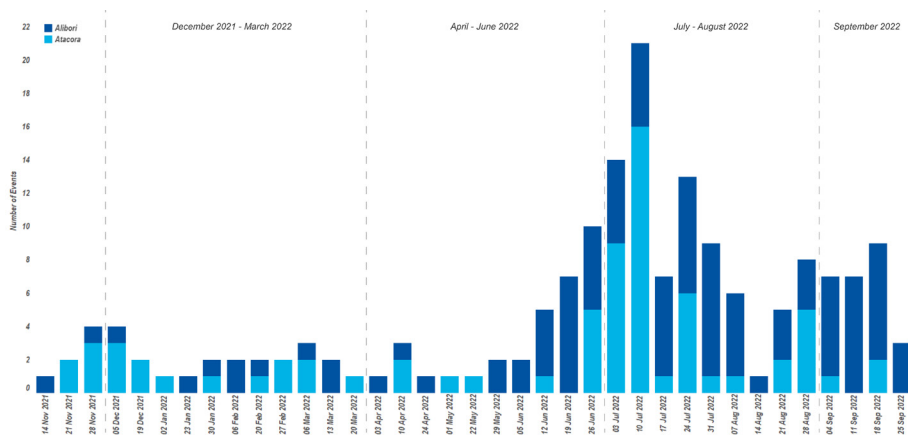
Another source is additional data on political violence and disorder (adding to ACLED) as well as various smaller events such as the arrests of individuals and non-organized instances of farmer-herder conflict and preaching by VEOs. Finally, fine-grained data on VEO movements in border areas with Togo, Niger and Burkina Faso.

The report has the following structure. The first section sketches recent developments in Northern Benin in 2022. The second and third sections explore how Northern Benin is impacted by the Komienga and Tapoa Provinces (Burkina Faso) and subsequently explain JNIM operations from Burkina Faso towards Benin. The fourth and fifth sections consider the ISGS presence in Niger’s Dosso Region and its effect on Benin, and subsequently explain what might drive ISGS operations from Niger into Benin.

1 Security Developments in Northern Benin in 2022

During 2020 and 2021, the presence of VEOs in Benin was largely of a transitory nature. Since the first attack on Porga in November 2021, however, the violence used by these groups has expanded and Benin has become a new battlefield. VEOs now seek to control populations and territory. We can discern four phases.

Figure 2 Conflict-related events in Northern Benin (November 2021 – September 2022)



Source: ACLED, Supplemental data (supplemental data added from June 2022 onwards)

December 2021-March 2022; The ‘Maginot Line’

Following the Porga attack, in the period from December 2021 to March 2022, Benin faced several incidents linked to VEOs. These activities were mostly concentrated in Atacora where the Parks, rather than populated areas, were targeted. Most of the violent episodes were linked to one group – Katibat Mouslimou – a Jamā’at nuṣrat al-iṣlām wal-muslimīn (JNIM) subgroup formed in Burkina Faso.

Benin’s response was the creation of a protection force along the border – a symbolic ‘Maginot Line’ (the French defence line against Nazi Germany). The Force Armée Béninoise (FAB) sought to control the entire border with Burkina Faso through a set of (mobile) border posts and bases in the Pendjari and Park W and a subsequent no-man’s land perimeter between Burkina Faso and Benin – to keep VEOs at bay. The idea was to prevent VEOs from pushing through and gaining footholds in Benin.

April – June 2022: An emerging security vacuum

By April 2022 the 'Maginot Line' had proved to be untenable. Around this time, the Monsey Police Station was attacked which created serious concerns for the Benin security system. The fear was that JNIM had expanded its battlefield.

Indeed, the defence mechanism started to crumble. This first emerged through IEDs. Various IEDs were planted in the Parks and around defence outposts. This greatly jeopardized the defence as intelligence supporters – such as the African Parks Network (APN) – and FAB staff became unwilling and reluctant to operate in the area. At the same time, in armed clashes JNIM tended to come out on top partly as it had better weapons.

For some time, FAB considered a revision of its strategy towards counter-guerrilla tactics and better protection against small-scale ambushes (e.g. through armoured vehicles). Yet, before this materialized, it became increasingly clear that ambushes, IEDs and direct armed confrontations decreased the willingness of Benin security officials to fight. Many feared that they were outnumbered, less well equipped than their opponents and were therefore vulnerable to attacks.

As morale diminished, the defence of the Parks declined. The FAB withdrew from border posts and retreated to the areas around Park W (with the caveat that their presence in Pendjari was somewhat maintained). Consequently, VEOs were presented with an unprecedented opportunity and freedom to move into Benin. This change in defences allowed them to freely move across the Parks within 2 to 4 hours and to access surrounding villages to collect supplies and interact with the population.

July-August 2022: Control of the Parks and their surroundings

This resulting security vacuum has turned the tide for Benin. Since July, VEO groups have increased their attacks and gained a foothold in the country. The months of July and August saw many encounters and armed clashes with FAB around the Pendjari National Park (Atacora) and later Park W (Alibori) such as Guene (Alibori) and Monsey (Alibori). Large parts of the Parks fell under the *de facto* control of VEOs as they moved more freely around the Parks.

In these areas (e.g. Koualou, Dassari, Materi (Atacora); Goungoun, Guene, Karimama, Monsey, Pekinga (Alibori)) local populations find themselves under a constant threat from VEOs. They face voluntary and forced conscription, they partly depend on VEO permission to carry out subsistence activities and are subjected to preaching. In these areas, it has become taboo to discuss VEOs. Criticising these groups and/or showing any support for the army has serious consequences and often means that such people are targeted and, in some cases, killed.

