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Unveiling Pervasive Patterns of Violence in West Africa



A Burundi soldier posts security at the Bangui Airport, Central Africa Republic. Source: U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Erik Cardena

Analyzing the Conflict Landscape of West Africa

Since 2018, there has been a substantial escalation in violence in the Sahel area, predominantly attributed to the activities of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, and along the Burkina Faso-Benin border. Between October 2018 and October 2023, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali consistently experienced elevated levels of violence. However, Niger, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal had much lower levels of violent occurrences throughout this time. See Figure 1.

The violence observed in Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal is defined mainly by the participation of various non-military individuals. In these countries, conflict is chiefly associated with civil unrest and demonstrations. This phenomenon highlights the difference in the types and degree of violence witnessed in these countries as opposed to the more widespread extremist-driven violence in other parts of the Sahel. The increase in violence in the Sahel region is indicative of a complex and diverse security environment driven



Both JNIM and IS engage in a range of actions targeting civilians by plundering and vandalizing property yet also engaging in armed clashes and attacks with both civilians and government forces.



Comparative Violence Levels Across Select West African Countries

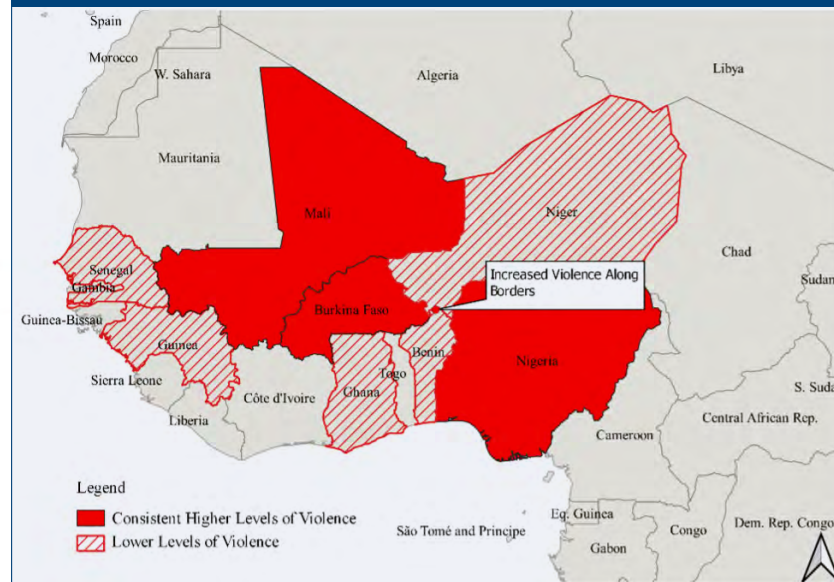


Figure 1. Violence levels in select countries in West Africa/Sahel. Source: Created by the author using QGIS and Data exported using “Data Export Tool - ACLED,” accessed October 15, 2023, covering the period from January 01 to October 15, 2023. <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

by multiple factors, including, but not limited to, the activities of VEOs.

Assessing violence solely by the number of incidents can be deceptive, as it fails to include essential elements such as the size and population of the country and nature of the incidents. A more precise approach is standardizing violent death rates based on population size. From January to mid-October 2023, Burkina Faso experienced the highest number of violent deaths, with Mali and Niger, respectively, following behind. Despite consistently having the most incidents, Nigeria ranked third in regional lethality. Benin, which had only one confirmed death connected to a violent protest in 2018, witnessed a significant escalation in 2023 with 171 fatalities, primarily occurring around its northern border with Burkina Faso. See Table 1.

VEOs, principally the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) rather than Islamic State (IS) factions, have significant influence and operational presence in the region. The inclusion of military and police forces, along with unnamed factions, among the primary participants in violent episodes underscores the complex and diverse character of hostilities in West Africa.

The primary perpetrators of violence-related fatalities in Burkina Faso are JNIM, the Burkina Faso Armed Forces, and, to a limited

Table 1. 2023 Fatalities Normalized Data by Population

Country	Population (2023)	Fatalities (2023)	Crude Rate
Burkina Faso	22,673,762	6767	29.85
Mali	22,593,590	3167	14.02
Nigeria	218,541,212	6632	3.03
Niger	26,207,977	767	2.93
Benin	13,352,864	171	1.28

Source: Author **Note:** Data for this table was exported from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Data Export Tool - ACLED,” October 15, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>, covering the period from January 01, 2023, to October 15, 2023.

degree, IS groups. Most casualties in Mali are caused by hostilities involving JNIM, and, to a lesser extent, IS. To restore security, the Mali Military Force carried out approximately 472 missions in 2023, displaying a similar level of aggression toward residents as the VEO fighters, thus exacerbating the situation for those caught in the midst. In contrast, Niger has a distinct pattern in which IS and the Niger Military Forces are the dominant actors in violent clashes. The violence in Nigeria originates from a complex network of actors involving a multitude of groups and individuals with diverse motivations and goals.

