

# Laws of Attraction

Northern Benin and risk of  
violent extremist spillover

CRU Report

Kars de Bruijne



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Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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June 2021

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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

West Africa's coastal states are at risk of Islamist violence spilling over from the Sahel. The Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM/Katiba Macina), and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have announced their intentions to move into the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, JNIMs Kouffa, for example, attempted to mobilise Fulani across the West Africa region.<sup>3</sup> Recently, Bernard Émié, the French head of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE) stated that Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have been explicitly singled out as targets by JNIM.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2016, there have been incidents in border communities that are tied to the presence of violent extremists. But apart from open violence, regular reports coming from Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo and north-west Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Ghana, point to roaming preachers, recruitment among youth, development projects such as water-wells, the transit of Sahelian fighters and trade with violent extremists.<sup>5</sup> These are signs that West Africa's coastal areas are possibly on the brink of a crisis.

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1 The author wishes to thank Nizar Touhami Chahdi for excellent research assistance. Special thanks go to Hénri Nsaibia, who acted as a sounding board and shared his meticulous work on tracking the movements of violent extremist organisations. Thanks to Jules Duhamel for designing the visuals. The report benefitted from input from Fransje Molenaar, Johannes Claes, Anna Schmauder, Imane Karimou and Elliot Bynum, five reviewers and several anonymous contributors.

2 L'Opinion, 2019. Bénin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire... les cellules terroristes cherchent à s'implanter dans l'Afrique de l'ouest côtière. <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/benin-togo-ghana-cote-d-ivoire-cellules-terroristes-cherchent-a-s-186024>; Tisseron, A., 2019. Jihadist threat. The Gulf of Guinea States up against the wall. Thomas More Institute. <https://institut-thomas-more.org/2019/03/04/jihadist-threat-%E2%80%A2-the-gulf-of-guinea-states-up-against-the-wall/>; Courrier International, 2019. Afrique de l'Ouest. Le Bénin, la prochaine cible des terroristes? <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/afrique-de-l-ouest-le-benin-la-prochaine-cible-des-terroristes>.

3 New video message from Jamā'at Nuṣrat al-Islām Wa-l-Muṣlimīn: 'Go Forth, Whether Light or Heavy'. <https://jihadology.net/2018/11/08/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-go-forth-whether-light-or-heavy-2/>.

4 Jeune Afrique, 2021. Al-Qaïda veut viser la Côte d'Ivoire et le Bénin, selon le patron du renseignement français. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1114996/politique/al-qaïda-veut-viser-la-cote-divoire-et-le-benin-selon-le-patron-du-renseignement-francais/>.

5 Crisis Group Africa, 2019. 'The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa'. *Briefing N°149*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/c%C3%B4te-divoire/b149-lafrique-de-louest-face-au-risque-de-contagion-jihadiste>.

Analysts point out that contagion of violence by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in the Sahel has been driven by local factors.<sup>6</sup> VEOs have mastered the art of exploiting local vulnerabilities around land use, resource management, social exclusion and ethnic tensions. For example, in the Sahel, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) exploited economic hardship and ethnic tensions in Gao and Mopti (Mali).<sup>7</sup> Katiba Macina used the promise of security, law and order, and fair conflict resolution of local disputes to legitimise its operations.<sup>8</sup> Ansaroul Islam obtained a foothold by preaching against the abuse of power by Burkinabe elites against disadvantaged groups.<sup>9</sup> Cash payments to young people facilitated the expansion of Boko Haram into Diffa (Niger).<sup>10</sup>

Yet the fear of violent contagion to coastal West Africa is often based on just repeating a handful of incidents: the 2020 Kafolo attack and the 2016 Grand Bassam attack (both in Côte d'Ivoire); the 2019 Pendjari attack in Benin; sightings of VEOs and roaming preachers; and the alleged presence of extremist cells in Nigerien, Burkinabe or Malian border areas.<sup>11</sup>

This means there is a disconnect between what we know about the expansion of VEOs and the fear of spillover from the Sahel into West Africa's littoral (border) states. However, except in relation to north-west Nigeria – where the Boko Haram splinter group Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansarul) is successfully exploiting ethnic tensions between and economic relationships with local gangs – there is a

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6 Benjaminsen, A. and Ba, B., 2019. Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:1, 1-20, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457); Hardy, R. A., 2019. Countering Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: What Policy Makers Need to Know. *World Affairs*, 182(3), 256–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820019862270>; Institute for Security Studies, 2018. Stopping the spread of terror onto West Africa's coast. Preventing the spillover of violent extremism from the Sahel is better than having to counter it later. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/stopping-the-spread-of-terror-onto-west-africas-coast>; Ilardo, M., 2020. Violent extremism in the Sahel Countering vulnerability to radical narratives: towards a more pragmatic approach. Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik. <https://www.aies.at/download/2020/AIES-Fokus-2020-01.pdf>.

7 Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T., 2015. *The roots of Mali's conflict. Moving beyond the 2012 crisis*. The Clingendael Institute.

8 *ibid.*

9 Crisis Group, 2017. The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North. Report n°254. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north>.

10 *ibid.*

11 Crisis Group Africa, 2019. 'The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa'. *Briefing N°149*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/c%C3%B4te-divoire/b149-lafrique-de-louest-face-au-risque-de-contagion-jihadiste>.

serious lack of information on whether – and how – VEOs seek to exploit local tensions in littoral West African communities, and how successful they may have been so far.<sup>12</sup>

This lack of information is a problem. Policy makers from several countries (e.g. France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States), from multilateral organisations (European Union and the United Nations) and from major implementers have spent over \$120 million on Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programming in the last five years alone in the coastal states. But without knowing which areas are at risk and how spillover takes shapes in the coastal states, there is a risk that donor money will not be spent on the right priorities. Worse, it may be counterproductive.

This report fills this gap by exploring local problems in one country possibly at risk: Benin, specifically the regions of Alibori, Borgou and Atacora.

These northern Beninese regions share an unfortunate geographic proximity to three theatres of violent extremist activity (see figure 1): a) Burkina Faso's Est region where JNIM and ISGS cells operate; b) Niger's Tillabery and Dosso regions where ISGS operates; and c) North-west Nigeria and Nigeria's Middle Belt where gangs and a diverse array of VEOs are present. For this reason, it is crucial to gain an understanding of community tensions in Alibori, Atacora and Borgou and how far VEOs have gone in exploiting them.

To this end, this report presents new data on communal violence in the north of Benin from an undisclosed local organisation and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) project. These data range from 2017 to the present and should lead to a major reconsideration of priorities; there are various open communal conflicts in Benin's north that have become intense and lethal. The Talon government appears to deliberately conceal these problems from the public (while, admittedly, working hard behind the scenes to address them).<sup>13</sup>

The analysis finds that northern Benin faces serious risks of exploitation by VEOs but that there are as yet no clear alignments between local community tensions and VEOs. That means there is still space for policy-makers and implementers. For example, new data show that sustained communal conflicts between farmers-herders and over land constitute entry points for VEOs. At the same time, development efforts have supported the intensification of agricultural production and land titling, and there are indications that these efforts have not been conflict sensitive and may thus have contributed to the current risks. In short, this report provides better information and insight into drivers

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12 For an example see: Foreign policy, 2021. West Africa Is Increasingly Vulnerable to Terrorist Groups. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/04/west-africa-is-increasingly-vulnerable-to-terrorist-groups/>.

13 Confidential interviews July 2020-February 2021.

of communal conflict to enable development policy makers, P/CVE programming and military officials to make targeted interventions.

This report is built around five chapters. The first chapters present data on political violence in northern Benin, highlighting the types of violence, the locations, the actors involved and the overall trends. The third chapter presents the three main reasons for violence in Alibori, Atacora and Borgou: herder-farmer tensions, problems around land ownership, and problems around the management of Pendjari Park and Park W. The fourth chapter explores signs that point to VEO spillover, the conditions that facilitate local collaboration and a brief assessment of the extent of collaboration. The final section ends with policy recommendations.

**Figure 1** Location map of Benin





# 1 Political disorder in Benin's north

Insight into political violence in the north of Benin is lacking. Incidents occurring away from road networks and smaller towns and villages are not often reported in national or local media in West Africa, and Benin is no exception.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Talon regime's crackdown on the media has limited the number of news outlets and led to a degree of self-censorship. To gain information on political violence in the north of Benin, ACLED initiated in March 2020 a structural collaboration with an organisation which had been collecting data on political violence since at least 2017, based on information from local observers. These data are vetted and then shared with ACLED and included in its database.

These new data have an impact on how to view the incidence and nature of political violence in Benin. Until 2016, ACLED recorded for Benin about one instance of political violence a month on average. In the data hitherto available, violence increased from 2017 to about four events a month – largely as a result of protests against changes to the constitution proposed by newly elected President Talon (2016). These data highlighted that Benin's mildly rising levels of political violence were related to riots and protests over national political issues, such as the exclusion of opposition parties in the 2019 polls. There were also some incidents of communal violence (mostly mobs who attacked thieves) but vigilante violence was generally limited. Until now, it appeared from Beninese sources included in ACLED that the most active actors in Benin were rioters, protesters, police and military. Activity was clustered in the south of the country where the political centre is located (see figure 1).

The new data on Benin is changing the narrative of political violence in the country. For 2017–2019, the new information received adds nearly 30% more violent incidents to the publicly available data. Furthermore, since March 2020, when the partner began providing weekly information to ACLED, the number of reported instances of political violence and protests is in reality much higher: rather than the average of four reported events a month, the new information tripled the number of monthly incidents to, on average, 10 to 15 a month for Benin. Figure 2 shows trends in the levels of political violence since 2016.

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14 For example, Davenport, C. and Ball, P., 2002. 'Views to a kill: Exploring the implications of source selection in the case of Guatemalan state terror, 1977–1995', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(3), pp. 427–450.

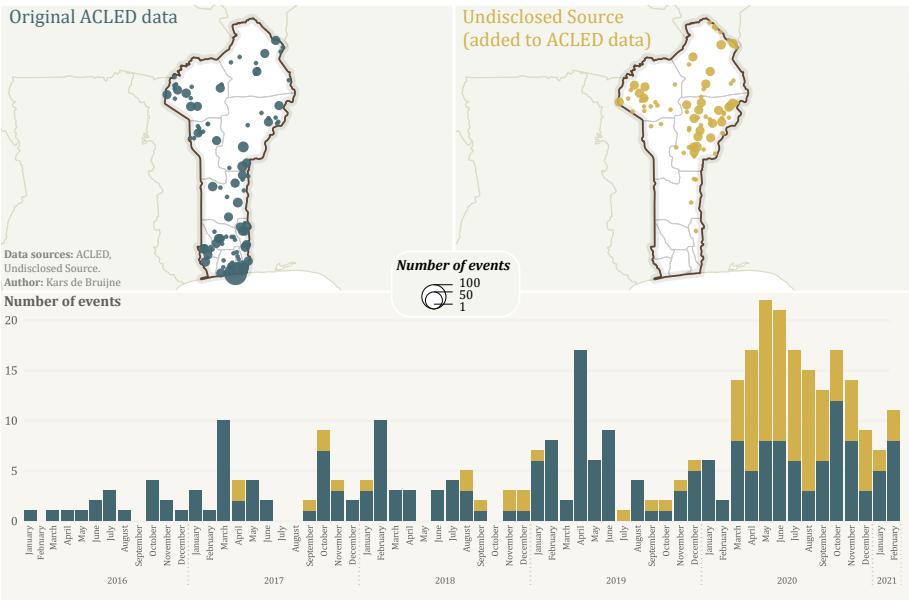
Kars de Bruijne, 2019. 'Coverage, Source Mix and Reporting Bias in West Africa', Internal ACLED report.