September 2022: the entry of ISGS and a strategic pause?

The beginning of September, however, has seen another key change: the announcement of the presence of ISGS in Guene, Boiffo and Malanville (Alibori). Revealed at the onset of the rainy season and accompanied by deliberate provocation, this move demonstrates that ISGS appears to showcase, if not expand, its presence, authority and capacity in this Department.

While it is still ongoing, the presence of ISGS could be a game-changer for Benin. It is already evident that Alibori has surpassed Atacora as the most active conflict zone.³ Such dynamics risk inflaming conflict, however, particularly if JNIM and ISGS start to actively compete over the same territory.

3 Admittedly, this is in part because the Mouslimou group in Atacora is not in any hurry, as revealed in September 2022 in Koualou. During a meeting JNIM new recruits promised that they would deal with a Mayor once the river level would lower.

2 Pressure on Atacora from JNIM in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's Kompienga Province was an early victim of the infiltration of Idrissa Dicko's ("Mouslimou") Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), where the group established a foothold in the (gold) mining sector and a shared populist message of its intentions to retake resources.

Since the end of 2021 and throughout 2022, this province has seen a more increased intensity of violence. Kompienga Province has engaged in a campaign of expansion into four directions that is still ongoing (see figure 3 and 4).

The first target was southwards towards Nadiagou village, a strategic location at the intersection of the Fada N'Gourma and Tanguieta road, between Burkina Faso and Benin and the Pognoa and Arly Park axis, which connects Burkina Faso and Niger.⁴ The attacks started on November 18, 2021 and a week later JNIM successfully took control.⁵ Since early 2022, JNIM has increasingly strengthened its grip on Nadiagou and has started to target villages close to this base in order to extend its influence.⁶ This has allowed JNIM to freely move its fighters from Kompienga to Tapoa Province and thereby gain full control of the Beninese border. From there, the objective is to assert authority from Fada to Diapaga (the main city of Tapoa).

Around the same time, the group also expanded northwards towards Fada, the capital of the East Region and the place where political power is concentrated. This was initially done through road checks on the Nadiagou-Fada road.⁷ A few months later, in June and

4 de Bruijne, K. (2021). Under the Microscope: Inside the Attacks on Porga and Keremou. *The Clingendael Institute*. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/under-microscope-inside-attacks-porga-and-keremou>.

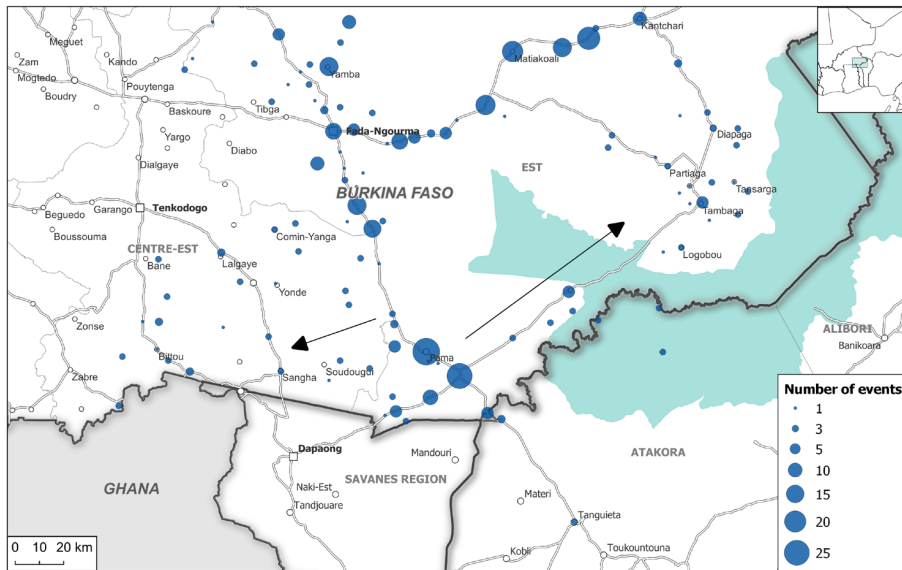
5 Burkinabe security forces escaped through Togo (as the road leading straight to Fada-Ngourma was too dangerous).

6 For example, on January 12, 2022, it carried out a carefully planned ambush on the police station in the neighbouring village of Tindangou. On February 15, the JNIM attacked another neighbouring village, Tibadi. On February 20, 2022, the electricity line between Pama and Nadiagou was sabotaged.

7 Such a checkpoint was established between Pama and Kompiembiga, a blockade of the latter village being organized. A checkpoint was also established between Fada and Pama at Natiaboani. Moreover, mobile checkpoints started on the Natiaboani-Ponio road between Tambibongou and Bossoari. JNIM used these controls to accentuate its hold on this area. For instance, in Tambibongou the village telecommunications antenna was burned down. In March, these road checks continued, with a checkpoint between Pama and Fada at Kantambari village and another on the Nadiagou-Ponio road at the village of Ponio-Sankoado. JNIM increased its grip on the Ponio-Nadiagou axis with attacks on the 31st of March, torching the school at Pognoa-Sankoado and the destruction of another telecommunications antenna in the village of Tambibongou.

