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Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin

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Summary

As the infiltration of communities in northern Benin by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) has intensified since 2021, the number of kidnapping incidents has surged. This research identifies four main types of kidnapping by VEOs – forced recruitment, intelligence gathering, punishment and intimidation – all of which are closely linked to conflict dynamics and group expansion. Kidnapping is used as a strategic tool for infiltration into new territories.

Key findings

- **An effective protection programme for defectors, key targets for abductions, should be developed.** This would preserve an important source of intelligence while also incentivising further defections.
- **Explore amnesty programmes for individuals who have joined the ranks of the VEOs.** Dialogue should be made an important feature in counterterrorism strategy.
- **Reinforce local infrastructure to bolster community resilience towards kidnapping and other forms of violence.** This should include telephone network coverage and road infrastructure, among others.
- **Kidnapping incidents should be incorporated into ECOWAS and national early warning mechanisms.** The pervasiveness of kidnapping can be used as a barometer of VEO entrenchment in a given area.
- **Rebuilding international cooperation structures with neighbouring countries is crucial.** The Benin government should immediately seek a resolution to current diplomatic stand-offs.

Introduction

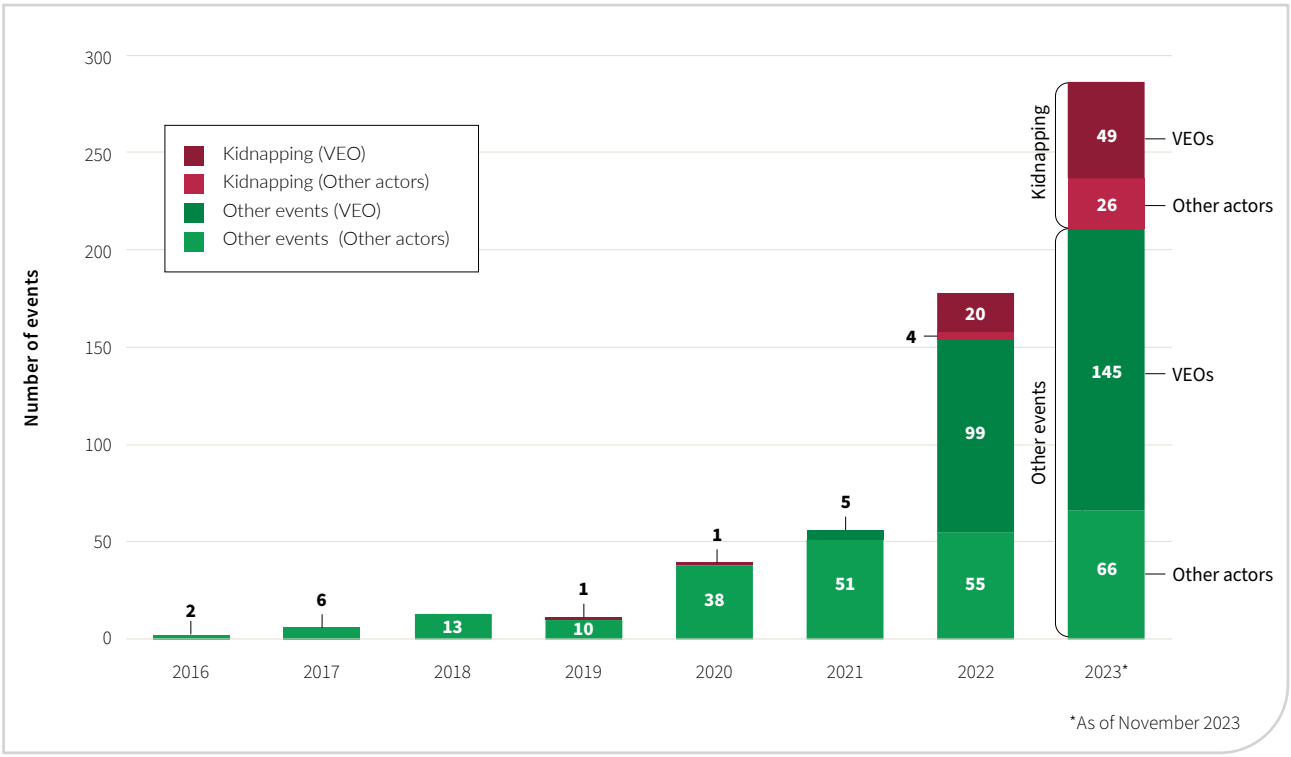
Kidnappings in northern Benin[1] surged in 2022 as violent extremist organisations (VEOs) intensified their southwards spread from the Sahel. By the end of November 2023, northern Benin had experienced at least 101 kidnapping (or attempted kidnapping) incidents since 2019, with the figure for 2023 alone (75) more than three times higher than that of the previous year.[2] In 2022, 24 incidents were recorded, more than the total number of incidents recorded across the country between 2016 and 2021.[3]