Importantly, it is not only the magnitude but also the nature of this new information that is concerning.

The primary finding is that all newly discovered violence is in the north – Alibori, Atacora and Borgou. Moreover, this does not involve relatively ‘light’ incidents of protests and some riots involving material damage but rather involves clashes between groups of (armed) communities that have led to fatalities. Newly observed political violence in the north of Benin is deeply communal and is more lethal than much political violence hitherto observed in the country.

Perhaps most concerning of all is that the large amount of data collected since March 2020 coincides with the start of direct reporting from the area. This means it is likely that violence levels have been higher for a much longer period but were never reported. Spillover often takes place as VEOs seek existing fault lines, particularly if these have already seen violence. Thus, the active and lethal communal violence in three northern areas that has already been seen for years creates favourable conditions for spillover by VEOs.

**Figure 2 Political Disorder in Benin (January 2016 - February 2021)**



# 2 A closer look at Alibori, Atacora and Borgou

Political violence and protests in Benin's north are seen mainly in three regions: Alibori, Atacora and Borgou. These regions share some structural conditions that generate political violence but also have unique 'violence profiles' (see figure 3). Generally there are three main differences.

First, there are different intensities of political disorder. Atacora, bordering Burkina Faso and Togo, and Alibori, bordering Niger, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, experience roughly the same number of total incidents of disorder. However, Borgou, further south and bordering Nigeria, has four times more incidents of disorder than Atacora and Alibori. This is important, as Borgou has a lower population density than Atacora and Alibori.

Second, despite the similarities between Atacora and Alibori there are differences. There are significantly more armed clashes and fatalities in Alibori than in Atacora.

Third, there are differences in the clustering of incidents. Political disorder in Atacora clusters in the west of the region, clamped between the border with Togo and the Pendjari National Park. Violence in Alibori takes place in various communities bordering Niger and on the main road leading to it (from Kandi to Malanville). Political violence in Borgou, however, is widely spread the territory.

**Figure 3 The Nature of Political Disorder in Northern Benin (January 2016 - February 2021)**

*Number of events by type and region*

Type of event	Alibori	Atacora	Borgou
Armed clash	11	2	5
Attack	5	16	16
Looting/property destruction	2	3	7
Mob violence	10	12	43
Peaceful protest	3	6	10
Violent demonstration	7	4	14
Other	0	1	3

Data sources: ACLED, Undisclosed Source. Author: Kars de Bruijne

*Number of fatalities by event type and region*

Type of event	Alibori	Atacora	Borgou
Armed clash	27	5	3
Attack	3	17	11
Looting/property destruction	0	0	0
Mob violence	0	5	7
Peaceful protest	0	0	0
Violent demonstration	2	0	5
Other	0	0	0

## Specific regional trends

Atacora came into the spotlight when on 1 May 2019, alleged VEOs killed a park ranger/tourist guide and abducted two French tourists near Porga (Materi) in the Pendjari National Park. Pendjari is part of the W-Arli-Pendjari (WAP) complex, a protected forest area spanning the border areas of Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this incident is unique: most political violence in Atacora is deeply communal and local. Violence in the region is chiefly characterised by conflict between farmers and pastoralists over grazing land, conflict between families over landownership and, importantly, mob violence over ritual sacrifices and sorcery.<sup>16</sup> The groups involved are likewise communal; in ACLED data these are coded as unidentified groups (Unidentified Armed Group or Unidentified Communal Militias), in line with the methodology. Other important actors in the local data are those of a Fulani ethnicity who might clash with Bariba and Dendi, and to a lesser extent with Wamaa and Berba (Porga, Tanguieta and Coby). It is not clear whether these groups have an organised structure or whether they rally for a particular cause.

Violence in Alibori is different from Atacora. The most notable difference is that the area has over the past two years seen open clashes between armed groups, particularly between farmers and herders, and between park rangers, poachers and Fulani gunmen (in Park W).<sup>17</sup> This violence resulted in 15 fatalities during 2020 in armed clashes alone (compared to none in Atacora and three in Borgou). Violence in Alibori is also local in nature and pertains to land conflict and pastoralist-farmers tensions. However, unlike Atacora, violence in the area has more transnational components and involves cross-border dimensions. For example, the new data highlight the presence of Nigerien and Nigerian individuals. The main driver of this cross-border element is that the main transhumance (i.e. the movement of pastoralists between countries) routes in Benin end in Alibori. A specific problem for Alibori region are lethal incidents related to Park W – one of the parks in the WAP complex; all 15 fatalities since March 2020 took place near Park W.

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15 *The Guardian*, 2019. Two French soldiers killed rescuing hostages in West Africa. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/10/two-french-soldiers-killed-rescuing-hostages-in-west-africa>.

16 ACotonou, 2016. 'Bénin : les affrontements entre agriculteurs et éleveurs font trois morts et deux blessés'. <http://news.acotonou.com/h/89040.html>; RFI, 2017. Conflits récurrents entre agriculteurs et éleveurs au Bénin. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20170510-conflits-recurrents-entre-agriculteurs-eleveurs-eu-benin>; BeninWeb, 2020. 'Bénin: les auteurs d'assassinat de présumés sorciers à Pehunco dans le viseur du PG'. <https://beninwebtv.com/2020/03/benin-les-auteurs-dassassinat-de-presumes-sorciers-a-pehunco-dans-le-viseur-du-pg/>.

17 *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 2018. 'Bénin: Affrontement mortel entre un braconnier et des forestiers du parc W à Banikoara'. <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2018/03/benin-affrontement-mortel-braconnier-forestiers-parc-w/>.

Violence in Borgou is both more intense and more dispersed. The spread of incidents over the district and the large number of reported communal and ethnic militias highlight the fact that perpetrators are more established and better organised in Borgou than in Alibori and Atacora. Many of Benin's *chasseurs* (hunters), like the Dabanga – best described as institutional communal self-defence forces, originate from the Borgou region.<sup>18</sup> The reasons for political violence in Borgou are similar to Alibori and Atacora. Violence concerns farmer-pastoralist tensions – with pastoralists often being settled Fulani and Bariba – as well as various land conflicts. Until now, Borgou was known most for political violence in the south of the region (Parakou and Tchaourou), as some incidents of political violence in 2019 related to political competition in the capital between the Talon regime and the *Forces cauris pour un Bénin émergent* (FCBE) of former President Boni Yayi.

### The politics of violence

Thus, amidst all the rumours about potential VEO spillover to the coastal areas, there has been violence for some time in the north of Benin but it has not been reported. New ACLED data should lead to a revised narrative on the dangers facing Benin's north.

But it should also raise a key question: how it is possible that all of this violence has gone undetected?

It is not that the Talon regime is unaware of the problems in the north. In fact, the Talon regime has worked very hard to ensure that problems in the north remain isolated from the presence of VEOs in border areas and has even tried to address some of the root causes. For example, the government has set up a system to 'report suspicious activities and strangers' through local authorities; the Beninese agency for the integrated management of border areas (ABeGIEF) is actively developing relationships with civil society networks and supporting border communities that have peaceful relationships with their neighbours. A number of international donors and organisations provide

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18 Abou Moumouni, I., 2017. 'Coproduction de la sécurité publique dans le Nord-Bénin', *Anthropologie & développement*. For example, the Dabanga exist in almost all the communes of the departments of Borgou/Alibori, Atacora/Donga and Collines and their members number around 8,000.

Abou Moumouni, I., 2017. L'offre informelle de la sécurité publique au Bénin: l'instrumentalisation des groupes d'autodéfense par l'État. *Déviance et Société*.

support to the Beninese government, and applaud the openness of the government to collaborate, learn and address these issues.<sup>19</sup>

Why then is there so little information on violence in the north of Benin? There may be cultural reasons. Like Burkina Faso and Mali before, the Beninese have a self-image of living in a peaceful country where violent extremism and violence are unlikely to get a foothold. But, more importantly, there may be political reasons. The Talon regime seems to have (possibly deliberately) kept incidents of violence out of the public eye. For example, during 2020, media outlets that reported on violence in the north were taken down and strongly controlled, and self-censoring media rarely report incidents in the north. Likewise, in the week before 11 April 2021 (election date), a major attack against JNIM took place in Pendjari (25 March) but was kept out of the public eye until after the elections. One reason for this silence might be Talon's self-image as a businessman who could put the country back on track; high levels of violence (possibly predating his rule) would endanger that image in the run-up to his re-election in April 2021. Equally important is his investment in attracting tourists to Benin, and particularly to Pendjari Park and Park W. After the elections, an alleged violent encounter with JNIM in the week of April 25 2021 in the Park was also not reported (even to donors).

Understandable as this may be for a politician seeking to be re-elected and to maintain a positive image, the consequence is that there is no debate on the real drivers of violence in the north. As a result, the spillover policy of Benin remains security-oriented, focused on border control and the instrumentalization of communities as intelligence providers. New data by ACLED proves that the real problems and underlying drivers of violence are elsewhere. The remainder of this brief attempts to get them into better focus and move the public debate on spillover in Benin out of darkness into the light and on a firm empirical footing. It is the only way to address root causes efficiently, collaboratively and effectively.

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19 Commission Nationale des Frontières – Agence béninoise de gestion intégrée des espaces frontaliers. Qui gère les frontières du Bénin? <http://www.abegief.org/?Qui-gere-les-frontieres-du-Benin>; Action fiche of an EU-funded project entitled 'Consolidation of peace in Benin through the prevention of violent extremism': <https://www.gtai.de/resource/blob/153744/55756b86da8856c5da245ee4605003b2/pro201908305000-data.pdf>; Confidential interview 5 (12 February 2021).

### 3 What drives high levels of communal violence in northern Benin?

Political violence in northern Benin has three different but linked causes. Farmer-herder conflict is the most important problem (a 45% share). A second problem is ownership of and access to land, which is tied to farmer-herder conflict (about 10%). A third and more isolated problem involves the management of Park W and Pendjari Park (also 10%).<sup>20</sup> Figure 4 shows the sites of communal violence.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 4 The drivers of political disorder in Northern Benin (2016 - February 2021)**



<sup>20</sup> The remaining 35% of political violence and protests involves mainly local protest and riots.

<sup>21</sup> These incidents include all ACLED event types. For coding – including separating land from farmer-herder conflict see annex 1.

### 3.1 Farmer-herder conflict and transhumance in northern Benin

To obtain an insight into the data, table 1 lists incidents related to farmers and herders in the five weeks from 1 August to 6 September 2020. For example, on 7 August 2020, a number of farmers assaulted and wounded a Fulani pastoralist when his herd damaged cropland in Gorgounou (Alibori); the farmers then confiscated the pastoralist's livestock. Incidents like this are very common in Benin's north and occur in Alibori, Borgou and Atacora. Farmer-herder conflicts are often the result of deep-rooted and long-standing tensions between communities that can escalate into physical violence in various contexts.