July 2022, JNIM expanded its activities with direct attacks on Pama, a larger city and the capital of the province.⁸ By the end of July 2022, JNIM started to empty villages around Kompienga demonstrating the clear dominance of the group.⁹

Figure 3 JNIM activity in Atacora, Centre-Est, Est, and Savanes region (October 2021 – May 2022)



Source: ACLED, Supplemental data

The Kompienga base also expanded westwards to the Centre-East Region of Burkina Faso. The Centre-East region has been an area of influence for JNIM-affiliated militants since 2018. The first half of 2019 in particular saw a spate of violence but then, for about two and a half years, only sporadic, low-profile activity was reported in the border area in the far east of the region, known as the Transhumance Corridor.

8 On the 4th of June at Nadiagou, an Imam was kidnapped. On the 5th of June, JNIM organized a massive ambush against VDPs between Tagou and Nagare. Around ten VDPs were killed. On the 11th of June, JNIM carried out another successful ambush against soldiers and VDPs at Pama, the provincial capital. The next day, the pressure increased on Pama with mortar attacks on the city. On the 5th of July, the VDPs' position at Nagare was again under attack. At the end of July, respectively between the 26th and the 29th, an antenna was destroyed at Natiaboani and a school was burned down at Pognoa-Tikonti.

9 The inhabitants of villages at Bossoari and Mardeni, located between Pognoa-Sankoado and Nadiagou, were ordered to leave.

However, in the second half of 2021 the situation began to change dramatically. Initially dismissed as “banditry”, the region saw a resurgence of JNIM activities with attacks on police posts, mining facilities, vandalism and acts of sabotage against schools and telecommunications antennas, and preaching in villages and towns. In addition, JNIM fighters launched a violent campaign against the Koglweogo in the region, who had been integrated into the Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP). Many VDP fled to Ghana.

Burkinabe forces responded to renewed JNIM activity with a series of ground and air operations that did not last. Activity continued to increase when JNIM fighters and Burkinabe government forces began fighting for control of the small town of Nadiagou in Kompienga Province near the border with Benin in November 2021.

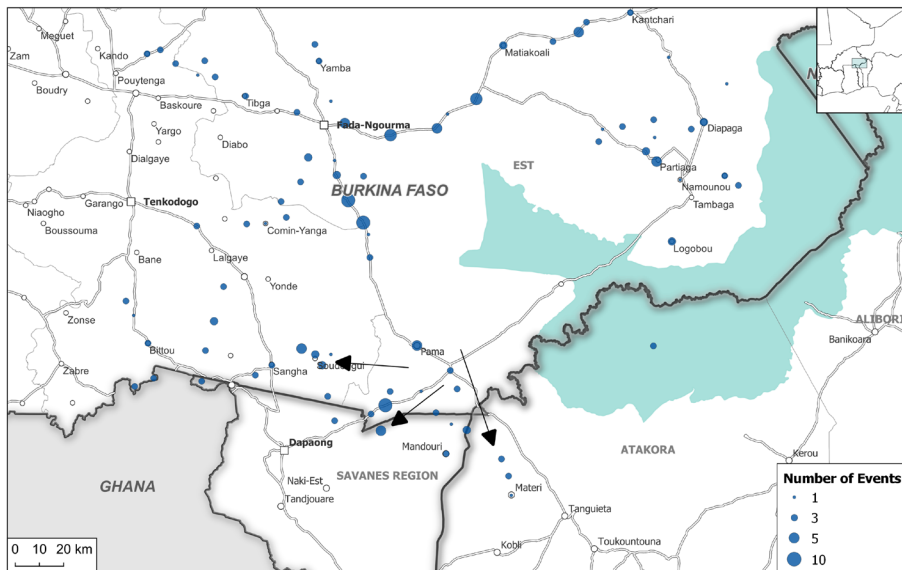
Finally, the Kompienga group began to expand southwards into Togo (and Benin). In May 2022, it attacked an army outpost in Kpenkankandi which was used to send Togolese troops into Burkinabe villages. Two months later, JNIM launched a massive attack on multiple Togolese villages. In total, 28 civilians were executed, most of them Togolese informants. As in Benin, JNIM subsequently used IEDs on the roads leading to those villages and it engaged in occasional attacks against Togolese military outposts.¹⁰

Although Tapoa Province is sometimes viewed as a franchise composed of various subgroups and commanders, there seems to be an unusually high degree of connection between the activities of Kompienga and Tapoa Provinces. Military activities are highly coordinated, as seen in the joint blockade of Fada-N’Gourma, the capital of the

10 Numerous subsequent attacks show that the threat for Togo is destined to persist. On July 15, 2022, a Togolese FDS vehicle detonated a landmine while trying to reach a village attacked the day before. Between July 16 and 17, 14 VEOs on 7 motorcycles travelled to Daloga, a disputed village between Togo and Benin, to seek out informants for the army whom they did not find. The departure of the civilian population was demanded. More than 400 people have since left the village. On the night of July 19 to 20, armed persons passed through the village of Donga a few kilometers south of Mandouri centre, on the border with Benin. They would have been successfully repelled by the army had it been present. On the night of July 27 to 28, an army vehicle detonated an IED while trying to reach the village of Kpemboli on the border with Burkina. One soldier was killed and 9 were injured, some of them seriously. That same night, a clash took place in Kpenkankandi, another village bordering Burkina, between the FDS and violent extremists. The details are unknown but the confrontation would have been to the advantage of the violent extremists according to the local population. On July 30, two civilians in this village were abducted on suspicion of giving information to the police. On August 10, 2022, two children on a cart detonated an IED near Tiwoli. On August 16, 2022, between Blamonga and Koundjoaré on the border with Burkina Faso, two violent extremists were killed when their own IED exploded. On August 22, 2022, an IED exploded when a Togolese FDS vehicle passed over it. An exchange of fire followed. The outcome of the confrontation is unknown at this point in time.

