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This Issue:
Tackling insecurity: National and regional responses

This edition of West Africa Insight looks at the ways in which cross-border insecurity - on land and at sea - pose threats to the region and explores opportunities for citizen-led responses to national security challenges in Burkina Faso and Nigeria.

Daniel Eizenga argues that better security cooperation is required to grapple with insecurity challenges in the central Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Crises which are forcing many living in the affected border areas to live in dire humanitarian conditions.

Switching attention to the Gulf of Guinea, Amanda Bisong, highlights the challenges of a regional response to rising maritime insecurity and makes the case for developing West Africa’s ‘blue economy’ as part of a long-term solution.

In Nigeria, a country affected by the Boko Haram insurgency and maritime piracy, Hajara Waziri looks at another site of contestation - the Middle Belt - and explores the role of women in farmer-herder clashes, as victims, perpetrators and potential peacemakers.

Finally, Philippe Frowd reflects on the growing importance of existing non-state security providers - the koglweogo - in Burkina Faso in light of the recent spike in insurgent violence. Arguing that these groups both challenge and augment the security capacity of the state.

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Tackling Insecurity
At the start of 2019, grim warnings across the Sahelian zone pointed to increasing violence and a worsening humanitarian situation. By the end of the year, fatalities resulting from violent events attributed to militant Islamist groups had nearly doubled in the central Sahel, an area comprising central and northern Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger. Despite repeated efforts to dislodge and defeat armed insurgent groups, the militaries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have proven unable to do so, nor have they been able to fully protect their citizens. A multi-year French counterterrorism initiative, Operation Barkhane, and the regional joint force known as the Sahel G5, have been unable to reverse the deteriorating security situation.

In November 2019, the World Food Program reported that 2.5 million people were in urgent need of food assistance in the central Sahel, a region where 1 million people have been internally displaced and some 270,000 refugees are seeking safety. Burkina Faso has experienced the greatest surge in violence which, to date, has uprooted nearly 500,000 people. According to Burkinabè Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alpha Barry, “in the Sahel, terrorism is winning territory and its gangrene is taking root”. In early 2019, the same minister warned that West Africa’s coastal countries risked becoming embroiled in the fight against terrorism as violence spread south into Burkina Faso.

While Burkina Faso’s neighbours on the Gulf of Guinea have yet to be drawn into the asymmetric conflicts of the central Sahel, the threat of spreading insecurity persists. Militant Islamist groups operating in Mali organised an attack at a beach resort in Grand Bassam, Côte d’Ivoire in 2016. In November 2019, Burkinabè officials claimed to have killed six terrorists including Abdoul Hadi, a well-connected leader of the Macina Liberation Front, near Pô in southcentral Burkina Faso, not far from the border with Ghana. These activities demonstrate the ability of armed groups to extend their influence and the threat this poses to countries south of the central Sahel.

The crisis in the central Sahel—particularly where Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger meet—dramatically escalated in 2019, while the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin continues to threaten the lives of millions in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The fragility of the current circumstances and their highly combustible potential pose a serious threat to Sahelian governments, but also to their West African neighbours. The transnational nature of these crises point to an increasing need for regional security cooperation, but so far efforts aimed at precisely that have been stymied by a lack of resources and political will.

GRAPPLING WITH SAHELIAN INSECURITY

All eyes on the central Sahel

At the start of 2019, grim warnings across the Sahelian zone pointed to increasing violence and a worsening humanitarian situation. By the end of the year, fatalities resulting from violent events attributed to militant Islamist groups had nearly doubled in the central Sahel, an area comprising central and northern Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger. Despite repeated efforts to dislodge and defeat armed insurgent groups, the militaries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have proven unable to do so, nor have they been able to fully protect their citizens. A multi-year French counterterrorism initiative, Operation Barkhane, and the regional joint force known as the Sahel G5, have been unable to reverse the deteriorating security situation.

