

Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin

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The first security incident attributed to violent extremist groups in Benin occurred in May 2019. Prior to this, though, these groups had already been taking advantage of illicit activities in the country to mobilise human, financial, operational and logistical resources. In addition to addressing the threat and safeguarding their populations and property, Benin and its neighbours need to step up their efforts to tackle the supply chains that enable these groups to operate and finance themselves.

Key findings

- ▶ The border dispute between Benin and Burkina Faso over Kourou-Koualou, frustrations linked to measures to protect national parks, and the illicit activities carried out in the country's north have all created vulnerabilities that violent extremists exploit to recruit and to use Benin as a source of logistical, operational and financial resources and livelihood.
- ▶ This study on Benin documents the links between violent extremism on the one hand, and fuel smuggling, illegal hunting and drug trafficking on the other. It also highlights the risks associated with illegal gold panning and arms and ammunition trafficking.
- ▶ By collaborating with fuel traffickers in the Kourou-Koualou area, violent extremists have been able to obtain fuel. This collaboration has also enabled them to mobilise financial resources through a fee that traffickers pay in exchange for violent extremists protecting and securing the trafficking zone.
- ▶ By collaborating with Beninese hunters, particularly in Arly National Park, the violent extremists have been able to recruit among hunters. The latter has supplied the groups with food, sometimes from illegal hunting (dried meat).
- ▶ Extremist groups operating in Kourou-Koualou are involved in cannabis trafficking to make a profit.

Recommendations

- ▶ To contain these groups, Benin and its partners must avoid analysing the violent extremist threat solely in terms of attacks. It is also important to understand the links between violent extremism and the illicit activities that enable these groups to mobilise the resources required for their operations.
- ▶ To prevent extremist groups from continuing to use Kourou-Koualou for retreat, operations and provisioning, a lasting settlement concerning its legal status and an effective state presence on the ground is needed.
- ▶ With regard to the trade in fuel illegally imported from Nigeria, two approaches are possible: either this activity is considered as a solution to needs that formal distributors are unable to satisfy, and is therefore better supervised and organised; or it is confirmed to be illegal and the necessary steps are taken to prevent this fuel being brought into and sold in Benin. In the latter case, populations dependent on smuggled fuel would have to be offered alternatives and those involved in smuggling would need different employment opportunities.
- ▶ Regarding national park management, it is important to draw on the consultation frameworks set up with communities to address the resentment that has led some hunters to collaborate with violent extremists. These consultations will make it possible to strike the right balance between measures to preserve biodiversity and the need to protect income-generating activities.
- ▶ The fight against drug trafficking in Benin should be stepped up to reduce the country's role as a transit zone. There should also be a focus on local production of cannabis and the cross-border trafficking it drives.
- ▶ Strategies aiming to dry up funding and supply to these groups must include integrated actions and cross-border coordination.

Introduction

Insecurity linked to violent extremist groups, which was initially confined to the Sahel,¹ has gradually spread to the northern border areas of West African coastal countries, including Benin.

The kidnapping on 1 May 2019 of two French tourists in the Pendjari National Park in the north-west of the country, and the murder of their Beninese guide, were the first incidents officially recorded in Benin. Numerous other incidents, incursions and attacks targeting defence and security forces, forest rangers and officials from the African Parks Network (APN) – the organisation managing the Pendjari and W national parks – have since been recorded. These incidents have intensified since November 2021.

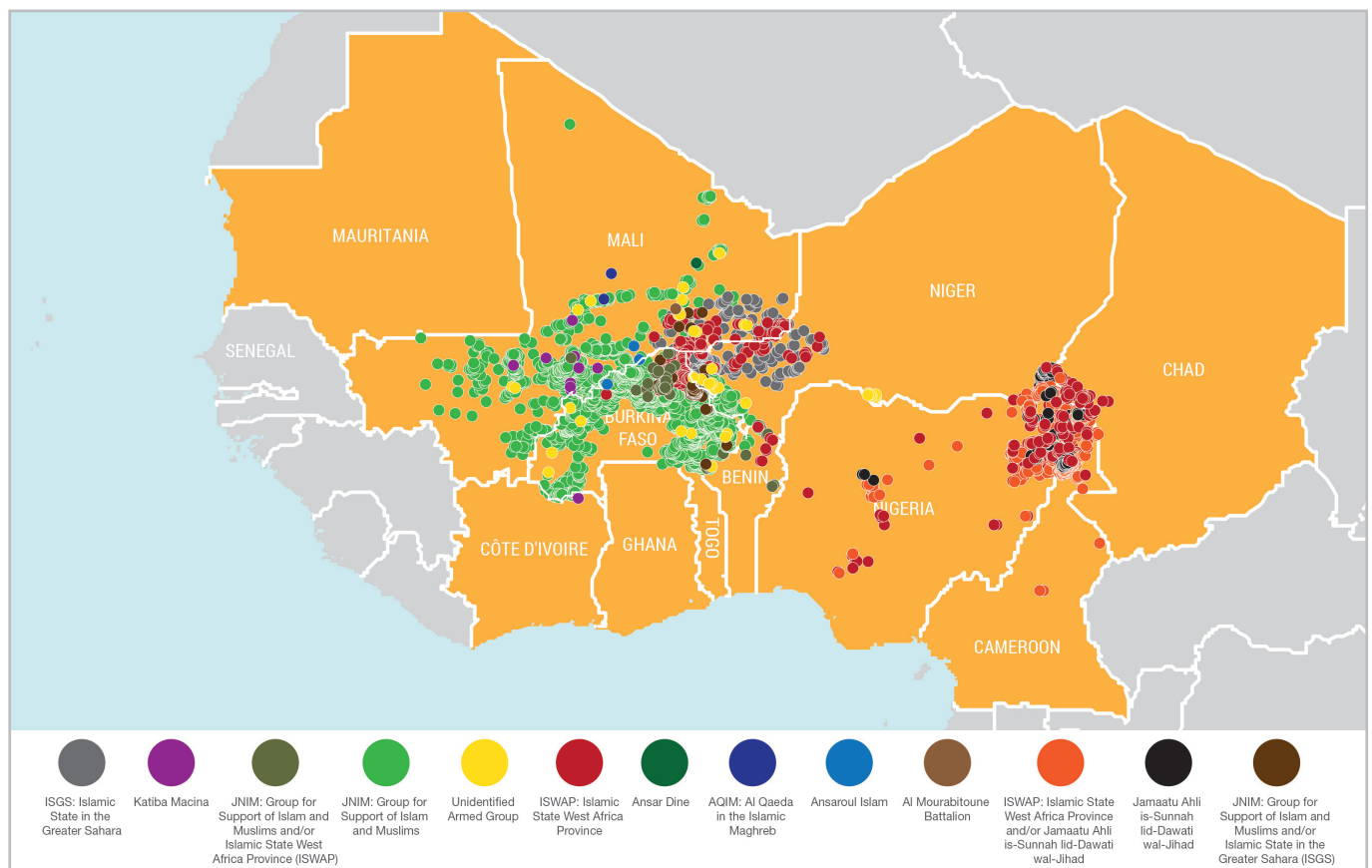
However, the security incidents that garner media and political attention are only the tip of the iceberg of violent extremism in Benin. This report seeks to document an aspect of this phenomenon that deserves more

attention, namely the links between violent extremism and illicit activities² in Benin. The research focuses on the strategies that violent extremist groups use to mobilise human, financial, operational and logistical resources in Benin. It is intended to inform current and future decision-making processes about preventing and countering this phenomenon, as well as provide an evidence base that could inform possible adjustments to these responses.

This report is divided into four parts. The first briefly presents the methodology that guided the research. The second examines the security context in relation to violent extremism in Benin, in particular how this phenomenon manifests in the departments of Alibori, Atacora, Borgou and Donga in northern Benin.

The third section analyses the links between violent extremism and the various illicit activities documented in the course of this study. Finally, the last section presents the risks that have come to light in relation to gold panning and trafficking of arms and munitions.

Chart 1: Terrorist incidents in West Africa in 2022



Source: This map is based on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) information

The analysis of the links and risks identified serves as a basis for formulating recommendations and courses of action for decision makers and actors responsible for developing, implementing or adjusting actions to prevent and tackle violent extremism in Benin.

Methodology

The research focuses on the concepts of violent extremism and illicit activities. Violent extremism is discussed in terms of individuals' association with the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin – JNIM)³ and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Most of the security incidents reported in northern Benin have been attributed to these armed groups⁴, whose rhetoric is full of references to Islam.

They also have in common the fact that they have committed acts portrayed as terrorist. More broadly, this report documents the strategies that these groups use to expand, to implant themselves and to mobilise human, operational, logistical and financial resources.

The people interviewed for this study use several expressions to refer to these armed groups. Some of them, notably in the Alibori and Borgou departments bordering Nigeria, use the expressions 'terrorists', 'jihadists', 'unidentified armed individuals' or 'armed groups', or refer to the 'Boko Haram' group, which operates mainly in north-east Nigeria. Others identify these individuals by their appearance. For example, some people report having seen or interacted with 'individuals in turbans heavily armed with sophisticated rifles, ammunition and grenades on motorcycles' in their village.

