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Cover: Around a thousand displaced people have taken up residence at Koum-Lakre school's two-hectare site in Kaya, Burkina Faso.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

AQIM Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

CISC Collective Against Impunity and the Stigmatization of Communities

(Collectif contre l'impunité et la stigmatisation des communautés)

FDS defence and security forces (forces de défense et de sécurité)

IDPs internally displaced persons

IEIM Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor

IS Sahel Islamic State Sahel Province (formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara – ISGS)

JNIM Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin)

VDP Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense

de la patrie)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

idnappings of nationals in Burkina Faso surged to record-breaking levels in 2021 and continued at this unprecedented scale throughout 2022. Non-state armed groups – including, most prominently, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, known by its Arabic acronym JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) – are central perpetrators.

According to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), kidnappings have increased over 30-fold since 2017, when the security situation in Burkina Faso began to sharply deteriorate (rising from eight incidents in 2017 to 262 in 2021 and 219 in 2022). However, tracking broader conflict dynamics, 2021 saw the most dramatic spike in kidnappings at the same time as Burkina Faso became the epicentre of the conflict in the central Sahel, with large parts of the country engulfed in continual and severe violence. By April 2022, 40% of the territory was outside government control, according to official sources.

Burkina Faso constitutes a springboard for violent extremist groups originally operating in northern Mali descending towards coastal West Africa.⁴ Despite growing international and regional attention paid to this expanding conflict, little focus has been given to the proliferation of kidnappings of Burkinabés. Not only does kidnapping generate revenue for armed groups, but, arguably more importantly, it has devastating impacts on communities. Kidnapping operates as an 'accelerant market' – in other words, it fuels instability while itself being fuelled by conflict. Kidnapping is also a mechanism through which armed groups strengthen their governance grip.⁵

Kidnapping in this report is used in a broad sense to encompass all cases of 'taking and carrying away of a person by force or fraud or the unlawful seizure and detention of a person against his will',6 and not only when the primary driver behind the kidnapping is financial. Understood thus, kidnapping can be conducted by state or non-state armed groups, whether in relation to the conflict or not, no matter what the motivation is. The more specific term of kidnapping for ransom is used when the motivation driving the abduction is economic,7 which, this report argues, has been a secondary driver in the vast majority of kidnapping cases in Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel since 2012.

This report will first demonstrate how kidnapping for ransom operated as an entry point for violent extremist groups, which started with their expansion from central Mali to Burkina Faso in 2015, highlighting the relationship between criminal and violent extremist groups in the early stages of the insurgency in the country. The second part of the report will focus on current dynamics, exploring the evolution of the kidnapping industry as the conflict became more violent, often involving intercommunal conflict, and spread to most of Burkina Faso's 13 regions.

In painting the current picture of the kidnapping economy, violent extremist groups emerge as the main protagonists. Most noteworthy in this regard is JNIM, which is strategically using kidnappings to assert and maintain control over territories under its influence. JNIM's distinct yet overlaying motives – including intimidation, punition, intelligence gathering, control and recruitment – will be broken down and analyzed. The financial gains of the illicit economy will then be separately assessed to show that, even if financing is not the main motive today, kidnapping nevertheless remains an industry resourcing all parties to the conflict.

Understanding the role of distinct illicit economies and their contrasting impacts on instability is key to designing crime-sensitive stabilization efforts. As part of a broader GI-TOC research workstream focusing on accelerant criminal economies – those that play the most prominent role in driving instability in West Africa – this report seeks to shed light on the political economy of Burkina Faso's kidnapping industry and underscore its impact on instability. In doing so, the report analyzes kidnapping for ransom as a criminal economy, arguing for its place alongside more 'traditional' illicit economies in organized crime literature, and underscoring the market's importance in understanding the intersection between armed groups and illicit economies in conflict expansion.

The report draws on primary and secondary data collected between June 2022 and December 2022. Primary data collection included 35 interviews in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, and in Kaya (Centre-Nord), a town that has seen a huge influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) since 2019. Additional interviews took place remotely with stakeholders in Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions (Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord and Est), areas that were the most affected by kidnappings in 2022. In-person interviews were also conducted in Bamako, Mali, as part of efforts to gain a broader understanding of the Sahelian kidnapping industry. Additional secondary research was conducted in parallel, including a literature review of grey, academic and media sources, as well as open-source intelligence data gathering, with monitoring of news and social media, and extraction of data from organizations to provide quantitative input.



Burkina Faso's capital,
Ougadougou. Kidnappings of
nationals in Burkina Faso surged to
record-breaking levels in 2021 and
continued at this unprecedented
scale throughout 2022.

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Key findings

1. The kidnapping industry has evolved to primarily target nationals: 97% of kidnapping incidents recorded since 2017 in Burkina Faso targeted Burkinabé citizens.

The nature of the kidnapping industry has changed since early in the first decade of the 2000s, when violent extremist groups motivated by financial gains were kidnapping Westerners throughout the Sahel. While this practice faded as foreign targets dwindled, and international attention diminished in parallel, kidnappings far from disappeared. Instead, Sahelians have become the primary target of attacks. Kidnappings of internationals brought important financial capabilities for violent extremist groups operating in northern Mali, and to some extent supported their expansion across the subregion since 2012, but they had limited impact on local communities. Conversely, kidnappings of Sahelian citizens, used as a weapon of war by all parties to the conflict are tearing communities apart. This swells the harms of the kidnapping economy to local populations and positions the industry more centrally as an element of armed group governance, and as a source of financing only to a secondary extent.

2. Kidnapping is an accelerant market feeding, and fuelled by, instability.

Accelerant markets are those that have a strong reinforcing relationship with instability and multiply harms: not only do accelerant markets strengthen armed groups and lead to more violence, but higher levels of violence fuels these markets in turn. GI-TOC research has shown that arms trafficking, kidnappings and cattle rustling are three of the most prevalent accelerant markets in West Africa. These three markets are closely interlinked with instability, and they often cluster together in the same hubs of illicit economies, which coincides with conflict hotspots and are particularly prominent in rural areas of the Sahel and across the West African region. Arms trafficking fuels violence by weaponizing conflict, and the ensuing instability and need for self-protection lead to a higher demand for trafficked arms. A higher degree of weaponization in turn directly impacts the levels of violence in cattle rustling and kidnapping incidents, sometimes resulting in the deaths of the victims if they show the slightest amount of opposition. Cattle rustling and kidnapping also reinforce each other: several sources in Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel highlighted how kidnappings of shepherds or livestock owners sometimes take place during rustling incidents, with ransom being demanded in addition to entire livestock herds looted for financial gain.

3. Kidnapping is a key strategic tool for JNIM's infiltration and consolidation.

JNIM uses kidnapping as a strategic tool to establish influence over a new territory – through intimidation and data gathering – or to maintain its existing influence, by continuing to intimidate and gather information, vetting any kind of activity in its territory and recruiting community members. A spike in kidnappings in a given region can hence serve an early-warning mechanism, as it suggests that JNIM is in the process of infiltrating new communities and needs to intimidate (and chase away) key personalities or force them join its cause. JNIM refrains from kidnapping individuals that the group sees as helpful for their broader goals, for example, negotiation with the authorities, a clear instance in which broad strategic goals trump other considerations, including financial. Financial motivations appear to be a secondary driver in the vast majority of kidnappings by JNIM. This reflects JNIM's wider strategic engagement, whether directly or indirectly, in illicit economies, motivated not only by profit but also by governance aims.

4. VDP mobilization catalyzes spikes in kidnapping incidents.

The creation of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie) (VDP) was a catalyzer for kidnapping incidents and, more generally, violence between parties to the conflict and against civilians. While the VDP was legally created in early 2020, it was only later that year that the first units became operational and in 2021 that significant units were established. This coincided with a 40% increase in kidnapping incidents in 2021. Data also shows that there is a strong geographical overlap between kidnappings and clashes between JNIM and the VDP, supporting the idea that the creation of the VDP led to an increase in kidnappings. This can be explained by the fact that VDP members are recruited from communities that JNIM is attempting to govern, and heightened suspicions of JNIM, which had to resort to kidnappings to either infiltrate or maintain its influence over territory.

5. A spate of kidnappings of foreigners in 2022 points to a shift in JNIM's modus operandi.

Preliminary analysis of kidnapping for ransom cases in 2022 shows that JNIM might be shifting its modus operandi. In 2022, the group faced growing opposition in the Sahel from its rival Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and increasing pressure from the redeployment of Malian armed forces (Forces armées maliennes), their Russian partners and Dogon self-defence militias in central Mali. This has cost JNIM significantly more than in previous years, when it faced little opposition. In 2022, nine foreign nationals, including six Westerners, were kidnapped in Burkina Faso and Mali, a noticeable shift given how rare such high profiles kidnappings had become since 2012. Other discernable changes include JNIM's reach into Bamako, Mali's capital, (for the first time since the beginning of the conflict) to kidnap a German priest in November 2022; and the faster and cheaper resolution of kidnapping cases, which may point to a decentralization of kidnapping control and greater quest to obtain ransom payments.