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While Burkina Faso’s neighbours on the Gulf of Guinea have yet to be drawn into the asymmetric conflicts of the central Sahel, the threat of spreading insecurity persists. Militant Islamist groups operating in Mali organised an attack at a beach resort in Grand Bassam, Côte d’Ivoire in 2016. In November 2019, Burkinabè officials claimed to have killed six terrorists including Abdoul Hadi, a well-connected leader of the Macina Liberation Front, near Pô in southcentral Burkina Faso, not far from the border with Ghana. These activities demonstrate the ability of armed groups to extend their influence and the threat this poses to countries south of the central Sahel.
Transnational terror

The transnational capabilities of insurgent groups pose a serious impediment to confronting the violence in the central Sahel. Using highly mobile tactics in border areas, insurgents have avoided operations targeting their encampments and have effectively expanded the battlefield in a short period of time. Relying on this strategy, militant Islamist groups have established links that crisscross the broader Sahelian region and help to coordinate their efforts through coalitions such as Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin which comprises several al Qaeda-linked groups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, including Macina Liberation Front and Ansar Dine.

In addition to coordination, these networks also connect them with organised crime and smuggling networks that operate in coastal West Africa to move drugs and people undetected towards North Africa. As smugglers move north through the Sahel, militant Islamist groups act as gatekeepers providing protection and acting as guides to smugglers from whom they extract a fee. These interactions facilitate the activities of both sets of actors which aim to subvert the authority of regional governments and profit from the general insecurity.

This poses a serious risk to the wider region, as insurgents operating across the Sahel search for opportunities to expand their influence. Political instability in Mali in 2012 allowed insurgent groups to effectively occupy territory in the north of the country until they were dispersed by a French-led military intervention. Should similar levels of political instability occur in countries along the West African coast, the already well-organised insurgent groups may use their networks to take advantage and extend their influence.

Simmering conflict in the Lake Chad Basin

Both Islamic State in West Africa Province and Boko Haram, continue to target government officials, soldiers, and local community leaders across northeastern Nigeria, eastern Niger, western Chad and northern Cameroon. The scale of the violence might have diminished in recent years since reaching its peak in 2014 and 2015, but the humanitarian conditions in the Lake Chad Basin remain deplorable, with millions relying on external assistance. As of September 2019, the UN estimated that more than 2.4 million people had been displaced and 9.9 million people in the region required humanitarian assistance as a result of the conflict.

However, national governments seem increasingly satisfied with a de facto stalemate in which the crisis remains relatively contained at the margins of their territories. In the case of the Lake Chad Basin, the inability of governments to address the crisis is both a product of political calculus and limited capacity. In each case, the governments responsible for addressing insecurity in the region have shifted their focus to other more urgent concerns, such as the Ambazonia separatist crisis in Cameroon, rebels in southern Libya targeting the Chadian regime, migration and the central Sahel for Niger and any number of domestic issues in the case of Nigeria.
A look at the situation in the Lake Chad Basin reveals two obstacles, both political in nature, to resolving the crises in Sahelian Africa. First, because these crises are transnational in nature, they are at once more tactically complicated and less politically exigent to resolve. Country-specific or regime-specific challenges take precedence over the shared collective action problems. Regional crises, once contained to communities at the margins, develop a political economy which diverts incentives for resolving the crisis towards ways in which conflict actors may profit from the crisis.

Second, for authoritarian regimes such as Cameroon and Chad - whose leaders’ tenure combined extends beyond half a century - these crises offer political cover in their interactions with international partners, and useful justifications for emergency powers that curtail civil liberties and political rights. Though it should be noted that such political cover is not without limits. Cameroon, in particular, has seen security assistance from its partners diminish due to credible accusations of human rights abuses by its armed forces.

The situation in the Lake Chad Basin underscores an important lesson to consider regarding the conflict in the central Sahel and transnational insurgency more broadly: that containing the conflict and limiring the ability of insurgent groups to destabilise central states can become an accepted strategy and long-term outcome, even if dire humanitarian conditions persist for those living in the affected border areas.

**Rectifying regional responses**

The transnational element to the conflicts in the central Sahel and Lake Chad Basin warrant intensified efforts to improve regional security cooperation. By tackling these challenges through existing institutions, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, those seeking to resolve these crises can avoid—or at least reduce—the unique collective action problems that these conflicts present. So far, ad-hoc institutions such as the Sahel G-5 joint force, or its counterpart the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin, have been insufficient for addressing these crises. This suggests that renewed attention, additional regional support, and regional political pressure are needed for long-term crisis resolution.