Insecurity linked to violent extremists has spread from the Sahel to West African coastal countries

Using the term 'jihadist' to describe these groups is questionable and controversial. Nevertheless, it is used in this report because it is the term most often used by the interviewees to refer to groups targeting Benin.

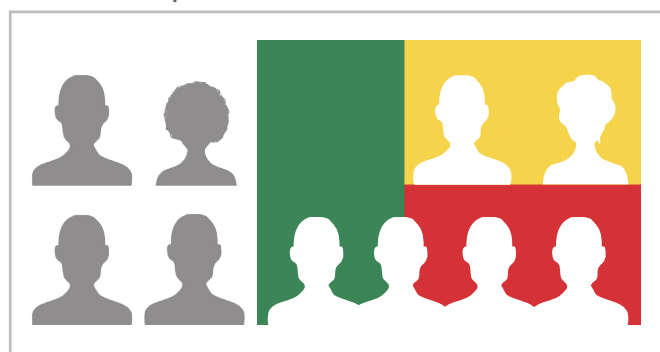
With regard to illicit activities, often referred to as trafficking or smuggling, the research focuses on

those documented in the areas studied during the literature review on the phenomenon, and those practised in Benin whose links with violent extremism have been demonstrated in previous ISS studies in Liptako-Gourma.⁵ This includes trafficking of arms and ammunition, drugs, medicines, agricultural inputs, motorcycles and protected species, fuel smuggling, illegal gold panning and illegal hunting.⁶

The research focuses on how these activities are organised, in particular the players involved, their roles, motivations and interests, their *modi operandi*, the flows of different products (including financial flows) and the links between these activities and violent extremism. More specifically, the research seeks to highlight the role these activities play in the strategies adopted by violent extremist groups to establish themselves and to mobilise human, operational, logistical and financial resources.

The study was designed and implemented by a team of 10 people, including two women. Following a literature review, field data collection was carried out in two phases, from 13 September to 13 October 2021 and then from 24 January to 18 March 2022.

Chart 2: Composition of the research team



Semi-structured open-ended individual interviews, based on flexible interview guides, were conducted with 330 people (including 42 women) from five categories of interviewees⁷ (see Chart 5) in the departments of Alibori, Atacora, Borgou and Donga, all in northern Benin (see Chart 4). These departments were chosen because of their proximity to the geographical areas where violent extremist groups active in the Sahel operate, and because some have experienced attacks and security incidents claimed by or attributed to these groups.

Chart 3: Stages in conducting research

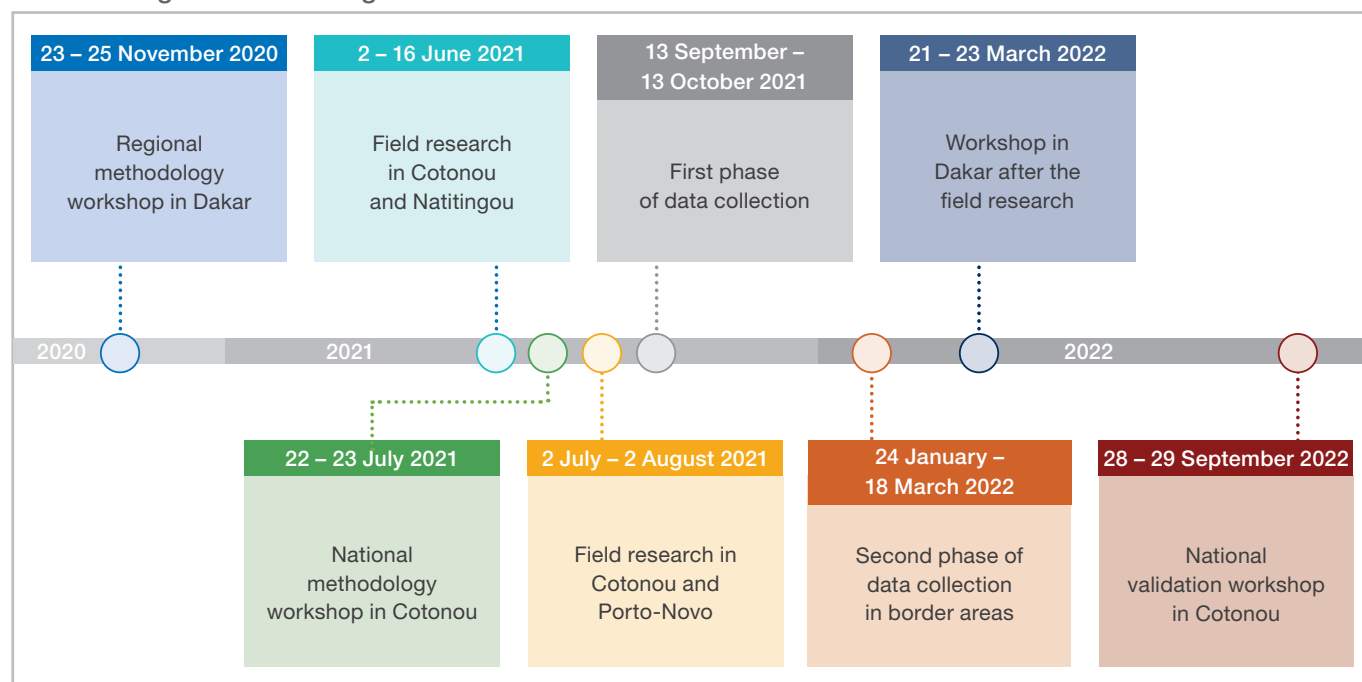


Chart 4: Departments and communes covered by the research



Interviews were also conducted in Cotonou and Porto-Novo with people involved in developing and implementing responses to prevent and counter violent extremism and illicit activities.

In terms of methodological challenges, incursions by suspected members of violent extremist groups, in addition to the military operations carried out in the Alibori and Atacora departments between late 2021 and early 2022 limited access to certain areas. This situation has also created a climate of mistrust within the communities, making it harder to conduct some interviews. To meet these challenges, some interviewees were moved to secure locations to conduct the interviews.

According to information gathered during the research, in the Kourou-Koualou region, women in military uniforms were spotted at meetings that these groups held with the population. It seems they were responsible for standing guard while the men talked to people. Hunters supplying groups in villages around Arly National Park in Burkina Faso claimed to have seen young girls in these villages occupied by the groups.

Women's involvement in trafficking cannabis for the benefit of the groups has also been documented. It was not possible during this study to collect more data on

