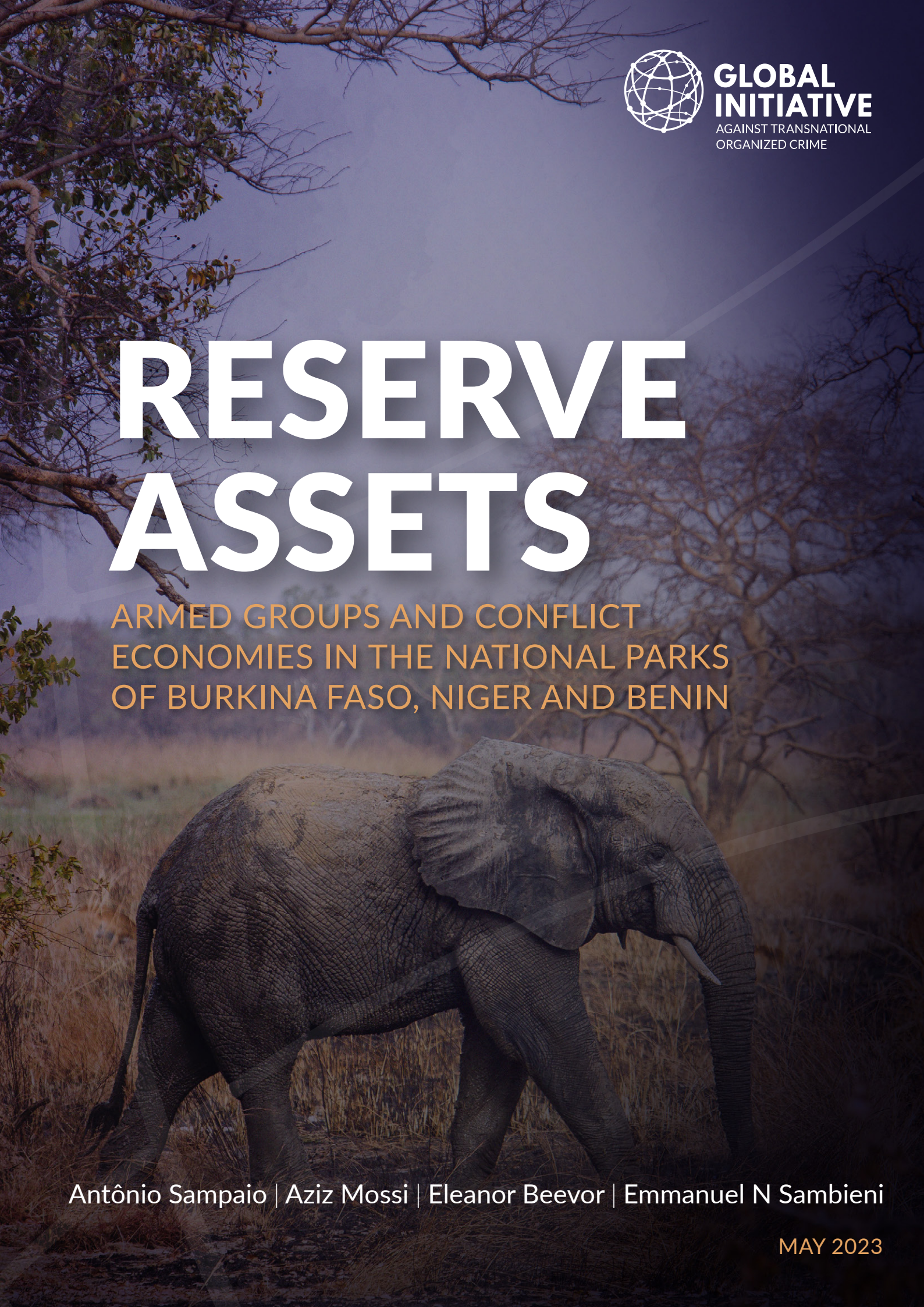

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

# RESERVE ASSETS

## ARMED GROUPS AND CONFLICT ECONOMIES IN THE NATIONAL PARKS OF BURKINA FASO, NIGER AND BENIN

Antônio Sampaio | Aziz Mossi | Eleanor Beevor | Emmanuel N Sambieni

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# CONTENTS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremist groups have been expanding from their primary bases in Mali and Burkina Faso towards the southern and coastal states of West Africa. One of the main corridors for this expansion has been the stretch of protected land comprising the W, Arly and Pendjari national parks. This area of connected natural reserves, which also contains several smaller semi-protected areas and hunting concessions, is referred to as the WAP complex. Its location along multiple national borders (it straddles the borders of Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso and runs close to those of Nigeria and Togo), the cover offered by its forests and savannah vegetation, and its relative isolation, have made it a critical operational space for the non-state armed groups feeding political instability in the Sahel.

This has been underscored by a sharp rise in violent attacks in the areas skirting the WAP complex in Benin, and to a lesser extent Togo, since late 2021, as the protected areas have become a vehicle for the region's two main armed groups to extend their influence towards the coastal states. The most significant of these is Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – an amalgamation of violent extremist groups, mainly from Mali, and ideologically affiliated to al-Qaeda. Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) is also active in the WAP complex, albeit to a much lesser extent.

While the primary appeal of the complex to JNIM (and ISSP) is as a refuge, combatants have also presented themselves as an alternative system of governance to its residents. In doing so, they have adapted to – and taken advantage of – the fact that many of those living in the complex depend on the illicit economy. This is properly characterized as *illicit* rather than *informal*, since obtaining basic supplies often involves goods crossing borders undeclared and untaxed. In the coastal states – Benin, which contains a large part of the WAP complex; Togo, whose north-eastern edge is a short distance from Pendjari Park; and Nigeria, whose north-western border is also close to the complex – goods are significantly cheaper due to a combination of port infrastructure and subsidies on key commodities such as fuel. However, residents in this area (where formal markets scarcely exist) largely consider many of the banned economic activities (such as smuggling fuel, consumer goods and hunting) as legitimate, as they supply vital items that could not be purchased by the overwhelming majority of the population through the more expensive formal markets.

## Definitions – illicit and informal economies

**Illicit economy: M**arkets in which there are illegalities committed at least at one point in the supply chain, whether in sourcing, production, transport, sale, diversion or distribution.[1]

**Informal economy:** All economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements.[2]

Such price differentials have fostered a mature smuggling ecosystem. The WAP complex serves as a relatively safe route for small bands of smugglers, usually on motorbikes, compared to the main roads across the southern border of Burkina Faso, where the chances of encountering a state checkpoint are much higher. Meanwhile, the formal sector has always been largely absent. The net result is that the communities around the parks have gravitated towards smuggling, not only as a supplier because it is a profitable activity, but also as consumers, since it is the only way to access goods in many parts of the zone.[3]

Smuggling is just one aspect of the local political economy that armed groups have exploited to assume authority over residents. Another is the area's land politics, and its history of contestation over natural resources. Much as with the smuggling economy, JNIM has incorporated local aspirations to take advantage of the parks' natural resources into their governance practice. They have also navigated, and sometimes capitalized on, local conflicts over access to land. This report will focus predominantly on natural resource exploitation and how armed groups leverage local resources for governance purposes, rather than on land conflict or tensions between farming and herding communities.[4]

In the WAP complex, rather than turning a profit, the principal aim of armed groups in engaging with illicit economies is to further their governance agenda. Evidence gathered so far suggests JNIM has largely resisted directly taxing the smuggled goods coming from coastal states into the WAP complex. Instead, financial contributions from residents are levied predominantly through *zakat* (an Islamic alms distribution system) or sometimes on livestock grazing. Both can be framed as a payment in exchange for a service, albeit with varying credibility. More broadly, JNIM's offer to the local population is to allow them to practice illicit activities undisturbed, in exchange for accepting the group as a governing force. Thus, JNIM is primarily a facilitator of illicit economies and a profiteer second.

This is not to suggest that JNIM is a benevolent actor in the WAP complex, and the group regularly employs violence to coerce civilians. JNIM combatants go to significant and destructive lengths to ensure there is no contact between the residents they seek to govern and the state or other opposing forces. Violence tends to be directed against those they suspect of opposing them, as a means of stoking intercommunal conflict, or simply to inspire fear among residents and ensure obedience.