In Benin, as elsewhere in the Sahel and littoral West Africa, farmer-herder conflicts arise due to agricultural and animal breeding activities being carried out in the same areas. Interestingly, the data suggests that in Benin farmer-herder violence occurs in areas where pastoralist communities have settled rather than along transhumance routes into Niger and Burkina. This is why most farmer-herder violence takes place in Borgou, rather than in Alibori and Atacora (and Donga).

Herders and farmers in West Africa have for centuries enjoyed symbiotic relationships. This symbiosis was driven by mutual dependency; farmers needed livestock products (dairy, meat) while herders needed agricultural products such as millet, vegetables and fodder for feeding both cattle and themselves.<sup>22</sup> In Benin this symbiotic relationship has changed because of a complex interplay of four related elements: a changing political economy of pastoralism which has uprooted social-economic relations; the weaponisation of transhumance movements; the sedentarization of pastoralists; and finally, increased awareness of a Fulani identity. All of these combined explain why it is Borgou in particular that has been affected by farmer-herder violence.

#### The political economy of herding

Farmer-herder conflicts in northern Benin have increased as the political economy of herding has changed due to rapid demographic growth, urbanisation and industrialisation.<sup>23</sup> The resulting demand for food and agricultural produce has led to the expansion of agricultural land and has gradually limited grazing and transhumance areas. Pastoral livelihoods have come under threat and the symbiotic relationship is disrupted because of these tensions. Development policies have reinforced the intensification of farming and marginalised herder communities. At the same time, population growth has increased meat consumption and demand.

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22 Djohy, G. 2010. *Pastoralism and Socio-technological Transformations in Northern Benin*. Göttingen University Press.

23 Bisson, L., Cottyn, I., De Bruijne, K. and Molenaar, F., 2020. *Between hope and despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso*. The Clingendael Institute.



This has led to a change in the cattle economy. Transhumant people have attempted to adapt to a new economic reality but so far without success, as gains in market access go directly to either the collection trader or *local* markets. This means that middlemen and brokers take the market surplus. Moreover, urban elites and business people have set up sedentary livestock farms, driven by policies favouring the intensification of cattle production to meet the growing demand for meat and milk in urban areas. Hence, there is pressure on herders' livelihoods and stress for transhumant communities, especially as they often lack influence on local decision making.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1 Examples of farmer-herder violence in northern Benin, 1 August – 8 September 2020**

Date	Location	Details of violence
2 August 2020	Bembereke (N'dali, Borgou)	A Fulani pastoralist armed with a machete attacked and severely wounded a farmer. The event was reported as a settlement of accounts due to a year-long dispute over damaged cropland.
2 August 2020	Bessassi (Borgou)	A herd belonging to a Fulani pastoralist destroyed cropland belonging to a farmer. The farmer responded by confiscating livestock and filing a claim to local authorities.
2 August 2020	Sakabansi (Nikki, Borgou)	A Nigerian Fulani pastoralist killed a farmer amid a dispute. Farmers responded by attacking a neighbouring hamlet and killing one person.
7 August 2020	Gorgounou (Alibori)	A number of farmers assaulted and wounded a Fulani pastoralist when his herd damaged cropland. The farmers also confiscated his livestock.
17 August 2020	Tampatou (Toucountouna, Atacora)	A number of farmers assaulted a Fulani pastoralist after his herd of livestock damaged farmland).
17 August 2020	Wansokou (Toucountouna, Atacora)	Amid a land dispute, five members of a family destroyed the farmland of a neighbour who was a former administrative councillor.
18 August 2020	Kakatinnin (Derassi, Borgou)	A number of farmers and pastoralists clashed over damaged farmland
19 August 2020	Sori (Gogounou, Alibori)	A group of farmers attacked and wounded a Fulani pastoralist after his herd of livestock damaged farmland.
25 August 2020	Sirarou (N'dali, Borgou)	A group of Fulani pastoralists assaulted and wounded a farmer after he dispersed cattle damaging his farmland.

24 Bisson, L., Cottyn, I., De Bruijne, K. and Molenaar, F. 2020. *Between hope and despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso*. The Clingendael Institute.

Date	Location	Details of violence
27 August 2020	Ouenra (Nikki, Borgou)	A number of farmers attacked and severely wounded a Fulani pastoralist after his herd of livestock damaged farmland.
1 September 2020	Tchatchou (Tchaourou, Borgou)	In reaction to devastated farmland, a group of farmers assaulted and wounded a pastoralist.
3 September 2020	Bouka (Nikki, Borgou)	In reaction to devastated farmland, a group of farmers attacked a Fulani pastoralist camp. Three people were wounded and livestock seized.
4 September 2020	Soubo-Baraworou (Nikki, Borgou)	A group of Fulani assaulted and severely wounded a farmer.
6 September 2020	Beroubouay (Bembereke, Borgou)	A Fulani pastoralist assaulted a farmer with a machete amid a land dispute. Other farmers intervened and the Fulani shot and wounded two farmers before being overpowered. Four people were wounded and the farmer's confiscated livestock.
6 September 2020	Malanville (Alibori)	In reaction to devastated farmland, a group of farmers assaulted and wounded a pastoralist and dispersed livestock.
8 September 2020	Pede (Kandi, Alibori)	Unknown individuals equipped with machetes killed and mutilated a security guard at a farm.
8 September 2020	Badekparou (Tchaourou, Borgou)	Unknown individuals illegally cut 50 logs of teak wood on farmland.
8 September 2020	Badekparou (Tchaourou, Borgou)	Unknown individuals illegally cut 50 logs of teak wood on farmland.

## Transhumance

Another element of increased farmer-herder conflict in Benin is tension around transhumance movement. In West Africa, there are officially demarcated transhumance corridors, established on 26 February 2004 by ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). In the agreement, five transhumance routes into Benin have been

recognised – all from Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>25</sup> The routes from Burkina Faso enter Benin in Atacora and end at Donga (Djouougou), and from Niger into Alibori (Malanville, and a host of informal entry points) to Goungoun.<sup>26</sup> These routes are of different width and demarcated with stone beacons or other permanent signs and are meant to be equipped with key infrastructure such as water points, bridges, transit (resting) areas, grazing enclaves (for longer grazing stops), veterinary and human health centres, and possibly mobile schools.

Violence is common along these routes during transhumance season.<sup>27</sup> Historically, these routes involved only a smaller number of herders who would often refrain from getting close to farmers' land. But due to greater land scarcity and infertility, farmers and herders increasingly compete for access to the same land. Pastoralists are also migrating further south into communities where they have no traditional ties.<sup>28</sup> Increased contact sometimes leads to arbitrary detention, inflated fines, cattle rustling and extortion and in response there has been a weaponisation of pastoralist communities. Currently transhumance herders carry small weapons, including firearms, swords and spears and bows (the use of firearms is a recent phenomenon).<sup>29</sup>

Since March 2020, tensions around transhumance movements have further increased as the borders with Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger have been closed due to Covid-19 and the imposition of taxes. Only 50,000 cattle have been allowed access to formal

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- 25 **Route 1:** Fada N'Gourma (Burkina Faso) - Pama - Porga - to Togo or Tanguiéta (Benin) - Natitingou - Djougou - Bassila; **Route 2:** (a) Sebba (Burkina Faso) - Kantchari - Diapaga - Namounou - Pagou - Porga - to Togo or Tanguiéta (Benin) - Natitingou - Djougou - Bassila; (b) Torodi (Niger) - Makalondi - Kantchari - Diapaga - Namounou - Pagou - Porga - to Togo or Tanguiéta (Benin) - Natitingou - Djougou - Bassila; **Route 3:** Say (Niger) - Tamou - Botou - Tapoa Djerma - Kotchari (Burkina Faso) - Kondio - Kéréroum (Benin) - Toura - Goumori - Kerou - Towards the upper Alibori reception area; **Route 4:** Say (Niger) - Kirtachi - Boumba - Monsey - Karimama (Benin) - Karigui - to Goungoun reception area; **Route 5:** Birni N'Gaouré (Niger) - Dosso - Gaya - Malanville (Benin) - Guéné - towards Goungoun. A Lesse, P. et al. 2015. Transhumance en République du Bénin: états des lieux et contraintes Transhumance in Republic of Benin. *International Journal of Biological and Chemical Sciences*
- 26 As agreed by the FAO in 2012. La transhumance transfrontalière en Afrique de l'Ouest: proposition de plan d'action. [https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/Transhumance\\_Transfrontalier\\_en\\_AO\\_Rapport\\_FAO.pdf](https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/Transhumance_Transfrontalier_en_AO_Rapport_FAO.pdf).
- 27 Leonhardt, M., 2019. *Regional Policies and Response to Manage Pastoral Movements within the ECOWAS Region*. International Organization for Migration. [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom\\_ecowas\\_pastoralism.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_pastoralism.pdf).
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 UNOWAS, 2018. *Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Coexistence*. [https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_pastoralisme\\_eng-april\\_2019\\_-\\_online.pdf](https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_pastoralisme_eng-april_2019_-_online.pdf); Vellturo, M., 2020. *The Erosion of Pastoralism in the Sudano-Sahel: Time to Recognize a Growing Security Threat?* <https://www.stimson.org/2020/the-erosion-of-pastoralism-in-the-sudano-sahel/>

transhumant corridors, but the reality is that use of informal routes has increased.<sup>30</sup> For example, earlier in 2020 the Beninese government took 100,000 cattle from a pastoralist (owned by an individual named Big Otus in Cotonou).<sup>31</sup> Moreover, within Benin there are also national (secondary) routes and local (tertiary) routes. But the first months of the Covid pandemic saw a prohibition of inter-department travel in Benin, which locked pastoralists into districts for extended periods,<sup>32</sup> forcing them to seek informal and new routes, leading to more confrontations.

### **Pastoralist sedentarization**

A particularly problematic aspect of farmer-herder conflict is that settled pastoralist communities are in conflict with local communities. A number of transhumant pastoralists have settled in Benin, partly in response to the droughts of the 1970s and partly as a coping mechanism to the changing political economy.

The Talon government has explicitly pushed this sedentarization agenda, which is largely embraced and accepted by pastoralist Fulani communities. North of Parakou, for example, the government has created a Fulani model village that has raised enthusiasm and acceptance that this will be the new norm. Borgou department in particular is home to former transhumant communities that are now breeding cattle as settlers.

The data in this report suggests that most farmer-herder violence takes place by and against these settled pastoralist communities rather than along transhumance routes. This is strengthened by data analysis finding that most farmer-herder incidents do not take place between December and April (when transhumance routes are used) but rather from June/July to November.

There are two reasons why sedentarization fuels conflict. One is that many migrant pastoralists have become an integral part of communities in northern Benin and have been able to acquire land over the past 60 years. However, autochthone farmers still perceive these settled pastoralists as nomadic, stateless and foreigners with ways of life that are different to theirs. Moreover, autochthone farmers (e.g. of Mokolé or Dendi ethnicities) believe that pastoralists should have no right to land and are unlawfully encroaching and destroying farming livelihoods by possessing land. Another reason is

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30 Leonhardt, M., 2019. *Regional Policies and Response to Manage Pastoral Movements within the ECOWAS Region*. International Organization for Migration. [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom-ecowas\\_pastoralism.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom-ecowas_pastoralism.pdf).