Chart 5: Categories of interviewees

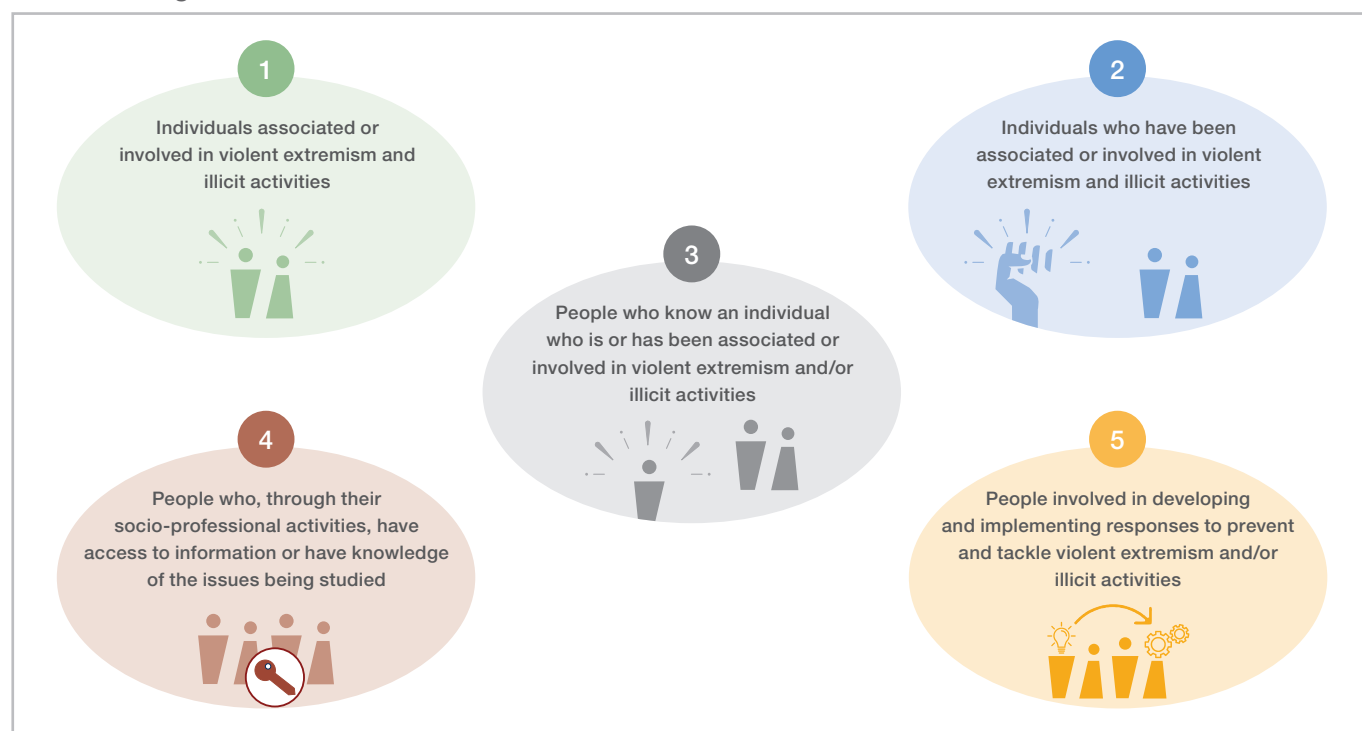
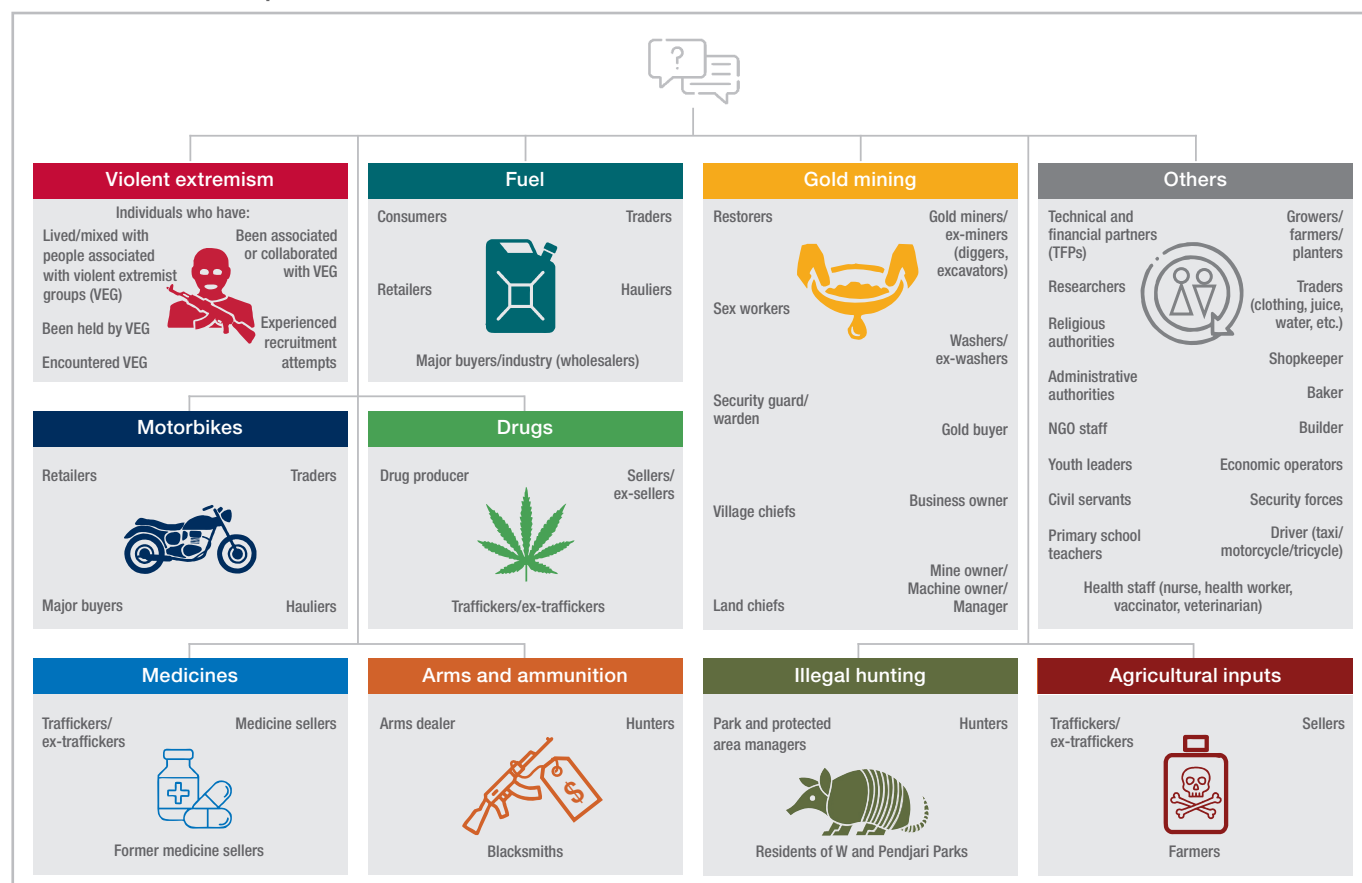


Chart 6: Interviewee profiles



the presence of women in the violent extremist groups targeting Benin. However, these examples of female participation reveal gender-specific dynamics that need to be explored in greater depth.⁸

The information gathered sheds light on certain dynamics at play in the areas covered by the research. However, it was not always possible to gather evidence of all the dynamics and practices that may originate in, or extend beyond, these areas. The dynamics presented in this report are those that have been conclusively cross-referenced and whose links with violent extremism have been documented. Risks have also been identified in relation to arms and munitions trafficking and gold panning.

Certain illicit activities practised in the areas studied, but whose links with violent extremism have not been formally demonstrated by research (trafficking in medicines, agricultural inputs, motorcycles, protected species, etc.) are not detailed in this report. They are, however, worth examining in more detail to prevent them from becoming additional vulnerabilities that violent extremist groups could exploit to strengthen their activities.

Context

From one security incident in 2019 in northern Benin and two in 2020, the trend has accelerated to at least seven incidents and attacks in 2021, over 20 recorded in 2022, and at least 15 in 2023, at the time of finalising this report. This increase in incidents has been accompanied by changes in *modi operandi* of the perpetrators and their targets, with repeated use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and attacks targeting police stations, Beninese army patrols and forest rangers from the African Parks Network. This organisation has been entrusted with managing the Pendjari and W national parks since 2017 and 2020 respectively.⁹

The deadliest attacks in the country to date were recorded between the nights of 1 and 3 May 2023 in Kaobagou and Guimbagou in the Atacora and Alibori departments respectively.¹⁰ At least 15 people were killed.¹¹

At the time of publishing this report, only four attacks had been reportedly claimed by the Group for the

Support of Islam and Muslims and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (JNIM and ISGS in Chart 7) in Benin. However, the *modi operandi* used, as well as the presence and actions of groups that allegedly belong to the jihadist movement operating in Benin's neighbouring countries, suggest that groups affiliated with JNIM or ISGS were involved in the unclaimed attacks. These groups have been active since at least 2018 in the Est Region of Burkina Faso, which borders Benin and Niger.

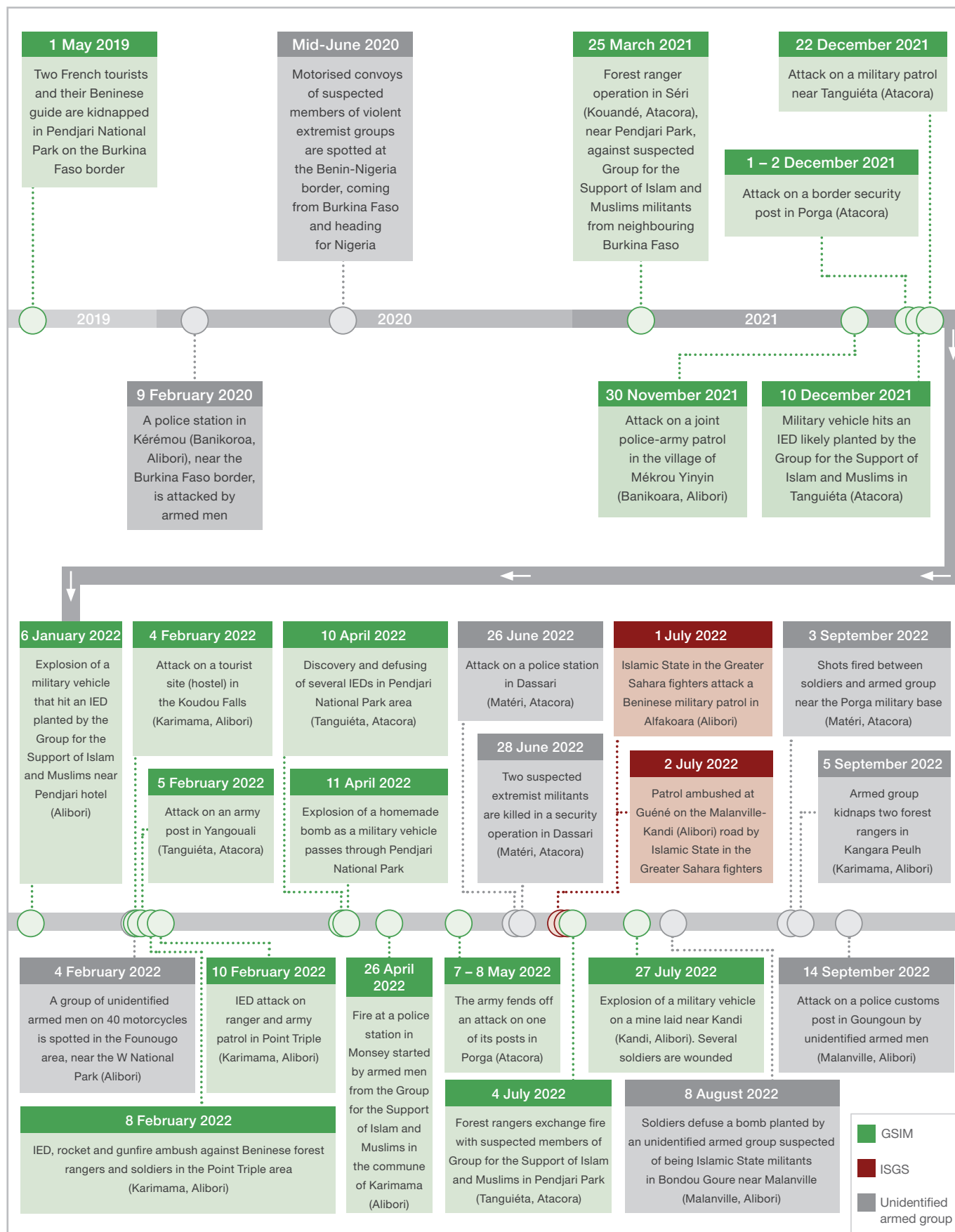
Atacora and Alibori are the departments most affected by incidents attributed to extremist groups

