

## THE ROLE OF CBAGS IN COMBATTING THE EXPANSION OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND BENIN

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### COMMUNITY BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

*“As experiences from the Sahel demonstrate, the appropriate use of CBAGs in the government response is essential to preventing a rapid escalation of violence.”*

### FAST FACTS

- The failure of Malian, regional, and international forces to contain the violence has led to an exponential expansion of [Islamist] extremist groups into central Mali, as well as neighboring states.
- The increasing scope and sophistication of jihadist attacks in coastal states is concerning. Extremist groups are not simply launching hit-and-run assaults from bases in Burkina Faso, but are recruiting from and working more closely with local communities. In such a scenario, the role of CBAGs is crucial.
- The vast local knowledge and connections that CBAGs have provide an opportunity for them to assist in state responses to violent extremism without deploying them militarily.

### Introduction and Context

While Islamist extremist groups had been present and involved in criminal activities in northern Mali since the early 2000s, they began to gain ground in the Sahel around 2012, when small, local insurgencies connected with al-Qaeda began launching attacks in northern Mali. The situation was exacerbated by the fall of Colonel Khadafi's regime in nearby Libya in 2011 and that country's destabilization, gradually leading to an influx of radicalized Sahelian nationals and large amounts of weaponry into Mali. The failure of Malian, regional, and international forces to contain the violence has led to an exponential expansion of extremist groups—now mainly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)—into central Mali, as well as neighboring states. In particular, in Burkina Faso, the northern regions of Soum and Oudalan have faced growing pressure, while groups have also expanded to the south and the

east and have posed a threat to Ouagadougou.<sup>1</sup> Niger has also been targeted frequently and the regions of Tillabéry, Diffa, and Tahoua have been particularly badly affected.<sup>2</sup> In turn, this expansion now poses a growing threat to coastal West Africa as well.

Now, both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire find themselves periodically targeted by these groups. Benin has witnessed at least five attacks since the start of the year, and Côte d'Ivoire experienced 13 assaults over the course of 2020 and 2021.<sup>3</sup> The attacks have involved the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including at least four successful and two failed in Côte d'Ivoire, and indicate the intent, particularly of JNIM, which has been more frequently linked to these attacks than ISSP, to target both of these countries in a more sustained manner than has hitherto been the case.<sup>4</sup> Recurrent attacks in these coastal countries underscore a strategy that French intelligence services drew attention to in 2020: the desire by groups such as ISSP and JNIM to expand from their strongholds in the Sahel towards the coast of West Africa, from where valuable access to ports would allow them to expand their involvement in trafficking routes considerably.<sup>5</sup> An uptick in attacks in the first half of 2021 in Côte d'Ivoire and more recently in Benin and Togo—exemplified by the first successful attack on Togo occurring on May 10-11—suggests that the armed groups are making moves towards this objective.

The role of community based armed groups (CBAGs) within this evolving threat is extremely important. As JNIM and ISSP have expanded, governments lacking military resources in Burkina Faso and Mali have mobilized CBAGs, typically in the form of traditional hunters such as the dozo and the Koglweogo, to combat the insurgents.<sup>6</sup> While this has assisted these governments in targeting insurgents, especially in areas where the military has a limited footprint, the use of CBAGs to combat the expansion of jihadist groups has also raised a number of challenges. These armed groups are not trained or equipped to target sophisticated insurgencies. They have also been prone to human rights abuses and have extensively targeted herding communities, perceived to be associated with jihadist groups, such as the Peuhl, from which ISSP and JNIM have

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1 Adele Orosz, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel is Strengthening its Grip in West Africa", *LSE Blogs*, February 15, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/02/15/violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-strengthening-grip-west-africa-mali-burkina-faso-niger-jihadi/>.

2 Ibid.

3 Caleb Weiss, "Jihadist Attacks Flow Into Littoral West Africa," *Long War Journal*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.long-warjournal.org/archives/2021/12/jihadist-attacks-flow-into-littoral-west-africa.php>; Francois Mazet, "Attaque Dans l'Extrême-Nord du Bénin: «Cet Incident n'est pas un Incident Isolé," *RFI*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220210-attaque-dans-l-extr%C3%Aame-nord-du-b%C3%A9nin-cet-incident-n-est-pas-un-incident-isol%C3%A9>.