Both the Sahel G-5 and the MNJTF have stalled in their efforts to restore peace and security to their respective regions as each has struggled to meet the pledged contributions and surmount the political calculus at work in their member states. Incorporating the Sahel G-5 and MNJTF into existing frameworks such as the AU’s African Peace and Security Architecture for West Africa and connecting the forces with ECOWAS, despite the fact that Mauritania, Chad and Cameroon are not formally part of this body, would bolster support for regional efforts. It might also extend the degree of accountability and legitimacy the Sahel G-5 and MNJTF draw upon, by holding their forces to regional standards and oversight. What is clear is that better security cooperation is required to grapple with regional insecurity challenges.

Dan Eizenga is a research fellow at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies based at the National Defense University in Washington D.C. where his research focuses on countering violent extremism in the Sahel.

The views expressed above are those of the author and are not an official policy or position of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the National Defense University, or the U.S. Government.

**Further Reading**

The Gulf of Guinea - a stretch of the Atlantic coast from Angola to Senegal - is a high-risk area for piracy, armed robbery, kidnapping at sea, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and all forms of trafficking. The region accounts for 86% of crew taken hostage and nearly 82% of crew kidnappings globally. In 2017 the European Union reported that of 81 attacks on ships in the gulf, 42 were instances of piracy and 39 were armed robberies. 32 seafarers were kidnapped for ransom. In 2019 about 62 seafarers have been captured off the coasts of Nigeria, Guinea, Togo, Benin and Cameroon. Although the International Chamber of Commerce reported that the number of piracy attacks reduced from 41 in 2018 to 29, Nigeria has seen a spike in attacks, with Lagos port reporting 11 incidents alone. Furthermore, regional security experts believe that incidents remain underreported or not reported at all. Ship owners choose not to because of the time-consuming investigative procedures of national actors, preferring instead to pay the ransom for kidnapped crew and writing it off as operational expenses.

The Gulf of Guinea also some of the highest incidents of IUU fishing, resulting in an annual cumulative loss of US$2 billion for countries in the region. The fisheries sector plays a key role in the economies of West African coastal states as well as supporting food security in the region. Fish is the cheapest source of animal protein. In Ghana annual fish consumption per capita is 25kg. In Nigeria, domestic demand for fish - at 3.32 million metric tonnes - far outstrips current annual domestic production of 1.12 million tonnes. But large fishing vessels and trawlers from countries outside the region threaten artisanal fisherfolk, putting food security and livelihoods at risk. In 2016, the Overseas Development Institute found that half of the fish species in West Africa are over exploited, listing the countries most affected by over exploited, fully exploited or depleted fish stocks as Nigeria, Cape Verde, Gambia, Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea Bissau. States are trying to combat IUU fishing through improved monitoring and reporting of vessels in cooperation with regional fishing monitoring organisations. However, it persists as a result of poorly delineated borders between the states, corruption in the issue of fishing licences and the inability of national navies to patrol their waters effectively due to limited equipment and capacity.

Furthermore, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017 World Drug Report found that over two-thirds of drugs trafficked between South America and Europe transited through the Gulf of Guinea. Transnational organised crime networks operating in West Africa and beyond, control significant transit routes that ensure the passage of persons, drugs, and increasingly, arms. Police in Guinea-Bissau seized 1.8 tonnes of cocaine in September 2019, following on from a bust in March where 800kg was seized. This illegal trade has been enabled by weak law enforcement capacity, corruption and largely unmanned maritime borders.

**REGIONAL RESPONSES:**

**Addressing maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea**
The maritime security architecture

West African states have organised themselves to cooperate on issues of maritime insecurity. The current maritime security architecture involves political and strategic, regional and multinational cooperation. Rooted in Article 58 of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Treaty, which provides the basis for cooperation on issues of regional security, states such as Benin, have been instrumental in championing maritime cooperation. Benin played a key role in driving the process which culminated in the adoption of the 2013 Yaoundé Declaration on maritime security and a memorandum of understanding between Gulf of Guinea Council, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and ECOWAS in the same year. The memorandum adopts a holistic definition of maritime insecurity which includes all illegal activities that constitute an obstacle to regional integration and sustainable economic development.