On 2 May 2022, in an unauthenticated audio recording, JNIM – an al-Qaeda affiliated group to which the majority of security incidents in Benin has been attributed – is said to have claimed responsibility¹² for the 26 April 2022 attack on the Monsey Police Station in Alibori. The group is also said to have claimed responsibility¹³ in an unauthenticated video for the 2 December 2021 attack on a Beninese army post in Porga, Atacora. Meanwhile, ISGS is said to have claimed responsibility, in an article published in the *Al-Naba* newspaper on 15 September 2022,¹⁴ for two attacks carried out against defence and security forces on 1 and 2 July 2022 in the Alibori department.

While media attention is focused on the areas of Benin bordering Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger, accounts also mention the presence of violent extremist groups in north-west Nigeria, more specifically in the Kainji National Park, bordering the Alibori and Borgou departments of Benin. Incursions by members of these groups into villages in the Alibori and Borgou departments to stock up on supplies, pray and preach to the population have also been documented. This situation represents an additional threat to Benin.

Interviewees who had interacted with the groups said the latter repeatedly sought to reassure the population that they would not attack civilians as long as they obeyed their rules. These include respect for Sharia law, the wearing of veils by women, a ban on collaborating with the state and its agents, and a ban on reporting

Chart 7: Main incidents linked to violent extremism recorded in Benin between 2019 and (September) 2022



North-east Benin: another gateway into the country for violent extremism?

The presence of extremist groups in north-west Nigeria, which borders Benin, and the rise in acts of crime and banditry in this area warrant particular attention. These acts are characterised by kidnappings for ransom, robberies, burglaries, theft of motorcycles and livestock, and various forms of trafficking.¹⁵ The same illicit activities were documented in the four departments covered by the research in Benin.¹⁶

In a statement issued in January 2022, a splinter faction of Boko Haram – Jama'at Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladi Sudan, also known as Ansaru¹⁷ and affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – claimed to be active in north-west Nigeria, near the Niger and Benin borders.¹⁸

In addition, work carried out by the ISS has drawn attention to the links between those involved in crime in the north-western states of Nigeria and the

Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (JAS) group, a faction of Boko Haram that was led until May 2021 by Abubakar Shekau, and the group's attempts to expand into this region.¹⁹ In November 2021, Niger State authorities also warned of the presence of members of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) on their territory, notably in Kainji National Park.²⁰

These developments raise concerns about the risk of north-east Benin becoming an additional gateway into Benin for violent extremism and providing opportunities for violent extremist groups operating in this part of Nigeria to expand into Benin. Such a scenario could also bring together Ansaru and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, on the one hand, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and ISWAP on the other. Moreover, collusion between bandits and terrorists in this area would pose a further threat to Benin.

the presence of these groups to the defence and security forces. In an unauthenticated video published in early August 2022, two armed individuals, speaking in the local Bariba language, warned civilians against collaborating with defence and security forces, and threatened reprisals.

While for now the groups are mainly targeting defence and security forces, their approach could change as civilians become more involved in efforts to prevent and tackle violent extremism. For example, there are cases of attacks on civilians²¹ and kidnappings by unidentified armed individuals in the departments of Alibori and Borgou, particularly of local elected representatives, their relatives or civilians suspected of collaborating with the defence and security forces.²²

Against this backdrop, the government's efforts to improve relations and strengthen trust between defence and security forces and the local population must not conceal the risks and pressures civilians are exposed to in villages where these groups operate and where the presence of their members is documented.

Links between violent extremism and illicit activities

In order to weaken the groups targeting Benin, it is important to gain a better understanding of the strategies they use to establish and consolidate their local foothold. These include winning the hearts and sympathies of communities to ensure funding, provisions (food products, medicines, etc.), recruitment and supply of operational resources (arms, ammunition, fuel, motorcycles, fertilisers, etc.).

The study shows that groups operating in the border areas between Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo and to a certain extent Nigeria are involved in a number of illicit activities, including fuel smuggling, illegal hunting and drug trafficking.

Fuel smuggling

Over the past four decades,²³ fuel smuggling has gradually emerged as one of the main sources of supply²⁴ in the research area. Smuggled fuel makes up a large share of daily fuel consumption in the four departments studied and beyond. Some of the fuel

Chart 8: Fuel smuggling routes



smuggled through Benin makes its way to Burkina Faso and Togo.

This well-developed and well-organised activity employs many young Beninese and involves a range of roles. These include hauliers, wholesalers, retailers, consumers and members of the defence and security forces, who carry out checks both at borders and in villages. Women, often relatives of wholesalers, are involved in the retail selling of smuggled fuel.

Smuggled supplies mainly come from fuel sold at the pump at service stations in Nigerian villages such as Illo, Lollo and Illua. Fuel was subsidised in Nigeria for years until 29 May 2023, when new president elect of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, announced the removal of subsidy on petroleum products. The fuel, which was particularly affordable²⁵ until then, is transported by motorcycle in 25-litre cans across Benin, sometimes as far as the border with Burkina Faso. Using the same

modus operandi, young Burkinabe strap eight to 10 cans onto motorcycles and set off from Benin in the direction of Burkina Faso. Fuel is also transported in 4x4 vehicles and trucks, always in 25-litre fuel cans. There are numerous unpoliced fuel routes along the Benin-Nigeria border.

This activity has developed and thrived for several reasons. Main factors include the shortage (or absence) of service stations, the ease with which smuggled fuel can be obtained along the main roads, its affordability, and the complicity of civil servants and government employees (particularly among the security forces).²⁶

Over the years, this mode of supply has become so ingrained in people's habits that the smuggling that feeds it has come to be widely tolerated, even by the security forces. They sometimes use smuggled fuel, and also benefit from it through the unofficial taxes they receive from hauliers.

In addition to smuggled fuel from Nigeria, another modus operandi has developed over the past four years. Tankers with Burkinabe and Malian registrations arriving from Cotonou dumped fuel they were meant to transport to Burkina Faso and Mali in Kourou-Koualou. It was exempt from taxes because it was in transit. The territorial dispute between Benin and Burkina Faso over the sovereignty of this area, evident from the absence of national authorities on the ground, has contributed to Kourou-Koualou's²⁷ lawlessness.

Quote 1

'Fuel trading in Koualou goes back a long way. It gained momentum around 2019 when the dry port was created. Since then, Koualou has become a major attraction for people of all nationalities and from all socio-professional categories. Although illegal, this activity was not carried out in secret. Tankers passing through Porga in the morning on their way to Bamako or Ouagadougou came back the same afternoon or during the night, for anyone to see. Customers were mainly and Burkinabe, who transported this fuel in barrels bound for Ouagadougou and Togo.'

Local councillor, Porga, 15 February 2022

Quote 2

'I moved to Koualou in 2015. I had two fuel depots that I bought in Nigeria. I set up the first depot at the entrance of Koualou and the second on the way out of the village. I was making huge profits and the customs authorities were complicit. In early 2021, the jihadists isolated Nadiagou.²⁸ Much of the fuel sold in Koualou ends up in their hands. They have 4x4 vehicles to transport fuel, which they collect from Koualou under armed escort. The jihadists, the big oil hauliers and we, the local beneficiaries, all had an interest in keeping the area under the control of the jihadists who profited from it.'

*Reseller of agricultural and oil products,
Porga, 14 February 2022*

The resulting security and administrative vacuum gave free rein to extremist groups, who had already been gaining a foothold in Burkina Faso's Est Region since 2018.

For many years, Kourou-Koualou was used as a storage area for smuggled fuel coming from or transiting through Benin. The fuel was used in the border zone and was also transported to Burkina Faso, Togo and Niger.

The presence of violent extremist groups in Kourou-Koualou encouraged fuel smuggling, thanks to the alliance of interests established between these groups and fuel traffickers. Several interviewees said the groups provided 'security' against armed robbers and defence and security forces so trafficking could continue unhindered.

This collaboration helped violent extremist groups to not only obtain the fuel needed for their operations, but also to raise funds through the fee²⁹ the traffickers paid them for protection and for securing the area.

Although it could not be completely ruled out, there was no evidence that violent extremist groups were directly involved in fuel smuggling. There was no evidence of them having a direct role in the purchase, transport, storage or sale of smuggled fuel in Kourou-Koualou.