East Region, and in the emptying of villages around their bases in July.¹¹ This is also clear in the movement of fighters. In April, less activity was reported in Tapoa Province while JNIM concentrated on keeping the road between Nadiagou-Kompienga and Tombaga-Tapoa open and on removing the last military bases of the Burkinabe military and VDPs.¹²

Figure 4 JNIM activity in Atacora, Centre-Est, Est, and Savanes region (June – September 2022)



Source: ACLED, Supplemental data

11 Both are attempting to control the closest villages to Fada. On the 15th and 19th of February 2022 they marked their territory by burning down two schools respectively in the villages of Boyemlagou and Kikideni. On the 20th February, JNIM ordered a large-scale attack on a VDP position in the village of Nagare. On the 6th of March 2022, JNIM attacked the village of Tagou close to Nagare. On the 18th of March 2022, JNIM again attacked VDPs in Nagare. A large-scale ambush of a military detachment by JNIM occurred on the 20th of March 2022 on the Fada-Pama road. According to official Burkinabe records, 13 soldiers were killed, the JNIM announced the deaths of 24 soldiers.

12 The first reported incident comes on April 14 when JNIM decided to reduce the usual movements made by the inhabitants of Madjoari and Tambarga. As a result, the first inhabitants began to leave these villages. In May, the JNIM accelerated its actions. On the 14th of May, VDPs were ambushed in this zone. On the 19th, the military position in Tambarga was attacked. About 20 individuals were killed in these two attacks. On the 25th of May, at least 50 civilians were killed while attempting to escape from Madjoari.

JNIM has increased its control of the main axes in Tapoa, both of Fada to Kantchari and of that around Diapaga, including over secondary roads that became more or less blocked.¹³ This was done by symbolic actions in villages such as the burning down of schools or town halls,¹⁴ as well as intensified roadblocks. Again, the most indicative sign of the control that JNIM has gained in Tapoa is demonstrated by the decision to start emptying certain villages in late July.¹⁵

13 This has been happening for instance on the secondary road leading to Bonkongou since March.

14 At Namounou, on the 16th of January, JNIM ambushed local police officers and on the 16th of February, the village townhall, school and police station were set on fire. At Logobou (January 22) the townhall was torched. In the larger village of Tambaga and its surrounding villages (Namponsiga, Kogoli, Diegbala and Fanfangou) between the 28th of February and the 5th of March, numerous attacks occurred. At Bantoini, on the 21st of February 2022, a telecommunications antenna was burned down. On January the 28th, JNIM destroyed a telecommunications antenna at Namoungou. JNIM also burned down a Catholic church and a school at Bougui on the 10th and 16th of February. At Namponsiga, on the 2nd of March 2022, a bar and a telecommunications antenna were set on fire. At Fanfangou, a school was burned down. This series of attacks demonstrates JNIM's intentions concerning Tapoa Province.

15 This mainly concerns Tandri, close to Kantchari, as well as Partiaga and Nadiabondi close to Diapaga.

3 Explaining JNIM expansion into Benin

The expansion of activities of JNIM's Kompienga and Tapoa bases in Burkina Faso outlined in the previous section are closely tied to Benin. We first explore the impact of these activities on Benin and subsequently explore the potential explanation for why the groups target Northern Benin.

3.1 How the Kompienga and Tapoa Provinces lead to violence in Benin

A first observation is that “Undermining the Maginot Line” by the Kompienga and Tapoa Provinces was first and foremost intended to support operations in Burkina Faso rather than really being aimed at Benin. The control over Nadiagou limited the capacity of Burkina Faso to defend its frontier with Benin. As a response, there was a gradual reliance on low-risk aerial bombardments rather than troop deployments.¹⁶ In the first three months of 2022, this reliance somewhat limited JNIM but did not significantly slow down its progress. Controlling Nadiagou subsequently allowed JNIM to gradually oust FAB from the border of Burkina Faso.

Attacks on FAB and APN installations along Benin's Park borders began in January and February 2022, with the specific targeting of installations used by both APN and FAB. The goal appeared to be to diminish the Beninese capacity to threaten JNIM's Burkinabe bases. Similarly, the attack at Point Triple against an APN convoy was a carefully planned and targeted operation which sent a clear message to African Parks to steer clear of Burkina Faso.

From April onwards, JNIM's objective in Benin became clearer (or might have changed): rather than pushing back the Beninese military, the goal seems to be to create a giant buffer zone, stretching across Monsey, W and Pendjari National Parks in Benin and over to the Mandouri villages in Togo. In Benin, increasing IEDs in the Parks and ambushes chased away both APN and FAB forces from Park W. The Pendjari National Park appears to be holding because of its more limited size, but it is weakening.

16 Aerial bombardments took place in Paladoubé, Kabonga; Nagaré, Malboala, Natiaboan; Tiourel, Kortikio, Tingangou, Pama and the interior of Arli Park (Tienyema village).