31 Confidential interview 1 (9 December 2020) and 2 (12 November 2020).

32 Communiqué du Gouvernement de la République du Bénin, 10 May 2020. CORONAVIRUS - Levée du cordon sanitaire à compter du lundi 11 mai 2020 à 00Heure. <https://www.gouv.bj/actualite/666/coronavirus---levee-cordon-sanitaire-compter-lundi-11-2020-00heure/>.

that sedentary livestock farming in confined village territories with limited resources has proven difficult: livestock farming requires high quantities of purchased fodder, or herds must be entrusted to pastoralist herders to guide them to greener pastures. As such, livestock sedentarization jeopardises traditional farming activity (by taking fodder) and smaller-scale internal movement where sedentary livestock production still leads producers to incorporate their animals into pastoralist transhumant herds.<sup>33</sup>

### **Fulanization of farmer-herding conflict**

Farmer-herder conflicts in Benin are becoming increasingly ethnised. ACLED data show that the vast majority of farmer-herder incidents involve Fulani and other ethnicities (64% since data collection began in 2017: 48 out of 76 events). Across West Africa, Fulani feel stigmatised and Fulani non-governmental organisations document abuses.<sup>34</sup> Among Fulani, photos and videos are shared on social media, reinforcing the idea of a Fulani people united in their suffering and victimisation.<sup>35</sup> This was illustrated in a recent interview in the north with a Fulani Ruga (a traditional leader), who revealed complete disillusionment with the perceived stigmatisation and marginalisation of his ethnic group in the area.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, there is mounting evidence of a growing anti-Fulani discourse in the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>37</sup>

This increasing ethnicization along Fulani and autochthone ethnic fault lines is moreover mixed with the management of natural resources and with land ownership (see below). The effect is violence such as destruction of property and regular clashes over land, which has led to deaths and a constant affirmation of ethnic differences.

One of the main questions, therefore, is whether groups within the Fulani community in Benin will be attracted to the more violent Fulani rhetoric of VEOs in the Sahel or the roving bandit cattle gangs in north-west Nigeria. In that regard, claims of a rising number of kidnappings for ransom in northern areas of Benin by Fulani cattle gangs (not observed in ACLED data, due to its focus on 'political' violence) might point to an increasing ethnicization of farmer-herder conflict in the country.

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33 Bisson, L., Cottyn, I., De Bruijne, K. and Molenaar, F., 2020. *Between hope and despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso*. The Clingendael Institute.

34 Ghaly Cissé, M., 2020. Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis. Africa Center for Strategic Center. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>.

35 Le Monde, 2018. En Afrique, le fantasme d'une « communauté peule » radicalisée. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/09/05/en-afrique-le-fantasme-d-une-communaute-peule-radicalisee\\_5350692\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/09/05/en-afrique-le-fantasme-d-une-communaute-peule-radicalisee_5350692_3212.html).

36 Interview 1 February 2021.

37 VOA, 2019. Les éleveurs peuls et le poison djihadiste. <https://www.voafrique.com/a/les-eleveurs-peuls-et-le-poisson-djihadiste/5157726.html>.

### 3.2 Contentious land ownership as a driver of violence

A second major reason for violence in the north of Benin are conflicts over land use and land ownership. Benin has serious problems in relation to the management and allocation of land, as evidenced by tensions over land ownership and regular intra- and inter-community clashes. Frequent changes of land policy (see Box 1) and the simultaneous existence of a state-sanctioned regime and a customary system of land ownership have produced a series of winners and losers who have each sought to change the law to their advantage.<sup>38</sup> In the face of this insecurity, actors mobilise various securitisation strategies like building a house, enclosure walls, a well, installation of boards and land pillars, employment of a guard and 'mystical practices'.<sup>39</sup> One example in our data is a case in Torozougou (Malanville, Alibori) where community members destroyed a building under construction on land they claimed ownership over.

In the north, tensions over land ownership fuel violence in three specific ways. One pattern is that the transfer of land entitlement has increased tensions between rural and urban communities. Many buyers of land (and livestock) are urban dwellers, civil servants and businessmen. As a result, northern traditional authorities are trying to prohibit land sales to urban individuals, who they see as non-indigenous, particularly southerners from Cotonou and Porto-Novo, but also Kandi, Parakou and Savè.<sup>40</sup> The problem is that traditional authorities do not enjoy a very prominent role in northern Benin, where local government agents are more powerful (a situation somewhat comparable to the Sahel region in Burkina Faso).<sup>41</sup> The latter often favour urban newcomers with connections to the political centre.

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38 Idrissou, A.H., Wennink, B., Baltissen, G. et Obura, F. (eds). 2014. La gouvernance du foncier rural au Bénin. La société civile s'engage. [https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/547490654a579\\_SNV-Livre-La-gouvernance-du-foncier-rural-2014.pdf](https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/547490654a579_SNV-Livre-La-gouvernance-du-foncier-rural-2014.pdf); Lavigne Delville, P & Saïah, C., 2016. Politiques foncières et mobilisations sociales au Bénin : des organisations de la société civile face au Code domanial et foncier. [https://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins\\_textes/divers17-01/010068957.pdf](https://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers17-01/010068957.pdf).

39 Lavigne Delville P., 2019. History and political economy of land administration reform in Benin. Research project of Economic Development and Institutions (EDI) <https://edi.opml.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ch7-Benin-LandRights.pdf>; Adjahouhoué L., 2013. Dynamiques sociales autour du foncier périurbain de Cotonou au Bénin : logiques des acteurs et vulnérabilité sociale. Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Abomey-Calavi. vol. 292.

40 Le Meur, P.-Y., 2006. Droits & Conflits fonciers en Afrique : le cas du Bénin. Groupe de recherche et d'échanges technologiques. [https://www.dii.dk/files/media/documents/publications/droits\\_conflits\\_fonciers\\_benin.pdf](https://www.dii.dk/files/media/documents/publications/droits_conflits_fonciers_benin.pdf).

41 Banégas, R., 2003. La démocratie à pas de caméléon : Transition et imaginaires politiques au Bénin. Karthala. <https://www.cairn.info/la-democratie-a-pas-de-cameleon--9782845863965.htm>; Bako-Arifarji, N., Le Meur, P.-Y., 2003. 'La chefferie au Bénin : une résurgence ambiguë', in Perrot C. H., Fauvelle-Aymar F. X. Le retour des rois. Les autorités traditionnelles et l'État en Afrique contemporaine. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280696655\\_La\\_chefferie\\_au\\_Benin\\_une\\_resurgence\\_ambiguous](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280696655_La_chefferie_au_Benin_une_resurgence_ambiguous); Bierschenk, T., & De Sardan, J., 2003. 'Powers in the village: rural Benin between democratization and decentralization'. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 73(2), 145-173. Retrieved 25 March 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3556886>.

Another pattern in land-related grievances is that traditional customary systems to integrate newcomers no longer operate. As is common across West Africa, customary land sales and lease arrangements involve mentoring relationships between indigenous landowners and ‘outsiders’ in search of land. It is a ‘mode of production’ where the ‘migrant’ obtains a specific status and is endowed with a bundle of rights and obligations in the community.<sup>42</sup> In customary settings, migrants gradually consolidate their rights, through permanent use, transmission of rights to descendants and matrimonial alliances. This status is similar to a form of local citizenship. However, when tensions rise in the community the rights of these outsiders are questioned. At present, a key dynamic is that indigenous young people are accusing their elders of selling the land to foreigners and undermining their future prospects.<sup>43</sup>

A third pattern that generates grievances is the bifurcated system of state and customary land rights and the effects on customary authorities. This bifurcated system increasingly undercuts the already frail position of customary authorities. Under the Marxist-Leninist single party regime (1975-1989) traditional authorities were undermined and sidelined – a process that was reversed in the 1990s as the government permitted traditional leaders (*chefferies* and *royaumes*) to regain their leadership, status and influence.<sup>44</sup> But in reality, the role of these leaders in the north of Benin remains limited and highly dependent on the state.<sup>45</sup>

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42 Chauveau, J.-P., 2006. ‘How does an institution evolve? Land, politics, intra-households relations and the institution of the tutorat between autochthons and migrant farmers in the Gban region (Côte d’Ivoire)’, in *Landrights and the politics of belonging in West Africa*; Le Meur, P.-Y., 2006. ‘State making and the politics of the frontier in central Benin’. *Development and Change*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2006.00505.x>.

43 Bierschenk, T., Floquet, A. and Le Meur, P.-Y., 1999. *Paysans, État et ONG au Bénin. Une société civile rurale entreprenante*. University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart.

44 Banégas, R., 2003. *La démocratie à pas de caméléon : Transition et imaginaires politiques au Bénin*. Karthala. <https://www.cairn.info/la-democratie-a-pas-de-cameleon--9782845863965.htm>; Bako-Arifarji, N., Le Meur, P.-Y., 2003. ‘La chefferie au Bénin : une résurgence ambiguë.’ in Perrot C. H., Fauvelle-Aymar F. X. *Le retour des rois. Les autorités traditionnelles et l’État en Afrique contemporaine*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280696655\\_La\\_chefferie\\_au\\_Benin\\_une\\_resurgence\\_ambigue](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280696655_La_chefferie_au_Benin_une_resurgence_ambigue).

45 Bierschenk, T. and De Sardan, J. (2003). ‘Powers in the village: rural Benin between democratization and decentralization’. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 73(2), 145-173. Retrieved 25 March 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3556886>; Koter, D., 2016. *Beyond Ethnic Politics in Africa*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316761366>.

**Box 1 Historic overview of land ownership in Benin<sup>46</sup>**

Land ownership in Benin is based on both civil law and customary law. During the colonial era, the state held ownership of all unregistered land, apart from that collectively owned by indigenous groups or held by the chiefs representing them. In 1961, state land could be sold or rented to private individuals and corporations for rural development. This resulted in illegal expropriation and redistribution among the regime's 'clients' and allies. In the 1980s, structural adjustment was intended to limit state control of land and sponsor privatisation. Throughout this time, traditional management and ownership of land remained a reality in Benin.

The 2007 revision paved the way for state recognition of the land rights of rural dwellers (*de facto* users of land) and customary owners. In reality, however, the rural registration system (*titre et cadastre foncier*) has never been fully recognised. In 2013, therefore, a new Land and Domain Code was meant to radically reform the legal framework of land tenure. Policy makers sought to standardise all laws and end legal dualism. Although this new code did not recognise rural tenure it allowed for an 'Attestation of Customary Possession' under strict conditions but the legal status of this attestation remained unclear. It thus reproduces the traditional division between 'informal' land and registered land.

In 2017, an amendment reverted back to the 2007 system but under stricter conditions. The law ordered the end to the Land Ownership Certificate and the return to the *titre et cadastre foncier*. Proof of rural ownership could include administrative certificates and land use certificates (Certificate Foncier Rural, CFRs) but sale agreements were not recognised. Currently, the process is to render null and void all customary ownership of land that cannot be proven.<sup>47</sup> From 14 August 2023, no land transaction will be permitted if the *titre et cadastre foncier* cannot be provided. This means that one will no longer be able to sell, buy, exchange or give land or a house if it does not have a land title. It ends presumptive ownership.