The situation in Kourou-Koualou has changed significantly since September 2021. That month, the Burkina Faso judiciary³⁰ arrested several people in Burkina Faso accused of running a fuel fraud network that was suspected of helping to finance extremist groups. Several people interviewed in Kourou-Koualou said these arrests had disrupted the network organised around this village. They said the flow of fuel unloaded and stored in it and transiting through it had ground to a halt. In addition, since the end of 2021, Benin's defence and security forces have introduced measures in the border town of Porga to control the flow of fuel to Burkina Faso.

The loss of Kourou-Koualou as a depot for smuggled fuel and a major hub for fuel trafficking has likely been a serious setback for the extremist groups. In retaliation, some interviewees say, these groups have targeted Benin, stepping up their attacks on the country from the end of November 2021.

To make up for the loss of Kourou-Koualou, the groups have developed other supply methods. For example, in the second half of 2022, a growing number of fuel tankers were hijacked³¹ by armed groups suspected of belonging to the jihadist movement, particularly in Burkina Faso's Est Region. The groups are likely to sell fuel stolen through these hijackings. Therefore it cannot be ruled out that stolen fuel from Burkina Faso is feeding fuel smuggling in the border area, including in northern Benin.

Benin has played an important role as a transit country for fuel smuggling to neighbouring countries

In addition to Kourou-Koualou's unique role in fuel smuggling, Benin has played an important role as a transit country for fuel smuggling to neighbouring countries, particularly Burkina Faso and Togo, for over a decade. This fuel also supplies areas frequented or occupied by extremist groups in the Est Region of Burkina Faso. Some of the fuel benefits them directly. One interviewee even mentions Benin as a source of fuel for the armed groups present in Gao, Mali, during the 2012 occupation (Quote 3).

Quote 3

'I am a long-haul truck driver and I know all the countries in West Africa. Long before the jihadists occupied Burkina Faso, I accompanied a tanker-driving friend to refuel the jihadists in Mali, in Gao to be precise. We took the fuel from Cotonou, crossed the border at Porga and went to Fada, then to Torodi (Niger), then to Gao (Mali).

It was the first time I met these armed groups. They were turbaned men and you could barely see their eyes. They were carrying all kinds of arms and ammunition. I got scared. Their leader, who came to meet us, told my friend to reassure me that they won't do anything to us. The proof: we were the ones who brought them fuel. After decanting all the fuel, we returned to Benin.'

Truck driver, Djougou, 10 October 2021

Rethinking the fight against fuel smuggling in Benin

Smuggling of petroleum products has been formally banned in Benin since 2018. Article 929 of the Penal Code³² prohibits fuel trading. Similarly, article 930 of the Penal Code³³ stipulates that 'the introduction of and trade in petroleum products throughout the national territory by natural or legal persons other than the petroleum distributors and companies duly authorised in the Republic of Benin are subject to sanctions.'

Alongside repressive measures, in 2018 the government adopted measures to regulate and secure the sale of smuggled petroleum products by setting transport standards and schedules and providing modern transport and distribution equipment (mobile mini-stations),³⁴ as well as facilitating the installation of service stations in the country (tax exemption on equipment required for their installation).

More recently, in 2021, a flat-rate tax on smuggled petroleum products was introduced to deter this practice. It amounts to XOF5 000 per 25-litre can, around XOF200 per litre. However, this measure has not achieved the desired objective. Those involved in fuel smuggling saw this tax as a form of formalising or legalising smuggling. This tax has simply been incorporated into the costs and miscellaneous expenses of the business.

The legal provisions – largely ignored and violated, or simply not systematically implemented – and

the various measures adopted have so far failed to stop smuggling.³⁵

Insecurity in the north of the country, and the fact that fuel smuggled to or via Kourou-Koualou was supplying an area under the control of extremist groups, led to the defence and security forces introducing security measures in Porga.

The aim was to prohibit any fuel from passing through unless it could be considered as meeting the needs of the population of Kourou-Koualou.

The limited effectiveness and efficiency of the measures adopted reflect the difficulty for the Beninese authorities to stop fuel smuggling. It is believed that smuggling continued to take place in the Kourou-Koualou area, bypassing the defence and security forces.

Since late February 2023, the Beninese authorities have stepped up military patrols in the region.³⁶ However, the effectiveness of these operations will depend on the Beninese armed forces being able to occupy the area on a long-term basis. It will also depend on the ability of the Burkina Faso authorities to regain control of the regions of Est and Centre-Est, which border Benin. In the absence of a lasting settlement on the legal status of Kourou-Koualou, and without an effective state presence in the area, Kourou-Koualou could continue to serve as a supply and retreat base for extremist groups.

The various measures taken show the difficult position in which the Beninese authorities find themselves in the face of widespread fuel smuggling that meets the needs of the population. A clear strategy is needed on the socio-economic activity linked to the trade in fuel illegally imported from Nigeria.

Either it should be seen as a solution to the needs that formal distributors of petroleum products are unable to satisfy, and is thus better supervised and organised; or it should be confirmed as illegal, and the necessary steps are taken to prevent this fuel from entering and being sold in the country. Effective alternative sources of supply for consumers and different employment opportunities

for those who make a living from this activity should then be provided.

The tax exemption on construction materials for service stations should continue and any incentive measures enabling better coverage throughout the country are to be encouraged. Any action to tackle fuel smuggling must consider its cross-border nature.

This calls for concerted, coordinated and integrated action with the neighbouring countries concerned (Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Togo and beyond to Mali) to avoid a measure taken by one country having unwanted or negative effects (in terms of fuel supply, security or employment) in another.

Illegal hunting

Hunting³⁷ traditionally took place in the parks of the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex, straddling Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, long before these areas were granted protected area status in 1950.³⁸ It is still mainly practised by men and handed down from father to son. Women do, however, play important roles in hunting. In particular, they are responsible for the treatment, processing, transportation and sale of hunting products such as meat and other by-products. These include elephant tusks and teeth, panther skin, and lion fat used in traditional medicine.

Most security incidents recorded in Benin are concentrated around the Pendjari and W national parks

Protection measures, and more specifically the protected area status enjoyed by the parks of the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex for over 70 years, allow for regulated hunting. As these forest areas are transnational, hunting is carried out on both sides of the border, by both Beninese and Burkinabe hunters. The markets of Matéri and Tanguiéta in the Atacora department have long been the main places to sell hunting products, particularly originating from Pendjari National Park.

These products are consumed locally and also sold to Burkina Faso and Togo.

Under a 10-year agreement with Benin, the African Parks Network was entrusted with managing Pendjari Park in 2017 and W Park in 2020.³⁹ It has implemented nature conservation measures, introducing hunting zones and hunting periods and establishing which species can be hunted. These have limited hunting activities, particularly in the Matéri district.⁴⁰ These measures also apply to other income-generating activities such as fishing, farming and livestock breeding.

The restrictions imposed by the African Parks Network have contributed to raising tensions with local populations living near the Pendjari and W national parks. These tensions have created a climate of mistrust and have even led to confrontations⁴¹ between park managers and local populations in villages bordering the parks in the Atacora and Alibori departments.

Some hunters in the area have refused to abide by the new rules or take part in the programmes developed and offered by the African Parks Network. Some have travelled to the Burkinabe part of Arly National Park to continue hunting. This was made possible through collaboration with armed members of violent extremist groups operating in Burkina Faso's Est Region.

Extremist groups have taken advantage of tensions between the African Parks Network and people living

near the Pendjari and W national parks in Benin, resulting in collaboration between Beninese hunters and jihadists.

To join forces with and recruit members of these communities, the jihadists authorised hunters to operate in Arly National Park, under their supervision. They claimed to be defending an alleged divine right to kill animals, which no government can deprive anyone of.

They did, however, impose numerous conditions, including a ban on transporting pigs to Burkina Faso, drinking alcohol and taking women into the forests. The hunters also had to convert to Islam. In return for the right to hunt, the hunters supplied the extremist groups with the goods they needed to survive in Arly National Park. These included foodstuffs (such as rice, oil, cheese, pasta and salt) or poached products (smoked meat and lion organs). The collaboration has led to some hunters being recruited into the jihadists' ranks.

If state regulations continue, Beninese hunters could renew their contact with extremist groups

Collaboration between jihadists and some Beninese hunters, established since at least 2019, continued throughout 2020. It continued into 2021, but on a more limited scale, as most of the hunters involved gradually distanced themselves from – or even ceased all cooperation with – the jihadists.

This distancing was the result of individual choices in the face of demands or conditions that were increasingly difficult to bear. The more specific threat of attacks against Benin and the military response also dissuaded some hunters from continuing to collaborate. Nevertheless, if state regulations on hunting (which are perceived as a constraint on a subsistence activity) continue, they could lead to hunters renewing contact with extremist groups.

Quote 4

'I personally collaborated with the jihadists for years and in those days, I didn't know what

their real objectives were. Hunting parties were organised. Some came from Burkina Faso, but they were real hunters, not jihadists. No one talked about religion and there were no religious constraints. It was after the fall of President [Blaise] Compaoré that these jihadists began appearing in the park. They tended to be Fulani, better armed and in a group of about 10, whereas my former collaborators were Mossis and Gourmantchés.