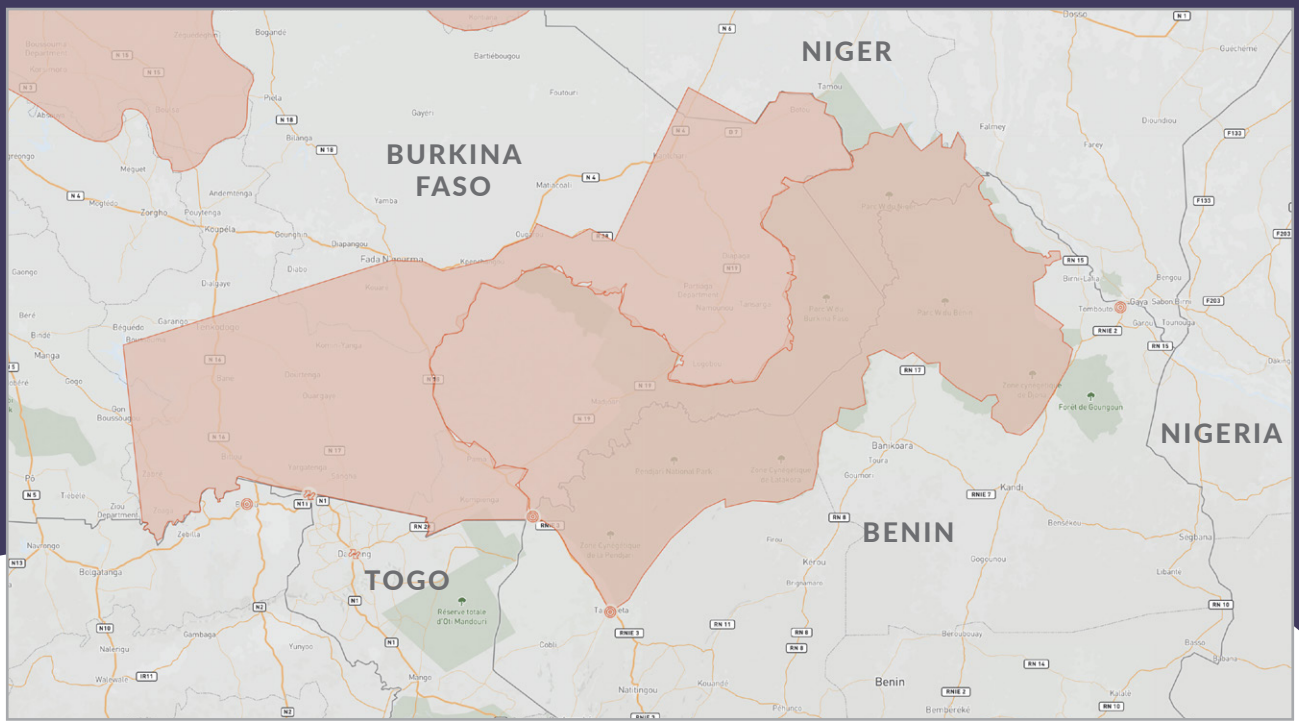


**FIGURE 1** The Benin–Burkina Faso–Niger transborder region is a notable zone for illicit economies.

SOURCE: wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping

## Methodology

This report draws on primary data collected during field research in communities surrounding the WAP complex in Niger and Benin in July 2022, and via remote interviews on the Burkina Faso side of the complex. Overall, this report draws on over 80 interviews (both unstructured and semi-structured) with key stakeholders, and additional validation exercises. In Benin, 38 interviews were conducted in the four communes of the Alibori department – namely, Kandi, Malanville, Karimama and Banikoara. In each of the communes, the researchers visited the districts and villages bordering Park W.[5] It also uses secondary data collected in English and French from academic and policy literature and local newspapers. In Niger, a further 18 interviews were conducted. Another 20 remote interviews were carried out with people on the Burkina Faso side between February and May 2022, and the data was similarly supplemented with local media sources, academic research and grey literature. Preliminary findings were shared, and tested, at a dialogue with 50 expert stakeholders hosted by the GI-TOC in Cotonou in October 2022. Supplementary data and expert opinions were factored into the report, and stakeholder engagement continued after the dialogue. A small number of further interviews were conducted by telephone in December 2022 to update certain data points.

# CONFLICT EXPANSION AND THE EMBEDDING OF ARMED GROUPS IN THE ECONOMY OF THE WAP COMPLEX

The building of influence over local political economies has underpinned the expansion of armed conflict from Mali towards southern and western areas of the Sahel. As described, two main violent extremist groups have spearheaded the strategy of embedding themselves into local socio-economic systems: JNIM and, to a much lesser extent, ISSP. While both ISSP and JNIM have spread south from Mali, a Burkinabé armed group called Ansar ul-Islam has also been active in Burkina Faso, though in association with JNIM (and particularly its core sub-group Katibat Macina) throughout.

Despite initial cooperation between JNIM and ISSP, armed clashes between them became a regularity by late 2019 and 2020. In Burkina Faso's Est province, clashes between JNIM and ISSP spiked in early 2020 as JNIM began to expel ISSP from the province. By the end of 2020, JNIM had effectively purged all areas of Est province beyond the regional capital of Fada N'gourma of ISSP combatants. Only small numbers of ISSP-affiliated combatants are believed to be in the WAP complex at present, although they are thought to have some outposts and a presence in the northern border areas of littoral states, including Ghana.[6] This was evidenced through the group's first attacks in Benin, in the Alibori department in July 2022 (claimed by official Islamic State media that September).[7]

The geographical spread of armed groups remains fluid and is therefore difficult to track accurately, especially given the risks involved in collecting data. In 2022, ISSP regained both strength and territory further north in the Sahel, particularly in the tri-border region of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. JNIM, increasingly on the defensive in these areas, is likely to continue to consolidate its gains in the northern littoral states, where currently it has the upper hand. Preliminary evidence indicates that it will be vigilant and unforgiving towards those it perceives as collaborators – either with ISSP or state authorities.

The southward expansion of extremist groups from Mali has been reflected in increasing violence in Burkina Faso. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, for instance, reported that Burkina Faso experienced a 69% rise in fatalities from the activities of violent extremist groups in 2022, relative to 2021.[8] Surging violence has left the country facing one of the world's fastest growing displacement crises.[9]

**The stretch of protected land comprising the W, Arly and Pendjari national parks has become a platform for violent extremist group expansion towards the coastal states of West Africa.** *© Westend61 GmbH/ Alamy Stock Photo*

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, Burkina Faso's displaced population grew by a staggering 2 000% between early 2019 and early 2022.[10] By September 2022, over 2 million people in the country had been displaced.[11]

The parks are a feature of this broad southward drift of the Sahelian conflict, though they have developed their own dynamics.

## Governments, park rangers and communities: A troubled relationship

The parks that are now part of the WAP complex have expanded over several generations, after plans were first developed in the 1920s by colonial authorities.[12] Outside of the three major national parks – W, Arly and Pendjari – the protected areas are primarily *zones cynégétiques* (hunting areas), which are designed for biological conservation but with a limited amount of commercial hunting permitted. The *zones cynégétiques*, which are predominantly located in Burkina Faso, are managed by private concessionaries. They were intended to benefit the residents of local villages by giving them a cut of hunting proceeds and a stake in the maintenance of the zone. The portion of revenue from *zones cynégétiques* going to the local population varies between jurisdictions. In Burkina Faso this has ranged between 2.5% and 3.5% of total revenues in recent decades, with the rest shared between concessionaries and the state.[13] By contrast, the majority of funds from the *zones cynégétiques* around Pendjari in Benin were reported to be channelled via local organizations to communities.[14]

The colonial-era designation of Park W in Burkina Faso in 1937, and the restrictions on social and economic activities that followed in the 1950s, were highly disruptive to local communities' way of

life.[15] Some residents living within the designated area were expelled,[16] while customary leaders lost access to grazing, fishing, farming and hunting areas, as well as to ancestral sites of spiritual or religious significance.[17] For instance, the Gourmantché residents of the outskirts of the park have historically relied on the forest for subsistence and maintain sacred sites in these forested areas – sites that represent an ancestral connection and are critical to their social cohesion and to chiefly authority.[18]

The designations of hunting zones in Burkina Faso, the *zones cynégétiques*, also got underway in the 1950s. These were intended, through the revenue generated by hunting tourism, to contribute to conservation efforts. In parallel, unauthorized hunting was forbidden, and informants would report infractions to rangers. The extent to which these rules were enforced varied in the post-independence period. The 1980s is remembered as a period in which policing of the reserve was particularly vigorous, although hunting tourism was suspended during this time and residents belonging to registered associations could hunt in a regulated fashion.