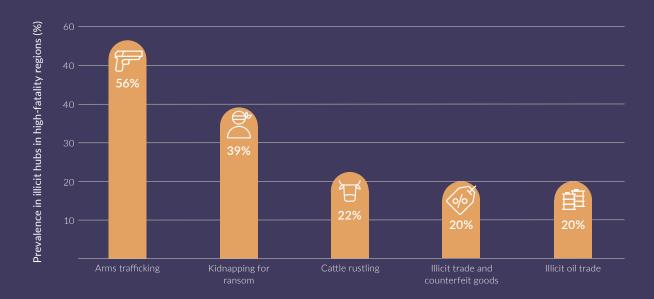


FIGURE 1 Most prominent illicit economies in 'high-fatality region' illicit hubs. Kidnapping is an accelerant market, fuelling and fuelled by instability and conflict.

SOURCE: Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Risk Bulletin - Issue 5, October 2022



KIDNAPPING: AN ENTRY POINT FOR VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

n 4 April 2015, an initially unknown armed group kidnapped Iulian Ghergut, a Romanian national working as a security officer for the Tambao manganese mine in Oudalan region, far north Burkina Faso, near the Nigerien and Malian borders. This kidnapping marked the start of conflict in Burkina Faso, heralding escalating attacks in the country, which had, until then, been spared the extremist group violence unrolling in neighbouring Mali and Niger since 2012.

The kidnapping was well prepared and deftly executed. The complex operation involved three vehicles – one for carrying the hostage, a following car (a car that can, for example, be used to escape if things do not go as planned) and a supply car.¹² Five armed men ambushed the car in which Ghergut was travelling with a gendarme as they patrolled the Tambao mine site, firing and injuring the driver and the gendarme, and kidnapping Ghergut. The kidnappers fled immediately and drove towards the Burkina Faso–Niger border. Six weeks later, Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui, then senior member of Al Mourabitoun – a violent extremist group headed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and close to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.¹³ This marked the beginning of Burkina Faso's kidnapping industry proper.

The kidnapping occurred at a watershed moment for violent extremist movements in the Sahel. In the same message claiming the kidnapping, Sahraoui reaffirmed Al Mourabitoun's allegiance to the Islamic State Central. In May 2015, Sahraoui created the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), de facto splitting from Al Mourabitoun.¹⁴ ISGS has been named the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) since March 2022, as the group was declared a separate province. Following a powerful upswing in areas of operations in 2019,¹⁵ IS Sahel has become a central player in the Sahelian conflict, mostly active along the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.¹⁶ It was declared the number one enemy by France in early 2020.¹⁷ Eight years after his kidnapping, as of the time of writing, Ghergut is believed to remain a hostage, though Saharoui had to give him up to the al-Qaeda coalition when defecting, as he was featured in several of their videos before December 2018, the last proof of life published by the group.¹⁸



The kidnapping of Romanian national Iulian Ghergut by Al Mourabitoun in 2015 marked the start of the conflict in Burkina Faso. *Photo: Screengrab from the video released by Al Murabitoon, from Long War Journal, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/al-murabitoon-shows-romanian-hostage-in-new-video.php*

This first violent extremist group attack in Burkina Faso was followed six months later by an attack against a gendarmerie post in Kénédougou province, Hauts-Bassins region, in western Burkina Faso, also bordering Mali. Shortly after, on 15 January 2016, Ouagadougou was the theatre of a complex violent extremist attack against a restaurant and a hotel, in which more than 30 people of 14 different nationalities were killed.¹⁹ On the same day, Dr Arthur Kenneth Elliott and his wife, Jocelyn, were kidnapped in Djibo, a city in the northern province of Soum, where they had been running a hospital for more than 30 years. Jocelyn Elliott was released less than a month later, but, as of the time of writing, Arthur Kenneth remains in captivity.²⁰ Arthur Kenneth last appeared alongside Ghergut in the video aired on December 2018. In this feed, AQIM made it clear that they would not be giving any more proofs of life of hostages, who then numbered five (including three others kidnapped in Mali and Niger),²¹ citing frustration at the lack of progress in the negotiation process, payment of ransom (which results in the resolution of the cases) and the passivity of Western governments.²²

That these two kidnapping incidents – both followed by ransom requests – occurred as violent extremist groups were starting to move south from central Mali into northern Burkina Faso is no coincidence. Following similar patterns witnessed in the Sahel and broader West Africa, kidnappings – and other illicit activities – often operate as entry points for violent extremist groups. The last decade of conflict in the region has shown that the nascent stages of violent extremist group territorial infiltration – before direct attacks or the establishment of bases in the new territory – are typically accompanied by higher levels of criminal activities in the targeted areas. This is particularly the case for carjacking and highway robbery, vehicle theft, cattle rustling, armed robbery, murder and kidnapping for ransom.²³

This trend has become clearer as violent extremist groups move southwards, further from their original core in Algeria and northern Mali and increasingly influenced by local socio-economic dynamics and realities. Although often most of these criminal activities are not claimed by, or directly linked to, violent extremist groups (which, in their own ideology and narrative, are combating criminal groups), many are likely to benefit these groups financially. Indeed, violent extremist groups, while expanding their geographical reach, recruit or work with criminal groups.²⁴ This phenomenon has been referred

to as the 'jihadization of banditry'.²⁵ Similar patterns have, notably since 2021, been unfolding further south, most prominently in northern Benin²⁶ and northern Côte d'Ivoire,²⁷ where violent extremist groups have been increasing their footprint, threatening the stability of coastal West Africa.

Criminal actors are ideal candidates for armed group recruitment for four key reasons. First, they master routes, safe havens and security and defence force positions in a given area. Second, criminal actors often already possess weapons and know how to use them, enabling violent extremist groups to easily and quickly mobilize them to join a specific attack or operation.²⁸ Third, the nature of illicit activities means that armed groups are often able to establish some level of reciprocal relationship with criminal actors: violent extremist groups benefit from the knowledge and capacities of criminal groups, while bandits benefit from the protection and broader alliance that allows their business to flourish.²⁹ Lastly, both groups benefit from the state being weak, as they thrive in areas with little state presence or where the trust between communities and authorities is low (because of decades of marginalization, for example), resulting in little legitimacy.

For the kidnapping for ransom economy, the cooperation between criminal and violent extremist groups has been confirmed by most interlocutors, who have highlighted several forms of coordination between the two actors. These are described later on in this report, in the section 'The kidnappers: Who are the perpetrators in Burkina Faso's kidnapping industry?'.³⁰

The role of kidnapping for ransom in financing Sahelian violent extremist group expansion

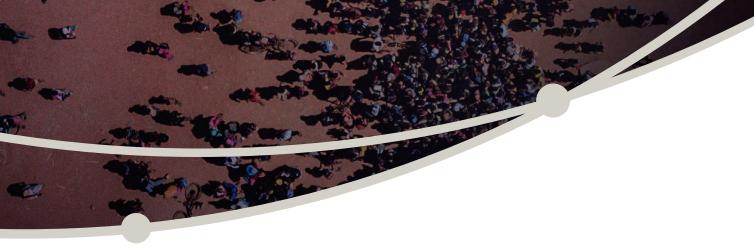
inancial motivations also incentivize violent extremist groups to cooperate with and mobilize individuals involved in illicit economies.³¹ Territorial expansion is expensive – the need for sources of revenue is swollen as groups expand their geographical reach, recruit new members and up the tempo of operations. The involvement of violent extremist groups in illicit activities, including kidnapping for ransom – whether directly or indirectly – is central to generating local revenue streams, which, in turn, are used to purchase food, weapons, fuel and new recruits.³²

The financial proceeds of kidnapping for ransom have, since early in the first decade of the 2000s, been an important resource for violent extremist groups in the Sahel. The kidnapping economy reached its peak profitability in the first years of the 2000s, when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat) – AQIM's predecessor – moved from southern Algeria into northern Mali and northern Niger. It is estimated that between 2006 and 2012, AQIM alone received €60 million in ransom payments.³³ Kidnappings for ransom were so important to the group that disagreements over the distribution of income from kidnappings led to internal tensions and divisions.³⁴

By 2017, the number of Westerners being kidnapped for ransom had significantly reduced. This was a result of the limited targets available, as the vast majority of Westerners had left these high-risk areas and stopped transiting areas under the influence of violent extremist groups. Nonetheless, kidnapping for ransom remained a central source of financing for armed groups. In 2017, Al Mourabitoun

and AQIM formed an alliance with two other al-Qaeda-linked groups, Katibat Macina and Ansar Dine, establishing JNIM. That same year, JNIM's annual revenue in the region was estimated to range between US\$18 million and US\$35 million, with kidnapping for ransom representing US\$8 million of this – i.e. between 22% and 44% of their funding.³⁵ Other illicit economies were also prominent sources of revenue, both indirectly through taxation of cigarettes, drug and medicine smuggling, and directly from extortion, cattle rustling and artisanal gold mining.