In 2020, the jihadists set us new conditions. They gave us their support for hunting in Arly forest, but only if we converted to Islam. And from then on, no more women in the park, even though they helped us carry the meats we smoked. No more alcohol, but they were going to give us pills to deal with stress and fear of lions. We worked together all through 2020. For our stay in the forest for a hunting campaign that lasted 10 to 15 days, my two brothers and I had to return with oil, pasta, condiments and, most importantly, Wagashi cheese and cow's milk. But in 2021, a new group of jihadists arrived with more demands – daily prayers, and we had to wear a beard to resemble the prophet, they said.

From then on, the collaboration began to falter and during my last campaign with the group that dismissed me, there was talk of going to Mali to better understand the religion. I had supplied them with enough basic necessities (peanut oil, spaghetti, Maggi flavouring, salt, etc.) but the contract didn't last. Despite the fact that this activity allowed us to feed our families, my brother and I stopped the collaboration.'

Hunter, Matéri, 2 February 2022

Quote 5

'Poaching is pushing Beninese hunters to collaborate with jihadists, who allow hunting in exchange for supplies of rice and other foodstuffs. Two hunters who were arrested and presented to prosecutors confessed to collaborating with them.'

Republican Police, Matéri, 23 September 2021

Balancing biodiversity conservation measures with the need to protect income-generating activities

Most security incidents recorded in Benin are concentrated around the Pendjari and W national parks. On 8 and 10 February 2022, one soldier and eight forest rangers were killed and another 12 injured in W National Park. There are two main reasons that these parks attract violent extremist groups.

First, the geographical locations of the parks enable groups to move easily from one country to another, taking advantage of the porous borders and multiple unofficial crossing points. Second, the dense forest cover makes aerial surveillance difficult, giving extremist groups the opportunity to take refuge and benefit from the natural resources – particularly the wildlife – that abound in the parks.

To counter this threat and prevent the parks from becoming rear bases or sanctuaries for such groups, the government has taken a number of measures. These include deploying military personnel from the Benin Armed Forces to the two parks to support the African Parks Network rangers; and increasing resources and ranger numbers, recruited mainly from communities surrounding the parks.

Military exclusion zones have been established in the parks. The African Parks Network has also strengthened terrestrial, aerial and river surveillance in these areas. Notably they've done this through procuring equipment,⁴² creating a specialised intelligence cell within the ranger teams, and establishing an intelligence-sharing framework with defence and security forces.⁴³

The operator has also arrested several people involved in various wildlife offences in the parks⁴⁴ and is said to have prevented attacks.⁴⁵

In addition, the African Parks Network has reinforced its community development initiatives⁴⁶ to benefit people who live near the parks. It has also forged a partnership with the Union of Village Associations for the Management of Wildlife Reserves (U-AVIGREF) to improve relations and foster collaboration with communities.

These efforts are important in preventing groups from establishing in these parks. However, some interviewees felt these measures were inadequate and did not take sufficient account of the needs of local populations and people from certain socio-professional categories who carry out ancestral subsistence activities in the parks.

Furthermore, the African Parks Network and all park management actors should continue to capitalise on the consultation frameworks⁴⁷ established with communities to address the resentment that has led some hunters to collaborate with violent extremists.

Dialogue forums dedicated to each socio-professional categories that depend on the Pendjari and W parks for their activities could also prove useful.

These exchange forums would allow for better identification of communities' needs and concerns. They'd also allow for better understanding of the vulnerability factors specific to each socio-professional category that could lead to people's engagement in violent extremism in order to protect or continue carrying out their activities.

In the long term, these dialogues could help strike the right balance between measures to preserve biodiversity and the need to protect income-generating activities. They could also contribute to achieving effective co-management of these protected areas, which is essential for their long-term conservation.

In addition, such dialogues could help the African Parks Network and the relevant authorities to assess the relevance of income-generating activities currently offered to those who live near the parks.

If necessary, these activities could be extended and adapted to reflect the realities and needs of all socio-professional actors whose economic activity depends on the parks.

An update to the National strategy for the conservation and management of wildlife reserves

2011–2020⁴⁸ and the strategy and action plan for biodiversity 2011–2020⁴⁹ should be considered. This would help these policies adapt to the regional security context and the various threats that increasingly weigh on these areas, including classified forests.

To meet these challenges effectively, the Beninese authorities will have to integrate their actions into a regional dynamic, together with the countries that share the W-Arly-Pendjari complex, namely Burkina Faso and Niger. Togo, whose Oti-Kéran-Mandouri complex borders Benin and Burkina Faso, could also be involved in a preventive approach.

Due to the cross-border nature of the W-Arly-Pendjari complex and the deteriorating security situation around and within these parks, the effectiveness of any action to secure and conserve

this area will depend on the ability of the countries concerned to adopt a concerted and integrated cross-border approach.

This involves, among other things, improved collaboration between the defence and security forces and the various departments of the three countries in charge of managing these areas, information sharing, an effective state presence in these parks that takes into account the protection of local communities and their activities, and the conservation and security of these areas.

This would be an opportunity to strengthen relations between communities, defence and security forces, and water and forestry officers, some of whom have been strongly criticised by communities for their involvement in acts of corruption, extortion, intimidation, etc.

Drugs

The data collected points to extremist groups' involvement in drug trafficking along the border between Benin and Burkina Faso, and more specifically around Kourou-Koualou.

In the area studied, the two main products being trafficked were tramadol⁵⁰ and cannabis. Consumption of these products is widespread, particularly among young people,⁵¹ and especially farm workers, gold miners, shepherds and some zémidjans (motorcycle taxi drivers). In the Donga department, more specifically in Djougou, cannabis is consumed in ghettos and clubs by young people – both female and male.

In the Atacora department, there is a particularly strong link between gold mining and drug trafficking, characterised by consumption of cannabis and tramadol at artisanal gold mining sites in Kouatena. The diggers are reputed to use it to 'chase away fear' or to 'give themselves courage.' The tramadol found on gold mining sites is said to come from Cotonou or Porto-Novo. It is reported to be transported by public bus before being distributed by zémidjans. Ghana (via Togo) and Nigeria (via Malanville in particular) are also mentioned as places of origin for these products.

Some cannabis in the illicit market is produced locally in the Atacora and Donga departments. This cannabis is then exported to Togo (Mandouri, and even as far as Cinkassé in northern Togo, on the border with Burkina Faso, via Dapaong) and Burkina Faso (via Kourou-Koualou).

Women – often the producers' wives – are reported to play a role in getting the cannabis to the markets and selling it.

Women – often the producers' wives – are reported to play a role in getting the cannabis to the markets

Members of extremist groups operating in the border zone between Benin and Burkina Faso are said to have been involved in trafficking this product between Matéri and Kourou-Koualou. Women assumed to be their wives were reportedly involved in transporting large quantities of cannabis acquired on the markets of the Matéri commune to Kourou-Koualou. The cannabis was passed off as 'moringa' or concealed in goods and food products. Once in Koualou, this cannabis was picked up by other actors for transport in Burkina Faso and probably beyond.

According to one interviewee involved in cannabis production whose account could not be cross-checked, extremist groups were also involved in transporting cannabis from Kourou-Koualou to other countries, notably Mali. Cannabis trafficking between Matéri and Kourou-Koualou had been observed for several years by interviewees who lived in Kourou-Koualou between 2020 and 2022.

Quote 6

‘The cannabis growers entrusted the products to their wives, who sold them to the wives of jihadists and who referred to the cannabis as moringa. This was made available fresh or dried. No one was interested until an argument between buyers and sellers turned into a brawl. Police intervention and investigations brought to light that every market day in Matéri, buses from Burkina came to stock on foodstuffs, fuel, and “moringa” which was nothing more than Indian hemp. The destination of these vehicles was Koualou. In this area, the “jihadists” stock up on foodstuffs and cannabis.’

Republican Police, Matéri, 7 February 2022

Quote 7

‘Farmers in the Koualou area have had the freedom to grow and market cannabis. When I was teaching in Koualou, it struck me as paradoxical that while the jihadists were hunting down bandits and other drug users in the area, they were sending their wives to buy large quantities of cannabis in jute bags, which they took the time to dry with the help of some women and young people from Koualou.

The wives of the jihadists and their Beninese accomplices transported the bags of cannabis on tricycles. Individuals in military uniforms and others in civilian clothes came to pick up this stock. An acquaintance who produces it claims that these jihadists transport it to other countries such as Mali.’

School teacher, Porga, 17 February 2022

According to several interviewees, although extremist groups were opposed to drug consumption in Kourou-Koualou, they allowed cannabis trafficking to continue unhindered. This could reflect a dissociation made by the groups between consumption and trafficking, or simply a certain pragmatism and a willingness to take advantage of anything that might support their actions. It was not possible to identify how these groups benefit from their attitude towards this particular form of trafficking – however, some financial gain may be assumed.

That said, the continued trafficking of cannabis once again illustrates the convergence of interests, and more specifically the involvement of extremist groups in illicit activities in the Kourou-Koualou area and the relationship they keep with those practising them.

Reinforcing the fight against drug trafficking in Benin

The fight against drug trafficking in Benin must be strengthened, particularly to reduce the country’s place as a transit zone.⁵² Attention should be paid to local production of cannabis and the cross-border trafficking it drives. Cannabis field detection methods and production monitoring must be stepped up. Due to the inherently transnational nature of drug trafficking, the fight against this problem requires consolidation of regional cooperation with the countries neighbouring Benin.