46 Information from Lavigne Delville P., 2019. History and political economy of land administration reform in Benin, Research project of Economic Development and Institutions (EDI) and Lavigne Delville, P. 2010. 'The reform of rural land tenure in Benin. The development and assessment of an institutive policy in an aid-receiving country', *Revue française de science politique*.

47 Benin Web, 2020. Réformes foncières: voici deux points de changement essentiels d'ici à 2023. <https://beninwebtv.com/2020/06/benin-reformes-foncieres-voici-deux-points-de-changement-essentiels-dici-a-2023/>.



Moreover, the multiple land reforms in Benin have led to a continuous stream of land claims, with the concomitant need to mediate and settle the claims. Customary norms and traditional authorities tended to be involved in management but the frequent changes and the overlapping jurisdictions means that land ownership cases have become often too complicated for traditional authorities.<sup>48</sup> Traditional authorities are consequently not able to mediate between parties in land ownership conflicts and resolve new conflicts, as they lack the relevant know-how and legitimacy to decide in difficult cases. It is one of the reasons why there are examples in the data where residents of villages fight one another after rulings by traditional courts (e.g. in Belle and Kperankou-Baguiiri where seven people were wounded). What is problematic is that customary authorities have become somewhat politicised, as the present regime has taken a stand against customary authorities and does not rely on their ability to ramp up votes, whereas they played significant roles in the *ancien regime* of Boni Yayi.

### 3.3 Toxic tourism: the privatisation of Pendjari Park and Park W

The third driver of violence is more localised and involves the management of Benin's natural reserves: Park W (Alibori) and Pendjari Park (Atakora). The new data from the undisclosed source collected for this report, records various incidents that involve conflict between park rangers and local populations and transhumant communities (see figure 4). Where most violence took place in 2017 and 2018, there is presently continued destruction of property and serious violence. For example, on 8 September 2020, unknown individuals equipped with machetes killed and mutilated a guard at a farm in Pede (Kandi, Alibori). Likewise, there is a sustained conflict in Torozougou (Alibori). In March 2021, chasseurs (hunters) in Tanguieta protested against the management of the park.

Management of the parks has been a contentious issue for over a century. During the colonial period local populations were actively expelled in order to boost French control over the parks. After independence, however, there was no government involvement in either park; for example, there was little engagement in mediation of local conflict and little service provision for forest guards (e.g. vehicles, personnel). During the 2000s, up until 2017, the parks were managed by the Centre National de Gestion des Réserves de Faune (CENAGREF) in coordination with the local communities, who were represented by the l'Union des Associations Villageoises de Gestion des Réserves de Faune (AVIGREF). Under this arrangement, local communities cultivated crops (such as cotton) in the Zone of Controlled Occupation. There were also permits to water cattle in the parks, and for hunting and fishing. CENAGREF shared in 30% of the trophy-hunting

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48 Wily, L.A., 2011. "The Law is to Blame": The vulnerable status of common property rights in sub-Saharan Africa'. *Development and Change*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01712.x>.

income by AVIGREF.<sup>49</sup> Hence, CENAGREF had no real control over the parks and local and transhumant communities were given a *de facto* carte blanche to freely use the parks' resources.<sup>50</sup>

In 2017, however, the government strengthened its grip on the parks and awarded a 10-year management contract to African Parks Network (APN) for both Park W and Pendjari Park.<sup>51</sup> The contract was meant to support President's Talon strategy to base Benin's economic growth in part on the development of tourism in the north (the WAP complex is the most diverse eco-zone in West Africa). However, as with the investment in agricultural, this economic decision has also had adverse effects. Privatising the management of the parks led to the closure of public access to the park, which in turn stoked local tensions.

Communities in and around both parks rely on park resources for wood to sell, hunting for personal consumption, fishing, and farming, e.g. growing cotton (a practice that stems from Benin's post-independence treatment of the park). Hence, local tensions have emerged as APN's operations have put the livelihoods of local populations in and around the parks at risk.<sup>52</sup> The various incidents in and around Pendjari and W coincide with the moment that APN began operating in the area. Early in 2018, tensions came to a head when traditional chasseurs attacked APN headquarters in Tanguita. In response park rangers seized and destroyed chasseur equipment.

APN operations not only put the livelihoods of local populations at risk; there are also two main transhumance routes running through the parks, one in Pendjari and another through W. These routes are in the parks as a direct consequence of past attempts of pastoralist transhumance communities to avoid settled farming communities; the parks

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49 Janssens, I. 'Conservation conflict following a management shift in Pendjari National Park (Benin): A Q methodological Study'. [file:///Users/mac/Downloads/Janssens\\_Iliana\\_MScThesis\\_Human\\_Ecoloy\\_QinPendjari.pdf](file:///Users/mac/Downloads/Janssens_Iliana_MScThesis_Human_Ecoloy_QinPendjari.pdf).

50 Idrissou, L., Van Paassen, A., Aarts, N., Vodouhè, S., Leeuwis, C., 2013. 'Trust and hidden conflict in participatory natural resources management: The case of the Pendjari national Park (PNP) in Benin'. *Forest Policy and Economics*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1389934112002675?via%3Dihub>.

51 Benin Web, 2020. 'Après la Pendjari, le Park W confié à African Parks Networks'. <https://beninwebtv.com/2020/07/benin-apres-la-pendjari-la-gestion-du-parc-w-confiee-a-african-parks/>; Le Monde Diplomatique, 2020. 'Who is the land for?' <https://mondediplo.com/2020/02/12african-Parks>.

52 L'évènement Précis, 2019. Difficultés d'accès aux ressources: Grincements de dents autour de la Pendjari. <https://levenementprecis.com/2019/10/09/difficultes-dacces-aux-ressources-grincements-de-dents-autour-de-la-pendjari/>.

were 'ideal' conduits to access fertile and open areas in Benin.<sup>53</sup> While transhumance communities could previously freely enter the premises of Park W and Pendjari Park, the 2017 regulations (particularly the well-guarded 'zones de tampon' around the park) have enabled APN (supported by the government) to block the main transhumance routes, motivated by the need for park conservation. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and reinforced by the presence of JNIM and ISGS on the Burkina Faso and Nigerien border zones of the parks, all transhumance is now prohibited.

As a result, hunters, pastoralists and local agricultural producers and villagers find themselves united in opposition to APN. APN states it has learned from managing Pendjari Park since 2017 and claims it is applying the lessons to Park W, where it recently started operating. For example, there are plans to cede parts of the park to local populations for farming, to formalise informal transhumant access points, to plant herding areas along the route and to facilitate transhumance movement in a small strip just above Park W and a strip below Pendjari Park.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, APN (partly supported by donors) is trying to improve community relations by organising community meetings where it can listen to local people's views, understand their needs, and engage in job creation activities. The (new) APN director for Park W is clearly seeking to take the sting out of local discontent.

However, the data highlight that none of this has been truly sufficient; there have been violent incidents around Park W over park management. In fact, in both parks there seems to be at present an ongoing tit-for-tat dynamic where park rangers detain people and confiscate equipment, weapons and motorbikes and local communities retaliate by destroying park infrastructure and attacking park rangers. Research is urgently needed into why APN continues to generate local tensions, despite seemingly trying hard not to do so.

## Conclusion

In short, high levels of violence in northern Benin are driven by three interconnected factors. Two of these are long-term processes that have become mixed with cultural and social dynamics which are hard to disentangle and difficult to resolve. These are farmer-herder conflicts where there are tensions between settled pastoralist communities and local populations, and land ownership problems where multiple systems compete and create confusion over rules and procedures. Both of these drivers

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53 Idrissou, L., Van Paassen, A., Aarts, N., Vodouhè, S. and Leeuwis, C., 2013. 'Trust and hidden conflict in participatory natural resources management: The case of the Pendjari national Park (PNP) in Benin'. *Forest Policy and Economics*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1389934112002675?via%3Dihub>.

54 Confidential interview 6 (1 February 2021), Confidential interview 5 (12 February 2021).

intensify the challenges to the social fabric of northern Benin; both are, in part, driven by policy making at national level and in part supported by international donors (and thus require reflection on the conflict-sensitivity of actions). A third factor is more temporary in nature, that is, the role of APN in sealing off Pendjari Park and Park W. The role of APN is relatively new and the tensions it generates relatively one-faceted in that they pertain to threatened livelihoods and are not yet mixed with deeper socio-cultural issues.

## 4 Is northern Benin at risk of violent extremist spillover?

We return to the initial pages of this report: the apparent threat of violent extremism from the Sahel spilling over to the coastal areas. As significant drivers for spillover are existing communal problems and violence, the key question is whether communal violence around land, pastoralism, and management of the parks is currently exploited by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in Benin.

This chapter makes three main observations. First, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the presence of VEOs is a bigger problem for Benin than has hitherto been assumed. Different VEO cells are present in Benin, albeit temporary, transitory and often limited in nature. Second, there is as yet no clear collusion between agents involved in communal violence and VEO interests. Third, there are very dangerous dynamics in Benin's border areas – particularly between Burkina's Est and Atacora as well as Niger's Dosso and Alibori. Thus, despite the sobering message of this report on the higher levels of communal violence in northern Benin, the regular but transitory presence of VEOs and the very real dangers at the borders, this report suggests there is still policy space to prevent spillover to the north of Benin.

To back up these claims, this report relies on a set of grey sources such as undisclosed reports and conversations with Beninese and international sources in and outside of the security field (including in-country conversations).<sup>55</sup> It first explores sightings of VEOs in Benin, then identifies four areas with temporary VEO presence, and finally explores nascent relationships that seem to be developing.

### 4.1 Sightings of violent extremists in northern Benin

The available evidence suggests that despite everything, at the end of 2020 it seemed likely there was no permanent collective presence of VEOs in Benin's north. Nevertheless, VEOs do regularly traverse the three provinces, have logistical connections, and have developed ties with individuals in Benin.

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<sup>55</sup> These sources are harder to verify. Only information confirmed by more than one source or triangulated has been included.

To see this, figure 5 provides information on sightings of VEOs in Benin in 2020. These data have been collected by the author, Héní Nsaibia (of Menastream), a local network, intelligence reports and other sources in and outside Benin for the purposes of this report. These sightings range from VEOs moving into Benin to buy or trade fuel or meat, to meeting with associates or moving from one country to another. Whereas most sightings appear in Alibori, it is important to stress that these data are necessary incomplete; other sources suggest more sightings in Atacora (Natitingou/Tanguieta) and even as far south as Donga (Djougou Town).

**Figure 5 Suspected VEO activity in Benin (May 2020 - February 2021)**



A recent report noted sightings in Atacora of ‘VEOs [that] were reported to wear black outfits and spoke Hausa and Zarma, but not the local language’; the same report noted sightings in Donga of ‘VEOs that were dressed “religiously like imams, with the sheared pants and the turban”. They spoke the local languages, Hausa and Fulfulde.’<sup>56</sup> While such reports seem to convey a degree of rumour and local gossip, there are too many such reports to dismiss them as rumours only. Figure 5, nevertheless, displays only incidents where some verification was possible.

<sup>56</sup> ELVA, 2020. Tracking VEO Spill-over from the Sahel into Littoral West Africa. Situation report.