The protocol of the Yaoundé declaration, created an Inter-Institutional Coordinating Centre (ICC) in Yaoundé and two Regional Coordination Centres for Maritime Security in West Africa (CRESMAO) and Central Africa (CRESMAC). The Gulf of Guinea was delineated into zones to ensure coordinated and targeted responses to the challenges of insecurity in the region, in line with countries commitments to implement the 2050 African Integrated Maritime Strategy of the African Union. The mission of CRESMAO is to strengthen regional maritime cooperation, coordinate activities in maritime zones E, F and G, and facilitate the sharing of information and experiences with the centres. The ICC in Yaoundé is responsible for operationalising the decisions taken by the joint ECOWAS-ECCAS bodies on tackling maritime insecurity. But both CRESMAO and CRESMAC face similar challenges of insufficient staff, budgets that are restricted by a significant reliance on donor funds and poor engagement from member states.

Figure 1: Cocaine trafficking routes through West Africa (Source: Jason Institute for peace and security studies. https://jasoninstitute.com/2019/04/21/drug-trafficking-in-the-sahel/)
For the most part national defence strategies of West African states do not align with regional and interregional commitments. In Nigeria, where incidents of maritime insecurity are the highest in the Gulf of Guinea, other insecurity threats - the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east and farmer-herder conflicts in the middle-belt - are more politically significant. The state feels pressured to prioritise and showcase their wins in these areas.

While the state has managed to reduce the amount of oil theft taking place in the Niger Delta, it has done so through the use of security contracts; further complicating the security dynamics in the region. Making any intervention both politically sensitive and logistically difficult.

Competing priorities in security provision are a feature of the region. Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire are increasingly concerned with threats from rising terrorist activities spilling over from neighbouring countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso. But for states such as Benin, which depend on their port as a key driver of economic growth, there is a more integrated approach to addressing maritime insecurity. This holistic approach includes using fishing communities to monitor and report piracy activities and integrating civil society actors to carry out sensitisation and awareness on the ills of engaging in acts that contribute to maritime insecurity.
Developing the blue economy

Innovative, and long-term, approaches to tackling insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea should look at tapping into the potential for economic development by designing and implementing strategies to support a blue economy in the region. The blue economy encompasses fisheries, maritime transport, tourism, aquaculture, energy and extractive industries. So far none of the ECOWAS states are seen as continent leaders in developing this sector, that the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa estimates has the potential to generate US$4 trillion annually for the continent, with goods and services taking up US$2.5 trillion. Maximising its potential would contribute to creating jobs, improving natural resource and climate governance and improve food security, as well as securing the livelihoods of coastal communities and improving rise levels of inequality. If states can see the potential of the blue economy to create jobs and boost economic growth - a major challenge for all ECOWAS states - this may shift the importance of the seas in their political calculus and in turn drive a greater commitment to tackling issues of maritime insecurity.

An immediate focus should be recognition of the fact that transnational crime in the region has further strengthened the linkages between insecurity in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. Funds from trafficking in drugs and arms are strengthening the presence and activities of terrorist groups and non-state actors in the Sahel and vice-versa. Coordinated implementation of a comprehensive, and regional, strategy to address these interlinked threats is needed if either is to be effectively addressed.

Further Reading

- Daniels, A. et al. 2016. “Western Africa’s missing fish: The impacts of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and under-reporting catches by foreign fleets”. Overseas Development Institute
- The Economist. 2019. “The Gulf of Guinea is now the world’s worst piracy hotspot”. 29 June

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Women and the herder-pastoralist conflict in Nigeria: Victims, perpetrators, peacemakers?

Since the return of the democratic government in 1999, state failure and corrupt administrative bureaucracy has led many ordinary Nigerians to shift their loyalty away from political institutions to ethno-regional and religious networks for safety and protection. This shift is reflected in community responses to the rising challenges of insecurity ranging from terrorism to regional agitation, electoral violence, armed banditry and kidnapping.

In recent years Kaduna, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa and southern parts of Adamawa State have become the epicenter of clashes between herders and farmers. According to Akinyemi and Olaniyan, social commentators and experts on the history of conflicts in Nigeria, the seeds of the herder-farmer conflict have been sewn by severe environmental degradation across northern Nigeria symbolised by aggressive desertification, low rainfall and the loss of streams and surface water for cultivation.