Kidnapping for ransom was hence one of the most profitable sources of revenue for JNIM, and contributed to underpinning the expansion of the coalition towards coastal West Africa, with Burkina Faso representing a springboard in this development. Indeed, both AQIM and Katibat Macina supported the establishment of Ansarul Islam, a local violent extremist group that started to operate in Burkina Faso in late 2016 but quickly expanded its reach and operations thanks to its close relationship with groups operating in Mali.³⁶



EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT DRIVES KEY CHANGES IN BURKINA FASO'S KIDNAPPING INDUSTRY

ince late 2016, the security situation in Burkina Faso has steadily worsened. The nature of the conflict has changed in three interlinked ways, particularly important in shaping the evolution of the kidnapping industry. First, violent extremist groups – primarily Ansarul Islam and JNIM, but also IS Sahel mostly in border areas – have launched an growing number of attacks against defence and security forces, and anyone representing state authorities. Second, self-defence groups, first independently and later regulated by the state, have become a key element of the security response. The first two elements have led to the conflict becoming increasingly fought along communal lines, resulting in a sharp increase in civilian casualties as communities have found themselves targeted by all parties to the conflict.

The conflict has evolved from a localized uprising in Soum province, Sahel region, in northern Burkina Faso, to a fully fledged insurgency spreading across 11 of the 13 regions, with key conflict hubs in the northern and eastern regions of the country (Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord and Est), and escalating tensions in 2021 and 2022 in the western and south-western regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades, respectively bordering Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.

Violent incidents related to the conflict have been increasing since late 2016 – incidents recorded by ACLED more than doubled, from 87 in 2017 to 224 in 2018. The year 2019 brought further escalation – with incidents growing threefold to reach 619. While incidents broadly stabilized in 2020,³⁷ due to the negotiation of several local peace agreements, they doubled once more in 2021, reaching 1 323. Significantly, 2022 marked the most violent year on record since the insurgency started, with ACLED data tracking 1 738 incidents (see Figure 2).³⁸

Data specifically tracking civilian casualties shows a different side of the conflict, and marks 2019 as a pivot point in the nature of conflict, with far-reaching consequences for the kidnapping industry. Initially, violent extremist groups attacked mostly symbols of the Burkina Faso state (army, police and the gendarmerie, but also administrative building and schools). However, since 2019, civilian casualties have skyrocketed, with 38, 67 and 173 civilian deaths respectively in the first three years of conflict (2016–2018), spiking in 2019 to reach 1321 civilian casualties. Civilian casualties have remained broadly stable at this substantial level since (barring a slight drop in 2021; see Figure 2).³⁹

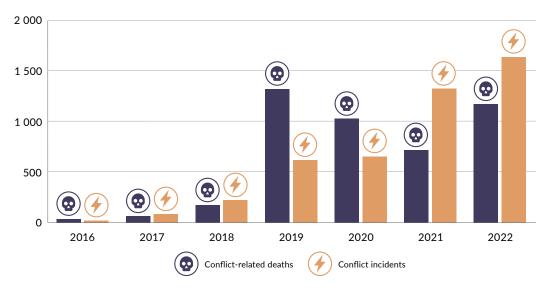


FIGURE 2 Conflict incidents and conflicted-related deaths in Burkina Faso, 2016-2022.

SOURCE: ACLED

As violent extremist groups expanded their operations from Mali to northern Burkina Faso (from 2016) and eastern Burkina Faso (from 2018), self-defence militias – called Koglweogo (meaning 'guardians of the bush' in Mossi) – stepped into the vacuum left by the defence and security forces (forces de défense et de sécurité) (FDS), which failed to provide security and respond to the growing threat. In early 2020, as violent extremist groups continued to expand their areas of operation across Burkina Faso, and FDS territorial coverage shrunk further, the Burkinabé authorities legally established the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie) (VDP). This provided a legislative framework for the recruitment, training (14 days is stipulated by law) and arming of civilians to provide intelligence and fight in their home areas alongside or, in areas where the regular forces have no presence, instead of, FDS. While the VDP was meant to be inclusive and diverse, it was mostly formed along ethnic lines and on the back of existing groups, such as the Koglweogo (mostly Mossi) and Dozo self-defence groups.

The VDP's goal of attempting to defend their communities against violent extremist groups quickly turned to include launching pre-emptive attacks against neighbouring communities, especially the Fulani, accused of being passively or directly involved in violent extremist activities. ⁴² The infamous attack on Yirgou, Centre-Nord region, was the first major revenge massacre of such scale: on 31 December 2018, six people, including the village chief and city councillor, were killed by alleged JNIM members. The next day, koglweogos took revenge against the Fulani communities living in Yirgou, accusing them of complicity, and killed at least 49 of them (more according to human rights organizations). This incident was a watershed moment in the history of the insurgency in Burkina Faso, as it heightened mistrust between communities and fuelled recruitment into self-defence groups. ⁴³

As the level and nature of conflicts underwent drastic change in Burkina Faso and the broader Sahel, so did the economy of kidnapping for ransom. With the industry shifting from international to Sahelian victims, largely due to the limited number of Westerners in areas under the reach of violent extremist groups, kidnappings became less of a financial venture (though they still are) and more of a tool for violent extremist groups to use to enter new territories and maintain control over time (see section 'Kidnappings as a tool in armed group governance strategy: JNIM's approach'). Yet although kidnappings of Westerners – and thus international community attention – declined, kidnappings exploded

in 2021: following a gradual increase between 2017 and 2020 (from eight to 65 between 2017 and 2020), they spiked to 262 in 2021, remaining high at 219 in 2022.⁴⁴

The territorial expansion of violent extremist groups alone cannot explain this sharp rise in kidnappings. Instead, multiple sources reported that the creation of the VDP was a multiplying factor.⁴⁵ While the decree creating the VDP is dated January 2020, units only became operational later that year, with recruitment growing and units proliferating in 2021, especially in eastern Burkina Faso.⁴⁶

The establishment of the VDP led to an overall spike in levels of violence (involving armed clashes, violence against civilians and human rights abuses), including kidnappings, because of the communal nature of the groups and resulting retaliatory attacks (as illustrated by the Yirgou massacre).⁴⁷ As shown in Figure 3, there is a clear overlap in the geographies of kidnapping hotspots and armed clashes between VDP and violent extremist groups – northern and eastern Burkina Faso (Est and Sahel regions) are both the epicentres of conflict, and the areas most impacted by kidnappings.

In late 2022, the military government reaffirmed the core role of VDP in the state security response and launched a new VDP recruitment campaign, commending the 90 000 individuals who responded to it.⁴⁸ While not all of the 90 000 who registered will eventually become volunteers, this is nevertheless an important recruitment campaign. It is likely to herald further increases in violence and kidnappings, as violent extremist groups will respond to the higher number of VDP members through more intimidation and harassment of communities in which volunteers are present, or with attacks on communities who do not actively oppose the group. In fact, this has already started. For example, in November 2022, 20 men were kidnapped on the road between Kantchari and Fada, in the Est region of Burkina Faso, at an irregular checkpoint manned by JNIM, which has been active on this road since the end of 2019. The kidnapped men were accused of having put down their names on the list of volunteers.⁴⁹ Given that VDP members are recruited from communities that JNIM is attempting to govern, and that the group is represented and funded by the state, it is unsurprising that violent extremist groups have responded forcefully to the establishment of VDP units, including through kidnappings.⁵⁰



In late 2022, the military government reaffirmed the core role of Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) in the state security response and launched a new recruitment campaign. © Olympia de Maismont

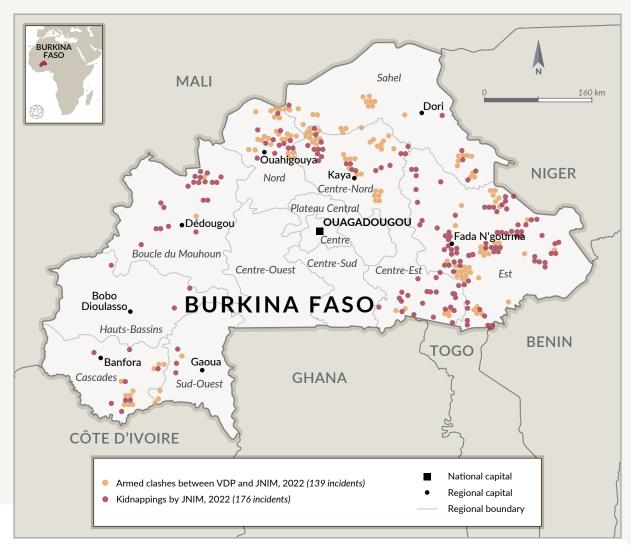


FIGURE 3 Kidnappings and armed clashes between the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) and JNIM, 2022.