A second indication of temporary VEO presence is a well-publicised security incident that happened in June 2020. A group of 12 individuals had moved from Burkina Faso through Benin into Nigeria. The group was monitored upon entering Benin by the government in (very close) collaboration with African Park Network. The group originated from Burkina Faso (possibly north of Diapaga) then moved into Park W at the Point Triple entry point and moved through the park to the vicinity of Goungoun and then via Madekali into Nigeria (Kebbi state). At various of these places, the 'group of twelve' met what seemed to have been potential collaborators. From there, the group moved in and out of Benin (e.g. Godjekoara, Segbana, Kalale) over a period of weeks before they finally went on to Kainji Lake National Park in Nigeria. What concerned (inter)national security officials was not only the prolonged movement of the group but also the fact that they visited various individuals in Benin, used some routes only known locally and grew in number over time.

## 4.2 VEO presence in Alibori, Atacora and Borgou

While these sightings are concerning, as they show the porous nature of borders, the links with neighbouring countries and the ability of groups to move around Benin, the most worrying aspect is that there are three areas where temporary VEO presence is very common. While VEOs have no permanent and settled presence, they wield some influence in these areas.<sup>57</sup>

The first of these areas is the border of Alibori with Niger, particularly in the area between Malanville and Kompa, with flashpoints Woro Chateaux, Karimama in Benin and Katanga in Niger. An ISGS cell seems to operate in the area. Reports suggest that the group is moving between villages in Benin and Niger and can stay up to a month in a town. From local sources it is clear that the group is operating in broad daylight; for example, in Woro Chateaux the leader of the cell is known by name ('Mr Shangania').<sup>58</sup> Likewise, in Katanga the group engaged in public violence by reportedly killing two individuals on 8 August 2020. There are various reports that suggest that Karimama is used as a regular resting area. A report by the Dutch consultancy ELVA suggests that

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57 An area to note is Djougou. While there is evidence to suggest that Djougou sees active VEO presence, the area is known to be the home of Islamic revivalism (Knoope, P., Chauzal, G., 2016. *Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin*. The Clingendael Institute) and that Islamic preachers (some sponsored by Gulf States) are preaching violence and prey on social cleavages (Mossi, A., 2019. Étude sur les risques et les facteurs potentiels de radicalisation et d'extrémisme violent en république du Bénin. ACotonou). While this dynamic has been going on for a few years (and is not limited to Djougou only), intelligence reports from Benin suggest that 2020 saw new preachers coming in as they escaped pressure in the city of Kara (Togo). A new dynamic is that there is more local support.

58 ELVA, 2020. Tracking VEO Spill-over from the Sahel into Littoral West Africa. Situation report.

this ISGS cell may have tried to impose a tax and forbidden women to work.<sup>59</sup> For outside observers it is important to realise that this presence remains temporary and flexible, and that the influence of this cell is limited and for many inhabitants not very important in their lives.

A second area of Benin under mild VEO influence is Atacora. The influence stems from Burkina Faso's Est region and although ISGS has had a presence in Est, it is now JNIM/Katiba Macina that is mostly in control of the border areas and the Pama and Singou Reserves, Arli National Park and W on the Burkina Faso side of Est.<sup>60</sup> JNIM has three main bases in the area and a few smaller ones. One rear base is in Pama/Kompiembiga, where it has full and open control, including direct involvement in running various artisanal gold mines. Another base is in Singou/Arli where it moves into surrounding villages now and then. A third base is around Tapoa-Djerma; this base operates in Park W (on the Burkina side), and Botou/Tamou. Movement of JNIM fighters – allegedly totalling at least 300 in number – between the bases is common and it is from these bases that much of the fighting with ISGS in 2020 took place (e.g. in Pama, Madjoari, and Logobou, respectively in Kompienga and Tapoa Provinces).

The *de facto* influence of this group is significant, with some reported influence as far away as Fada (in Est), on the Bounbou mine (where an accommodation has likely been reached) and into Niger. Since the group's attack on La Tapoa (Niger) on 4 December 2020, they also appear to be well stocked in terms of arms and ammunition. The influence of these JNIM units on Benin is considerable. There is movement of these groups in Pendjari Park and Park W where they engage in agricultural activities (both parks are part of larger park structures that span into Niger and Burkina Faso). Further, JNIM influence reaches into Atacora, particularly along the Porga-Tanguieta-Natitingou axis. In Benin, JNIM currently seeks supplies for its Pama rear base; there are many reports of fuel theft (and fuel buying), large amounts of meat allegedly stolen and procurement of motorbikes – all linked to JNIM (accounting for the fact that criminality in the area is common). Since March 2021, there is an increase of armed incident between the group and APN.

A third cluster of activity is in and around Kalale, the Forêts de Trio Rivières (between Kalale and Kandi) and stems from Nigeria's Middle Belt particularly Kara State (an area that shares ethnic demographics and has strong ties with Borgou).<sup>61</sup> Activity from

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> ISGS fighters have either moved to Nigeria and Niger, changed allegiance to ISGS or gone under the radar. One very small group of ISGS fighters is based on Logobou very close to the Benin border. Their hallmark is more mobile and they are operating as roving bandits.

<sup>61</sup> Further north (around Segbana) there seems to be another group from Nigeria. This group most likely stems from Zamfara state and may have settled in the area. Also this group was visited by the group of twelve. In early February the Benin police tried to push the group into Nigeria.



Nigeria can be traced back to the Kanji forest in Nigeria where VEOs pushed away by the Nigerian army from north-west Nigeria are camped. The 'group of twelve' visited individuals in Kalale, which led to the arrest of someone who received them. This research has found evidence dating from August 2020 of the Nigeria-based group sought procurement of goods in Kalele. On September 28 a jihadist and his wife were arrested in Bessassi for being a link with Nigeria, which led to new arrests and weapon seizures a day later. On 4 November presumed jihadists from Nigeria stole cattle in Bessassi. On 13 December a beheaded corpse was found in Derassi (10km from Kalale) under suspicious conditions. In early 2021 another arrest was made of someone who had been trying to recruit youth from Kalale for over a year. Local sources suggest that roads from Nikki to Kalale are under some military control. Some Western governments, therefore, consider declaring this area a red zone (the French ministry made that decision in early 2021).

The identity and motivation of this group is not clear. Multiple sources refer to Boko Haram presence. While this cannot be ruled out altogether, this designation is clearly a result of a long-existing practice in various areas in northern Benin of (unhelpfully) labelling all Nigerian threats as 'Boko Haram'. Alternatively, it might be that the group is linked to Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru, a breakaway faction of Boko Haram linked to Al Qaeda), ISWAP (which moved into the north-west in 2020 and has been under threat from the Nigerian military in Kaduna and Katsina and to a lesser extent Zamfara, or a dormant group in Sokoto) or to older VEO organisations like the inward-looking and secluded group Darul-Islam (Niger state, Nigeria) which also hosts elements who pursue a more violent agenda. Generally, all these potential actors are under some military pressure in Nigeria.

### **The meaning of temporary presence of VEOs in Benin**

The presence of violent extremists in Benin does not mean that Benin is the next target. VEO presence in Benin largely supports VEO activity in Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. For example, most activity around Kalale (Bourgou), Natitingou/Tanguieta (Atacora) and Malanville (Alibori) involves attempts to procure fuel, meat, motorbikes, food and medical supplies, sometimes in very large quantities (information suggests thousands of kilos/litres). From an operational/tactical viewpoint, it is clear that all three groups need resting areas, as they are engaging in ongoing military operations in Niger, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Stoking new conflict in Benin may not (yet) be a strategic move.

Further support for not overestimating the threat is that VEOs bordering Benin have made explicit statements of defensive postures. For example, the 'group of twelve' said it had no intentions for Benin when it encountered APN staff in Park W. Sources close to APN suggest that when they encounter VEOs in the park, they sometimes return them to

the border with instructions to stay on the non-Beninese side of the park.<sup>62</sup> What seems to have emerged, is a precarious and informal equilibrium and perhaps more explicit informal agreement has been reached that VEOs can operate somewhat freely in Benin's north as long as they pose no real threat to the country. It is clear that various Beninese policy makers seem to operate under this assumption.<sup>63</sup> It is a situation much like that of the Malien-Burkina Faso border in Liptako-Gourma up until 2016: VEOs in Mali and the Burkina state had reached an informal arrangement. It might not last forever.

### 4.3 Alignment of interests in the border areas of Dosso-Alibori and Est-Atacora?

This report points at early indications that VEO presence may not remain temporary. There are signs of two nascent marriages of convenience in the making between VEOs and local populations in the Dosso-Alibori and Est-Atacora border area.

Before we explore these potential links, it is important to look at some long-term developments that facilitate VEO activity in northern Benin. Since the 1970s researchers have pointed at a growing Wahhabi influence, as scholars from the Gulf came with a 'purist and anti-Sufi interpretation'.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the 2000s, areas in the north of Benin have been particularly susceptible to this message.<sup>65</sup> One effect is that there has been a spread of Koranic or Franco-Arabic schools with curricula that are oppositional to some sections of Beninese society. For example, a recent study observed a 'desire to [...] delegitimize the State and promote a distinct cultural identity'.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, training young Benin Muslim scholars continues from the Gulf countries. Upon their return, generational and ideological conflicts emerge over the purity of Islam and the relative power of religious elders who are tolerated by the younger generation (e.g. in Djougou).<sup>67</sup> The Beninese state has tried to mediate in these tensions.

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62 Confidential Interview 5 (12 February 2021). In a letter to the Clingendael Institute dated July 1, 2021, APN denied transporting suspected VEO back to Burkina Faso. As the event cannot be confirmed by non-APN sources, we refrain from a definitive conclusion.

63 Confidential Interview 2 (12 November 2021)

64 Knoope, P. and Chauzal, G., 2016. *Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin*. The Clingendael Institute.

65 Brégand, D., 2009. 'Du soufisme au réformisme : la trajectoire de Mohamed Habib, imam à Cotonou'. *Politique africaine*, 4(4), 121-142. <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.116.0121>.

66 Mossi, A., 2019. 'Étude sur les risques et les facteurs potentiels de radicalisation et d'extrémisme violent en république du Bénin'. *ACotonou*. <http://news.acotonou.com/h/123357.html>.

67 Knoope, P. and Chauzal, G., 2016. *Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin*. The Clingendael Institute; Mossi, A., 2019. 'Étude sur les risques et les facteurs potentiels de radicalisation et d'extrémisme violent en république du Bénin'. *ACotonou*. <http://news.acotonou.com/h/123357.html>.

## Dosso-Alibori: Malanville and Goungoun.

Despite the fact that as of yet there seems to be no real alignment of interests (yet), there are worrying signs around Malanville and Goungoun that should lead to caution on narratives of temporary hideouts.