With population explosion and urbanisation, herders and pastoralists are increasingly forced to cross the border into central and southern Nigeria in search of greener pastures. The agrarian nature and rich alluvial soil found in most parts of the Middle Belt makes it conducive for cattle grazing. As do the numerous sources of freshwater hold great potential for animal husbandry during the dry season. The fertility of this part of the country can in part explain the levels of internal migration and the increased contestation over arable land.

Although contestation and conflict between farmers and herders is nothing new, the weapons and ammunitions being used have become more sophisticated and raids more daring and violent. In the last five years there has been a notable spike in the intensity of the clashes between farmers and herders. In Benue State over 23,000 people were displaced across 14 local government areas (LGAs) between 2014 and 2016. Between May and June 2019, 65 were killed in Jalingo, the Taraba State capital, while 9,000 were displaced. In addition to 15 churches, two mosques and one health clinic were destroyed. In July 2019, Premium Times reported that herder-farmer clashes in June had resulted in 353 deaths and 60 kidnappings. Figures for July showed a slight drop in deaths - 282 - but an increase in kidnapping incidents - 97. Katsina State, home of President Buhari, was the most affected.
Whilst much has been written about the impacts of the conflict on local communities, particularly how the conflict has impacted on food insecurity, upset local economies and reinforced identity politics, there has been little discussion of the impact of the conflict on women and the role women have played in the conflict. Data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics shows women comprise 49.32% of the population.

According to the Federal Ministry of Agricultural & Rural Development, 75% of the farming population in Nigeria is female. They are major contributors to economic growth and the predominant owners of small-scale farms. Female members of pastoralist households are equally involved in agricultural and economic activities around animal husbandry.

Despite the fact that women are major participants in agricultural activities the violent clashes between the farmers and pastoralists are largely reported as attacks perpetrated by male aggressors. With women and children categorised as vulnerable groups caught up in the violence. But this image does not illustrate the direct impact this conflict has on women, nor their ability to shape it.

**Diminished roles**

The conflict - which has seen the destruction of crops, theft of cattle and farm produce - negatively affects women’s economic participation. Furthermore fears of insecurity renders them unable to access their farms, to cultivate, or local markets, to sell their products. In Benue State, a report by World Watch Research, documented five attacks on women working on their farmlands between January 2014 and September 2016.

In Katsina State, six women were attacked and kidnapped between March and December 2015 on their farmlands. Across the Middle Belt farmlands have become unsafe. For those who choose to stay, the destruction of arable land has reduced what they can sell at the market. Limited economic opportunities reduces the resilience of women and forces some, particularly those displaced, into begging, menial jobs and even prostitution.

The conflict has also affected the lives of pastoralist women and girls. Their major occupation in the Middle Belt is the selling of fresh cow milk (nono), butter and local cereal (fura). These items are highly sought after during village market days and around important festivals. According to Shuichi Onyama, a research consultant with the Center for African Studies, Kyoto University, farmers and herders have an established socio-economic relationship. Farmers use their harvest to obtain milk and livestock products from the herders. Money raised from these products is used to sustain pastoralists families and their cattle. However, the impact of the conflict has severed this relationship. The level of insecurity has also limited pastoralist women from going out to sell their market supplies. In some instances community marketplaces have been closed down because of fears around violence.

Women play significant roles in sustaining cohesion and building social capital in communities. However, the hardship they have experienced during the conflict is negatively impacting on their ability to play these roles. Loss of husbands, family members and even key stakeholders disrupt these societal structures and the trauma associated with the loss of a family member can manifest in poor mental and physical health. Furthermore in socially conservative rural settings widows are frequently evicted from their farmlands because tradition and culture does not support property inheritance for women. Land is passed to the sons or brothers of a man when he dies and not to his wife. This economic and social disenfranchisement renders them, and their families, more vulnerable especially if they are forced to flee into internally displaced person (IDP) camps where gender-based and sexual violence is pervasive according to a 2016 Human Rights Watch report.

> **In Katsina State, six women were attacked and kidnapped between March and December 2015 on their farmlands.**

**Tackling Insecurity**
Women have suffered as a result of the conflict but they have not always been bystanders to the unfolding violence. Women have been involved at three levels: as primary actors; interested actors with a stake in the conflict and its outcome; and simply as shadow actors that secretly and discreetly influence and facilitate the violence. Although there is insufficient evidence to suggest women are involved in direct combat, research by Prof. Donli, a researcher working with the UN, suggests that in Adamawa, Gombe and Plateau states indicates that women have participated in the encroaching into grazing routes to cultivate. Whilst female members of pastoralist families have been seen in Adamawa State destroying farmland belonging to farmers that have refused to allow their cattle to graze.