What is important is that Togo is drawn into this buffer zone. Sources claim that during a meeting in the Kompienga Province in the middle of 2022 some local authorities argued that access to Benin could be achieved in two ways. Either directly through Koualou (the strategy hitherto used) or instead by passing through Toutourgou – a small Burkinabe village on the border with Togo – and then on to Lalabiga – a village in Togo on the border with Benin – before finally reaching the Atacora Department of Benin. Subsequent military developments highlight that JNIM has indeed sought to create this path into Togo through the Soudougou Department of Burkina Faso.¹⁷

3.2 A buffer zone: to what end?

What drives the creation of a buffer zone around the Kompienga and Tapoa Provinces? While there are certainly also endogenous reasons (e.g. some recruits stem from Atacora and seem set to settle scores), here we explore three plausible exogenous explanations.

The first explanation for a buffer zone is JNIM's alleged overarching strategy. According to an analysis by Promediation (May 24th and July 5th 2022), the push by JNIM into the West, South and East of Burkina Faso is part of a coordinated strategy to progressively encircle the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou. To achieve this, JNIM seeks to take control of several aspects: firstly, of strategic supply routes from Benin, Togo, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire; secondly, of strategic supply infrastructure (bridges, roads, etc.), or indeed simply to destroy them; and, thirdly, of parallel criminal or supply networks. In short, this understanding would mean that Benin itself is not the primary target but is ultimately a means to obtain and consolidate control over Burkina Faso.

A second explanation is that JNIM seeks to carve out a buffer zone in response to coordinated regional military threats. These threats stem from, among others, the Accra Initiative. This initiative – created in 2017 – seeks to increase the synergies between Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire (Niger has observer status). One of the key mechanisms of the Accra Initiative is that countries agree to 'hot pursuit' operations. This means that rather than asking for permission to cross borders, countries can just 'inform' their neighbours and pursue VEOs on the neighbouring territory.¹⁸

17 The JNIM strategy in Soudougou Department seems to have started in late June 2022. On the 24th of June 2022, JNIM targeted VDPs in the village of Kolanga. On the 1st of July, a political figure was kidnapped in Komin-Yanga. Then, in late July, attacks followed. On the 22th of July, 15 people were killed in a JNIM attack on Sologo 2 and Lobden villages. On the 23th of July, a VDP was attacked in Napade. On the 24th of July, JNIM targeted a VDP position in Kohogo. On the 30th of July, a checkpoint was set up at Gagare. The whole Department is under JNIM pressure.

18 In reality, the right of 'hot pursuit' is to this day a source of tension.

So far, Burkina Faso has been the only country where ‘hot pursuit’ is possible. In the run-up to the first attacks against Benin, both Togo and Benin accumulated troops at the border with Burkina Faso. Togo had already done so in 2018 with the Koudjoare operation and it increased its presence in 2020. Benin similarly had some hot-pursuit operations in 2020 but this increased in 2021 when it was encouraged to address the issue of Koualou (a contested border area with Burkina Faso).¹⁹ Regular troop movements along the borders within the Parks and villages were a constant threat to JNIM.

Indeed, the Nadiagou attacks were preceded by military campaigns: “Ougapo 2” by Burkina Faso (in the Est and Centre Est); “Taanli 2” by Niger and Burkina Faso; and “Koundalou 4” by Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo. It is conceivable that the Mouslimou Group seeks to create the buffer zone to keep neighbouring military forces at bay, who have greater liberty because of the Accra Initiative.

A third and final explanation for a buffer zone would be that it will provide JNIM with specific benefits. As a start, a buffer zone could generate recruits to support an ever-expanding fight (e.g. there has been an increase in recruitment activity in 2022). Moreover, a buffer zone provides the group with more income (including Zakat) and opportunities for a stronger grip on illegal trafficking in the border area stretching from Togo (Mandouri) to Niger (W). For example, JNIM is known to operate in the gasoline market and seeks to gain control thereover.²⁰ Illustrative is a long-lasting conflict between leading fuel dealers and individual fuel smugglers who use boats. When local boat smugglers realized they were supplying JNIM they refused to continue. At that point in time, fuel dealers said they would denounce individual boat smugglers to JNIM which ‘kill’ those who refuse to continue.

3.3 How long will exogenous explanations of JNIM violence in Benin remain tenable?

These three explanations all have in common the notion that JNIM’s presence in Benin is first and foremost a means rather than an end in itself. This is significant as it suggests that perhaps some of the programming aimed at preventing a *spillover* would be better addressed towards Burkina Faso rather than Benin. It also suggests that a military response is necessary (while certainly needing to be accompanied by the simultaneous addressing of very real discontent in the areas).

19 In the Accra Initiative, another long-running discussion was a never materialized plan to clear the Parks.

20 Beevor, E. (2022). JNIM in Burkina Faso: A Strategic Criminal Actor. *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM-29-Aug-web.pdf>.

However, while this is presently correct, it is not the whole story.

First, Al Qaeda's main lesson has been that it needs to give autonomy to its fighters and speak to real local needs.²¹ For this reason, the various Katibats that make up JNIM have a large degree of autonomy and speak to the needs of the fighters.²² Hence, the Mouslimou group's ongoing recruitment in Benin likely means that JNIM's goals will change over time. Recent information suggests that this is actually already happening: new recruits from Benin seek to target Benin, its government and those who represent the authorities. For example, individuals recruited from undisclosed villages in Atacora recently expressed threats to behead mayors in the Materi Commune. In an incident in October in Porga, an individual from Benin was killed; he was the self-declared leader of Benin's local Jihad. Over time, JNIM has the potential to further localise its activities.