This view is driven by a number of small observations that together give rise to concern. To start with, the open presence of ISGS suggests that there is some local acceptance and tolerance among some sections of the population. Indeed, the area is home to Wahhabi religious groups from neighbouring countries. This holds for the Yan Izala movement, a movement originating from northern Nigeria (Jos, Kano and Sokoto), a precursor to Boko Haram in Nigeria with a strong presence in Niger and Chad.<sup>68</sup> The movement is explicitly anti-Sufi and although officially non-violent has various sections that support and engage in violence towards Sufi Muslims. The Yan Izala movement acquired a mosque in Malanville after a land conflict in the early 2000s where it supported the party that won the conflict.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the Tablighi movement – a Sunni mission that is a ‘pure’ but non-violent movement – gained some foothold in Benin (the movement is partly tied to some support for ISGS in Tillabery (Niger)).<sup>70</sup> It is reported that the Dosso-Alibori border area sees the movement of Yan Izala and/or Tablighi congregations in the form of rotating sermons on both sides of the border. These sermons have the aim of ‘re-Islamizing the Muslim base and the moralization of society’.<sup>71</sup>

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68 Centre Afrique subsaharienne de l'IFRI, 2020. ‘From rebellion to cooperation: the evolution of the Izala Movement in Nigeri’a. *Afriques Décryptages*. <https://afriquedecryptages.wordpress.com/2019/06/14/from-rebellion-to-cooperation-the-evolution-of-the-izala-movement-in-nigeria/>; Loimeier, R. *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*. Northwestern University; Besley, T., A. Peters, M., ‘Responsibility, and the corruption of youth’. *Educational Futures*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004380776>.

69 Abdoulaye, G. 2007. L’islam béninois à la croisée des chemins. Histoire, politique et développement, Köln, Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

70 Tablique has spread throughout West Africa, see: Janson, M., 2006. *The Prophet’s Path Tablighi Jamaat in The Gambia*. Leiden University. <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/17063>. The Pew Research Center claims that VEOs have recruited from Tablique. See: Pew Research Center, 2010. Tablighi Jama’at. <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-tablighi-jamaat/>.

On links with Niger, see: Unpublished CRU researchers in Tilabéry.

71 Brégrand, D., 2012. Circulation dans les « communautés » musulmanes plurielles du Bénin. Catégorisations, auto-identifications. Cahier d’études africaines. <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesaficaines.17080>; Knoope, P., Chauzal, G., 2016. *Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin*. The Clingendael Institute; Mossi, A., 2019. Étude sur les risques et les facteurs potentiels de radicalisation et d’extrémisme violent en république du Bénin. Cotonou. <http://news.acotonou.com/h/123357.html>.

Furthermore, various recent studies point to severe tensions between authorities (e.g. the police) and the local population.<sup>72</sup> For example, local community leaders in Malanville complain that they have repeatedly reported suspicious presence to the police but that no action has been taken.<sup>73</sup> Some local support for VEOs and the contentious relationships with the state are both enabling factors for spillover.

Another problem is that VEOs seem to tap into local resentments. This is most clear from the behaviour of the 'group of twelve'. After travelling through Park W, the group went on to Goungoun – the endpoint for the international transhumance route. On 30 May and 3 June 2021, Goungoun saw deadly clashes between Fulani pastoralists and local farmers, which left at least four dead. Various sources suggest that the 'group of twelve' intended to intervene in the local conflict, which had already ended at the time of their arrival. While those informed of the incidents often point to the apparent willingness to use violence, the key insight from this event is that these VEOs are very aware of local tensions and are willing to become embroiled in them.<sup>74</sup> Coupled with local susceptibility this means there should be serious concern of spillover in the Alibori.

### **Est-Atacora: Pendjari Park and Park W**

The second theatre in which marriages of convenience may be emerging is in the border area between Est (Burkina Faso) and the parks and the strong JNIM/Katiba Macina presence in the border area. While Atacora region is first and foremost a tactical hideout and procurement area, there are indications that VEO links with local tensions in Park W may become more pronounced. The driving force of this potential marriage of convenience is paradoxically the Beninese counter-insurgency force: African Park Network and its role in Pendjari Park and Park W.

African Park Network is not simply a wildlife conservation enterprise. In Benin, it has transformed into the country's counter-terrorism unit. In Pendjari Park APN has around 125 rangers, in Park W more than 60 are deployed and the numbers are rising due to ongoing training (to 324 in mid-2021).<sup>75</sup> These APN rangers are well trained and armed, and are supported by drones and other aerial surveillance in their operations to track movements in and outside the parks. The *Forces Armées Béninoises* (FAB), at the same time, lack combat experience and need both equipment and training. Many observers believe that the FAB would not be able to withstand a VEO attack. Therefore, it is APN that has assumed command over the FAB in the border areas. Since mid-2020, APN has

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72 Confidential interview 1 (9 December 2021).

73 Confidential Interviews 4 (December-February 2021).

74 One source suggested that the group of twelve also sought to intervene in a land conflict around Kalale. The information could not be verified. Confidential Interview 2 (12 November 2021).

75 Confidential interview 5 (12 February 2021).

issued orders as to where FAB personnel are to deploy. Also, intelligence gathering in the border areas is foremost carried out by APN – often in collaboration with Western supporters.<sup>76</sup> APN has become the bulwark defence of the Talon government against VEO spillover from Burkina Faso and Niger.

There is little doubt, that the apparent limited intentions of VEOs are at least in part driven by the strong and professional role of APN. However, this very strong role of APN increasingly pitches the organisation against VEOs in the border area. Indeed, the successful role of APN has not gone unnoticed by the governments of Niger and Burkina Faso, which have both attempted to manage their parts of the parks, although so far both have more or less failed to take control. In fact, park rangers in Niger, for example, are targeted by VEOs even when they stay far outside the park.<sup>77</sup> Park rangers in Pama, Arli and Singou (Burkina Faso) no longer operate. A recent training mission to reinstate some control in Arli, violently ended in the death of the trainer and two journalists.<sup>78</sup>

The Nigerien and Burkinabe governments and APN are considering extending the role of APN to Niger and Burkina Faso through proxy forces (undisclosed subsidiary organisations are claimed to have been set up to manage Park W in Niger and Arli/Zingou and W in Burkina Faso) and a marine operation (on the Niger River). Moreover, there is an active lobby of APN in Cotonou to consider military action against VEOs in the Burkinabe and Nigerien sides of the park, with support from APN donors.

However, it is this privatisation of security that risks creating problems. If the Benin army (FAB) had been in control, it would have been foremost a deployment that was defensive in nature. But the privatisation of security – concealed under the pretty face of eco-protection – means that commercial and ideological incentives are introduced in the mix and clearly risk spurring conflict. Any expansion of APN operations outside of Benin – even if only just perceived – will threaten VEO strongholds. The real problem is that it is exactly this threat, that has in the past pushed VEOs from relatively limited intentions into escalation (consider for example the imminent threats on the Alidouougou

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76 Some reports suggest there are tensions between the police/FAB and APN over intelligence sharing. Confidential interviews 4 (December-February 2021). Most evidence, however, points to a generally cordial (and subservient) relationship.

77 Urgence Tillabéry, 14 January 2021. *Security situation in the Tillabéri region*: Water and Forestry Sergeant killed in Torodi. On the night of Thursday, January 14 to Friday, January 15, 2021, at around 10:30 pm, unidentified individuals murdered a Water and Forestry Sergeant stationed at the market in Torodi (Tillabéri region). For more reports: <https://www.facebook.com/urgencetillabery/posts>.

78 France 24, 27 April 2021, 'Burkina Faso: trois Occidentaux et un Burkinabé portés disparus après une embuscade.' <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210427-burkina-faso-trois-occidentaux-et-un-burkinab%C3%A9-port%C3%A9s-disparus-apr%C3%A8s-une-embuscade>.

cell and subsequent attack on Kafolo – Côte d'Ivoire).<sup>79</sup> Joint operations by the Ivorian and Burkinabe military coupled with a larger role of APN risk leading to an escalation of activities in these cells. The push of APN risks triggering the same type of confrontation.

Moreover, the loyalty of APN is with President Talon and this means that incentives are introduced to withhold information. Recently, APN has not been openly sharing information, including not with some of its donors.<sup>80</sup>

This is all the more relevant, given that the heavily securitised approach of APN is leading to serious discontent in communities in and out of the park (see above). APN, which also operates in various East African parks, takes a militarised approach to conservation; it has invested strongly in military-style training, capacities and tools to protect wildlife from poachers.<sup>81</sup> One of the founders of APN, Mavuso Msimang, is a former prominent member of the ANC's armed wing. What's more, in Benin the goal of conservation has been partly taken over by the counter-terrorism focus of APN. Particularly telling is that Western intelligence organisations work directly with APN. At least three countries have their own intelligence staff in the park; some are integrated into the APN structure and there are joint APN-intelligence coordination cells to facilitate the regular exchange of information and expertise.<sup>82</sup> APN is providing regular and professional intelligence reports. It is claimed that the operating budget of APN is about 4 million euro (even though that is equally unclear), and some of it comes out of the intelligence budgets of individual and multilateral organisations.

Unfortunately, APN's track record of its all-security-like approach has led to local tensions in other contexts. For example, in Ethiopia APN was accused of burning property in order to intimidate local communities and force resettlement (in 2007 it ceased operations in Omo National Park).<sup>83</sup> In its operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), APN was accused of '(...) privatizing wildlife reserves, running them with military discipline and keeping locals out, for the benefit of rich international tourists [...]'.<sup>84</sup>

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79 ACLED, 2020. 'In light of the Kafolo attack: The Jihadi militant threat in the Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast Borderlands'. <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/24/in-light-of-the-kafolo-attack-the-jihadi-militant-threat-in-the-burkina-faso-and-ivory-coast-borderlands/>.

80 Confidential interview 2021.

81 Titeca, K., Edmond, P., 2019. *Outside the Frame: Looking Beyond the Myth of Garamba's LRA Ivory-Terrorism Nexus*. IOB, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium. <http://www.conservationandsociety.org/article.asp?issn=0972-4923;year=2019;volume=17;issue=3;spage=258;epage=269;aulast=Titeca>.

82 Confidential interview 7 (18 February 2021), Confidential interview (9 December 2020), Confidential interview 5 (12 February 2021).

83 Kebede, G., 2017. *Environment and Society in Ethiopia*. Routledge, ISBN 9781138324572.

There are clear signs that APN is acutely aware of the importance of the civilian and socially responsible dimensions of park management. As already pointed out above, APN plans to cede sections of the parks to local populations for farming and provide controlled access to the park for the various hunting associations. It also seeks to regulate transhumance by formalising access points, creating grazing areas and water-wells along the route, and facilitating transhumance movement in a small strip just above Park W and a strip below Pendjari Park. Moreover, APN is generally trying to improve community relations through community meetings where it listens to local people's views, takes into account their needs, and engages in job creation programmes that are effective and meet with local approval. However, problems continue to arise in and around the parks. The new demarcation zones around W are not met with local enthusiasm and in various villages around both parks there is serious discontent with APN.<sup>84</sup> Sealing off the border and the parks, as well as its counter-terrorism role, requires APN to be a strong security actor, which may simply be incompatible with the interest of the settled communities and transhumant pastoralists.

The great risk, therefore, is that this securitised approach continues to create local discontent which may become the exact entry point for VEOs (that moreover perceive APN as a threat to their hideouts in Niger and Burkina Faso). This threat is not theoretical but immediate; JNIM and ISGS brigades in eastern Burkina Faso implanted themselves on the back of strong local discontent over the heavy-handed security focus and corrupt practices of Burkinabe forest guards in managing Park Arli and Singou, the gold resources around Pama and Kompienga, and the generally restricted access to the park's resources. Hence, APN and Benin face an enemy that has proven to be highly skilful in exploiting tensions in the park among the same (ethnic) communities.