Illicit economies and instability: Assessing accelerant markets

he relationship between illicit economies and conflict is too often described as a linear one, with different types of illicit economies commonly elided in analyses.⁵¹ Yet it is important to recognize that different types of illicit economies show varying relationships with conflict and instability, as failing to do so risks making interventions counterproductive and untargeted.⁵² The GI-TOC's hotspot initiative, which mapped the key geographic hubs of illicit economies across West Africa, has added new evidence to this debate, and highlighted the prominence of kidnapping as a particularly destabilizing market.⁵³

The Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), a quantitative metric developed as part of the mapping initiative, assesses how the illicit economies identified at each hub affect instability. The IEIM is a tool designed to assess the relative importance of the role played by illicit markets in any specific hub in fuelling conflict and instability in the region. Using a blend of expert analysis and assessment, together with quantitative data, the IEIM gives each hub a score out of 30, with hubs then falling into one of four bands, ranging from 'very high' to 'low', depending on the role of illicit economies in driving instability in that particular hub. The prominence of certain illicit economies varies considerably across the IEIM spectrum. Arms trafficking, for example, is assessed to be a major market in more than half (54%) of all illicit hubs in the 'high' and 'very high' IEIM classifications, which indicates a strong connection between illicit markets and instability in those hubs. Conversely, only 27% of low- and medium-IEIM hubs across West Africa feature arms trafficking as a major market. Kidnapping for ransom and cattle rusting are similarly disproportionately prevalent in illicit hubs where illicit economies are drivers of instability.⁵⁴ These two markets were commonly identified as major markets in tandem with arms trafficking, highlighting the high degree of weaponization that is often linked to them. These three illicit markets - arms trafficking, kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling - can be understood as accelerant markets, i.e. those that have a particularly devastating impact on conflict and instability. All are central elements of West Africa's conflict dynamics, and feed conflict in distinct ways.

The Global Organized Crime Index, an expert-led assessment of crime at a national level, supports the findings of the subnational hotspot mapping, and provides a statistical framing for understanding different illicit economies as having distinct effects on instability. The results of the Index show that most of the global criminal markets analyzed therein have some degree of negative correlation with peace and stability. However, across Africa (reflecting global trends), arms trafficking displays a particularly strong negative correlation with peace (-0.82) (see Figure 4), unlike other illicit economies such as cannabis trade or illicit wildlife trade. ⁵⁵ Applying a harms perspective, the illicit economies with most impact on instability (accelerant markets) should be priorities for intervention, as they have devastating impacts on local communities.

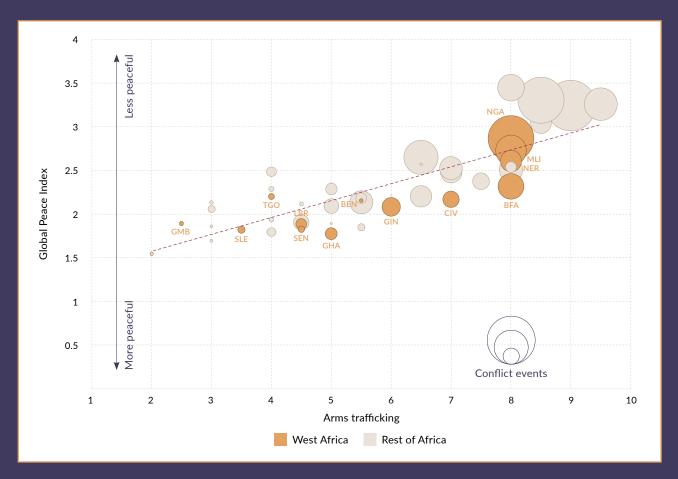
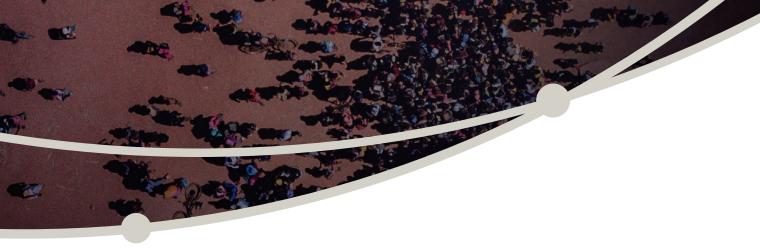


FIGURE 4 Relationship between arms trafficking, peacefulness and conflict across Africa.

source: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africa-illicit-hub-mapping



THE KIDNAPPERS: WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS IN BURKINA FASO'S KIDNAPPING INDUSTRY?

he Sahelian kidnapping industry is a fragmented criminal economy, characterized by little organization, and instead mostly operating on an opportunistic and ad hoc basis. While the kidnapping for ransom of Westerners in the initial years of the 2000s was more consolidated – dominated by a limited number of key actors and with an established network (perpetrators, intermediaries and negotiators) – the kidnapping of Sahelians is a fragmented criminal market. The kidnapping economy is closely related to local realities in the region, and motivations behind kidnappings need to be understood within this context. Incentives behind kidnapping incidents vary depending on who the perpetrators are, their levels of control over an area, and the nature of the group itself – be it violent extremist groups, criminal groups, or state forces and their auxiliary groups. The reality in urban areas throughout the region, where wealthy individuals (businesspeople, traders and hotel owners) are kidnapped by criminal groups seeking ransom payments, is vastly different from the reality in rural areas, where groups of women are kidnapped by local JNIM cells.

The kidnapping industry, like many fragmented markets, is characterized by a high degree of violence and unpredictability due to the numerous actors and distinct motivations involved. ⁵⁶ This also makes the kidnapping economy difficult to conceptualize and analyze, challenging traditional definitions of 'organized crime'. This has, in part, led to limited engagement with kidnapping as a criminal economy in the Sahel, producing a gap in the literature and understanding that this report seeks to address.

There are four broad categories of key perpetrator in Burkina Faso's kidnapping market: violent extremist groups (primarily JNIM and, to a much lesser extent, IS Sahel), self-defence militias, the VDP and state forces (FDS). A final category includes unidentified groups or individuals, who are typically close to criminal networks, though the latter appear to be far less common as perpetrators and are often found affiliated with armed groups in kidnappings for ransom incidents.

Despite the fragmented nature of the kidnapping industry, it is clear that JNIM is today the dominant actor, as kidnappings have become for the most part one of the group's tools for the establishment and the control over territories – through intimidation, vetting, punishment and recruitment – with profit by way of ransom a secondary driver.

Violent extremist groups are central, but not exclusive, perpetrators within the kidnapping economy. Self-defence militias, the VDP and the FDS engage in arbitrary arrests, detention and forced disappearances, many of which effectively constitute kidnappings in instances where they are perpetrated by actors not affiliated with law enforcement. While law enforcement actions – including by VDP members – are regulated by a legal framework, countless extrajudicial abuses and human rights violations, especially against Fulani communities, have been reported by local and international NGOs. ⁵⁷ As per the definition used throughout this report, kidnappings can be perpetrated by any type of actor, including state actors and their auxiliaries, when reported to be conducted extrajudicially. Because of the nature of these operations and the lack follow-up investigations – for example, to determine whether it actually took place and whether the person was freed – it is not possible to draw a clear and comprehensive picture of the scale of the overall kidnapping economy, nor to map the number of kidnappings per perpetrator.

While quantitative data is incomplete, interviewees highlighted several trends pertaining to each of the different central perpetrators – namely, the VDP, the FDS, IS Sahel and JNIM. While the next section is devoted to an analysis of JNIM as a perpetrator in kidnappings, this nascent qualitative evidence is used here to outline the group's contrasting kidnapping typology with that of other actors.

First, while JNIM, tends to carefully plan and execute its operations, the VDP and the FDS arrest and forcibly detain community members on the spot, based on ethnic profile, rarely respecting the presumption of innocence. They arrest them 'without any evidence or intelligence, just because of one's look or name', stated a member of civil society organization involved in documenting these cases. ⁵⁸ In contrast, JNIM tends to interrogate, judge and, if deemed appropriate, release victims depending on their deemed level of culpability.