Second, it remains important that JNIM has a structure wherein there is strategic coordination at the highest level (Shura Council). And strategies change as the last three years have made abundantly clear from Benin. In 2019 and 2020, Benin was an area of kidnapping (plans) and the procurement of JNIM, which changed to a transit and hide-out zone in 2021. Even though decision-making in rebel movements is often not fully hierarchical, it is clear that deliberate decisions have been made before each step on the escalation ladder. There are multiple conceivable reasons why JNIM might decide on more offensive activity in Benin.

21 Nsaibia H., Weiss C. (2020). The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa. CTC Sentinel 13 (7). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

22 It is a dynamic that is known from the academic literature on changing goals of rebel movements and rather than being unique to JNIM is 'just' a trait of successful rebels movements. Richards, P. (1996). *Fighting for the Rain Forest : War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. Portsmouth: Heinemann; Acosta, B., Huang R., and Silverman D. (2022). "Introducing ROLE: A Database of Rebel Leader Attributes in Armed Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221077920>.

4 Islamic State in Benin: (retaking) Alibori from Niger

On September 15th, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for two attacks near Guéné (Alibori) at the beginning of July. Data underlying this report suggest that, on 27th June, an armed group was spotted by civilians near Boiffo (Alibori). Four days later, the same group asked where the church was in Boiffo which caused panic and the deployment of an FAB unit a day later. On 2nd July, FAB and an armed group had their first clash around Torouzogou (Alibori). Two days later, on 4 July (some believe this incident happened on July 2), the armed group took revenge in an ambush near the APN and the FAB base at Alfakoara (Alibori).

This incident and the declaration by the Islamic State came as a relative surprise.

ISGS likely has a history in the Alibori region, yet hitherto this was largely of a transitory nature; the relative silence in recent years led to many assuming that ISGS had either been overtaken by JNIM or was in hibernation, with its strategic interests being elsewhere. The numerous contacts between the civilian population in Alibori and armed groups between April and August were generally attributed to JNIM groups from Tapoa via Park W.

4.1 ISGS-Benin's origins and its activities in Benin

Although it is uncertain, it seems that the presence of ISGS in Benin stems from Niger.

The Islamic State was the first group to approach Malanville in 2019. Subsequently and according to one source, an ISGS leader would have spent at least several weeks in the area of Park W in 2020 (it is known that Park W became a “zone 5” – a fallback zone for ISGS leadership – in 2020 during the deadly clashes against the JNIM in Liptako Gourma).²³ Around the same time, previous research had found an ISGS presence in Woro Chateaux, Malanville, and Karimama (Benin) and attempts to extract taxes and

23 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. (2021). North of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea: The new frontier for jihadist groups? *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. <https://www.kas.de/documents/261825/13432629/North+of+the+countries+of+the+Gulf+of+Guinea+-+The+new+frontier+for+jihadist+groups.pdf/97cbceda-85c1-33fc-45fd-50f8ddaaa0ab?version=1.2&t=1625138447487>.

encourage Sharia law.²⁴ In 2020, there were incidents involving ISGS just across the Nigerien border (e.g. in Katanga).

These contacts were facilitated by social, cultural and religious connections. The Tablighi movement – a Sunni mission that is a ‘pure’ but non-violent movement but which is also tied to some ISGS presence in Niger (Tillabery) – had gained a certain foothold in Benin in the 2000s.²⁵ Furthermore, it has long been reported that the Dosso-Alibori border area has been subjected to rotating sermons aiming to ‘re-Islamize the Muslim base and the moralization of society’.²⁶ Finally, Niger and the Alibori border with Benin share the same type of ethnic Fulani population: the Tolebe. This specific Fulani group is found in the Liptako Gourma Area and in Benin; they are also found in Segbana, Kalale and Nikki. Although not exclusively, the Tolebe make up the majority of Fulani that are part of ISGS (and to be clear, the majority of Tolebe – or Fulani for that matter – are not part of any armed group).

Revisiting recent evidence suggests that ISGS might have been around for a longer period of time. Earlier this year, two Fulani individuals near Karimama (Alibori) were kidnapped and killed in Niger as they had promised to join the fight but later retracted. Data collected on the movement of VEOs also points to ISGS movement along the border with Benin from Niger in the Dosso area (June 9, 21; July 11, 15, 30). Reports show recruitment among Fulani in Niger in order to send them to Benin and large groups of motorcycles crossing from Niger into Benin, in spite of the high water levels.²⁷

24 de Bruijne, K. (2021). Laws of Attraction. *The Clingendael Institute*. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/laws-of-attraction/>; ELVA. (2020). Tracking VEO Spill-over from the Sahel into Littoral West Africa. Situation report.

25 The Pew Research Center claims that VEOs have recruited from within the Tablique. See: Pew Research Center, 2010. Tablighi Jama’at. [link](#).