## Conclusion

In short, northern Benin is at risk. While there is no permanent collective presence of VEOs in northern Benin, VEOs regularly transit Beninese territory and there are at least three areas where temporary presence is very common (Malanville, Park Pendjari and Kalale). Of these, two areas see nascent dynamics that would facilitate a marriage of convenience between VEOs and local groups. The role of APN in particular risks accelerating dynamics that will be hard to control.

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84 Confidential interview 8 (14 April 2021); Confidential interview 9 (22 April 2021); Confidential interview 10 (20 April 2021).

## 5 Policy recommendations

This report has sought to explore the risk of violence spilling over into northern Benin from Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. It makes three observations. First, it shows that the incidence of political disorder and violence in northern Benin is much higher than hitherto seen. This violence is deadly and occurs in Alibori, Atacora and Borgou – the latter in particular sees high levels of (communal) violence.

Second, the report identified three main drivers for this high incidence of political violence and protest in the north. The most significant drivers are tensions between farmers and herders, and while some of the violence pertains to transhumance movement, the majority of incidents involve settled herders. Another driver is tension around land ownership that pitches original inhabitants against newcomers (be they settling pastoralists or (semi-) urban elites) and which is reinforced by clashing customary and formal systems. A final driver pertains to the challenging problem of African Park Network's style of managing Pendjari Park and Park W; its security-like approach creates tensions with local communities.

Third, the report noted that there is a much stronger presence of violent extremist organisations in northern Benin that hitherto observed, albeit mostly transitory and temporary in nature. Atacora, Pendjari Park and Park W see frequent activity by Katiba Macina from Burkina Faso's Est. Malanville and Karimama (Alibori) regularly see activity from an ISGS cell on the Nigerien border. Finally, the area around Kalale sees sustained activity from an unidentified VEO from Kandji Lake forest in Kara state in Nigeria. At present, there is not yet a convergence of the interests of local populations and VEOs but there are nascent dynamics in and around the parks as well as in the area around Malanville.

What can be done to limit the threat posed to northern Benin by VEOs?

### I. Remove immediate risks

To remove immediate risks, military policy makers of the Beninese government, APN and international donors to APN (e.g. France, Belgium, United States and the European Union) should consider the following actions:

- The Beninese government and international donors of APN should more critically assess the actions of African Park Network. The attempts of APN to expand its operations into Burkina Faso and Niger must end and APN needs to adopt a



defensive posture. It is for the Burkinabe and Nigerien governments to address the root causes of VEO presence in their territories and not for a private actor to seek military solutions. Moreover, APN needs to demonstrate more clarity, transparency and openness regarding security incidents and community issues and resentments around Pendjari Park and Park W (e.g. through community surveys) and, crucially, how these could be addressed more effectively.

- There are foreseeable future problems around transhumance movement in northern Benin. APN and the Beninese government need to be more transparent as to how large transhumant herds will be able to pass the very small route that has been designated in Alibori in the course of 2021. Stopping transhumant movement at the border or imposing artificial taxes to reduce movement and limit congestion will not be durable solutions and risk adding to resentments among pastoralist communities.
- There urgently needs to be more coordination between neighbours to avoid waterbed effects, where pushing VEOs away from one country means that surface in another. For example, a key reason for the temporary presence of VEOs in Benin are military operations in Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria that push VEOs into new areas. The effect is that security in one state often has adverse effects on another. To make a start on better coordination, Benin must address its very sour relationships with all its neighbours (see III below on the 'elephant in the room'). It also suggest that the work Accra Initiative – which seeks to share information between countries and improve military collaboration – can and should be improved.

## **II. Address and tackle root causes of communal violence**

Apart from these direct threats, the main risk for northern Benin is that VEO activity will mix with the drivers of communal conflict. To this end, policy makers and implementers working on P/CVE and development programming more generally should consider the following three recommendations:

- Address farmer-herder tensions and rethink present policy's. The present strategy seeks pastoralist sedentarization to alleviate tensions, however this report highlights that this strategy lacks a clear evidence base. Communal violence in Benin is foremost between settled farming and herding communities. Instead, an integrated set of actions needs to be considered to address immediate socio-economic and cultural problems. These include: grazing land agreements; a revaluation of pastoralist and farming customary authorities and their ability to negotiate (although this must be conditioned on inclusive behaviour); improved access to justice and legal aid programmes; and programming aimed at bridging social divisions – particularly in Borgou.
- In addition, a second set of actions should reconsider the new land policy. This should involve addressing the intended measure to limit the control of customary authorities, which will generate new grievances and perpetuate the lack of clarity

on land ownership. Instead, a better accommodation between customary land titling systems and the formal system should be found, followed by a simplification of procedures to limit ‘forum shopping’ (which generally benefits those with power and connections).

- Finally, international development donors and implementers must accept that development policies (particularly the bias in promoting sedentary agriculture and the push to ensure land titling to improve agricultural production) are partly responsible for community tensions in northern Benin. This should lead to a requirement to include conflict-sensitivity analysis in development programming that will focus not only on direct beneficiaries but on the whole population. Furthermore, donors must consider and track which communities are benefiting from their programming and should be explicit about why particular choices were made in the complex and conflict-prone environment of the north.<sup>85</sup> On this basis, adaptive programming should become central to the operations of development actors, meaning that programmes can be changed when undesired effects surface.

### III. Acknowledge the elephant in the room and take risks

Whether it concerns the central place of APN, the subservient role of the army, fraud relations with Benin’s neighbours, the push for agricultural production or policies that work against customary authorities, the elephant in the room is the nature of the Talon regime.

APN’s central role is a product of the direct tie of APN management to President Talon that has bypassed and excluded various sections of the Benin government. Talon has problems with all neighbouring presidents (although relations with the new Nigerian president Bazoum seem to be better than they were with Issoufou). These problems are due, in part, to Talon not showing respect (e.g. towards Buhari) and also his habit of actively seeking confrontations (e.g. with neighbouring authoritarian ruler Gnassingbe). Policies that undercut the chieftaincy system (e.g. land management, ability of hunting organisations to operate, and limiting chiefs’ role in intelligence collection) are motivated by the perception that they have stronger ties with opposition figures such as Boni Yayi. As a result, there are two urgent actions to be undertaken:

- Military policy makers must reconsider supporting the Beninese security sector (police and military) – despite the apparent appeal to support the sector. The subservient role of the military and its inability to act are not a product of state

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85 As an aside, as urban elites have particularly benefitted from land titling and agricultural intensification, serious reflection is also needed on whether intensification of production and donor aid are not systematically biased against small-scale farmers, who might not have the same means or resources as ‘urban outsiders’.

weakness but are a direct consequence of Beninese policy. Security sources within and outside the regime confirm the president's fear of a coup. For example: in March and June 2020 coup preparations were foiled; and military deployment in Cotonou during the April 2021 elections was focused on guarding arms and preventing a coup. It is in this light that the relationship between the Talon regime and the police and military must be seen: he engages in substantial 'coup proofing'. This is clear in the role of APN. Officially, the argument for APN's strong role in counter-terrorism is that the Benin military has no combat experience. In reality, the strong role of APN ensures there is a limited role for the military and that control of arms rests with an outfit loyal to Talon. This is similarly evident in the government's spending. The defence budget has been reduced since 2016, by as much as 20% in 2019/20, which does not square with the increasing threats to Benin. Army officers – particularly those overseeing parts of the north – do not receive procurements (while APN receives full support). A final example of coup proofing tactics is the way in which the Guard Republican has been reformed; since 2020 it now answers directly to Talon. In short, the logic is that an untrained and underequipped military poses a lesser threat, particularly when a threatening military force is outsourced to a private organisation which answers directly to Talon. In fact, the regime's control over APN is strong, as illustrated by the deliberate concealment from donors of an attack on 25 March in Pendjari against JNIM – likely an attempt to not disturb Talon's election campaign.

What this means for outside support to the Benin security sector (as is discussed in various circles, e.g. in relation to border control) is that major questions loom over the sector's role after training. Support could inadvertently and indirectly support and sustain Talon's authoritarian rule, as it might appease and buy off the security sector with better payments, material and training without these actually being used to stem the threat of violent extremism. Worse, with an ongoing purge of the security services, some of the training could be used against opponents of the regimes (e.g. police training has become much more focused on crowd control since 2020). Even worse, if the military is properly trained, and becomes battle ready and deployed to counter violent extremism, there is a real danger that the same military could indeed stage a coup d'état. The political context as evidenced by recent coup attempts in Mali, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire points to an increasing regional acceptance of coup attempts.

- The second recommended action concerns those responsible for political relations with Benin (heads of states, ministers and ambassadors). International actors and donors concerned with spillover from the Sahel should reckon with the fact that the political economy of the Talon regime might be one of the main stumbling blocks to effectively addressing short- and long-term threats to peace and stability in the country. As argued above, various root causes are related to the ways in which Talon has structured his regime. For this reason, international actors should start pushing

more explicitly and more forcefully for solid changes in the political economy of the Talon regime. As shown by the extradition of the Permanent Representative of the European Union to Benin in 2019 for being too critical of the authoritarian turn of Benin, international actors must be willing to take more risks. That might involve being more assertive behind closed doors (which is partly happening), supporting reform-minded powers in the country, and, foremost, tightening conditionality for various forms of development and military aid and act as a bloc to ensure that the regime is not playing one against another. The use of public pressure – as the United States recently engaged in after the April 2021 elections – might need to be considered, even if it leads to tense diplomatic ties.

# Annex 1 Codebook

The criteria for each of the four categories discussed in this report are outlined below. All ACLED event types are included to construct the categories below.

## **1. Farmer-herder conflict:**

- Farmers and/or herders (pastoralists) are usually coded in the associated actors columns of the ACLED data and/or referenced in the notes. When both actors appear, events are coded as farmer-herder conflict unless the notes suggest otherwise;
- Farmer-herder conflict is observed when other elements associated with agriculture and livestock (e.g. cattle, herding, cotton, etc) are mentioned in the notes, particularly as a motive for the act of violence in the notes section;
- Settlement of scores between farmers and herders indicated by mention of acts of retaliation from either side; explicit mention of willingness to take revenge due to past grievances;
- Violence perpetrated against pastoralists related to accusations of trespassing, destruction of crops, etc. (often hunting societies represent the interests of the farming community);
- Violence perpetrated against farmers related to accusations of cattle theft, stealing of crops, etc.

## **2. Land disputes:**

- The notes explicitly mention land ownership conflict;
- The notes explicitly mention that disorder ensued due to court cases over land;
- Trespassing cases explicitly mentioning land ownership issues (e.g. conflict over land titles).

## **3. Violence around parks and nature conservation:**

- Park rangers and forests guards are coded as actors or associated actors in the ACLED dataset and/or are part of fatalities in case of killings;
- Armed clashes between poachers/hunters/rangers;
- Mention in the notes of natural parks and/or organisations that monitor parks (APN, Pendjari, Park W, etc.);
- Conflict in border towns are assessed in cases of competition for resources.

#### **4. Other:**

- None of the above;
- Violence against civilians by government officials, especially linked to political competition. Mention of political parties, syndicates (student or professional associations), protests, demonstrations and/or riots;
- Violence and protests of civilians against government, often in relation to controversial decisions;
- Political events that have elements of banditry in them (e.g. abduction against ransom, armed robberies, piracy, etc – unknown gunmen);
- Violence due to accusations of sorcery/voodooism;
- Public lynching of individuals who have committed a crime such as stealing, rape, etc.