Women take part in a demonstration to demand truth and justice for the victims of Yirgou, where retaliation against the Fulani community after a terrorist attack left 49 dead. © Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images

Second, while a significant proportion of the victims abducted by JNIM are released, abductions by the VDP and the FDS most often result in a killing or a disappearance. ⁵⁹ In the words of a humanitarian actor, 'just because they were in the wrong village at the wrong time, they are accused of being jihadists; they disappear, and their families never hear from them again'. ⁶⁰ For example, the Collective Against Impunity and the Stigmitization of Communities (Collectif contre l'impunité et la stigmatisation des communautés) (CISC), a local civil society organization in Burkina Faso, was contacted by numerous families in the Centre-Ouest region after 21 people disappeared, taken by men in military uniforms in mid-July 2022. ⁶¹ A CISC member stated that, 'unfortunately we receive several hundreds of such cases, of individuals arrested in broad daylight in a town on market day, or on their way to town, with no information on what this is about and where they [VDP or FDS] are taking them; and the reality is that often their dead bodies appear several days later at the entrance to their village'. ⁶²

IS Sahel and JNIM are known to have different strategies towards governing and engaging with the local population. This results in distinct approaches to kidnapping: IS Sahel is more brutal and less strategic. The group targets influential individuals who do not support their cause, or anyone they suspect of collaborating with the FDS or the VDP, for intimidation purposes (just like JNIM). While IS Sahel also kidnaps similar targets, the group mostly kills victims after a couple of days. In that sense, IS Sahel's modus operandi is more similar to that of VDP and self-defence groups: indiscriminate, violent and often resulting in the killing of the individual kidnapped. 63 Interestingly, a researcher who focuses on violent extremist groups highlighted that while IS Sahel might seek economic gain at first, if demands are not met, the motivation behind the kidnapping shifts to propaganda purposes or results in an execution.⁶⁴ This shows that the various motivations highlighted in this report are sometimes interrelated and not necessarily distinct. Another key difference is that IS Sahel has only been linked to one case of kidnapping for ransom of a foreigner (Jorge Lange, kidnapped in April 2018 and freed in December 2022). This is mostly due to the group's lack of logistics and capabilities to keep a hostage for several months or years, unlike JNIM, which consistently has between six and 10 foreign hostages in its custody. IS Sahel has, since 2019, been involved in kidnapping of Burkinabé nationals for ransom, although not to the same extent as JNIM, as explored in the section on financing, 'Kidnappings for ransom: Resourcing armed groups'.

Despite their mostly different approaches to kidnapping, both JNIM and IS Sahel have understood the advantages that working with criminal groups can bring when engaging in illicit economies, including in kidnapping. The most common scenario is when violent extremist groups hire bandits or small hands to gather intelligence on a potential victim's whereabouts and habits, and feed it back to the group. ⁶⁵ Criminal groups can also be directly involved in the kidnapping, leveraging their knowledge of the territory and local actors (who often fear these groups), before transferring the victim to the violent extremist group, which has the logistical capabilities to move the victim beyond the reach of security and defence forces and hold them for the required period of time (in some cases, months or years) until ransom is paid. ⁶⁶ In both scenarios, violent extremist groups have ordered the kidnapping. But criminal groups can also sometimes take the initiative, and for the same reasons as mentioned above – namely, lack of logistical capabilities – sell the hostage to a violent extremist group that will keep them and lead on negotiations until ransom is paid. ⁶⁷

The fragmented nature of the kidnapping industry means that several distinct motivations are driving the kidnapping industry in the Sahel. However, the GI-TOC has identified two broad motivations – governance and financing – which are explored in the two sections that follow.

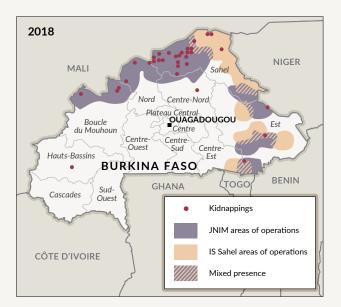


KIDNAPPINGS AS A TOOL OF ARMED GROUP GOVERNANCE STRATEGY: JNIM'S APPROACH

mong the perpetrators described in the previous section, JNIM is by far the most active actor when it comes to kidnappings. Moreover, the use of kidnappings as part of a broader governance strategy is most clearly evident from JNIM's approach, as the group leverages kidnapping as a strategic tool.

Kidnappings serve different purposes for JNIM depending on whether the group is trying to enter a new territory or whether it already controls a particular area. When JNIM starts operating in a new region, kidnappings are used for two main purposes: intelligence gathering and intimidation. Once the group has been successful in establishing itself in a particular territory, these two motivations remain. However, there is typically a shift in targets, and two further motivations also become central: vetting and recruitment. While separately analyzing these motivations allows us to shine a light on JNIM's strategic use of kidnappings, it is worth noting that these motivations are often interrelated and not necessarily distinct. Ransom is an additional motivation, which is explored in a separate section (see 'Kidnapping for ransom: Resourcing armed groups') as, even if not as significant now as in the first decade of the 2000s, it nevertheless represents a source of financing for the group.

Kidnapping patterns reflect JNIM's growing areas of influence. Kidnapping incidents increase and remain high in areas where JNIM is trying to establish influence but does not have (or does not yet have) consolidated influence, and sharply drop once JNIM has established influence. From 2016 to 2020, JNIM focused on establishing itself in the Sahel and Nord regions – northern areas of Burkina Faso at the border with Mali – which explains why these two regions were the hardest hit by kidnappings during that initial period. More specifically, data shows that in Soum province – the first province to be under JNIM's infiltration operations and today under consolidated influence – kidnappings represented more than 50% of all incidents in the country in 2018 compared to one single kidnapping incident recorded in 2022 (representing 0.4% of all kidnapping cases). However the Sahel region, of which Soum is a province, was still in 2022 the third most affected region after Est and Centre-Est regions. Indeed, Est region has since 2021 been the most affected region (more precisely, Gourma province). No kidnapping incidents were recorded in Gourma province, Est region, in 2018 – as JNIM had not yet moved into the



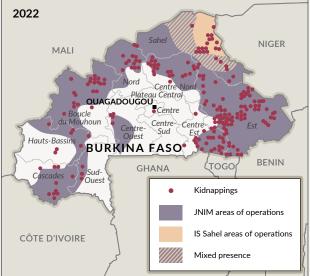


FIGURE 5 Kidnapping incidents and violent extremist groups' areas of operations, 2018 and 2022.

eastern parts of Burkina Faso – but is in 2022 the most affected province, with almost 20% of the 219 kidnappings taking place there.⁷⁰

Moreover, JNIM has since been seeking to increase its geographical reach, which has translated into more regions being affected by kidnappings. In 2020, six regions were affected, reflecting JNIM's progression towards the western and eastern parts of the country, bordering Mali and Niger. In 2022, this range expanded further, with kidnappings occurring in 10 of the 13 regions. Kidnappings have become another method of war, alongside direct attacks and other forms of armed violence, which explains why kidnappings primarily take place in conflict hotspots. The case of the 66 women kidnapped near the town of Arbinda, Sahel region, is a prime example of how interlinked kidnappings and conflicts have become. The women were kidnapped by JNIM on 12 and 13 January 2023 (two distinct groups kidnapped in two separate incidents) and kept for eight days before being found at a bus security checkpoint about 200 kilometres from where they were taken. While motivations behind the kidnappings are debated, the most likely scenario is that the women were kidnapped to force VDP and FDS to go on the look for them and organize rescue missions, during which JNIM could ambush the groups. Arbinda – and more broadly, Soum province – is in its vast majority under JNIM influence with little to no FDS and VDP presence. An attack indeed took place on 13 January against a VDP position, resulting in deaths of two VDP members.

Since 2021, the Est region of Burkina Faso has seen the highest concentration of kidnapping incidents – almost twice as much as in the Sahel region, the next most affected area.⁷⁵ It is likely that this is in large part due to the high number of VDP units and self-defence groups in the Est region – and hence JNIM's greater need to use kidnapping to gather intelligence and identify, and then intimidate, potential collaborators. The high rate of kidnappings in the Est region thus reflects the fact that JNIM's influence there remains contested by an array of actors, with ongoing state presence across parts of the region through VDP and FDS, or koglweogos and other self-defence groups.⁷⁶



Women kidnapped by JNIM in January 2023 were discovered eight days later at a bus security checkpoint, some 200 kilometres from where they had been taken. *Photo: Screengrab from Citizen TV Kenya*, Twitter, https://twitter.com/citizentvkenya/status/1617105116045139968

Furthermore, key trade routes, and consequently smuggling and trafficking axes, linking coastal West Africa and the Sahel traverse eastern Burkina Faso. The Est region is therefore also home to the criminal groups working across these routes, and involved in trafficking (weapons, fuel and medicines) and other illicit economies (artisanal gold mining and poaching) across the largely forested natural reserves that span Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo (Parc national d'Arli and Parc National du W).⁷⁷ While JNIM does not kidnap smugglers or traffickers, an increasing number of armed actors in a given area means more vetting to carry out, and truck drivers associated with criminal groups are temporarily kidnapped by JNIM for vetting and intelligence gathering.⁷⁸ Establishing control over such a complex area requires an intense campaign of armed attacks and intimidation, including through kidnappings.