The 1990s saw the return of commercial hunting and the creation of privatized hunting concessions on the edges of the WAP complex. Village committees were installed, which were supposed to manage the hunting concessions and profit from the tourism. In practice, these only began working in the first decade of the 2000s and have been a mixed success. While some residents report benefiting from them, they often fail to incorporate all inhabitants of the area, with Peuhl communities being frequently unrepresented. The same can be said of efforts to create so-called buffer zones for farming and grazing on the peripheries of the WAP complex – in practice, arable farming communities have dominated these, exacerbating tensions with pastoralists who rely on them for grazing.[19]

Within the WAP complex, there are sites in which limited economic activities are permitted, such as pastoralism, agriculture, hunting or the collection of non-timber forest products – though, in 2015, Burkinabé park management expressed the intention to restrict these activities further.[20] These activities, and the limited revenues received from hunting concessions, are seen by local communities as scant compensation for the loss of full use of the protected areas. For instance, communities around Park W resented being unable to use the land for cash crops (particularly cotton) during the agricultural commodities boom in the initial years of the 2000s.[21]

Relations between communities around the biosphere and the defence and security forces in Benin and Niger have long been marked by friction. Grievances were fanned in 2017, when Benin introduced restrictions on some of the main routes for transhumant pastoralists in its section of the WAP complex.[22] These restrictions turned into a full prohibition in 2019 when the Beninese government banned the entry of foreign livestock involved in long-distance migration.[23]

The exploitative behaviour of park rangers and the state agents working with them has often compounded local resentment. Rangers across the WAP complex are either employed by the state, usually in the water and forestry departments; in NGOs, such as the African Parks Network in Benin; or in private concessionaries that manage the hunting zones. In Burkina Faso, rangers are typically seen by communities as extracting money or goods from local people. The arbitrariness of rangers' fines and applications of the rules poses a serious risk to residents' economic security and social cohesion. As one UN security and access officer working in the Est region commented:

> A ranger would go and cut down a tree branch and then find the nearest herder and tell them that *they* had clearly cut that branch and would now have to pay a fine. There were people who

**The Beninese government has created a Special Brigade to ensure wildlife preservation in Pendjari National Park.** © *Stefan Heunis/AFP via Getty Images*

> were completely ruined by this, simply because a ranger or a forester wanted to get something from them and so accused them. This really exaggerated tensions and helped to radicalize certain communities.[24]

Hostility towards park rangers has grown in recent years. In 2020, traditional hunters attacked a base of African Parks, an NGO that manages and patrols the Benin sections of parks W and Pendjari, in Natitingou, in the Atacora region, and had their equipment seized or destroyed in response.[25] African Parks has since engaged in greater community outreach efforts, in an attempt to diffuse these tensions.[26] Some stakeholders report improved relations between communities and African Parks, although others point to ongoing acrimony.[27]

There is no singular view towards the national parks among residents of the area, although the common theme is that support for protecting the WAP complex can only be sustained if there is a net benefit to residents. Some have benefited from tourism or other community conservation projects. There is also general support for preserving the area's natural resources, including among pastoralists, who want to ensure ecosystems are preserved for long-term access to grazing land.[28] Yet, in practice, the benefits that arose from the creation of the WAP complex have been spread unevenly and, in the eyes of residents, have not come close to making up for their loss of the free use of the reserve's resources. Likewise, there are historical and very recent memories of forced exclusions, corruption, violent acts and imperious conduct by state authorities and those managing the parks, both nationally and internationally.

## Armed groups in the WAP complex: From encroachment to offensive

Park rangers noticed a surge in armed group activity in early 2019 within the portions of Park W located in eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger (although combatants may have arrived in the complex as early as 2018).[29] The forested savannah of the WAP complex has been a relatively safe haven for fighters. State armed forces are far less familiar with the terrain inside the parks than JNIM, which puts them at a serious disadvantage. The terrain is inhospitable to armoured vehicles, and the trails are unsuitable for vehicles other than motorbikes, which would leave soldiers exposed. The thick woodland and bushes also make aerial surveillance much more difficult.

JNIM fighters nevertheless avoid clustering in the park, for fear of airstrikes and surveillance. Reports from hostages held in the parks suggest that militant bases consist only of a meeting point at which units gather once or twice a day for prayers, planning, resupply and to prepare themselves for operations. Once these activities have been completed, they disperse in different directions deep into the park for the rest of the day to avoid detection.[30] It is quite possible for JNIM to exist discretely inside the parks, using the cover to plan their military activities, recuperate and conduct intelligence and reconnaissance.[31]

The WAP complex has therefore become a launchpad for violent extremist groups' operations in the areas surrounding the biosphere, helping to spread insecurity over the roads and towns around the parks. Route Nationale 18, the main road connecting the capital of Burkina Faso's Est region, Fada N'gourma, and the Beninese border – which passes through the Pama Reserve at the far west of the WAP complex – has been subject to frequent attacks believed to be by armed groups.[32] In 2019, suspected extremists killed 39 people in an ambush on several buses transporting workers from a mine controlled by a Canadian company.[33] Another ambush on a convoy of mining workers killed a further six in August 2022.[34]

Having purged most officials and security forces from the area, JNIM combatants have continued to monitor the territory closely to ensure they do not return and to prevent civilians collaborating with the state. An elected official told researchers that, in 2020, armed groups operated freely on the Route Nationale 18 between Fada N'gourma and the disputed town of Kourou/Koualou (claimed by both Burkina Faso and Benin, a dispute currently being considered by the International Court of Justice).[35] Armed groups were stopping vehicles at roadblocks, taking in those they consider to be from pro-government villages for questioning and screening for members of security forces or forestry agents.[36] However, since the closure of the Benin–Burkina Faso border crossing and the deployment of state forces on the roads around the Beninese side of Kourou/Koualou in December 2021, armed group checks in the area have significantly reduced, including on the Burkina Faso side. This is in large part due to the reduction in road traffic.

A dramatic rise in armed group activity in Benin took place in 2022 after JNIM extended its influence southwards across the Burkina Faso border in Kompienga province.[37] In December 2021, JNIM claimed responsibility for a hit-and-run attack that killed two Beninese soldiers at a border security post in the town of Porga, located on the outskirts of the WAP complex and near the Burkinabé border – the first instance of a violent extremist group claiming an attack in Benin.[38] This was followed by repeated JNIM offensives against a defensive line established by the Beninese armed forces along the border, which was eventually broken, leading to a drain of state forces from the area.[39]

By late 2022, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) pointed to JNIM having 'become deeply established in the country's northern regions', with 28 instances of political violence organized by the group between 1 November 2021 and 14 September 2022. Within the WAP complex, sightings of JNIM elements point to a concentration in the south-east of Park W, close to the locality of Alafia, between Kandi and Malanville.[40]

JNIM expansion also seems to have reached Togo. In May 2022, the country registered its first ever lethal terrorist attack, later claimed by JNIM, which resulted in the deaths of eight soldiers and 15 attackers, according to the government.[41]

In September 2022, ISSP claimed responsibility for two attacks that took place in July in Benin's Alibori department, including one that killed two soldiers on patrol in Park W, indicating that the group had some presence there.[42] While ISSP is only thought to have a small number of combatants in northern Benin, their presence appears to have sparked an aggressive response from JNIM, whose efforts to drive them out are likely to have contributed to a spike in violence in the Alibori department in the last quarter of 2022.

## Use of the biosphere to hide hostages and as a rear base

Abductions by JNIM combatants are frequent in the Est region of Burkina Faso, and hostages are often brought to their bases in the national park areas to discourage strikes (particularly airstrikes) on these strategic positions. Army officers or members of the Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland – VDP) are often taken to elicit intelligence or to be used in propaganda videos. One such video reportedly circulated on WhatsApp in January 2022, featuring an army officer and a VDP member asking for the state to help negotiate their release.[43] Others who fall under suspicion – such as community leaders or businesspeople who are unsympathetic to JNIM, or NGO workers whose affiliation they have difficulty verifying – are also kidnapped and hidden in the park.

The WAP complex also serves as an important logistical base for resupplying insurgent bases in Burkina Faso. As elsewhere in the Sahel, JNIM seizes large numbers of weapons and equipment from the military during its raids around the parks. But, since heavier vehicles and artillery cannot be used in the park areas themselves due to the terrain, these are reportedly redirected to bases in other contested areas, such as in Mansila or Gayeri. Small arms and light weapons seized from the military are more likely to be held on to, either for use in the Est region, or as an emergency back-up supply for other bases.[44]

There is no evidence at present to suggest the WAP complex is operating as a commercial arms-trafficking route. Analysis of regional seizures suggests that armed groups such as JNIM still obtain the majority of their weapons through raids on the armed forces. While there are major commercial arms-trafficking routes in the Sahel, JNIM and other armed groups do not constitute a major market in themselves. The major black markets for arms that exist nearby, such as in Niger's Tillabery, Tahoua and Diffa regions and along the Nigerian border, are supplied by bulk transfers, so it is unlikely that any small shipments of arms going through the parks could compete in these markets on price.[45] ■

## Entry points for armed groups in the WAP complex

Extremist armed groups were able to leverage the complex history of community tensions and conflicts in and around the WAP complex to help embed themselves in the area.[46] Alongside grievances over the restrictions associated with the park, intercommunal tensions were also severe. These tensions have been reflected in a wave of lethal incidents of political violence in Benin's northernmost department, Alibori, around Park W. Between March 2020 and February 2021, all 15 fatalities registered by ACLED in Alibori were near Park W (after this point, fatalities were concentrated near the Niger border skirting Park W, but also spread southwards).[47]

Much of this violence was linked to conflicts between pastoralists and crop farmers.[48] In 2021, this situation threatened to escalate after a violent clash in Guene, Malanville, on 24 July 2021, which killed five people. This had been the latest in a string of clashes over a transhumance corridor in the area. In response, the Beninese army dispatched units to stabilize the situation, which remained in place throughout 2022 and early 2023.[49] While this has reduced violence, it has not addressed the latent tensions between herders and farmers.