4 Weiss, "Jihadist Attacks"; "Trois Attaques Ont Fait au Moins 9 Morts Dont un Français Dans le Nord du Bénin," *France 24*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20220211-trois-attaques-ont-fait-au-moins-9-morts-dont-un-fran%C3%A7ais-dans-le-nord-du-b%C3%A9nin>.

5 Aneliese Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading to the Gulf of Guinea Littoral States, and a New Approach to Countering it is Needed," *Modern War Institute*, September 9, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/jihadism-is-spreading-to-the-gulf-of-guinea-littoral-states-and-a-new-approach-to-countering-it-is-needed/>; Daniel Finnan, "Sahel Jihadists Eye Expansion into Côte d'Ivoire and Benin Says French Spy Boss," *RFI*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/afrique/20210203-sahel-jihadists-eye-expansion-into-cote-d-ivoire-and-benin-says-french-spy-boss-africa-attacks-military-aqim>.

6 Koglweogo are a CBAG, which emerged in 2014-2015, largely comprising Mossi and Gourmantché communities. Koglweogo have become increasingly involved in efforts to tackle jihadist expansion with state support.

recruited considerably, without evidence that they have committed crimes.<sup>7</sup> This kind of violence has undermined the state's response by marginalizing some communities, in turn facilitating jihadist recruitment.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the state, local communities, and CBAGs is therefore crucial for coastal West African states to manage effectively, as JNIM and ISGS expand into the littorals. This is not least because CBAGs' local knowledge and connections make them, if mobilized well, potentially valuable resources in combatting the proliferation of jihadist violence in coastal states.

## Relevance to policy and practice

The main response to the expansion of extremist violence in Côte d'Ivoire and Benin thus far has been military. Both countries have significantly expanded their military presence in the northern border regions. In July 2019, Côte d'Ivoire launched an operation called *Frontière étanche* along its northern borders, before declaring a militarized zone in the northern region and deploying an additional 3,000 troops to the border in November 2021.<sup>9</sup> In Benin, military and police reinforcements have been sent to the north, and mobile positions have been set up.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in April 2020, Benin further expanded its security force presence along the borders of Burkina Faso, Niger, and the north-western quarter of Nigeria, and further special forces are due to be posted to the region by 2025.<sup>11</sup>

This prioritization of a military response raises many problems. While reinforcing security is required, neither Côte d'Ivoire nor Benin has a particularly effective military.<sup>12</sup> Côte d'Ivoire's armed forces are prone to mutinies and have been undergoing extensive, though often ineffective, security sector reform since the end of the civil war in 2011.<sup>13</sup> Equally, Benin's President Patrice

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7 Peuhl communities are traditionally nomadic herders, which has generated varying levels of conflict in coastal and Sahel states in West Africa. This has periodically resulted in attacks on Peuhl communities by farmers who perceive the herders to have trampled their land or stolen their livestock. Protection and dispute resolution in these disagreements has been minimal and the Peuhl have often perceived themselves to be unfairly attacked for being herders. Jihadist groups have mobilised this feeling of marginalisation to recruit widely in Peuhl communities, which has exacerbated local negative sentiment towards Peuhl people, who are now perceived negatively for being herders as well as because of the perception that they are all involved with jihadist groups. In turn this has led to further attacks on Peuhl communities by self-defense groups seeking to eradicate jihadist forces, spurring still more recruitment of Peuhl people to jihadist groups. "The New Frontier for Jihadist Groups?," *KAS* (2021): 42; "A Vicious Cycle: The Reactionary Nature of Militant Attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali," *ACLEd*, May 31, 2019, <https://acleddata.com/2019/05/31/a-vicious-cycle-the-reactionary-nature-of-militant-attacks-in-burkina-faso-and-mali/>.

8 "The New Frontier," 42; *ACLEd*, "A Vicious Cycle."

9 Georges Ibrahim Tounkara, "Lutte Contre le Terrorisme: l'Armée Ivoirienne Recrute," *DW*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/fr/c%C3%B4te-divoire-arm%C3%A9e-recrutement-terrorisme/a-59912946>; "The New Frontier," 14.

10 "The New Frontier," 43.