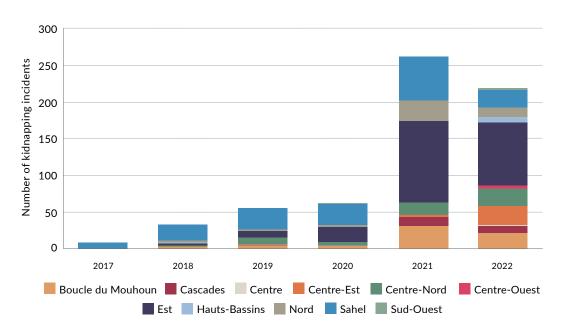


FIGURE 6 Number of kidnapping incidents in Burkina Faso, by region, 2017-2022.

Kidnappings as part of territorial expansion

Intelligence gathering is a key motivation for kidnappings by JNIM when the group is trying to establish its presence and influence in new territories. (This contrasts to IS Sahel and the VDP, which do considerably little intelligence gathering.) Broadly speaking, JNIM leverages violence in a targeted manner to achieve a specific purpose; this, in turn, furthers the group's ultimate goal: to win the hearts and minds of the communities, and consequently establish stable governance arrangements. Intelligence gathering – and a system of information collection and sharing – underpins this targeted use of violence and, thus, the achievement of legitimacy and control.⁷⁹

JNIM recruits young men and women in villages to spy at markets, on key roads and in neighbourhoods, offering them money and or protection in return. According to a historian with expertise on violent extremism and radicalization in Burkina Faso, for some, including those who have just lost their parents in an attack by the VDP or FDS, for example, 'they [JNIM] do not even need to offer anything; the need for revenge is strong enough'.⁸⁰

In areas where JNIM does not have spies, the group typically resorts to kidnapping for interrogation. Targets for such intelligence-gathering kidnappings are usually selected either due to their presence in a geography of strategic interest to JNIM, or because of their specific role within the community – or both. Women are particularly vulnerable targets as they often have to leave their villages or towns (unarmed and without protection) to gather leaves and fruit or fetch wood or water. A group of women in Kaya, a town in the Centre-Nord region 100 kilometres from Ouagadougou, to which they had fled from areas in which JNIM was active in 2021, had all heard of or experienced similar incidents. A female kidnapping victim explained that she had been held captive for 48 hours, during which she was asked questions about armed forces and VDP positions. She said that JNIM knew that her husband had a senior position in the village and was protected by the VDP, and she had been targeted specifically because of that.⁸¹

JNIM also targets people for intimidation. As noted above, the group usually avoids indiscriminate or excessive violence (mostly, but not always, with existing cases of large-scale violence targeting civilians). Instead, their governance model couples winning local support through, for example, the provision of basic services (security and justice foremost), with violence that is justified, legitimized and has a specific purpose, according to each local JNIM cell.⁸² Kidnappings for the purposes of intimidation are a central pillar of this strategy.

JNIM relies most heavily on violence and intimidation in the early stages of establishing influence over an area. There are several parallel methods used by JNIM to establish influence in new territories. One of them is to identify and intimidate anyone who opposes them or can undermine them – namely, national authorities, those who collaborate with the authorities formally (e.g. VDP) or informally on an ad hoc basis (other self-defence groups, civilians providing intelligence), and anyone perceived to represent the authorities (e.g. mayors, teachers and healthcare workers).⁸³

Women are also targets of temporary kidnappings for intimidation purposes. During a focus group discussion in Kaya, one woman explained how, in early 2021, she and a group of about 10 other women had been kidnapped by what they referred to as 'jihadists' while on their way to collect wood. The men took them away from the main road, in what has been described by the women as a 'temporary bush camp',⁸⁴ and asked them questions about their practice of Islam and about their husbands (whether they had joined the VDP). They were released – some of them after having been beaten and sexually assaulted – with a clear message: 'Abandon the village or we will come back and kill you all.'⁸⁵ The woman came from the same village where the VDP had been formed in 2021.



An empty market in Titao.

JNIM recruits young men and women in villages to spy at markets, on key roads and in neighbourhoods, offering them money and or protection in return. © Olympia de Maismont

In the early stages of infiltration, popular JNIM targets for intimidation include traditional and local authorities (village chiefs), religious leaders (imams or pastors), teachers, and anyone who is influential or occupies a strategic position within the community the group is trying to govern. These key personalities are kidnapped, kept for a couple of days or up to a few weeks, during which JNIM explains what its aim is, how it is going to achieve it, its rules and methods of governance and, most importantly, tells the kidnapping victims what they are expected to do and what role they must play in securing JNIM's influence in the area. We include they are expected to do and what role they must play in securing JNIM's influence in the area. He is and supportive of JNIM's influence. Those who refuse are either released and then leave the area, or are killed, 'and their bodies exposed not far from their places of origin in order to dissuade anyone else from refusing their [JNIM's] offer.

Between 2018 and mid-2020 in Sahel province, dozens of village chiefs, local leaders, religious leaders and teachers were targeted and kidnapped, but the number of victims has since decreased, as JNIM now has a more consolidated influence in the region. Conversely, kidnappings of such targets have been growing in eastern Burkina Faso, as these are areas to which JNIM shifted its focus in 2021 and was still working to establish itself during 2022.⁸⁸

The August 2020 kidnapping of the 'grand imam' of Djibo (the regional capital of Soum province, heart of the insurgency) is representative of JNIM's kidnapping methods and targeting for intimidation purposes in the early phases of its establishment. The imam, Souaibou Cissé, was a proponent of moderate Islam, advocating for tolerance. Cissé had known he was a target of JNIM; he had been threatened multiple times in the past, as the group had failed to convince him to align with their views. Despite usually being careful of his movements and limiting them to a minimum, the imam had gone to Ouagadougou in mid-August for a wedding. On his way back, he had been kidnapped by JNIM. JNIM, having gathered intelligence and prepared for the attack, set up an irregular checkpoint between Kongoussi and Djibo and waited for the bus Cissé was travelling in to arrive. JNIM pulled the bus over, knowing that the imam was in it. They took the imam and let all the other passengers go, and the bus continued to its destination. Cissé was found dead four days later. This happened as JNIM was strengthening its grip over Djibo. The authorities reacted with the creation of the VDP later that year, which, in turn, strengthened JNIM's will to increase its control over the key city. Since February 2022, JNIM has been surrounding the town, controlling inflows and outflows fully through irregular checkpoints and patrols, and preventing movement of food supplies, effectively putting Djibo under siege.

JNIM operates a subtle balance: the group needs to intimidate enough key personalities to avoid constant threats of revolt, but it also needs to accept the role that these individuals play in the community, thus realizing that too much disorganization (e.g., from getting rid of all the leaders) is counterproductive.⁹³ JNIM's strategy

clearly acknowledges that the group can also benefit from key community actors, principally for two central reasons: first, to gain increased legitimacy vis-à-vis the population, and second, by valuing the role such stakeholders can play as key focal points for negotiations and liaison between JNIM and the authorities. To play the latter role, such individuals need to be able to travel without being targeted (killed or kidnapped). Figures who have been permitted safe passage in this regard include the emirs of Djibo, Baraboulé and Tongomayel – three key negotiating actors for local peace agreements, access and kidnapping negotiations. The de facto granting of safe passage to these key individuals further demonstrates JNIM's strategic use of kidnappings for governance purposes, and how such motives trump other (for example, financial) considerations.

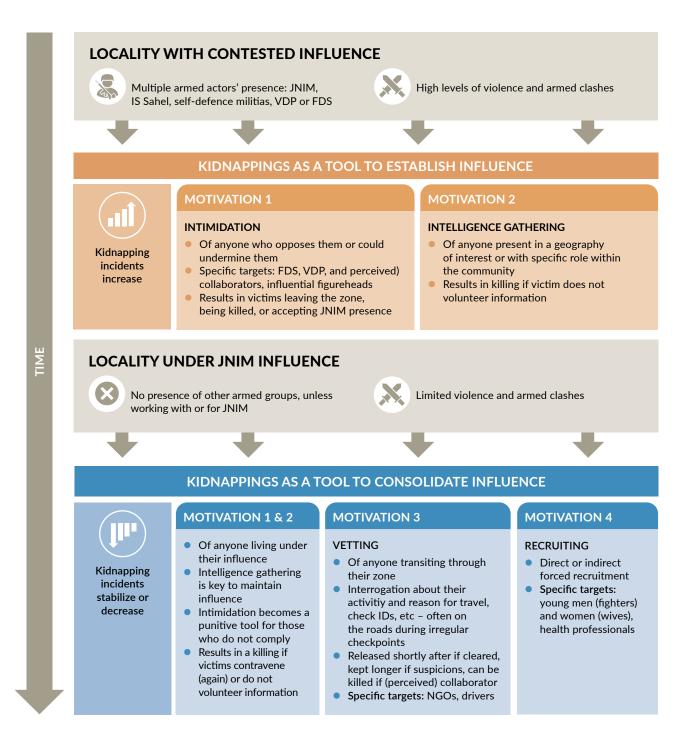


FIGURE 7 Kidnapping as a strategic tool for JNIM over time.