Herder communities have long been in conflicts with sedentary agricultural communities in the areas surrounding the WAP complex in eastern Burkina Faso, Niger and northern Benin over access to land.[50] The region has seen an expansion of agricultural land and a reduction of space available for pastoralism, partly due to Benin's restrictions on transhumance and partly responding to the needs of West Africa's growing population. This has exacerbated intercommunal tensions between (predominantly) Fulani herders and (predominantly) non-Fulani farmers, with clashes becoming increasingly deadly over the past decade.[51]

State governance and regulatory structures have repeatedly failed to mediate these disputes. In a small, predominantly Fulani village called Ila-Kompa, in Benin's Karimama arrondissement, conflicts over land have arisen between Fulani pastoralists and Gourmantché and Dendi farmers. Although both sides repeatedly sought state intervention by going to the court in Kandi and requesting that the *chef d'arrondissement* and police commissioner play a role in mediation, they received no resolution from the state and resorted to conflict.[52] The failure of the state to arbitrate in these conflicts has created space for armed groups to take on the role of regulators.

**Tensions between Fulani herders and agricultural communities over access to land have become increasingly deadly over the past decade.** *© imageBROKER /Alamy Stock Photo*

Great care must be taken when generalizing about pastoralists' affiliations with JNIM or other violent extremist groups, since they are certainly not the only demographic who have joined or collaborated with them. However, the particular precarity of pastoralist lifestyles – the result of land shortages, climate shocks, anti-transhumance policies and conflicts with farmers – has given rise to vulnerabilities and grievances that have been exploited by armed groups. A water and forestry agent in Falmey, Niger, recounted the following:

> Even the transhumants are in complicity with the jihadists [...] who take their *zakat* and let them graze their animals in the park. Our colleague, who was kidnapped from Tapoa by the jihadists six months ago, said that every morning [...] they deliver milk to the jihadists in cans. The jihadists take *zakat*, but they reassure them by guaranteeing them safety so that we agents do not disturb them. Maybe there are pastoralists who are constrained. But I know that others do it of their own free will.[53]

Cattle exchange is a source of revenue for JNIM, but it also feeds into their governance aims. This relationship is expressed in a number of ways, but the most common is cattle being demanded as a *zakat* payment. This is a customary income contribution, ordinarily paid to religious authorities in the area, which JNIM and ISSP have usurped. Although *zakat* is not explicitly given in exchange for services, it is a way of formalizing the armed group's authority over the community. Because herders would be less able to access the park without armed groups' purging of officials and rangers, this can be viewed as a form of service provision. Additionally, a certain amount of the *zakat* collected may be redistributed within the paying communities, further legitimizing the practice.

Still, *zakat* is not always perceived as legitimate by residents, particularly when rates are changed. Armed groups upped the *zakat* for pastoralists in northern Benin in 2021 from the traditional toll of one head of cattle out of 100, to one in 10.[54] More recently, residents in Diapaga, Burkina Faso, have had the majority of their harvest and flocks seized by combatants. A resident said that his brother had found his granary emptied, and farmers from at least five villages had had their sheep and goats seized on the grounds of *zakat*. This is despite the fact that harvests have already suffered due to insecurity and the controls imposed by JNIM on residents' movements.[55] Nevertheless, providing access to resources (i.e. grazing land in the protected areas) that would otherwise be restricted by the state and facilitating other banned activities have been key means by which violent extremist groups have implanted themselves in the region.[56] If pastoralists feel forced to choose between paying *zakat* and cooperating with armed groups, or having their herds die out, the former will understandably win out.

Enhanced counterinsurgency operations have led to a climate of heightened suspicion, often resulting in excessive force being used against Fulani communities by government security forces in the areas around the complex. This has exacerbated a long-standing trend of harsh treatment. In July 2022, a Fulani who was arrested in the park and taken for questioning at the Guéné police station, in the Beninese village of Tolozougou, was shot dead when he tried to escape.[57] Such incidents fuel hostility towards the state and have been shown to contribute to recruitment into armed groups. Corruption among state officials was also identified as a source of grievance by local communities.

In Benin, armed groups have also stoked intercommunal tensions. In Malanville, locals reported that Fulani herders received weapons from extremist groups during a local dispute with Dendi farmers in 2021.[58] The exploitation of ethnic and communal divisions by armed groups has been seen in multiple places across the Sahel.[59]

A further entry point for militants has been through the widespread influence of smugglers and traffickers. As a police unit chief in Malanville said, 'The traffickers [...] not accepting the presence of the state, prefer the disorder of the jihadist', noting that the advantages gained by traffickers from the presence of armed groups is unlikely to wane.[60] Indeed, some observers argued that the symbiotic relationship between armed groups and smugglers was key to the former gaining control of parts of the WAP complex. 'There are a lot of criminals in the zone,' said one Burkinabè NGO access advisor, including 'big' transnational crime networks as well as low-level smugglers:

> The armed groups very rapidly became partisan with these [...] smugglers. Anything that can make the state further disappear from the area is in their interest, so that they can pursue their activities calmly. [Armed groups] worked with these *contrabandiers* to do a sort of 'mapping' of military installations, in order to target them. These actors know the zone, so they could easily help them find all the military installations, and the armed groups then began launching attacks against these targets.[61]

Local dependency on illicit economies has been especially important in winning the armed groups a degree of popular support. A policeman in Gaya, Niger, described the causes of widespread local involvement in smuggling:

> Everyone knows but no one says anything [...] They're going to say that if it's not smuggling what are they going to do, what are they going to eat? What will they live on? There are people who will tell you openly if they are not doing this, they will go and 'cut' the roads [hijack or rob vehicles], they will go and steal.[62]

There are also ideological affinities in some areas connecting communities and extremist armed groups. For instance, the town of Djougou in northern Benin has become known regionally as a centre for extremist Islamic preachers.[63] Armed groups have attempted to preserve broad public support by focusing their violent attacks on individuals and state targets considered a direct threat (such as police stations and military posts), although this has not been without exceptions. One local government official emphasized that this was a central feature of militants' rhetoric: 'Terrorists claim that they do not want to attack the civilian population but rather the state and its agents.'[64]


Djougou in northern Benin is known regionally as a centre for extremist Islamic preachers.
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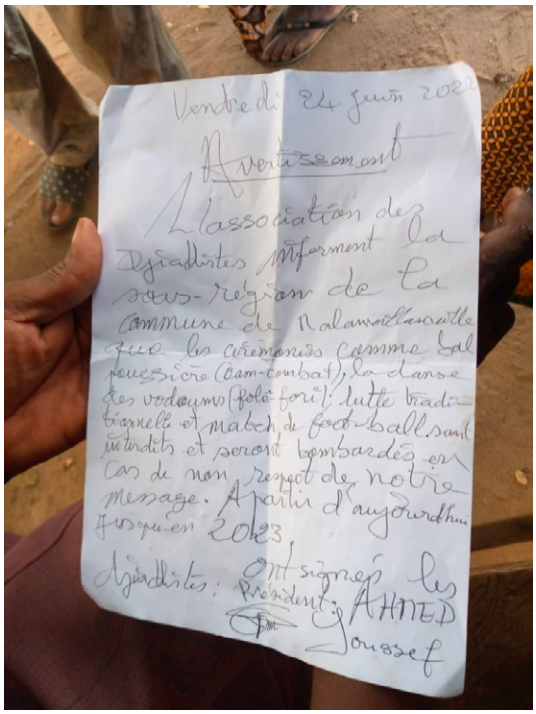


**A note found at a mosque in Sakanwan in the commune of Malanville, Benin, demanding the 'Islamization' of the population.** *Photo: Aziz Mossi*

It is difficult to assess the degree of popular support enjoyed by armed groups in communities in and around the complex. The reality, given a perceived lack of other options, is undoubtedly a mixed picture of approval, fear, accommodation and adaptation. This is borne out in the testimonies collected by field researchers. Interviewees living in villages skirting the complex, who have spoken to combatants during their day-to-day activities in and around the park (grazing, collection of firewood, collection of medicinal plants etc.), emphasized the 'good faith' of the armed groups towards the civilian population.[65] Similarly, many accounts report that armed groups encouraged them to continue their activities peacefully. Likewise, there are reports, particularly from the park areas around Burkina Faso, of community members helping JNIM elements with various errands, such as fetching items from towns where state security has a stronger presence.[66]

Intimidation, however, has clearly played a central role in enforcing compliance in many localities. In the villages of Karimama and Kangara, in Benin's Alibori province, civilian abductions have risen. In Karimama, along with the towns of Malanville and Kandi in the same province, an extremist group distributed threatening notes to mosques in June and July 2022 (see photo). These handwritten letters, affixed to the walls of some mosques, demanded the 'Islamization' of the entire population, including the abandonment of popular practices (such as traditional music, dances and football) as well as the explusion of Christians from the Alibori region. They also ordered the community to provide them with youths and resources. Similar reports from park communities in Burkina Faso cite the severe enforcement of Islamic practices. In one case, in May 2021, two women were killed by militants in Matiacoali, a town in Est region north of the Singou reserve, for refusing to wear the veil.[67] An earlier incident in December 2020 saw a group of 20 women whipped for not wearing headscarves.[68] Such threats have led to widespread fear and compliance.

Nevertheless, the support that armed groups such as JNIM have received from residents in and around the WAP complex has been essential to their implantation in the area. Intelligence gathered from locals about state military positions and their assistance in obtaining items from state-controlled towns have been critical to their successes.