11 "The New Frontier," 43; "Le Bénin Renforce la Coopération Sécuritaire Avec ses Voisins Face à la Recrudescence d'Attaques," *RFI*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220214-le-b%C3%A9nin-renforce-la-coop%C3%A9ration-s%C3%A9curitaire-avec-ses-voisins-face-%C3%A0-la-recrudescence-d-attaques>.

12 "The New Frontier," 44; Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

13 The temperament of the Ivoirian armed forces has improved somewhat since former rebel leader and head of the national assembly Guillaume Soro went into exile in 2019. Soro had been heavily implicated in numerous mutinies in Côte d'Ivoire, which have since dissipated – the last one occurring in 2017. However, following years of reshuffles and reorganisation of the military, the level of discipline and the extent to which the forces are well organised remains highly questionable. Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

Talon is widely believed to fear a coup against his presidency and has therefore starved his armed forces of resources, making sustained operations in the north much harder.<sup>14</sup> In the Sahel, a lack of resources combined with poorly trained armed forces has resulted in poor military outcomes. In Burkina Faso, for example, the military has often struggled to retain territory it has taken during offensives.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, security forces have often resorted to brutal methods, largely because they are poorly trained and struggle to differentiate between civilians and jihadist forces, leading to mass extrajudicial killings of communities thought to be involved with jihadists. According to Human Rights Watch, this approach has resulted in the extrajudicial execution of several hundred men, and contributed to a loss of trust in the security services among the local population and to an increasing spiral of violence in the region.<sup>16</sup> There are already signs that a similar situation is occurring in the littoral states, where Peuhl people in Côte d'Ivoire have complained that they are being arbitrarily arrested and mistreated for their alleged role in jihadist activities.<sup>17</sup>

The role of CBAGs in the military response of both Côte d'Ivoire and Benin is also of concern. In Côte d'Ivoire, CBAGs such as the dozo traditional hunter groups are prominent, particularly in the north and the west, and have often been used as a parallel army by the government.<sup>18</sup> As yet there are few indications that the dozo are being systematically used to target jihadist forces in the north. There are signs, however, that the government is considering using them in such a manner, having already deployed them to assist with the aftermath of the al-Mouribatoun attack in Grand Bassam in 2016.<sup>19</sup> Given the human rights violations that appear to be committed by security personnel in the north, the way that the government intends to operationalize the dozo in its response to rising insecurity is of concern, particularly given the precedent set in the Sahel. The situation in Benin is slightly different because traditional hunters there are not as closely tied to the government, although the challenge that CBAGs pose to the government's response to increasing Islamist extremist violence remains. This is not least because in northern Benin, traditional hunters have been marginalized by recent regulations against hunting in the northern national parks, reducing their ability to make a living.<sup>20</sup> This raises the risk that these traditional hunters could be recruited by jihadists and their potentially valuable assistance—given their vast local knowledge and connections—in combating the expansion of Islamist extremist groups will be lost.<sup>21</sup>

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14 Kars de Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover," *Clingendael CRU Report*, June 2021: 39.

15 "The New Frontier," 45.

16 Ibid.

17 Henry Wilkins & Nanythe Talani, "Dans le Nord Ivoirien, les Groupes Jihadistes Exploitent les Fractures Sociales," *VOA*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/dans-le-nord-ivoirien-les-groupes-jihadistes-exploitent-les-fractures-sociales-/6523091.html>.

18 Richard Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflic': Violence et Politique en Côte d'Ivoire," *Les dossiers du CERI*, October 2012: 6.

19 Rodrigue Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs Traditionnels Dozo en Côte d'Ivoire: Enjeux Socioculturels et Dynamiques Sécuritaires," *Centre Franco Paix*, June 2018: 45.

20 "The New Frontier," 42.