Kidnapping in areas under consolidated influence

Once JNIM has established a higher level of influence in a particular region, kidnappings decrease, most sharply those involving influential figureheads and suspected collaborators. This is because individuals who could undermine JNIM have either left, or have accepted (passively or actively) the group's presence, and so no longer represent a threat.

While kidnapping cases drop, they do not stop entirely, as JNIM still uses kidnappings as a tool to gather intelligence and intimidate (but with a shift in the type of victims) as well as for vetting and recruiting. Kidnapping for intelligence gathering continues, as JNIM is in constant need of information, given that the situation remains volatile even once the group enjoys a certain level of influence – for example, because of new VDP groups being established in villages, an increase in FDS operations or a new self-defence militia being armed.

Kidnappings for intimidation purposes continue, but take on a more punitive nature, central to the exercise of control. They do not only target key local personalities, but also anyone living under the influence of these individuals. Indeed, the group resorts to kidnappings in order to establish fear and respect, for everyone to understand that the new rules need to be observed and its governance model respected. No one can challenge the group openly without facing consequences. Here, intimidation and punishment mix. According to a former member of JNIM, if someone contravenes these rules, they will be kidnapped for a couple of days during which JNIM makes it clear what mistake the person has committed. The person will then be released but kept under close attention. If he contravenes [the rules] again, he will be kidnapped again, judged, and killed if found guilty, added that same source.

Victims of kidnapping for vetting are often held for a couple hours, several days or, in some cases, a couple of months if suspicions are high. JNIM interrogates them about their activity or the reason for their visit or transit, and if the explanation is satisfactory, the victim is typically released. While the typology of victim in this phase is broad, NGOs and humanitarian organization staff are particularly common targets. As JNIM tolerates the activities of these organizations, encounters between them happen on a semi-regular basis. If the access has been well negotiated, and the agreement respected by the organization (involving types of activities and staffing practices), the abduction only lasts a couple hours and the victim is released. However, if JNIM is suspicious, a comprehensive verification may take place in order for JNIM to be confident that the activities will not undermine their control. For example, if a member of a humanitarian organization is seen talking to someone associated with the VDP or with the authorities, suspicions will immediately be raised, and this will be enough for JNIM to kidnap and interrogate the person. In an incident in Est region in 2021, a local NGO staff member was kidnapped and remained in captivity for about five months because he was seen on a motorbike with a local official, which made the negotiation for his release extremely complicated.

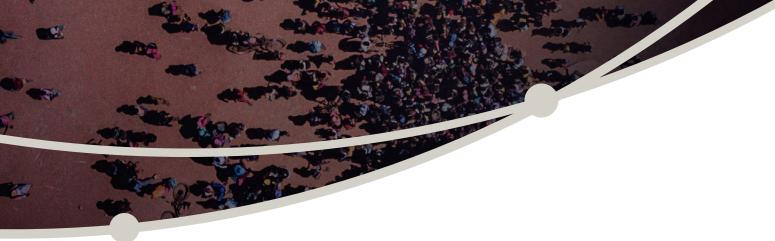
Forced recruitment is the second central motive for kidnappings in areas under JNIM's influence. Once the group has established itself, it requires communities to take part in the war effort, in exchange for protection, through a son who can join as fighter or through a daughter who can be married to one of the group's members. ¹⁰² JNIM goes house to house in newly acquired localities, and typically gives a warning to the head of the family, telling him that he has a couple days to give one of his children to the group. 'If the father refuses, JNIM will return, and he himself or one of the family members will be killed, until the family complies with the demand,' stated a key figure in Soum province. ¹⁰³ Sometimes, JNIM conducts forced recruitment campaigns without warning. This was the case in August 2022, when the group went to five villages in Sourou province (Bassan, Bangassi, Ninlare, Kassoum and Doussoula), Boucle du Mouhoun region, kidnapping young men to participate in the war effort. ¹⁰⁴

Health professionals (doctors, nurses) are regularly kidnapped by JNIM, which needs their expertise to treat its members or to continue to work in hospitals that are in the villages and towns under their influence, effectively forcing them to work with the group.¹⁰⁵

Kidnapping can also be an indirect means of recruitment, because of the suspicions that are then placed on that person. Indeed, if someone is kidnapped and released, the authorities will assume that the person gave JNIM what they needed (information, for example). This turns the victim into a target of the FDS or VDP because of his or her alleged 'cooperation' with JNIM.¹06 JNIM, knowing that the person they abduct will become a target of the authorities and their allies, will offer to protect the individual in return, and that person then automatically finds him- or herself on JNIM's side. 'If they [JNIM] release you, the FDS will come after you, accusing you of being a jihadist yourself, so you do not have much choice [...] and JNIM uses this as a recruitment tool,' explained an expert on local kidnappings.¹07 More broadly, this dynamic of communities being caught in a predicament, with abductions and murders from all parties to the conflict taking place, explains the explosion of violence against civilians since 2019, which shows no signs of slowing down. This violence has a devastating impact on communities, and is creating a deepening humanitarian emergency and the world's fastest-growing displacement crisis.¹08



Kaya, a town 100 kilometres north of Ouagadougou, has seen a huge influx of internally displaced persons since 2019. © Olympia de Maismont



KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM: RESOURCING ARMED GROUPS

inancing is a motive for kidnappings, and all armed groups operating in Burkina Faso have been accused of kidnapping for ransom. Self-defence groups and – including Dozo armed groups, koglweogos and VDP members officially working with the authorities on defence and security – have been blamed for taking advantage of their newly acquired weapons and status to rob, loot, and settle personal scores, targeting the Fulani communities they accuse of being allied with violent extremists.¹⁰ Kidnapping for ransom incidents are reportedly part of these abusive tactics. One source with local knowledge of armed actors in Soum province, Sahel region, reported that members of a newly created VDP (formed in 2021) were roaming Fulani villages, threatening residents and abducting cattle owners or members of their families, and asking for ransom.¹¹⁰ In one incident, the VDP abducted the brother of a cattle owner as he was taking care of the animals, and asked for FCFA1 500 000 (€2 290) in ransom. In this case, the family paid the ransom, and the brother was freed.¹¹¹ The whole family then fled further south to the Centre-Nord region, abandoning their cattle. 'In other cases, the VDP will ask for three or four cows [roughly FCFA250 000 each (€380)]. If you do not pay, they will kill you,' added the same source.¹¹²

Violent extremist groups – both JNIM and IS Sahel – have also been linked to kidnapping for ransom cases. As noted above, in the case of JNIM in Burkina Faso, in the majority of instances it appears that money is not the driving force behind the kidnapping of residents – instead, it is more commonly a secondary motivation. JNIM has a long history of kidnapping for ransom, especially among its front runner groups operating in northern Mali (AQIM, in particular) and with the targeting of Westerners. IS Sahel does not have the same logistical capabilities as JNIM, and its capacity to hold and hide hostages for several months or years is limited. However, one source explained that IS Sahel has nevertheless been engaging in kidnapping for ransom in Burkina Faso, with several incidents having taken place since mid-2020. He

IS Sahel was, for example, behind the kidnapping of two healthcare workers (a midwife and a nurse) in Seytenga, Sahel region, in December 2021. The victims were transferred to Niger and then Mali, where they were kept for three months. ¹¹⁵ After a successful negotiation, they were brought back to Ouagadougou in March 2022, with a ransom of between €20 000 and €23 000 (depending on sources) paid by the new military government that took over in January 2022. ¹¹⁶ The two healthcare workers were flown back to Ouagadougou by military helicopters, welcomed by government officials at the airport, and their liberation announced on national television. ¹¹¹¬ This is in line with previous engagement

by many governments in the Sahel on negotiating the release of kidnapping victims, despite rhetoric opposing payment of ransoms to armed groups.

JNIM, however, remains the most important actor in Burkina Faso in terms of kidnapping for ransom, and sources interviewed could all recall several kidnapping cases involving JNIM. Unlike IS Sahel, JNIM has the logistics and the hideouts (mostly in central and northern Mali) to keep hostages until a ransom is paid.¹¹⁸

Several factors shape JNIM's engagement in kidnapping for ransom. First, some kidnappings for ransom can be justified and legitimized by the group's regulatory principles – for example, as a cattle trader described, if 'a cattle owner refuses to help with the war effort [giving livestock], they will take him until his family pays a ransom'. Here, the distinct degrees of legitimacy linked to different types of kidnapping victim are also key. JNIM tries to distance itself from criminal acts that lack legitimacy among communities. Clearly, this does not encompass all activities that are illegal, as many are viewed as legitimate by communities – broadly, those that do not have a negative impact on them and their livelihoods. Smuggling of food items or fuel and artisanal gold mining are all generally well perceived, unlike cattle rustling, armed robbery and *coupeurs de route* (highway robbers). Turning to the kidnapping market: While broadly lacking in legitimacy, abducting a foreigner has a lesser impact on the perceived authority of JNIM, and does not have the same effect on communities as the kidnappings of Burkinabés, be they influential local or religious leaders or a group of women.