# THE INTERSECTION OF CONFLICT AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN THE WAP COMPLEX

Currently, there are two broad categories of illicit economic activity that armed groups have used to plant themselves in the WAP complex: cross-border smuggling networks and facilitating use of local natural resources that had been prohibited by the state. In both cases, it appears that building a system of governance over the population was more important for armed groups than self-financing. For its funding, JNIM seems to rely mainly on the so-called *zakat* payments it levies on residents, or from other ad hoc contributions in cash or in kind. Indeed, the term *zakat* is widely used by residents to describe payments made to armed groups, and of course, in practice not all of these payments will fall under a formal *zakat* rubric or even be viewed as such by residents. The important point is that armed groups in the WAP complex – particularly JNIM – are prepared to forgo other financing opportunities, such as systematic taxes on smuggled goods or illicitly extracted natural resources, in favour of the broad tax base and stronger relationship with the population that can be built through *zakat* payments.

Enabling access to state-controlled resources has proven to be a central pillar in the strategies of armed groups in West Africa and the Sahel, both for expanding into new territories and for entrenching their control once there. JNIM has followed this approach by garnering influence over the communities around the Park W complex in Burkina Faso, from where the group could expand into the biosphere. This strategy has been fairly effective, as evidenced by the assistance provided by sections of the civilian population.[69] Combatants told the population that if state forces could be pushed out of the park, they would be able to exploit its natural resources more or less as they pleased.[70] Indeed, it was a combination of smugglers and civilians who reportedly helped JNIM to target and expel rangers, park authorities and state representatives from the towns in and around the biosphere.[71] Purging state officials from areas they wish to control is standard practice for JNIM, and it appears that it prioritized officials identified as corrupt by local residents, which rapidly won the group popularity.[72]

## Gatekeepers: Resource extraction from local economies

Despite the cooperative nature of this relationship, JNIM acts as the gatekeeper to these resources, periodically adopting a more regulatory role by charging small sums or demanding a cut of proceeds. Many of the economic activities that armed groups facilitate are considered 'illicit' by governments and external observers, but seen as legitimate by local communities, such as hunting within the biosphere and grazing animals on parkland. Interlocutors in the WAP complex have sometimes referred to these charges as *zakat*, but, in reality, these charges may be more straightforwardly characterized as payments for JNIM providing access to these resources.

It is also worth noting that these 'taxes' have not so far been accompanied by any significant or systematic service provision, such as education or justice. There are occasional reports of judicial proceedings and limited provision of Koranic education, but these are ad hoc. For the moment, highly developed services have not been an essential component of JNIM's offer to residents in these areas. This may be because the most important service the group can provide, from the point of view of many residents, is preventing state agents and park rangers from returning. It was the rules of the state and the park authorities that stopped them exploiting local natural resources or engaging in illicit economies.

Financial contributions are not always demanded by JNIM itself but are sometimes offered by residents in return for protection. An aid worker suggested that many of the exchanges between JNIM and residents take the form of a quid pro quo:

> Maybe a resident will tell the group, 'I am trusting in God, but I am also placing my trust in you. Today, I must take my cows to such and such a place. If you have any advice for me, I would appreciate it, and if you can look after me in this place, I will offer you one bull.' [...] So it is not really a tax. It is more of a service. And the armed groups at the departure point will take the bull and tell the owner, 'Thank you, our cohabitation and collaboration is going very well. When you take that road, you will encounter these groups – we will inform them you are coming and that you are a good person.'[73]

### Access to grazing land within the biosphere

However, there have also been instances of systematic charges for residents to access formerly prohibited resources. Armed extremist groups have found that granting access to the complex for herders to graze their animals, in exchange for a fee, is extremely lucrative. This is, from the perspective of many pastoralists, a vital service, given the difficulty of finding pasture and water. Currently, the rate for entry into the park is believed to be around FCFA2 000 per head of cattle.[74]

Compliance with armed groups' *zakat* and other charges in exchange for security is not necessarily enthusiastic on the part of residents. Even herders, who have been a regular support base for extremist armed groups, report that the *zakat* is sometimes unacceptably high.[75] For pastoralists in northern Benin in 2021, the combatants uprating of the *zakat* – from the traditional one head of cattle out of 100, to one in 10 – was viewed as predatory and excessive.[76] Such exploitative practices have prompted armed opposition elsewhere in the region. In June 2021, ACLED reported increasing dissatisfaction by communities in western Niger with the *zakat* being charged by ISSP in the form of cattle, which they felt was tantamount to theft.[77] Earlier that year, assassinations of village chiefs, imposition of taxes and cattle thefts by the group resulted in deadly clashes between local communities and ISSP combatants and further population displacement.[78]

**JNIM has opened up opportunities for artisanal gold miners in Burkina Faso by chasing out industrial miners with state concessions, including in areas close to the WAP complex.** *© Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters via Alamy Stock Photo*

## Gold

There are a number of artisanal gold-mining sites within the WAP complex (10, according to a conservation NGO working in the biosphere).[79] Although evidence of JNIM's interactions with gold miners and smuggling networks within the complex is patchy, the way this relationship has evolved elsewhere indicates the probable dynamics at work.

JNIM's main appeal to artisanal miners across Burkina Faso lies in the fact that the group has chased out industrial gold miners who had been given state concessions, including in areas close to the WAP complex. This has given artisanal miners freer access to the mines, in exchange for contributions, but has also ended government restrictions that had previously bound artisanal gold miners or panners to sell to specific buyers. For example, in Burkina Faso's Kompienga province, bordering the Pama Reserve at the WAP complex's western edge, an armed group chased out the state concessionaries to whom local artisanal miners were obliged to sell. This has allowed small-scale mining operations to choose buyers for their gold, and potentially increase their profit margins.[80]

Inside the WAP complex itself, the absence of rangers allows artisanal miners to exploit the sites without fear of repercussions from the state. Evidence from elsewhere in Burkina Faso suggests that JNIM is likely to have struck mutually beneficial arrangements with miners over security provision, access charges and on the buying and selling of mined gold on an ad hoc basis.[81]

## Poaching

Poaching is perpetrated throughout the complex to different degrees and by different actors. In Niger, park authorities attribute most poaching to well-organized and armed Nigerian networks, using Nigerien locals from the villages surrounding the park as guides. These guides tend to work in the local transport sector (as pirogue boat operators or motorbike taxi drivers), and so are aware of the

locations of ranger posts and routes into the parks via lesser-known trails and waterways. According to water and forestry agents in Falmey, these teams of poachers and guides still operate in parts of the WAP complex controlled by extremist armed groups, and must be doing so with their permission.[82]

JNIM's presence in the WAP complex certainly appears to have benefited poachers and severely damaged wildlife populations. A survey cited by the International Crisis Group (ICG) found that the elephant population in Park W in 2021 had plummeted to less than half of that recorded in 2015 (from 8 938 to 4 056). The ICG also reported lower bushmeat prices in the surrounding villages, indicating a spike in supply.[83]

However, this should not be taken to mean that JNIM is actively supportive of poaching, and the group's ideological stance on the matter is ambiguous. At times, they have been averse to the practice and appear to be less tolerant of poaching than other illicit activities. Yet they are also aware that communities around the WAP complex claim the right to hunt in the protected areas – and so the group struggles to maintain a distinction between legitimate 'hunting' and illegitimate 'poaching'.

**Still from a video of armed group combatants killing a buffalo, February 2022.**
*Photo: Eleanor Beevor*

Local sources say the group objects to poaching and excessive hunting on religious grounds, and has sought to eliminate the activity from the park. On a similar basis, the group has also discouraged the felling of trees for timber smuggling and local charcoal production.[84] In Pendjari Park, JNIM reportedly mediated a dispute over control of a particular route between fuel smugglers and timber smugglers, and sided with the former.[85]

Informants confirmed that JNIM members do not engage in commercial poaching themselves, but the group is known to hunt some animals. An unusual video circulated on WhatsApp in February 2022 showing fighters killing a buffalo in the complex.[86] The purpose of the video is uncertain, however, and the consensus among interlocutors is that JNIM members hunt primarily for subsistence and tend to focus on small game such as rabbits and birds.

In general, observers said, JNIM prefers to discourage 'excessive' poaching through outreach to locals rather than through confrontation, to keep their promise to open up the park's natural resources.[87] However, one ranger believed that poachers were afraid of JNIM, and that the group was prepared to kill poachers if they came across them. Indeed, in one incident reported by ACLED, a person was abducted in Tapoa in December 2020 for having tried to poach animals without the permission of JNIM.[88] There is some precedent for this approach in Mali. JNIM members there have pushed out poachers and encouraged forest communities to minimize damage to flora and fauna, although the group still permits cattle grazing in the protected areas.[89]

The group's stance against poaching is inconsistent. In some communities living along the edges of national parks in the tri-border region of Liptako–Gourma, armed groups have occasionally protected poachers in exchange for *zakat*.[90] While there is no direct evidence of this kind of arrangement in the WAP complex, there are hints that links may be forming between armed groups and poachers. Park rangers in Burkina Faso's portion of the complex claimed to have spotted combatants and poachers walking together in the woods.[91] JNIM also reportedly collaborated in 2020 with groups that had been denied hunting permits in Arly Park. This suggests that, despite reservations, they are not opposed to facilitating the practice.[92]

## Links with smuggling and trafficking networks

The WAP biosphere is important both for major transnational smuggling networks and smaller enterprises that are less well-resourced. In the case of the latter, which cannot afford the risk of being caught with contraband on major roads, the cover provided by the parks is essential. The goods being smuggled through these routes are diverse, including the standard stock in fuel, cigarettes and medical products (both counterfeit and substandard items). However, there is also a large market for motorcycles, spare parts and other more mundane goods, such as clothing and household items, which are cheaper to buy in coastal states.