A more common approach is for women to instigate men to carry out reprisal attacks as a way of proving their bravery according to a 2018 report by Search for Common Ground. An example of this is when a clash affects a farmer on the farmland and he does nothing to respond to the attack, he is persuaded by his wife to take revenge: to attack a pastoralist, not necessarily the one that committed the initial attack, as a form of retribution. This happens in communities such as Michika and Madagali (Adamawa State) where women do the majority of the farming, with men expected to provide security. Though a traditional division of labour in these communities, this appears to be an emerging phenomenon in contexts across the affected states where the government has failed to provide security.

Finally, women have a less visible hand in supporting the violence by working as informants or trading in illegal goods (or weapons) to raise money to fund attacks. Women have also been accused, by both sides, of acting as spies. In Benue and Plateau states, women have been accused of spying on farming communities as they trade goods at the market. In Benue state, the Movement Against Fulani Occupation has taken its case against the Federal Government of Nigeria to the ECOWAS Court of Justice. They are demanding compensation killings in Benue State and accuse women of being informants and foot-soldiers for their husbands.
Raising the voice of women

To broker peace between the affected communities, platforms and spaces for dialogue between key stakeholders such as religious leaders, traditional leaders and community village heads, are needed. Women should be included at all levels as a key part of the reconciliation, rehabilitation and peace building processes in the region. Whilst women may be involved directly, or indirectly, in the clashes, they also retain the capacity to support local and state-level peace initiatives.

The Kaduna State Peace Commission, with Priscilla Ankut as the Executive Secretary has demonstrated leadership in an effort to mitigate the herder-farmer conflict in the state. Similar initiatives can be replicated at the community level where women with convening power and influence can carry out advocacy, and set up platforms, that call for cessation of violence. But these initiatives are only one part of the wider effort needed to address the root causes of the conflict. For now this is being hampered by policy somersaults and lack of consistency on the position of the government on how to tackle the problem.

The farmer-herder clashes that have led to the loss of lives and properties of many Nigerians continue despite the numerous conferences, seminars and reports discussing the issue. However the plight, experiences and voices of women, on both sides, has not always been to the fore. Moving forwards, and in efforts to resolve the conflict, they must be.

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Further reading

Burkina Faso’s unprecedented insecurity situation has accelerated the growth of existing non-state security providers like the *koglweogo*, which both challenge and augment the state’s security capacity. Since 2016, insurgent violence has spiked in the northern Sahel, Nord, and Centre-Nord regions. These attacks are attributed to the local group Ansarul Islam and more recently the Saharan regional branch of al-Qaeda JNIM (Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin’ or the ‘Group to Support Islam and Muslims’). This rural jihadism is in addition to attacks on high-profile sites in the capital Ouagadougou in 2016, 2017, and 2018. The East region of Burkina Faso has more recently seen a spike in insurgent violence, thought to be mostly linked to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

Attacks using improvised explosive devices are one metric that illustrates the rapid onset of violence. Burkina Faso’s first such attack was in August 2017; they now occur almost weekly. This violence — generally labelled as terrorist or jihadist — emerged in a context in which popular concerns about everyday insecurity were already significant. Anxieties about crime targeting motorists on national roads, city-dwellers after dark, and cattle owners were already well on the rise before the rise in political violence. In this context, the *koglweogo* self-defence groups have emerged as a central actor in the fight against ‘insecurity’, working primarily as local anti-crime and self-defence groups but also, in some regions, taking on counterterrorism tasks. The state’s current attitude towards them, as well as their future role, are deeply ambiguous. This is despite a growing recognition that Burkina Faso’s fate is not entirely in the state’s own hands.

'Tackling Insecurity'
Koglweogo groups existed well before the current spate of violence in the country. Their origins are primarily rural, and their name comes from the Mooré words kogl- and -weogo which roughly translate to ‘keepers of the countryside’. The emergence of the koglweogo was spontaneous and organic, with some of the first organised groups formed in the region around Ouahigouya, near the Malian border. These groups positioned themselves as protectors of rural life and worked primarily to reduce cattle theft, petty theft and night-time highway robbery. The koglweogo as patrolling vigilantes was ‘version 1.0’ of the movement: lightly armed (if at all) with artisanal rifles, principally rural and focused on theft.