Risk of additional opportunities for groups

Risks have also been documented in connection with illegal gold mining and arms and ammunition trafficking. These activities represent other vulnerabilities that can provide groups with additional opportunities to access various resources (human, operational, logistical and financial).

Clandestine gold mining

Artisanal gold mining has been developing in the Atacora department, particularly in the commune of Natitingou, for almost three decades. Gold was already being mined in Perma in colonial times. Led by local residents and foreign operators, artisanal mining resumed in the early 1990s. Most of Atacora’s gold

mining sites are located in two districts of Natitingou. These are the Perma district, home to the gold mining sites of Kouatena and Gnagnamou, and the Koutopounga district, which contains the Tchantangou gold mining site.

Although carried out on 'permitted sites' (plots leased by the local council), gold mining is largely performed in an anarchic fashion, notably without the ministerial authorisation to exploit a plot of land required by current legislation.⁵³ Controlling the business and all that it entails remains a major challenge. Notably, there is no departmental or local authority in charge of enforcing mining regulations.

Artisanal gold mining is particularly well developed in the Kouatena area. The sites there attract people from all walks of life who are driven by the hope of a life-changing discovery or are simply seeking a better life.

The presence of vulnerable people at illegal gold mining sites makes them recruiting grounds for armed groups

In addition to people from Benin, the sites attract nationals from several countries in the region: Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Women are present on these sites and are generally involved in sieving and washing sand extracted from gold mining sites, as well as crushing rocks. They generally receive XOF1 000 for a bowl of sand. As a bonus, they also receive the residue after washing.

In one documented case, a gold trader and digging site owner in Kouatena claimed to rely on his two wives to supervise work on the sites in his absence. A cross-border gold trader reported using his wife to transport gold between Togo (Sokodé) and Benin (Perma) and another claimed to use his wife's hairdressing salon as a gold buying point for small retailers.

These cases show the involvement of women in roles such as transportation and marketing of mined gold. In addition to these functions, which are directly linked to gold mining, women also carry out related activities on the sites. Examples include selling food products and medicines.

The difficulty of controlling people's comings and goings on gold mining sites and the supply chains of certain sensitive pieces of equipment make gold mining and miners vulnerable to the infiltration of violent extremists. Artisanal gold mining is of high interest to violent extremist groups.

The presence of vulnerable people at illegal gold mining sites who are searching for a better life makes these sites potential recruiting grounds for armed groups. Artisanal gold mining also drives markets for goods that are licit (including foodstuffs and other consumer goods) and illicit (including medicines, drugs, arms, ammunition and explosives) that provide violent extremist groups with supply options.

In operational terms, equipment used in gold mining, such as explosives or detonating cords, can be used to make IEDs. Moreover, gold mining offers violent extremist groups opportunities to invest financial resources. The origins



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and legality of these are difficult, if not impossible, to establish. The same applies to the identities of the people behind these investments. The resources invested make those who benefit from them obligated to these people. Finally, the marketing of gold from mining operations, which is largely outside any state control, generates substantial local financial resources.

Some of these vulnerabilities are illustrated by several facts uncovered in the course of this research. An IED and explosive materials used to make IEDs, such as black powder, sulphur, slow fuses and batteries, were found⁵⁴ in 2022 in the heights of Koupéico (in the Perma district). These facts indicate that violent extremist groups have succeeded in establishing relationships in the distribution channels for these explosive components, which are also used on gold mining sites.

Quote 8

‘The main income-generating activity around which everyone here revolves is gold mining. I prefer to sell outside Benin because of the red tape and the high taxes. We are aware of the presence of armed elements. They were surprised by hunters whom they took hostage. These armed individuals spent several days in the bush in a village bordering Kouatena, before being arrested by a platoon of soldiers who handed them to the court. Since then, we have decided to stop allowing newcomers we don’t know to mine gold. Landowners have been warned. Only well-known old-timers like me can acquire mines or plots. For the moment, officially, no jihadists are mining the gold, but we’re all scared. It is hard to tell who’s who in this village. The military and the police carry out unexpected checks on mining sites. But on a day-to-day basis, everyone has their own way of ensuring their safety and protecting their workplace. Gold mining is an activity that has enabled me to build in Kouatena, Perma and, at home in Niger. The locals also benefit from it. Today, due to insecurity, people are afraid to invest in the locality.’

*Gold miner and trader, Kouatena,
27 January 2022*

Regulating artisanal gold mining in Benin to curb infiltration by violent extremists

Over the years, Beninese authorities have taken numerous measures to better control artisanal gold mining in the Atacora region. A gold miners’ office was set up to make it easier to issue permits (normally renewable every three years) and to control the movements of gold miners.

However, the office was unable to fulfil this function effectively. It did not receive unanimous approval from gold miners, some of whom questioned its legitimacy in wanting to regulate the activity. No authorisation has been granted by the office since 2018.

The main measure taken to regulate gold mining in the Kouatena area was the creation of a special police unit to secure the sites and settle conflicts linked to this activity. This unit replaced a special gendarmerie brigade, which was tasked with securing all gold mining sites without opposing their clandestine operations.

Although the Kouatena special police station has helped to reduce cases of armed robbery and theft, its effectiveness has been undermined by its limited human and material resources: insufficient staff, lack of four-wheeled vehicles and shortage of two-wheeled vehicles.

The security context, characterised by a terrorist threat on Benin’s borders, played a significant role in the Beninese authorities’ decision to ban gold mining in October 2021⁵⁵. This ban was accompanied by the eviction of gold miners. Rumours of the presence of terrorists are said to have prompted security measures, the strengthening of the military presence in the district of Perma and in the suburb of Kouatena, and the introduction of mixed patrols.

Awareness-raising campaigns organised by the Ministry of the Interior and local councillors were carried out to encourage people to be vigilant and in particular to identify and report suspicious individuals.

Artisanal gold mining in Atacora needs to be taken back under control and better regulated. To achieve this, competent technical entities need to be established at the departmental and local levels, within the Ministry of Mines (and particularly within the Bureau of Mining and Geological Research of the Republic of Benin), which would be responsible for enforcing existing mining legislation.

Similarly, it could be worth reviving or revitalising the departmental unit responsible for mining issues. Community actors must be made aware of the need to respect the conditions surrounding access to operating permits and to take responsibility for doing so.

Furthermore, the current revision of the 2006 act on the mining code and mining taxation in the Republic

of Benin⁵⁶ provides an opportunity to rethink, in consultation with all stakeholders, regulation on gold mining in the country, in order to adapt it to the challenges facing this employment-generating sector.

The presence of nationals from several countries in the region on gold mining sites highlights the need to set up systems to monitor and control migratory flows, in collaboration with local actors and authorities. This approach also involves strengthening cooperation between the security forces and the local population.

The operational capacity of the Kouatena special police force must be strengthened through provision of adequate human and material resources.

Arms and ammunition

In order to not attract attention, violent extremist groups are not always able to move from one area to another with the arms and ammunition they need for their expansion and establishment efforts. They therefore try to obtain these where they are. This is one of the reasons they attack defence and security force posts and their convoys. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims claims to have seized arms and ammunition following two attacks on security posts. In an unauthenticated recording,⁵⁷ it claimed responsibility for the 26 April 2022 attack on the Monsey police station, which enabled it to seize 17 firearms, ammunition and a large sum of money. In an unauthenticated video,⁵⁸ the group also claimed responsibility for seizing arms and ammunition during an attack on a defence and security forces surveillance post in Porga on the night of 1–2 December 2021.

Arms and ammunition are also sourced through trafficking. Benin is not spared from the illicit circulation of firearms and ammunition or the trafficking driven by this. For example in 2021, shipments of ammunition (notably 12-gauge shotgun cartridges) were intercepted in Benin.⁵⁹ There have been reports of trafficking through Kourou-Koualou of arms originating from Cotonou or the town of Koforidua in south-east Ghana. These arms are transported by freight trucks, including

tankers, and motorcycle taxis. The absence of police checks on the roads is seen as a significant facilitating factor in this situation.

Quote 9

‘Several young people from my area have been asked by the jihadists to work as labourers in Koualou, transporting goods to their bases in the villages bordering Arly National Park. Lots of arms and ammunition have passed through Koualou in tanker trucks. These trucks, which mainly belong to people from Mali or Burkina Faso, transport everything for the benefit of the jihadists (food, fruit, fuel, arms and ammunition, etc.). In the forest, donkeys are sometimes used to quietly carry parcels through certain areas.

My son, whom the jihadists killed, was used in these exchanges. He was 23 and could transport six cans of fuel over 90 km to reach the villages bordering Arly National Park, where the jihadists are based. He used to earn up to XOF1 000 per can. They killed him because he lost a package containing arms.’

*Refugee from Burkina Faso, Matéri,
10 February 2022*

Quote 10

'I am a motorcycle taxi driver in Benin. In 2020, a customer from Burkina Faso introduced himself as a discharged member of the Burkina Faso army. He was arms trafficking. My role was to take him to Koualou every time he returned from Cotonou, sometimes with arms and ammunition. The bus bringing him from Cotonou dropped him about 7 km from Tanguiéta and he would call me at around 7.30 am. I had to arrange to drop off his parcel containing disassembled arms in Koualou. He paid me XOF20 000 for a journey of less than 100 km. In one trip, I earned the equivalent of 10 workdays. It was a tempting opportunity.