The nature of incidents attributed to VEOs sheds light on their operational activities. Both JNIM and IS engage in a range of actions targeting civilians by plundering and vandalizing property yet also engaging in armed clashes and attacks with both civilians and government forces. Furthermore, both groups perpetrate a substantial number of kidnappings. See Table 2.

IS groups are also quite active in looting, property destruction, and armed conflicts. In contrast, JNIM exhibits a broader range of actions: While they engage in armed conflicts, assaults, plundering, and the destruction of property, the group also employs remote explosives and land mines and has occasionally employed air/drone strikes and suicide bombs. These differences highlight how the two groups operate and their capabilities and focus.

Insights into the Origins and Activities of JNIM

JNIM was founded in 2017 and operates in the Sahel region of West Africa. It is an umbrella organization that unites several organizations, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun, and Katiba Macina. For instance, since 2022, only one violent event was attributed to Al-Mourabitoun despite it being a well-known group in the region. Despite operating independently, JNIM has sworn allegiance to Al-Qaeda and shares the organization's larger goals of establishing Islamic rule and combating Western influence in the region. Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of JNIM, has sworn loyalty to the Taliban chief, the Amir of AQIM, and the Amir of al-Qaeda.

While JNIM is a coalition of militant Islamist groups, the individual parties possess distinct organizational structures, leaders, and objectives. The coalition has expressed its intent to enforce stringent sharia law (Islamic rule) and expel Western troops, particularly those from France, from the Sahel region. JNIM capitalized on the lack of economic prospects and exploited the ethnic and social divisions among the respective populations to enhance recruitment and extend its sphere of influence. The organization generates funds by coercing or collaborating with smuggling and organized crime groups and taxing the populace as well as ransoming captives.

Insights into the Origins and Activities of Islamic State Groups

Jihadist organizations, like the Islamic State in the Sahel and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have also arisen in the Sahel region. These factions have vowed loyalty to the worldwide IS and function in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and other countries in the Sahel region. Like JNIM, ISGS objectives include establishing a stringent interpretation

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of Islamic law and opposing Western influence. Among IS, the individual sub-groups’ precise goals and organizations may also differ. Just like JNIM, IS groups conduct assaults against military and civilian targets to destabilize governmental power. The affiliates of the global IS frequently compete with those groups associated with Al-Qaeda to gain influence in the region. This rivalry exacerbates regional insecurity.

Turf War

The rival relationship between JNIM and the IS groups has escalated into comprehensive territorial warfare in the Sahel, aligning with the ongoing conflict between the globally operating Al-Qaeda and IS. The fight between JNIM and IS in West Africa organizations ranks among the most lethal globally. The inter-jihadi clashes occurring over the broader regions of the Middle East and Africa share a common characteristic: They either follow a cyclical pattern or evince a slow decline. JNIM’s refusal to share territory in certain areas where it has historically been strong, along with the IS groups’ persistent recruitment of JNIM members, has led to both groups viewing each other as traitors. Most prominently, JNIM’s willingness to participate in discussions with the Malian government and establish deals with Dozo militias, traditional hunters in northern Côte d’Ivoire, southeast Mali, and Burkina Faso, led to IS doubts regarding the dedication and reliability of the implicit alliance and marked an end to cooperation between them. Over the past year, the relationship between JNIM and IS has been marked primarily by direct confrontations and armed conflicts, highlighting the degree of animosity and rivalry between the two

factions. These interactions frequently revolve around territorial disputes and assertions of superiority, thus signifying a persistent conflict that affects the stability and security of the territories in which they operate.

Moreover, a concern for Sahelian observers is the increasing transborder violence, which could lead to the expansion of insecurity into the West African coastal region. VEOs now operate close to the borders of Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo, and, notably, extend into Benin. Adjacent to Burkina Faso, Northern Benin has experienced the greatest transborder violence. See Table 2.

There has also been a rise in activity near and in the W-complex and Pendjari National Parks. In Pendjari, the Benise authorities are aided by the African Parks Network in maintaining a greater presence. The IS also has claimed responsibility for incidents in the area through its official media channels. However, IS’s operations are restricted due to the substantial antagonism it has faced from JNIM,

Table 2. Number and Locations of Violent Incidents in Benin’s Transborder Region

Locations Benin	# Incidents Jan 22 - Oct 23
Koualou	32
Karimama	20
Materi	20
Koabagou	20
Kalale	12

Source: Data for this table was exported from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Data Export Tool - ACLED,” October 15, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>, covering the period from January 01, 2023, to October 15, 2023.

whose objective is to impede the group's capabilities as a competitor in the region.