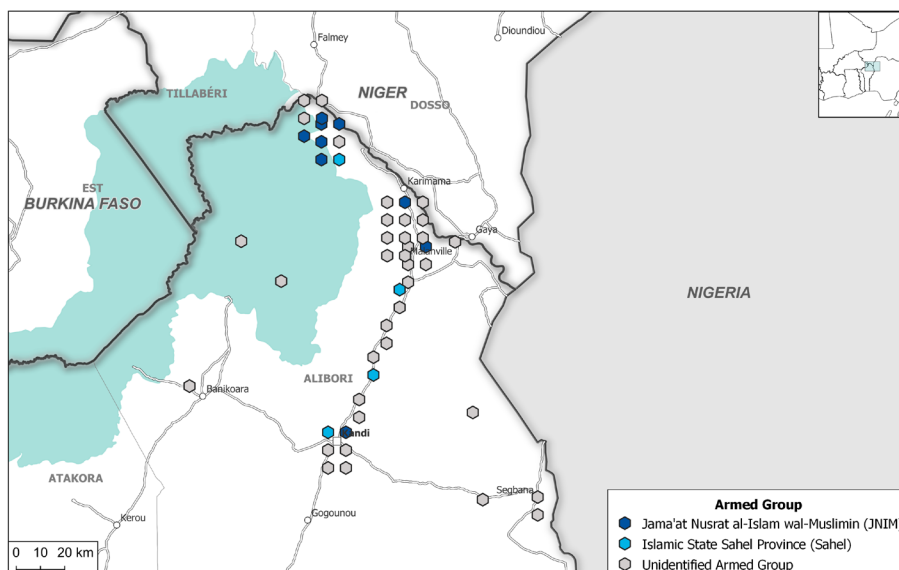
26 Brégand, D. (2012). Circulation dans les « communautés » musulmanes plurielles du Bénin. Catégorisations, auto-identifications. *Cahier d’études africaines*. [link](#); Knoope, P., Chauzal, G. (2016). *Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin*. The Clingendael Institute; Mossi, A. (2019). Étude sur les risques et les facteurs potentiels de radicalisation et d’extrémisme violent en république du Bénin. Cotonou. https://finances.bj/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PPREVUE-II-Rapport-Final-de-Synthese_VF-241018.pdf.

27 E.g. on 21 September 2022, two young Fulani men living in the village of Rounto-Tanda [Monboy Tounga] (Gaya, Dosso) welcomed unidentified armed men (suspected IS Sahel) at night on the banks of the River Niger. These men had come from the right riverbank on the Beninese side. In complicity with another Fulani who owned a canoe, they supplied the armed men with provisions. Some young Nigerien Fulani have been recruited and are currently with the group in Benin, although the inhabitants do not report them for fear of reprisals.

5 Explaining ISGS activity in Benin

It is not clear what exactly drives ISGS activity in Northern Benin. There are three potential explanations and all ultimately suggest that ISGS is presently not inherently seeking to control parts of Benin.

Figure 5 Suspected armed group activity in Alibori (June – September 2022)



Source: ACLED, Supplemental data

The first explanation is that ISGS has decided to compete with JNIM in Benin (figure 5). The slow but steady growth of the JNIM presence in the Eastern region, where IGSS was defeated by it in mid-2020, and its subsequent foothold across Northern Benin might be a reason for the re-emergence of ISGS in Benin.

One indication of competition with JNIM as a driver is the area where ISGS first hit: Guene. Guene was somewhat regularly visited by JNIM (from Diapaga) in May and June, and the armed group shared the message that they sought to regain control of the Park. When ISGS entered the village a month later, it also adopted a conciliatory tone with

regard to the communities, arguing that its goal was to attack the army and not harm the villagers.

Another indication might be that ISGS attempted to move towards Monsey as security officials believed.²⁸ Monsey was the first village in Alibori that JNIM reached (in April 2022). It is conceivable that ISGS sought to retake control.

A final indication is that ISGS claimed responsibility for very minor incidents, blew these activities out of proportion and seems to be in haste to claim successes. It openly claimed responsibility for the Guene incidents in Al Naba, and subsequently shared a carefully staged photo with its flag, two clean motorbikes and two Chinese AK rifles. It also crossed the River Niger into Benin (from Niger) at the high point of the rainy season. All of this suggests that ISGS is feeling pressure and is in a rush to present itself as an alternative and/or counter JNIM presence in Alibori.

A second explanation for ISGS activity in Alibori is linked to Nigeria. While this is hard to gauge with certainty, some information suggests that JNIM expansion in Alibori in the first nine months of 2022 was not solely about reaching Alibori but could have been about creating a corridor through Benin into Nigeria. This corridor would have to start in Park W (Benin), to exit between Alfakoara and Guéné, to go on to Forêts des Trois-Frondes, to move through Kalale and, finally, to exit into Nigeria by way of the Kainji Lake Forest. Credible sources highlight that JNIM had created a small unit tasked with forming a bridge around Kalale.²⁹ The idea was that JNIM sought to connect with Ansaru – a group rapidly expanding in North West Nigeria in 2021 through association with ‘Bandits’ but since then less and less successful – in Nigeria (according to Beninese civilians who were approached to assist).

To be clear, the link between the Sahel conflict and Nigeria has been routinely made for over a decade but it has never really materialized. Moreover, there are clear political interests at stake in making this connection as it would likely unlock Nigerian reluctance to participate and convince many countries that their interests in West Africa are at stake. For this reason, any information has to be treated with caution. However, there are two reasons why information about attempts to link up are more plausible now than they have been before (even though they are still unclear).

28 Presently, security personnel in Benin assume that ISGS is in Monsey. When Monsey was attacked in April some security officers already suggested that ISGS was responsible. An incident on 24th September – multiple armed motorcycles came within the vicinity of Monsey crossing from the River Niger – was initially attributed to ISGS but later proved to be likely have been perpetrated by JNIM.