Smuggling networks are, as described by multiple observers, an important resource for armed groups, especially when they were establishing themselves in the biosphere.[93] Traffickers are highly useful to militants since they are already familiar with the topography of the parks, and the routes by which motorbikes can negotiate otherwise impassable areas. They are also well-informed on the movements of the security forces, customs agents and rangers. According to informants, this intelligence is used by armed groups, particularly JNIM, to target their positions.

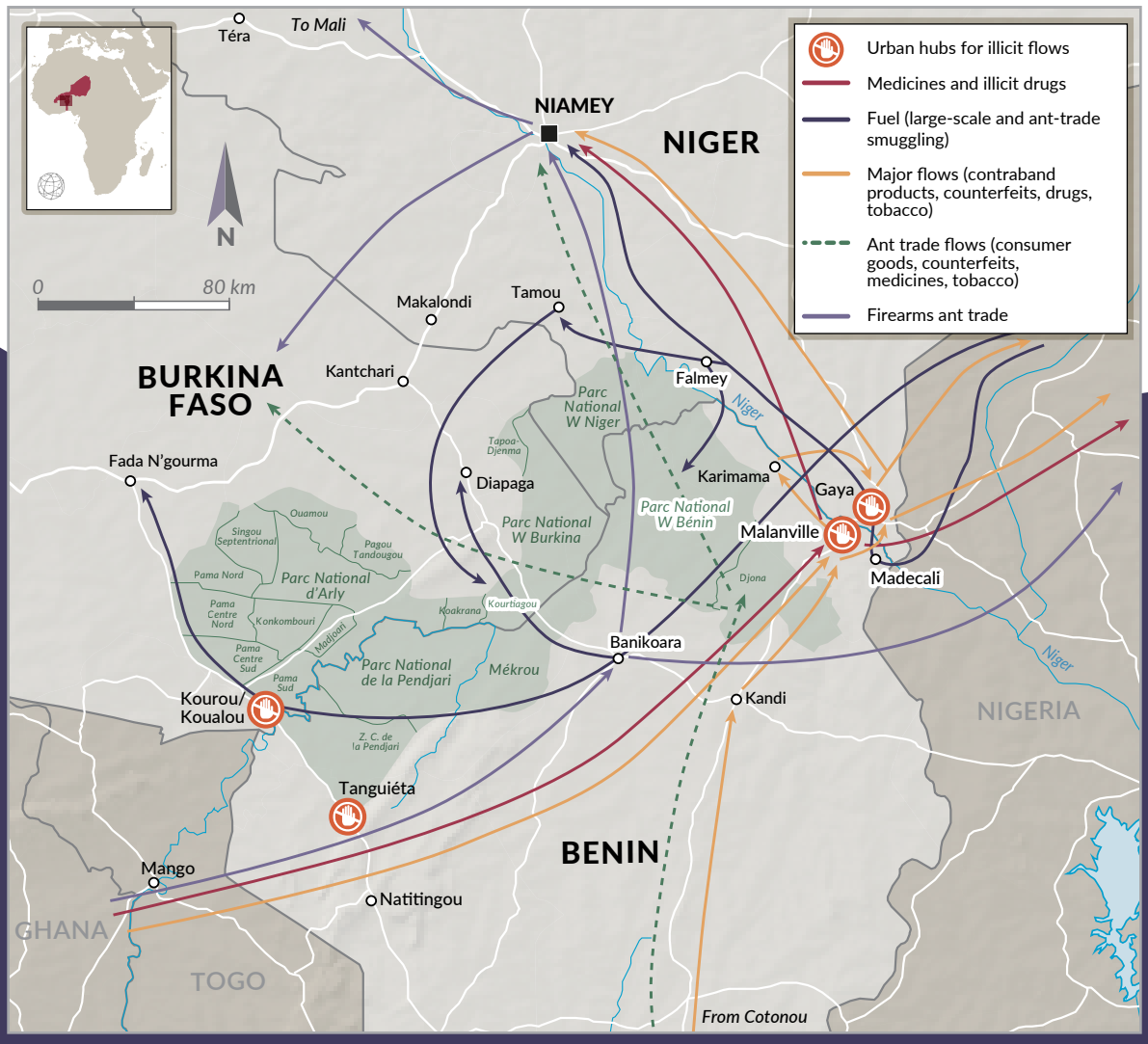


**FIGURE 2** The W-Arly-Pendjari complex and routes of main transnational illicit flows.

Given that there is little or no data on the volume of smuggled goods in this area, especially since the onset of conflict, and without a countervailing formal sector to compare it with, it is not possible to prove there has been a notable increase in smuggling. However, like poachers, smugglers in the area have clearly benefited from the expulsion of state forces.

While there will be a spectrum of relationships between smugglers and combatants, at least some smugglers seem to be actively assisting armed groups, rather than simply benefiting from the absence of state authority. As one water and forestry agent in Falmey, Niger, described, traffickers have been known to assist insurgents with covert transportation:

> Here, you see motorcycles passing by at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Where are they going? In fact, they are transporting these jihadist elements. It is the local transporters who take them out. Because the combatants know that they can't get through on their motorcycles if we are here.[94]

The Niger River is a major conduit for smuggling flows, including fuel, drugs and motorbikes entering Benin from Nigeria. 'Go on a motorcycle by the river and pretend to be passing through,' said one gendarme in the Nigerien town of Gaya, close to Park W at the Benin border. 'You will see how the

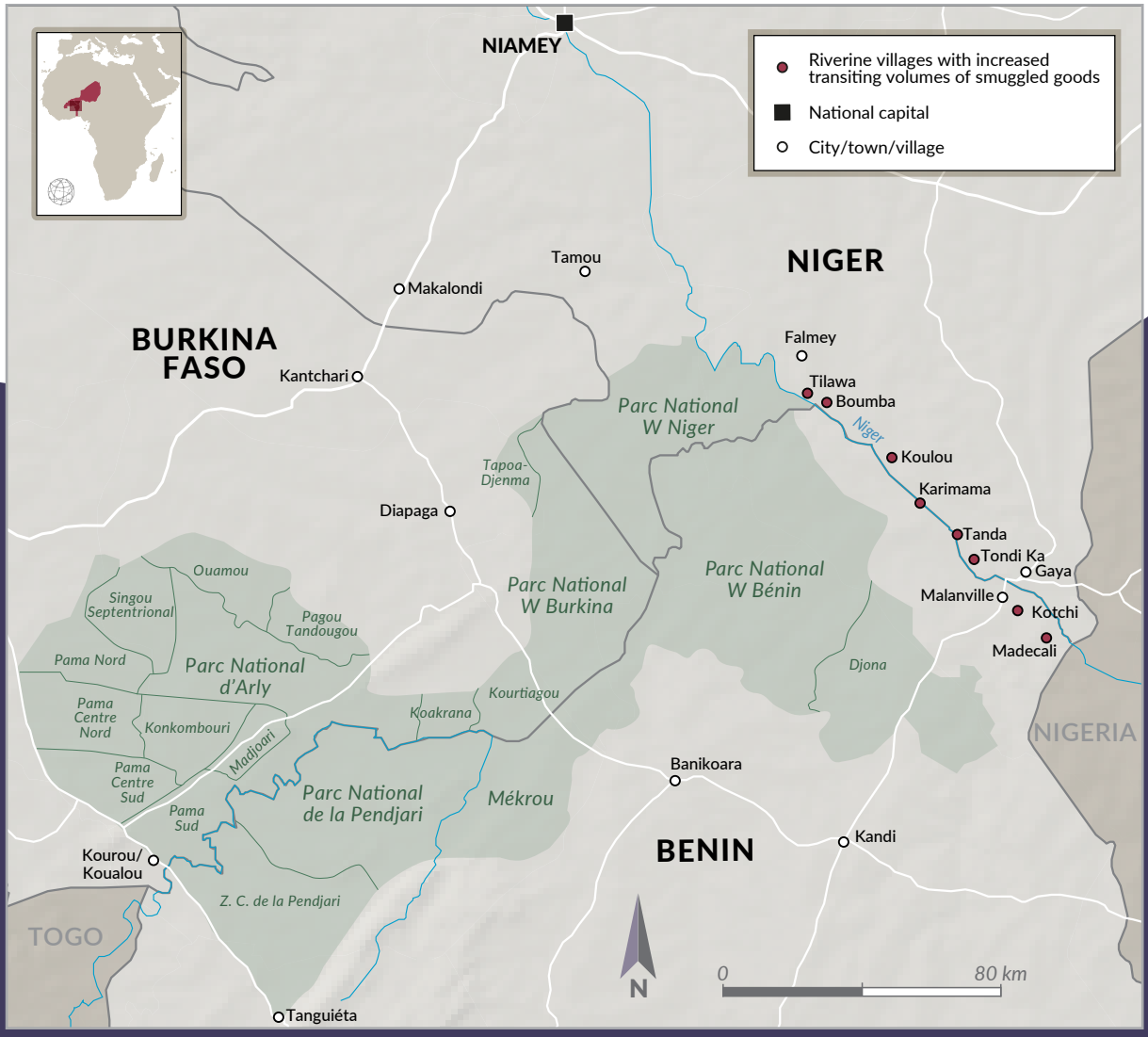


**FIGURE 3** Riverine villages reportedly with increased volumes of transiting smuggled goods.

drugs cross the water and on the other side there are others waiting to cross into Niger every day.'[95] Observers interviewed in Gaya and in Malanville, Benin, reported that a series of new piers and landing stages were being built in villages on either side of the Niger River, near the edges of Park W, apparently in anticipation of high volumes of goods being smuggled from Nigeria, Benin and Ghana.[96]