21 Ibid.

# Challenges and Opportunities

## ***Challenge 1: Operationalization of CBAGs in combating jihadist violence is uncertain and relationship between military and CBAGs is unclear***

While the Ivorian government has a better relationship with the dozo in northern Côte d'Ivoire than the Beninese government has with traditional hunters in the north of that country, the way that CBAGs are to be used in combating the expansion of jihadist violence has yet to be defined in either country. This raises questions over the training of the traditional hunter groups and what rules of engagement they are following. This is particularly problematic if the military is being accused of human rights abuses already, as in Côte d'Ivoire, and if CBAGs are mobilized with the support of the state, as in Burkina Faso and as has often been perceived as the case in Côte d'Ivoire historically. In such scenarios, popular perceptions will likely conflate the actions of the military with those of CBAGs, and human rights abuses committed by one will likely affect the reputation of both. Moreover, given CBAGs' limited training for conflict with jihadist groups and widespread stereotypes about the affiliation of Peuhl communities with jihadist groups, the potential for CBAGs to engage in human rights abuses is high, as has been witnessed in Burkina Faso and Mali. For example, in Burkina Faso, Koglweogo self-defense militias help the government in security crackdowns by identifying members of the Peuhl community involved in militant activities, a behavior that has led to human rights abuses and can provoke retribution against the perceived constituency of the Koglweogo – the Mossi and the Gourmantche.<sup>22</sup>

## ***Challenge 2: Communities are more likely to escalate violence or join jihadist groups in response to perceived prejudices and abuses of power by military or CBAGs***

One of the major problems in countering Islamist extremism that has occurred in the Sahel is the lack of trust that local populations have for the government and the armed forces, as well as CBAGs who have committed human rights abuses while working with the state.<sup>23</sup> This can result in a tendency to cooperate more closely with the jihadist groups. In cases where jihadist groups offer security and basic services, local communities can rapidly develop a more trusting relationship with them. That the Peuhl community in northern Côte d'Ivoire is already claiming discrimination at the hands of the military and dozens have left the northern town of Kafolo, fearing reprisals for jihadist violence, suggests that this challenge could escalate rapidly in the northern border regions.<sup>24</sup> Equally, the Beninese state's implementation of strict regulations around herding and farming within its northern national parks has marginalized many northern communities, which

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22 ACLED, "A Vicious Cycle."

23 Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

24 AFP, "Jihadist Threat Stirs Anti-Fulani Hostility in Ivory Coast," *Africa News*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2022/01/26/jihadist-threat-stirs-anti-fulani-hostility-in-ivory-coast/>.

may facilitate their recruitment by jihadist groups.<sup>25</sup>

## ***Opportunity 1: Governments can build more trust with local communities through improving land management and development policies***

There is a considerable opportunity to address latent tensions between Peuhl communities, traditional hunters, and armed forces in northern parts of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire by enhancing understanding of land access and acquisition and providing more accessible legal means to dispute land access. This is crucial because if these tensions, which occur predominantly over land, are left unaddressed, they are likely to facilitate recruitment among communities which perceive themselves to be marginalized in the north of both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, both states struggle with populations disputing and claiming land access, leading to regular conflict between different communities.<sup>26</sup> This can relate to disputes involving the nomadic Peuhl herders, traditional hunters, and more settled farming communities, as in the Sahel, but can also be problematic among other ethnic communities, and is largely due to a lack of recognized land titles. In Benin, in the northern provinces of Alibori and Atakora, more than 80 percent of households do not have land titles, even though the overwhelming majority of the population (between 80 and 90 percent) live on agriculture, hunting, or fishing.<sup>27</sup> In Côte d'Ivoire, longstanding tensions over land acquisition and access, complicated by the influx, over the past 100 years, of large numbers of 'non-autochthonous' populations, predominantly from Burkina Faso, lead to regular outbreaks of violence.<sup>28</sup> The government can do more to address these problems. Currently in Côte d'Ivoire, to demarcate land and gain a land title is prohibitively expensive for most farming communities.<sup>29</sup> The government could expedite this process by decreasing the cost significantly and making it much easier for communities to acquire titles by establishing one-stop shops in rural areas. Establishing a clear process for disputing land access with local government and subsequently initiating sensitization campaigns surrounding this process would also help to reduce tensions and violent clashes over land in both countries.

Expanding development programs would also reduce competition for minimal resources and increase opportunities for civilians to make a living in northern Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. This in turn would reduce community tensions over land access. Côte d'Ivoire has already made a good start on significantly expanding its development programs for the north of the country, which is a crucial part of building trust with local communities and convincing them that the state will

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25 Matthieu Millecamps, "Benin : Has Talon's Government Underestimated the Jihadist Risk?," *The Africa Report*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/98859/benin-has-talons-government-underestimated-the-jihadist-risk/>; "The New Frontier," 49.