The arms came from Cotonou. I didn't get a chance to see what type they were, but I think they were military arms. When we approached Porga customs, he would get off the motorcycle and walk through the checkpoint. I continued via the backroads and waited for him just beyond the Pendjari bridge. I once took him a few kilometres to Nadiagou, where two of his colleagues were waiting for us. He also paid me an extra XOF5 000. He told me that he sometimes bought arms from Koforidua in Ghana. Carriers with large trucks leaving Kpalimé or Badou (two Togolese towns bordering Ghana) would drop them off at Kpèrèkètè or Bodi in the commune of Bassila in the Donga department. When he doesn't go to Cotonou, he goes to these localities to collect arms with the help of the zémidjans.'

Motorcycle taxi driver, Perma, 6 February 2022

Once again, Kourou-Koualou appears to be a major hub for this trafficking, particularly as a transit zone. Some interviewees referred to the violent extremist groups as the recipients of the arms and ammunition transported to or via Kourou-Koualou. However, it has not been possible to confirm this information. Nevertheless, the existence of arms and ammunition trafficking close to where extremist groups operate increases the risk of them benefitting from it.

According to some interviewees, in late 2021/early 2022, two individuals carrying cans of petrol on motorcycles were intercepted at a police checkpoint in Mékrou Yinyin in the Alibori department. The two evaded the check by fleeing into the bush. Empty cans were found on their motorcycles, with seven rifles (type unspecified) and a large sum of money (XOF7 million was mentioned) concealed inside.

A few weeks later, two people described as jihadists reportedly clashed with soldiers in the area. Retaliatory action by jihadists for the loss of arms and money they had owned or which had been destined for them has been



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suggested, although this couldn't be confirmed. The discovery of firearms transported by people involved in fuel smuggling illustrates the role played by some of them in arms trafficking, and more broadly, the integrated nature of this illicit economy.

Banditry (robberies, cattle and motorcycle theft, kidnappings, etc.) marked by the growing use of artisanal

firearms and AKM-type assault rifles have also been documented in the research area. These events have prompted some victims, including traders, smugglers and cross-border herders, to illegally acquire arms from Ghana for protection. In a region where illicit arms proliferate, these acts of banditry and the need for protection could further fuel the flow of illicit arms.

Strengthening controls on the illicit flow of arms and ammunition in Benin

The existence of arms and ammunition trafficking, and the security risks posed by this situation, underline the need to strengthen controls on the illicit flow of arms and ammunition into the country. To this end, the previously abolished roadside checkpoints could be reinstated, particularly on routes identified as high-risk areas following an assessment involving notably the police and customs services, as well as local elected representatives. In addition, it would be advisable to reinforce the security of stocks and arms and ammunition stores in barracks and isolated posts, to prevent them from becoming targets and sources of arms and ammunition for these groups.

The need to tighten controls on the illicit flow of arms and ammunition also applies to movements to and from neighbouring countries. This involves reinforced cross-border cooperation, particularly on the borders with Benin's neighbours Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, Togo and Ghana. The Accra Initiative, which brings together several of these countries,

and aims to prevent the spread of violent extremism and combat transnational organised crime, notably through information and intelligence sharing, could serve as a framework for collaboration and consultation on appropriate measures to strengthen the control of illicit flows of arms and ammunition in its member states.

At the regional level, efforts undertaken by the national commissions on small arms and light weapons of the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should be strengthened to ensure effective implementation, at the national level, of the 2006 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons. ECOWAS member states should also continue to take advantage of the annual meetings of these commissions to strengthen regional collaboration and to share best practices drawn from their respective experiences of preventing and combating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

Conclusion

Illicit activities existed long before the emergence of violent extremist groups in Benin's northern border areas. But these activities now play a key role in the often-inconspicuous strategies used by these groups to establish and consolidate their local foothold, and to secure their supplies of human, operational and financial resources.

Several of these activities were recorded in the research area. However, the analysis focused on activities with documented links to violent extremism – fuel trafficking, illegal hunting and drug trafficking –

and on those that risk providing groups with additional opportunities, such as illegal gold mining and arms and munitions trafficking.

Benin needs to strengthen its security arrangements to limit the spread of violent extremism in the country and improve the safety of the population and their property. In addition to this, in coordination with neighbouring states, it must increase its efforts to better understand the supply chains of these groups and to weaken these by attacking the means they use to operate and finance themselves. Authorities must go beyond ad hoc efforts to combat cross-border organised crime by providing

sustainable, multidimensional responses that act on structural factors.

Furthermore, state initiatives to weaken these groups by cutting off their supply chains must consider the complexity and dynamics underlying links between violent extremism and illicit activities. Some illicit activities whose links to violent extremism are documented in this research (e.g. fuel smuggling and illegal hunting) are income-generating activities for communities. They are also a way for these communities to access basic social services, for which state provision is weak.

Communities must be involved as much as possible in the design and implementation of these initiatives, as well as in the creation of alternative solutions. This will help to avoid certain unforeseen negative consequences, including the disruption of livelihoods, which could drive disgruntled populations into the arms of terrorists.

In combating this phenomenon, it's important to not create the conditions for people in certain socio-professional categories to be drawn into violent extremist groups. The state must make efforts to protect people and their property to keep communities on its side. It is therefore imperative to avoid stigmatising the various socio-professional categories documented in this study, some of whose members maintain relations with violent extremist groups.

To respond appropriately, it's important to understand the vulnerability factors of each of these socio-professional categories, the situations that encourage recourse to illicit practices, and the challenges these actors may face in changing employment.

In addition, strategies aimed at reducing group financing and supply must include integrated actions and cross-border coordination. Otherwise extremist groups will simply choose other routes when faced with obstacles.

Benin is also affected by the illicit circulation of firearms and ammunition, and arms trafficking

In this respect, the Accra Initiative can provide a useful framework for coordination and information sharing between its member states.

Finally, certain vulnerabilities identified in the context of this research warrant particular attention and scrutiny to avoid these elements providing additional resources to the armed groups active in Benin. These include illicit activities practised in the areas studied but whose links with violent extremism could not be thoroughly documented (trafficking of medicines, agricultural inputs, motorcycles, protected species, etc.). They also include local conflicts, particularly between farmers and herders, and the ban on cross-border transhumance.

Notes

- 1 These areas include Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. In addition, the Grand-Bassam attack in Côte d'Ivoire in 2016, claimed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had been planned and executed by individuals from Mali.
- 2 This follows on from the study published by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in 2019, showing that West African coastal countries, including Benin, are supply or transit zones, as well as sources of funding for violent extremist groups operating in the Sahel. See W Assanvo et al, Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.
- 3 The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims is a coalition made up of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Emirate in the Sahara, Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoun and Katiba Macina
- 4 These two groups are surrounded by sub-groups that are officially affiliated or simply linked to them.
- 5 See W Assanvo et al, Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.
- 6 A number of other illicit activities have been identified in the research area. However, the activities on which the analysis focuses are those for which links have been documented as part of this study.
- 7 Among the interviewees, 135 belonged to categories 1 and 2. These five categories are neither exclusive nor clear-cut. The same actor may belong or have belonged to more than one category over time. Moreover, without precise information on the size of the groups targeting Benin, or on the number of individuals involved in illicit activities, it is impossible to determine the representativeness of the interviewees met in the course of this research. For this reason, this report avoids quantitative analysis.
- 8 A study carried out by ISS in Mali and Niger on the ways in which women associate with the Katiba Macina in Mali and Boko Haram in Niger revealed that women are strategic human resources for these groups. These women take on multiple roles, either voluntarily or under duress, offering the groups significant strategic and operational advantages. See JE Abatan and B Sangaré, Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including women to what end?, Institute for Security Studies, 2021 <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-35.pdf> <https://issafrica.org/fr/recherches/rapport-sur-lafrique-de-louest/katiba-macina-et-boko-haram-inclure-les-femmes-a-queelles-fins> <https://issafrica.org/fr/recherches/rapport-sur-lafrique-de-louest/katiba-macina-et-boko-haram-inclure-les-femmes-a-queelles-fins>.
- 9 See African Parks, <https://africanparks.org/>.
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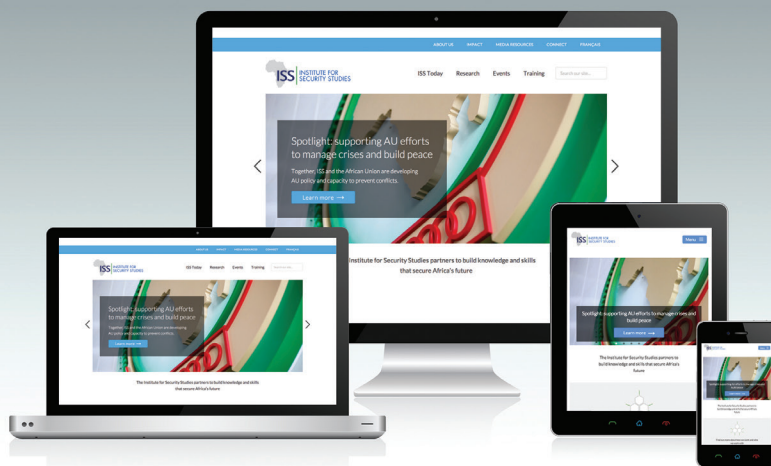
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