Another key smuggling entry point into the complex, particularly for motorbikes and vehicle parts, is the town of Tamou, which lies in Niger and within a protected area just north of Park W on the border with Burkina Faso. Traffic to and from Tamou has to pass through this area of parkland, whether coming from the Nigerien or Burkinabé side. According to data shared by the police in Tillabéri, JNIM combatants based in Boutou, a two-hour drive from Park W, obtain motorbikes directly from the networks in Tamou.[97]

Extremist groups also use smuggling flows to purchase goods needed by fighters, such as arms, fuel, clothes, food and medicine.[98] This demand has increased the profitability of many contraband goods, especially fuel.

## Fuel smuggling

Fuel smuggling is widespread in the WAP complex and surrounding areas, and people at all levels of society are implicated in it.

Large-scale criminal networks are known to be involved, alongside numerous smaller traders. The illicit fuel trade supplies a significant proportion of the demand from communities in the area. People living around Park W in Benin and Niger have few options for obtaining fuel in the formal (taxed) economy, and those suppliers that exist are expensive and often face shortages. As of August 2022, the price per litre of gasoline was FCFA540 at a petrol station in Niger, and FCFA600 in Benin, far above the FCFA300–FCFA400 charged in the informal trade. In this climate, even some local government agencies in charge of combating fuel smuggling mainly supply themselves with contraband from the informal market. One customs officer interviewed in the village of Falmey, close to Park W in Niger, said he is tasked with tackling contraband fuel, but has no option but to use the same illicit fuel because the closest petrol station is 85 kilometres from the village.[99]

While the exact trafficking routes vary, generally fuel from Nigeria passes through northern Benin or Togo into Burkina Faso via the WAP complex, either by motorbike on unmarked trails, or using larger vehicles on the main roads. The disputed Kourou/Koualou area on the Benin–Burkina Faso border has long operated as a stockage and redistribution point (although its importance appears to have diminished since late 2021), and lies on a major fuel trafficking corridor with Nigeria, where fuel can be purchased far cheaper than in neighbouring countries.

Investigations into one significant fuel smuggling syndicate, whose members were arrested in Burkina Faso in 2021, revealed what is thought to be a common modus operandi. The syndicate moved fuel from Nigeria into Benin, after which the fuel was stockpiled in Koualou village, a contested territory just on the outskirts of the Pama Reserve. From there, it was loaded onto trucks, which were diverted to various regional towns in Burkina Faso, principally Fada N'gourma. It is likely that the fuel passed through the Pendjari National Park in Benin, and then into the Burkinabé side of the WAP complex, along the main road running between the hunting concessions and Pama Reserve.[100]

The fuel trade is a major source of livelihood for the local community. Numerous stalls selling fuel can be seen dotted along the side of the road – most of which is obtained via the illicit market through

**The border crossing at Malanville-Gaya.** *Photo: Wikipedia*

so-called *transporteurs*, who carry small quantities of fuel through the park on motorbikes. The advantageous price of smuggled fuel, coupled with the fact that residents are heavily reliant on motorbikes for transport, makes for a reliable local market.

Fuel smuggling is one sector that all informants were confident that extremist armed groups are closely involved with, certainly as consumers, given their need to ensure a reliable supply for their motorbikes and other vehicles. The insertion of JNIM into the fuel supply chain has reportedly increased prices on the grey market, and made the fuel trafficking economy as a whole more lucrative. Armed groups reportedly pay higher than market price for fuel, and in some cases also pay transportation fees to smugglers.[101] According to some close observers, the increased profitability of the fuel market can be seen in the greater sophistication of some smuggling outfits, with fuel increasingly being sold from shops rather than at the roadside.[102]

JNIM has been known to access fuel in a variety of ways – from cultivating good relationships with low-level smugglers to hijacking petrol tankers. Some of these hijackings have been met with suspicion by some commentators, who believe that the incidents are in fact orchestrated deliveries to armed groups. For instance, 14 trucks of fuel were hijacked by armed men on the Matiacoali–Kantchari road in June 2022, north of the WAP complex. The fact that a large fuel convoy was travelling unescorted on this notoriously insecure road, which is largely controlled by JNIM, was met with scepticism by media outlets and security analysts.[103] It is likely that at least some of this fuel was taken into the park for redistribution to other bases. The drivers of the trucks were told to drive into the bush to an unknown point before making their way back to the road.[104] More broadly, the park's fuel smuggling routes allow smaller units of armed groups to be self-sufficient in terms of fuel supply.

## Taxation of smugglers – or lack thereof

Despite the importance of the WAP complex and surrounding roads to the region's illicit economies, and despite JNIM's (and to a lesser extent ISSP's) control of much of the complex, there is a notable lack of evidence for any systematic taxation on smuggled goods. No instances of formalized taxation

on smuggled or illicit goods were identified in the course of this research, apart from one relatively short-lived case, and at present, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

In late 2021, a number of JNIM checkpoints were reported along major roads in the Est region of Burkina Faso, particularly the Pama–Nadiagou–Koualou road, which runs along the western edge of the Pama Reserve (one of the protected areas within the WAP complex). On 18 November 2021, media sources reported that a JNIM cell had taken control of Nadiagou,[105] a Burkinabé town, which, until early November, had functioned as a government customs post when it was abandoned due to security threats.[106] Nadiagou lies at a junction of arterial roads connecting Kourou/Koualou and the N18 to towns further in the Burkinabé interior. JNIM controls and checks also reportedly took place in Kourou/Koualou itself.

These checkpoints appeared to have two objectives. The first was to survey those using the road, and ID checks were reportedly conducted by JNIM on people passing through Kourou/Koualou. The second appeared to be collecting taxes from fuel smugglers passing through the towns or along the roads, although the precise charges are unknown.

However, in December 2021, the Beninese armed forces reinforced their presence on the road leading to Kourou/Koualou and closed the border crossing. The amount of traffic on the road has substantially reduced, and a large proportion of the traffic that formerly passed through the Kourou/Koualou border crossing with Benin appears to have been rerouted through the Togolose border town of Cinkanssé. JNIM's short-lived efforts at taxing smugglers appear to have been one reason for this, although another factor may have been greater surveillance of the road to Kourou on the Beninese side.[107] Checkpoints along this route are now much sparser.[108]

Multiple sources confirmed that *zakat* taxes, extracted from both the general population and on pastoralists' herds, continue to be the primary means of revenue collection for armed groups in and around the WAP complex. Where checkpoints do exist, they appear to be primarily geared towards controlling the movements of residents (and non-residents alike), and there are no reports so far of payments being extracted on a systematic basis, either from citizens or smugglers.

This is less surprising when it is remembered that limiting the movements of people is a key tactic of JNIM, at least in the Est region of Burkina Faso. Blockades of the province's towns, such as Madjoari or Gayeri, have been frequent and enduring, particularly since the creation of a popular militia in 2020, the VDP. The idea behind JNIM's blockades is to prevent any interaction or collaboration between residents and the state, and to limit any external influences that may undermine its authority. This is tantamount to a prohibition on all movement along roads in the affected areas, which, along with the presence of state forces, appears to be affecting smugglers' routes – even if JNIM is not opposed to their activity. This may have contributed to the diversion of much of the smuggling that used to pass through Kourou/Koualou to the Togolese border.[109]

By discouraging all movement along these main roads, JNIM is limiting its opportunities to establish the more formal taxation systems for smuggled goods it has developed in areas such as northern Mali.