26 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34; Matthew Mitchell, "Land Reform and Peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire: Navigating the Minefield," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (December 2021): 1-20; "The New Frontier," 29; De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 8.

27 "The New Frontier," 28.

28 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34; Matthew Mitchell, "Land Reform and Peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire: Navigating the Minefield," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (December 2021): 1-20.

29 Matthew Mitchell, "Land Tenure Reform and Politics in Post-Conflict Côte d'Ivoire: A Precarious Peace in the Western Cocoa Regions," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (August 2014): 203-221; Author interviews with civilians, farmers and government officials in Toulepleu, Duekoue, Guiglo October 2017 – October 2018.

support them. For example, Côte d'Ivoire has begun developing a dry port at Ferkessedougou and an integrated agro-industrial center in the far north.<sup>30</sup> The project is part of a series of large investments that will boost local processing of cotton and cashews.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, in Benin, the government set up the Beninese Agency for the Integrated Management of Border Areas (ABeGIEF) in 2012.<sup>32</sup> The agency is intended to foster a sense of belonging among the Beninese people by building infrastructure and implementing poverty-reduction policies.<sup>33</sup> Since its creation, ABeGIEF has built 50 wells, 150 classrooms, markets, processing units, and police stations.<sup>34</sup> The expansion of and the addition of more similar programs, particularly surrounding education, health, and infrastructure, would be a highly effective and cost-efficient way of reducing the potential for civilians to join armed groups in the northern parts of these countries.

## *Opportunity 2: In contributing to countering violent extremism, CBAGs should be mobilized in local community trust-building exercises instead of military functions*

The vast local knowledge and connections that CBAGs have provide an opportunity for them to assist in state responses to violent extremism without deploying them militarily. Indeed, CBAGs could be incorporated into dialogue and sensitization campaigns with local communities, acting as focal points in the community, along with civil society representatives such as youth and women's groups, for coordinating these kinds of meetings.<sup>35</sup> These forms of dialogue should be as inclusive as possible, involving heads of farmers associations, leaders of CBAGs in the area, and other actors that are regularly coming into conflict with others in the region, such as the African Parks Network (APN) NGO in Benin.<sup>36</sup> Programs already in action could be expanded: as a leading example, the ABeGIEF is actively developing relationships with civil society networks and supporting border communities that have peaceful relationships with their neighbors.<sup>37</sup> Regular dialogue of this kind would improve the level of trust between CBAGs and local communities, reducing the scope for members of communities like the Peuhl to feel marginalized, thereby disrupting jihadist recruitment strategies.

## Conclusion

The increasing scope and sophistication of jihadist attacks in coastal states is concerning. The

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30 Ange Aboa, "Ivory Coast Says it Will Invest in North to Counter Jihadism," *Reuters*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ivory-coast-says-it-will-invest-north-counter-jihadism-2021-11-08/>.

31 Aboa, "Ivory Coast Says."

32 "The New Frontier," 27.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

36 APN provides armed rangers in northern Benin and is deployed to protect the northern nature reserves. However, APN's role in northern Benin has been contentious because it has cracked down heavily on hunting and herding in national parks, which had been a key form of livelihood for many members of northern Beninese communities, leading to recurrent outbreaks of small-scale violence between APN and communities in the north.

37 De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 9.

challenge is made more pertinent by the fact that extremist groups are not simply launching hit-and-run assaults from bases in Burkina Faso, but are recruiting from and working more closely with local communities.<sup>38</sup> In such a scenario, the role of CBAGs is crucial. As experiences from the Sahel demonstrate, the appropriate use of CBAGs in the government response is essential to preventing a rapid escalation of violence. To this end, several steps can be taken. The governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Benin can do more to delineate the way that they intend to operationalize CBAGs in the response to extremist violence and place the emphasis on their role in community trust-building rather than in heavy-handed violent attacks on communities allegedly affiliated with jihadists, as has been witnessed in the Sahel. The government can also, with the assistance of international donors, expand existing development initiatives and land management programs that would serve to reduce communal tensions which, if left unaddressed, are likely to facilitate jihadist expansion.

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38 De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 1.

# Suggested Further Reading

## On community-based armed groups

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## About the Note

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