Second, if someone is not abiding by the groups' rules, or is accused of collaborating with the authorities, they become a target, and their money or livestock become spoils of war. Third, JNIM is not a homogenous entity, and some katibas or individuals within the group are known to engage more in criminal behaviours, especially in areas where the group does not yet have a strong influence and where the number of armed actors is high.

The question of ransom, and exact amounts, remains sensitive, as paying a ransom is equivalent to supporting violent extremist groups. Thus, many victims remain silent as to the conditions of their detention and their release. However, existing data indicates that JNIM identifies wealthy individuals, such as traders, businessmen, cattle owners and gold site owners, for ransom requests, knowing that they can get a significant amount of money from their families. Often, JNIM will call and negotiate directly with the family of the victim, explain the situation and their demands, indicating a price and a date. Ransom demands vary and depend on the wealth of the family: figures given by interviewees ranged from FCFA300 000 to FCFA800 000 (€457–€1 220) – typically for a small trader or shopkeeper – to FCFA2 million to FCFA3 million (€3 050–€4 575) for more important businessmen. Price tags for cattle owners and owners of gold sites can be even higher, as much as FCFA8 million (€12 160). For example, a wealthy cattle owner was abducted by JNIM in the south-west of Burkina Faso, near the Ivorian border, in November 2021. He was reportedly released several days later after paying a ransom of FCFA6.2 million (€9 500). Not all of these kidnappings are necessarily planned and commissioned by JNIM's tops leadership, as individuals and cells do enjoy certain level of independence, and kidnappings of small traders (for limited ransom) usually results from local needs for quick money.

The biggest ransoms are those demanded for foreigners. In addition to the three individuals kidnapped in the early days of the violent extremist insurgency in Burkina Faso, several foreigners have since been kidnapped by JNIM, and are either still in captivity, have been released or killed, or have escaped. ¹²⁴ In September 2018, for example, the son of the head of Balaji Group (a company exploiting the Inata mining site in the Sahel region) as well as a South African national and two Burkinabés (a driver and a local staff member) were kidnapped in Soum province and transferred to JNIM in Mali. While the South African died during the transfer, and the two Burkinabés were freed after a couple of days, the son

remained in captivity for 15 months. The son's liberation was negotiated through his father, wealthy businessman Akoliya Patelb, and key resource contacts in Tongomayel commune. In January 2020, the son was released for the sum of US\$750 000, against US\$2 million initially demanded by JNIM, according to a source with knowledge of the negotiation.¹²⁵

In 2022, a recent spate of kidnappings of foreigners both in Mali and Burkina Faso has refocused attention on the issue. Nine foreign nationals, including six Westerners, were kidnapped in Burkina Faso and Mali in 2022, a noticeable shift given how rare such high profiles kidnappings had become since 2012. In addition to higher numbers, the other key noticeable shift is the reach of JNIM into Bamako, Mali's capital – for the first time since the beginning of the conflict – with the kidnapping of a German priest in November 2022. 127

More important than the increase in the number of kidnappings is the change in modus operandi, as highlighted by an expert in violent extremist groups: in the cases mentioned above, the resolution of the kidnappings was relatively quick, cheap, local and dealt with privately. For the three victims who were released, their captivity lasted between three weeks and four months (short compared to the hostage periods of other foreign JNIM captives, many of whom have been detained since 2015). Ransoms paid were comparatively low (for example, US\$15 000 was paid for the release of a Thai doctor, compared to the several millions typically requested by AQIM in the first decade of the 2000s). The victims were not transferred to bases in northern Mali where AQIM usually keeps hostages for several years; instead, they were released in the vicinity of where they were taken hostage. Finally, the usual negotiators in Mali were not involved, nor were the authorities from the two countries. Instead, links were established directly with the families, who paid to have their relatives released.

It is likely that these changes can be explained by the JNIM coalition's need to increase its revenue, after a year of intense fighting against IS Sahel in central and northern Mali. Moreover, it appears that JNIM, which, since 2018, refuses to give proof of life of hostages (and has done so only in a couple of selected cases, with the intent of moving negotiations along), is increasingly frustrated by the slow resolution of cases. JNIM has understood that it needs to decentralize the chain of command related to kidnappings of foreigners, so that Katibat Macina can conduct its own kidnappings, enabling quicker resolution, with the priority being fast liquidity. If this trend continues, a higher number of kidnappings of foreigners for ransom might take place in 2023 and the coming years. This is because the kidnapping of foreigners has the advantage for JNIM of not affecting and harming they communities they are trying to govern, meaning that the group's legitimacy is not undermined.



Livestock owners in Burkina
Faso are sometimes kidnapped
for refusing to cooperate with
the war effort by donating their
animals. © Olympia de Maismont



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

his report has highlighted the key characteristics of the kidnapping industry in Burkina Faso, as well as the role that this economy plays for armed groups in terms of resourcing, but most importantly for JNIM as a key strategic tool driving its expansion. While the kidnapping of Westerners for ransom in the early days of the insurgency served as an entry point for JNIM's expansion in Burkina Faso, the group has shifted its practice towards using kidnappings as an instrument to assert or maintain its control over territory.

The kidnapping industry is a prime example of an accelerant industry that fuels conflict, and is closely tied to the governance of violent extremist groups, with financing motivations as secondary driver. This stands in sharp contrast to how kidnapping has been leveraged by armed groups in different geographies and over time; for example, it contrasts with dynamics in Nigeria, where armed groups appear heavily driven by economic motivations, with less emphasis on winning legitimacy among the population. An enhanced understanding of the kidnapping economy in Burkina Faso, and, in particular, JNIM's role as a key perpetrator, adds to the evidence base underscoring that the near-exclusive focus on the financial proceeds from illicit economies for violent extremist groups in the Sahel in understanding the crime–terror nexus is not representative of the complex realities on the ground.

Finally, analyzing how JNIM engages in illicit economies, including kidnapping, is key to understanding the group's expansion towards coastal West Africa, where it has been increasingly active since 2021, especially in northern Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. Across these areas, and most dramatically in Benin, kidnapping for ransom is progressively being used as an entry point for the group, mirroring patterns seen in Burkina Faso in 2015. These spikes in kidnapping incidents should be integrated in early-warning analysis and inform stabilization programming.

Recommendations

For civil society

Continue to monitor and document cases of kidnapping and wider human rights abuses against all communities. The role of information is key in a conflict in which access to conflict zones becomes more and more limited given the deterioration of the security situation, and where the threat of disinformation is increasing. Civil society has a key role to play in holding security forces and their auxiliaries responsible by publicizing their abuses. These organizations are also instrumental to reporting on extremist groups' violence, which helps shape national, regional and international strategies. Local civil society organizations, with the help and support of international organizations, are key to alarming all stakeholders on the most pressing concerns and harms suffered by communities, and should play the role of whistle-blower.

For the national authorities

- Reliance on the VDP and self-defence groups has been shown to increase levels of violence, as it heightens communal tensions and leads to deadly revenge attacks. Delegating security responsibilities has not resulted in increased state legitimacy and trust between the population and the Burkinabé authorities, including the FDS, police and gendarmes. Recognizing, however, that the VDP appears set to remain central to authorities' security strategy, given the November 2022 recruitment campaign, it is a key moment to mitigate the risks of human right abuses, enhance training and accountability, and enshrine these priorities as part of the recruitment campaign and ensuing onboarding.
- A more consistent structure for control and supervision of the VDP is required, from thorough vetting in selection processes to deeper training and careful deployment. Local conflict dynamics should be analyzed together with communities in order to avoid deploying VDP members to communal violence hotspots, and ensuring that VDP units are sensitized to conflict dynamics. In cases of human rights violations by the VDP or the FDS, penalties provided for should be applied. The authorities should take swift action to investigate and punish those responsible, and publicize their wrongdoing. This will reduce the current generalized climate of impunity. To do this, keeping an information line between civil society and authorities is crucial and the authorities should support, and not threaten, civil society actors reporting on abuses by parties to the conflict as Burkina Faso is facing a growing wave of disinformation and strong antagonism between communities and between the authorities and civil society.

For the international community

When designing crime-sensitive stabilization strategies, it is important to accurately diagnose the relationship between distinct illicit economies and instability, and recognize the central role that illicit economies play in the governance strategies of violent extremist groups – in particular, JNIM. Shaping interventions purely around disruption of resourcing, and ignoring the governance dynamic, can prove counterproductive. Accelerant markets, among them kidnappings, should be prioritized in responses, and understood as a key metric of harm on communities that should be closely considered in seeking to dislodge the governance grip of violent extremist groups on communities.



NOTES

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- 124 A couple travelling was kidnapped near the Benin border in 2018, and remained captive for a year in northern Mali before managing to escape. A Canadian was kidnapped in January 2019 but found dead a couple of days later.
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