29 The unit is still operational but has been withdrawn after the ISGS claims.

On the one hand, the geographical proximity has clearly reduced with the presence of VEOs in North West Nigeria and the expansionist VEO Katibats in Burkina Faso Est. The distance between Tapoa (Burkina Faso) and potential operatives in North West Nigeria is just between 200 to 250 kilometres. On the other hand, there are indications that individuals from North-Western Nigeria have recently been involved in violent activities in Mali. Thus, ethnically-related individuals operate alongside the ISGS. Some sources suggest that it is the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) that is supporting IS Sahel, but it is entirely possible that these reinforcements from North-Western Nigeria are members of the Fulani communities, formerly referred to as “Lakurawa” (the recruits). The two explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and it could be a combination of both. All of this suggests that indications about JNIM attempts to link up with groups in Nigeria fit into wider regional developments.

While it is uncertain, this puts ISGS operations in Benin in a different context. Activity in Alibori might be read as an attempt to counter the attempt (or the threat to attempt) by JNIM to link up with groups in Nigeria. Whereas JNIM exerts stronger control over Benin, ISGS has deeper and more established links with groups in Nigeria, most notably the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).³⁰ ISGS may seek to prevent links between JNIM and Ansaru and maintain the connection with ISWAP.

A third and final explanation has nothing to do with the competition between JNIM and ISGS but is internal to ISGS. Throughout the Sahel, ISGS has been operating out of its areas during the last months and seems to have more liberty and capacity to do so. For instance, in both Mali and Burkina Faso, ISGS has succeeded in consolidating its territory, but in Mali in particular, it has expanded outside its traditional strongholds. In doing so, it has strategically seized the opportunity to demonstrate broader expansion in the region. This might suggest that ISGS has changed its strategy of operations throughout the Sahel and is acting more in line with its slogan: *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding). Given that ISGS's status was elevated in March 2022 when Islamic State Central designated a province to ISGS (the Islamic State in the Sahel, ISSP), this changing strategy might be aimed at demonstrating more successes to IS Central.

In short, there are good reasons to claim that VEO activity in Benin by ISGS is not driven by a strong local agenda (which is generally not the ISGS' mode of operation) but is rather driven by exogenous reasons. In this specific sense, the view of individuals in Beninese security circles that Benin is facing an outside threat is supported.

30 Since 2019, this relationship has developed from advice on communications to information sharing and material support and has now moved towards strategic coordination.

Conclusion

This report seeks to better understand how external developments explain and incentivise violence in Northern Benin. It asks the following question: How have the developments in Benin's neighbouring countries impacted the security situation in Alibori and Atacora (the Northern Provinces of Benin) since the end of 2021? The report makes five observations.

1. The security situation in Northern Benin has worsened since the end of 2021. There have been three main changes: From December 2021 to March 2022 there was a 'Meginot Line' along the border to protect against incursions. From April to June 2022, an emerging security vacuum emerged as JNIM pushed through the border leading to the FAB withdrawal and from July to August 2022 VEOs took control of the Parks and their surroundings. By September 2022, the presence of ISGS also became clear;
2. This report finds that recent developments in Benin to date, are to a large extent driven by security developments and changing strategies of groups outside of Benin, most notably in Burkina Faso. From the end of 2021, the main JNIM group operating around Kompienga has been expanding in all directions (including in Ghana and Togo) and has progressively taken control of part of Benin. The goal seems to be to create a larger buffer zone stretching from Niger into Togo;
3. Interestingly, potential rationales for both JNIM operations in Northern Benin and ISGS' open presence in Benin point to reasons that have far less to do with Northern Benin than one might expect from the worsened situation. JNIM might be motivated by military strategic objectives in Burkina Faso, protection against military coordination under the Accra Initiative or it may be seeking to create a supply zone for its Burkinabe operations. ISGS could be motivated by a response to the open JNIM presence in Alibori – a zone where ISGS has had some presence – or by seeking to link up with groups in Nigeria or preventing JNIM from doing so.
4. While they are difficult to really pin down, these motivations suggest that Benin is presently merely a theatre for VEO operations whose real goals, so far, lie outside of Benin. As such, this report provides a corrective to the idea that Benin's many local tensions and communal conflicts (both of which are real and very troubling) are inherently going to lead to instability (as they are exploited by VEOs). While there are great problems within Northern Benin that need to be urgently addressed, this report suggests that driving forces outside Benin presently have a greater bearing than those that exist within Benin itself. However, it is likely that these internal drivers will gain in prominence and likely take over outside drivers in the future (some recent incidents suggest these micro-processes are unfolding).

5. The key implication of this report is that more programming is needed in two fields:
 - a) there is a need to better understand security developments in the Sahel and how they affect Benin, followed by programming that responds to these security developments. This might take the form of seeking to improve relations between countries and their militaries and providing strategic advice for military operations (The recent Accra Meeting on November 22 speak to this concern – provided that it leads to real coordination);
 - b) there is a need to engage in programmes that cross the divide between the Littorals and the Sahel (rather than only cross-Littoral programming). This could take the form of multi-country programmes to improve community relations, to address customary justice provision, to improve ethnic/religious collaboration etc. This is not meant to take anything away from programming that addresses the root causes of instability in the Littorals; local tensions are the fuel that allows the fire to spread from the Sahel. But in order to be more effective, we also need more complementary and comprehensive programming that looks at West Africa as one region rather than Sahel and Littoral Islands.