## Responses

There have been several multilateral mechanisms for security cooperation in the Sahel in recent years. Among these, the most relevant to the WAP complex is the Accra Initiative, which was launched in 2017 to facilitate intelligence sharing, security sector training and joint military operations between

Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo.[110] It conducted three joint military operations, codenamed Koudanlgou I, II and III, between May 2018 and November 2019.[111]

The approach from each country to the threat stemming from their natural reserves varies. The Burkinabé government has focused more closely on the WAP biosphere's importance to armed groups since 2022. In June, the country's Higher National Defence Council desginated 'two special zones of military interest'. One covers much of the northern province of Soum, while the other extends over the vast majority of the Burkinabé part of the WAP complex. This zone covers 37 758 square kilometres.[112] Information from the affected regions is sparse, but these latest military operations, like so many before them, face in JNIM a nimble armed group whose combatants can exploit the WAP complex to evade aerial detection by dispersing and moving in small units.

Rangers who have remained in the area are being repeatedly targeted in attacks. At present, these are mostly those working for African Parks in Pendjari and Park W. In February 2022, nine people were killed by improvised explosive devices in Park W, including eight forest rangers and employees of African Parks and one member of the Beninese armed forces.[113] The incident reflects the close collaboration between the NGO, which is primarily focused on conservation, and the Beninese military. Reuters reported that in June 2020 an African Parks base dispatched anti-poaching units to pursue suspected Islamist militants armed with AK-47s and riding motorcycles in Park W. The NGO also reportedly launched a plane and a helicopter and coordinated with the Beninese army and police to aid them in positioning their forces. A senior representative of the park told *Jeune Afrique*, a news website, that 'there is a lot of communication between us and the Beninese armed forces', but added that his rangers and anti-poaching units 'withdraw immediately and let the military intervene' if the threat is identified as being from armed groups.[114] 'Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a poacher and a jihadist,' he noted.[115]

Regional and national initiatives are focused on coordinated military operations. However, this research did not identify a coordinated approach to addressing the issues of local governance, informal economic activities in and around the parks or the socio-economic and even infrastructural challenges that exacerbate poverty and engender a reliance on illicit economies. Rural marginalization from key state services has also come back to haunt governments in the region. Military transport vehicles, for instance, have trouble circulating on poorly maintained roads that are best suited to the motorcycles that are so ubiquitous in the region – a fact that has not evaded the armed groups.

Responses to illicit economies in the area have increasingly been shaped by their perceived links to armed groups. Park rangers have commented that, although poaching has long been recognized in the park, never has it been such a priority.[116] Similarly, greater impetus has been put into quashing the fuel smuggling trade due to its role in supplying armed groups. The Nigerien government in particular has stepped up its rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of stopping the illegal fuel trade and the smuggling of motorbikes. In Benin, while there have been sporadic crackdowns on fuel smuggling – such as the seizure of over 10 000 litres of fuel in September 2021 in the Kourou/Koualou area[117] – these have not been sustained, and instead the government has decided to tax illicit fuel imports, while concentrating its enforcement efforts on fuel leaving the state.[118] Smuggling routes have adapted to this asymmetry in regional enforcement, and now increasingly cut across Benin rather than Niger.[119]

Crackdowns on the fuel economy are widely perceived as unfair, not only by locals but also by state representatives posted in the area who highlighted the lack of alternatives to the grey market and the negative impact on communities.[120] These approaches – premised on cutting off the supply chains of armed groups – have been repeatedly unsuccessful in the Sahel, while having significant implications

for local communities and their relationship with the state. Although there have been attempts to address the fuel smuggling economy by alternative means – such as by integrating smugglers into the formal sector, as proposed by the Benin government in 2013 – these have not received sustained support and funding, so their impact has been minimal.

There are also a number of so-called soft or non-military initiatives being attempted in the region, although these are limited inside the WAP complex due to lack of access and insecurity. Community cohesion initiatives have been launched by park authorities in Togo, and African Parks has started various outreach initiatives in an effort to prevent residents cooperating with armed groups. However, more repressive means have also been deployed, including strict limitations on reporting and other forms of information suppression, which have been highlighted by civil society groups in Niger and Benin.[121]

There is no question that non-military efforts will need to be part of the response to armed group dominance of the WAP complex. However, these will have to contend with major challenges. Firstly, attempts at involving communities in conservation efforts must deliver immediate, transformational benefits, or at the very least should offset the economic sacrifices that communities are being asked to make by conservationists. Anything short of this will fail on its own terms and will struggle to compete with the more lucrative offers made by the armed groups.

Secondly, instituting and monitoring these efforts in such an insecure context will be extremely challenging, even in areas of the complex that are not yet under armed group control. This is not to say that it should not be attempted, but rather that the security of residents involved in any such scheme must be ensured.

# CONCLUSION

The WAP complex has seen a rapid rise in the presence and activity of armed extremist groups. Increasing interactions have been reported between these groups and local communities, as well as networks of smugglers and traffickers. The WAP complex offers clear military advantages for armed groups, due to the vegetative cover provided by the savannah and forests and their distance from security forces' main bases.

Combatants' armed capabilities and their commitment to expelling government forces has led to a proliferation of previously banned activities (such as poaching, smuggling, mining and cattle grazing) in the WAP complex and surrounding corridors because of the reduction in regular surveillance by state and civilian agencies. Because of the importance of these activities for local livelihoods in a region where formal employment opportunities are extremely limited, armed groups have been able to gain significant support from populations around the WAP biosphere. Nevertheless, their violent behaviour, restrictions on movement and freedoms, and sometimes predatory approach to revenue collection provide an opportunity for the state to make a better offer.

Analysis of the intersection of armed groups and illicit economies in the region has overwhelmingly focused on the financial or resourcing benefits reaped by armed groups from illicit economies, rather than on the central role these play in governance strategies. These prevailing narratives tend to prioritize shutting down illicit supply chains and financing streams. This can play into the hands of armed groups, who are able to position themselves as gatekeepers to vital resources, and alternative governance providers. This research has underscored how armed groups – most prominently JNIM – have, to a large extent, leveraged informal and illicit economies in and around the WAP complex as a means to strengthen their influence and legitimacy as they expand into new territories. Regional and international stakeholders must take this into account in crafting responses to illicit economies in areas with an armed group presence.

## Recommendations

- **Focus regional coordination mechanisms on addressing the specific challenges presented by the national parks**.

  The region has seen a multiplicity of regional security initiatives, with different permutations of member countries, and it is not clear that another one is needed. A more focused cooperation mechanism targeting the WAP complex could serve an important role in intelligence sharing and security coordination, and even help address border crossings by armed groups. None of the current regional security initiatives include all three countries that share the WAP complex – Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. The Multinational Joint Task Force comprises Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and

Benin, with the latter contributing no troops. The Accra Initiative includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. As an extremely porous and sparsely populated border area, the WAP complex would benefit from heightened intelligence cooperation, monitoring and policy coordination between Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. Whereas this type of cooperation can arguably be achieved via existing bilateral relations among the three countries, there is no sign that any comprehensive coordination regarding security in the WAP complex is in the works.

- **Engage with communities to address socio-economic needs**.
  The multiple security operations and cooperation mechanisms to address the instability spreading south of Mali have been characterized by a heavy military response. This is unsurprising given the terrorist tactics used by armed groups such as JNIM and ISSP. However, much less attention has been paid to addressing the obvious gap in public services provision. The lack of legal access to vital goods among the people living near the park (fuel, motorcycle parts, agricultural equipment, etc.) stokes the demand for smuggling and illegal activity. Bringing basic public services, such as water and power supplies, closer to the people around the WAP complex would help to reassert the state as a service provider, undermining the governance of armed groups and creating legal economic opportunities for residents.

- **Work with communities in the region requires dialogue and flexibility towards informal economies**.
  There is a powerful sense of frustration among communities around the WAP complex over government restrictions on activities such as fishing, cattle grazing and gold mining in protected areas. It is clear that residents have few economic alternatives. Efforts to ban these activities further delegitimize the state in the eyes of locals, and fosters support for armed groups who help them evade the restrictions. Therefore, state authorities, rangers and conservation or stabilization efforts must engage with communities constructively and flexibly to ensure their needs are met. Fuel smuggling is a prime example. Given the shortage of legal fuel supplies for residents around the WAP complex, and these residents' limited purchasing power, any effort to force out smuggling could simply foster resentment, particularly if it is not offset by fuel subsidies or legal means of accessing fuel.

- **Harmonize conservation goals with residents' socio-economic needs.**
  Residents around the WAP complex often support conservation in principle. They are willing to adapt to restrictions as long as the benefit they receive from the parks is proportionate to the income lost from farming and grazing on protected land. Even during periods with regular tourism, community revenues have been limited and residents have not benefited equally. Herder communities have felt particularly excluded from the benefits of the park, and have found their former grazing lands shrinking in the face of expanding farmland and climate shocks. This has led to illegal cattle grazing inside protected areas. If state control over the WAP complex can be re-established, it is essential to consider how herders' rights can be better accommodated and ensure sustainable grazing in the buffer zones around the biosphere. Benefits to local communities from national parks must be consistent and evenly spread in order to maintain support. This is difficult when benefits are dependent on tourism, which is unlikely to resume in the foreseeable future. Donors contributing to conservation in the WAP complex must be open to innovative schemes that ensure a more consistent income for residents around the biosphere. National parks are extremely expensive to run. Nevertheless, there is little prospect of preserving the area's biodiversity without local support, and this should be factored into donor planning and budgets.

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