Version 2.0 has seen a shift in the location and emphasis of these groups, as many have had to match the increasing violence used by criminals. Koglweogo groups have also come to particular public prominence since the insurrection that led to the departure of Blaise Compaoré in 2014, even though there is little link between the two events. They are still comprised of volunteers, but members are equally likely to be city-dwellers and to be part of a more organised local group with allegiance to a national structure. The shift in location of these groups has contributed to their greater visibility and their unorthodox approach - whipping and humiliating thieves, as well as the approximation of policing authority through uniforms - has grabbed media and public attention.

The state is still in the process of getting to grips with the scale and rapidly shifting areas of operation of the koglweogo. However, it is important not to overstate the shift between the two versions of these groups. Both respond to what they perceive as an unresponsive state security sector, draw from a wide cross-section of society (including many women) and possess nationwide numbers very roughly extrapolated at around 400,000 by one state official in a country of almost 20 million people. This easily dwarfs the state’s own forces, with the government claiming a ratio of 1 “agent” per 729 people — a figure that likely bundles together police, gendarmerie and armed forces. The effective spread of security forces across the country is highly unequal and sporadic, with the koglweogo providing wider and deeper national security provision where the state cannot or does not.

In Burkina Faso’s current security context, the koglweogo have taken on some occasional counter-insurgency roles such as intelligence-gathering. This is understandable given the expansion of jihadist and insurgent violence across the north and east, but it is also due to opportunistic links between these fighters and the armed bandits the koglweogo formed to stop. Koglweogo groups see the expansion of their security work towards the protection of social order more generally as perfectly logical. One national koglweogo official noted that the -weogo suffix typically taken to mean ‘countryside’ should be interpreted more widely as “that which is outside the home”, suggesting that these groups see their mandate as providing public security. Despite this, their association with counterterrorism is often unplanned and unwanted. Many koglweogo have paid a price in both human terms and reputational terms: they are not only increasingly dying from insurgent violence but also implicated in the messiness of an asymmetric war that has some ethnic reverberations.

While the koglweogo are present nationwide, they are strongly rooted in the central plateau of Burkina Faso where the bulk of the Mossi ethnicity reside. Local human rights NGOs suspect the koglweogos’ involvement in violence aimed at Fulani people, such as during a massacre in the village of Yirgou in early January 2019. Koglweogo groups dispute these allegations and stress their wide social base which includes Fulani members. Nonetheless, the degree to which they can be an open, civic movement remains to be seen.
Producing public authority

The *koglweogo* mimic the state in creating institutions like a national état major (general staff) which issues communications and maintains common policies. Members wear uniforms and the sizeable number of local groups associated with the national état major follow a national charter that stipulates the relationship groups are to maintain with community leadership (through councils of elders) and citizens more generally. The *koglweogo* claim and maintain forms of authority by making their work publicly visible; often violently so. This includes parading and flogging robbery suspects and extracting nes which serve to buy fuel, supplies and equipment for future operations. Any future formal security partnership with the state might put this relative financial autonomy at risk.

The linkage between *koglweogo* groups and customary authorities also indelibly links them to public concerns: this stretches from village-level consultations with chiefs and customary leaders all the way to stronger ties to ethnic chieftaincy and includes the self-proclaimed national leader of the *koglweogo*, Rassam Kandé Naaba (the Rassamkandé village chief). The *koglweogo* offer public and customary forms of security provision without any necessary link to the bureaucratic state as such. But despite creating their own type of public authority, the *koglweogo* see themselves as part of existing forms of it.

They see themselves as “a junior sibling in the state’s family of security” alongside the police and gendarmerie. This approach to security extends to the forms of collaboration that the *koglweogo* have with public authorities: they submit investigation reports to the police and gendarmerie, hand suspects over and often carry out joint investigations and operations. Many of these measures go unacknowledged and unrequired by the state, but the *koglweogo* are keen to anoint themselves as a public actor and stress their linkages with the highest level of the state.

They claim to fall under the presidency, no lower. Many local *koglweogo* groups maintain advisory councils on which they ask for the presence of the police and gendarmerie as well as local public and customary officials.