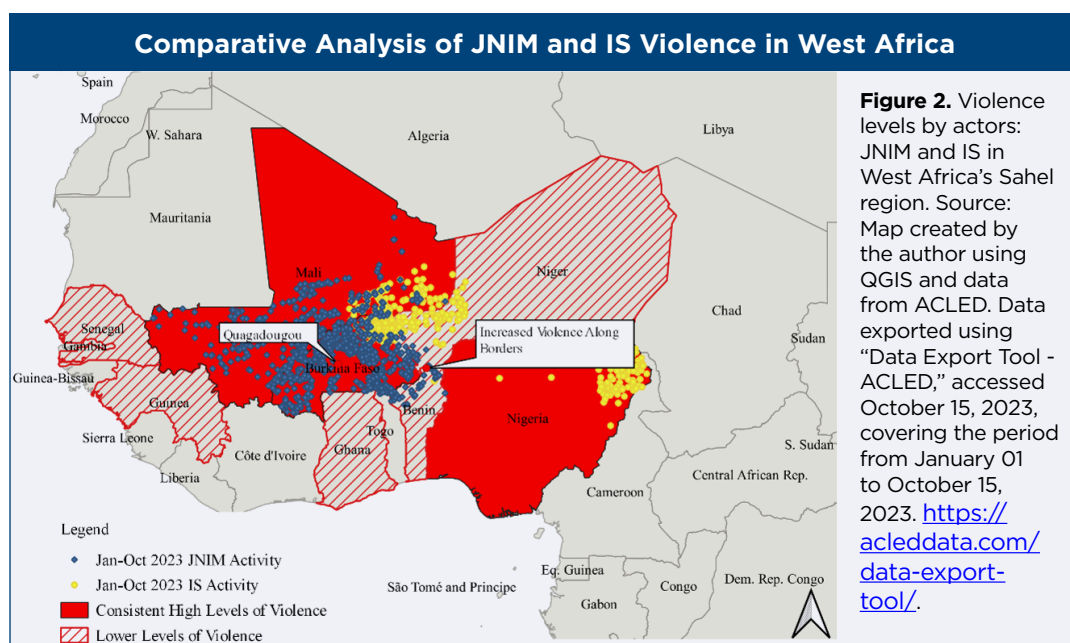
Overall, the violence in Benin involves a variety of actors, including both local and regional militant groups, state forces, and other unidentified entities, yet JNIM is the primary actor. See Figure 2. Since January 2022, there have been multiple encounters between police and military forces and the militant group, most likely the result of a national effort to address increased instability in the area. The main consequence is the infliction of violence upon non-combatants who become involved in direct confrontations, are targeted, or experience the aftermath of detonations and remote violence, which is one of JNIM's distinctive tactics. In addition, JNIM militants seize citizens to negotiate, instill fear, gather information, and enlist new members. Furthermore, JNIM employs plunder and damages property while actively participating in the community to secure compliance from the local population.

Quo Vadis JNIM?

Analyzing the trend of JNIM activity spanning from October 2018 to October 2022, a discernible trajectory emerges characterized by an encirclement strategy focusing on the capital and concurrent expansion efforts into Benin. This strategic maneuvering suggests that JNIM's likely objective is to systematically encircle central Burkina Faso and the capital city, Ouagadougou, to exert maximum pressure on the government. See Figure 2.

Furthermore, the group's transborder expansion appears motivated by an aspiration to establish authority over critical supply infrastructure, including bridges and highways. This strategic control over supply routes originating from countries such as Benin, Togo, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire, leading into and out of Burkina Faso, is to generate revenue and consolidate their operational influence in the region.

Controlling both the legal and illegal commerce entering and exiting Burkina Faso from and to the coast



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would provide more revenue streams and finance further operations. In 2023, heightened activity by “unidentified actors,” possibly bandits or VEOs unknown to the local community, occurred along the main roads leading to the coast (RNIE 2; RNIE 3), which function as primary smuggling routes.

One enduring aspect of JNIM's efforts to garner local support

is establishing relationships with smugglers and communities whose livelihoods depend on illicit economies. Once JNIM secures this support, the organization imposes Islamic religious taxes and institutes systematic road checkpoints. The intricate relationship between JNIM and local communities, including illicit networks, represents a complex dynamic that warrants further investigation and exploration. ♦



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTIANE THOMPSON is an assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at JSOU. She holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Akron; a masters degree in military arts from the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies; a master's of liberal arts (ALM) degree in extension studies sustainability from Harvard University, Harvard Extension School, and has completed advanced military education at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. She has more than three decades of experience supporting the U.S. DOD, from hands-on operational engagement to strategic analyst and planner positions. Her current research interests leverage innovative technologies such as geospatial information systems and artificial intelligence.

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NOTES

1. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). "Data Export Tool - ACLED," October 15, 2023. <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>. Data was exported via API from October 15, 2018 – October 15, 2023; a note on ACLED Data: ACLED, a popular database on worldwide political violence, has limits:
 - Due to dependence on open sources, occurrences in places with little media coverage may be underreported.
 - Reporting bias: Political and cultural prejudices affect data sources.
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 - Data verification: Secondary sources may contain errors and inaccuracies.
 - Temporal lag: Reporting delays might cause data lag.
 - Information may be incomplete, lacking event information.
 - Insufficient granularity: Broadly categorizes events.
 - Collecting data on non-state actors has challenges.
 - The techniques and sources develop throughout time, needing consideration in longitudinal analysis.
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