The state’s ambiguous role

The Burkinabè state has been ambiguous towards the *koglweogo* but it is beginning to crystallise around a more formal acceptance of what it calls ‘local security initiatives’ (LSI). The national police have a police de proximité (community policing) directorate charged with regulating LSIs like the *koglweogo*, the dozo traditional hunters’ groups, the ruuga composed of Fulani herders, and even volunteer traffic police. Much of the political relationship between state and *koglweogo* (and public debate about it) has been how to rein these groups in, but given the state of insecurity there is a growing desire to rely on LSIs and potentially integrate them into community policing initiatives. Many police and intelligence community actors in Burkina Faso consider the government very lucky to count on enthusiastic (and, importantly, free) security providers, given the state’s own resource limits. But *koglweogo* groups’ reactions to this effort to include them in community policing have been mixed. Some groups publicly resist while privately accepting training and workshops put on by the national police. For others the price of greater recognition and resources is countered by arguments that it will result in less autonomy and an inability to critique the state.

Part of the ambiguity in *koglweogo* groups’ differing relationships with the state is due to their decentralised nature. While the national ‘general staff’ steers some aspects of conduct for some groups, not all groups consider themselves aligned to the Rassam Kandé Naaba. Local practices around levying nes for example are firmly entrenched and difficult to guide at a distance. The ambiguity is further reinforced by the fact that *koglweogo* groups are critical of the state all while seeking state-like forms of legitimacy and direct recognition by it. For instance, those around Fada N’Gourma (in the south-east) have récépissés de reconnaissance which are formal notes from the government recognising them. *Koglweogo* groups typically have uniforms and enact forms of state-like military practice such as marching, saluting and

"The *koglweogo* claim and maintain forms of authority by making their work publicly visible"
establishing formal hierarchies of rank. These measures may seem mostly symbolic, but they are irksome to state officials.

Nonetheless, the state is moving towards a fuller embrace of ‘security amateurs’ like the koglweogo under President Kaboré. The killing of 39 local employees of a Canadian mining company in the east of Burkina Faso in November 2019 appears to have been a watershed moment. In his message to the nation after the event, Kaboré produced an unexpected and unusually full-throated endorsement of popular mobilisation and volunteering in the name of counterterrorism. The same week, officials from the president’s own Popular Movement for Progress (MPP, Mouvement Populaire pour le Progrès) - the majority in the National Assembly - called for a “patriotic burst” in response to the attack. A new group calling itself the Popular Resistance Movement (Mouvement de résistance populaire) was formed in early October 2019 as an additional support to existing local initiatives such as the koglweogo. This embrace of non-state security providers by the state might solve human resource and popular mobilisation problems in the short-term, but it is potentially risky at a societal level in the long-term.

**Upcoming challenges**

Burkina Faso’s political culture is being tested to its limit by the current security context. The government has sought to address morale in the security forces by passing legislation restricting efforts to “demoralise” the security forces. But these forces are credibly accused by international observers such as Human Rights Watch of a range of abuses during counterinsurgency operations in the north of the country. Given the move towards ‘new generation’ koglweogo forces and the more explicit encouragement of citizens’ roles in defending the country, there should be further reflection on the potential pitfalls of a reliance on self-organised non-state groups in sensitive security matters, as well as a broader militarisation of society.

A second challenge relates to how local security providers like the koglweogo will shape the electoral context with presidential and legislative elections due in November 2020. While a handful of local politicians made attempts to court the koglweogo during municipal elections in 2017, this outreach was generally rebuffed. Some local officials worry about a future, more complete, political cooptation of the koglweogo, though this is something members insist is off the table given the broad cross-section of society they draw from. Their decentralised structure, however, means that consistency in this rejection of a political role may be elusive. These fears are further exacerbated by questions around the security provision for election sites, the need for local intermediaries for rural campaigning and the role of traditional authority in both politics and security.

Finally, there is the political economy of the koglweogo themselves. While they are volunteers in terms of their work, they do levy fines and play a role in the guarding and management of artisanal gold mining sites. While professional security institutions in Burkina Faso have glaring weaknesses around training, equipment, and procedures, can ‘security amateurs’ like the koglweogo be any more effective — and who will rein them in? 

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**Further Reading**