In northern Benin, before 2022 there were only two recorded incidents of kidnapping (as a form of political violence, as opposed to for ransom and purely as a criminal act). The kidnapping of two French nationals (and the murder of a park guide) in 2019 marked a turning point in the evolution of violent extremism in the country, as the first attack by a VEO on Beninese territory.[4]

In 2023, with VEOs having expanded from the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and cemented their presence in Benin's Atacora and Alibori departments, recorded kidnapping incidents escalated dramatically again. This rise in kidnapping mirrors a sharp increase in violence more broadly in northern Benin (see Chart 1), with an increasing proportion attributed to suspected VEOs. Violence has also increasingly targeted civilians: civilian fatalities at the hands of suspected VEOs increased more than threefold between 2022 and 2023.

The main armed group present in these two most northern regions of Benin, and thus the focus of this study, is Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). The presence of Islamic State Sahel (IS Sahel) has been reported at the border with Niger, in Malanville and Karimama communes, and while an ongoing presence is still likely, its reach is far more limited compared to JNIM.

Chart 1: Northern Benin's spike in kidnapping occurred against a backdrop of increased political violence.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Note: Includes political violence, as well as strategic developments such as looting, property destruction, movement of forces and other events. While there is overwhelming evidence demonstrating the escalation in violence over the past two years, the considerable increase shown by data is influenced in part by the increased levels of reporting in the country.

Since 2021, and more extensively from 2022, JNIM has been infiltrating new communities in northern Benin by building alliances (often by force) and intimidating key personalities. Kidnapping is an important tool used by JNIM to achieve this, replicating tactics found across the Sahel. In these preliminary phases of penetration, they need to gather information and establish themselves as the new legitimate actor, while facing a significant amount of opposition.

A spike in kidnappings has repeatedly operated as an indicator of early-stage infiltration by JNIM into new, unfamiliar territories, in which they have not yet consolidated their presence and influence. While violent attacks are the most visible form of VEO activity, tracking and examining trends in kidnapping can provide a complementary data set for analysing the evolution of extremist armed group influence.

Kidnappings accompanying expansion is a consistent element of the JNIM playbook. This echoes past research from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in the region, which has identified kidnappings as an accelerant criminal economy, meaning that it has a self-reinforcing relationship with instability and plays a prominent role in driving conflict throughout West Africa.[5]

JNIM and IS Sahel are not the only actors in the kidnapping business, and there is a distinct type of abduction, perpetrated by bandits or otherwise unidentified armed groups, that primarily targets wealthy individuals. Crucially, these almost always result in a ransom request, which is not the case with kidnappings by VEOs. These profit-motivated kidnappings have a longer history in Benin, and have been traced, in small numbers, back to 2016 at least, but largely occur further south in the Borgou and Collines departments (although some cases have been reported in Alibori, again, mostly on or near the Nigerian border). While this (primarily criminal) species of kidnapping continues across the country to this day, VEOs are now by far the most common actors behind kidnappings in northern Benin.

With some notable exceptions, VEOs do not tend to engage in kidnap for ransom of locals. Broadly speaking, financial considerations are not driving the spike in kidnappings that Benin has experienced since 2021. Instead, this research identifies four main types of kidnapping used by VEOs – forced recruitment, intelligence gathering, as punishment and to intimidate – all of which are closely linked to conflict dynamics and territorial expansion. Far from being an example of random violence, kidnapping is used by VEOs in large part to further their goals of displacing the state from an area, with the long-term aim of building legitimacy among local communities. And yet across northern Benin, kidnapping (together with cattle rustling) is among the illicit economies with the most destabilizing effect on communities.[6]

This report will first set out the backdrop for this surge in kidnapping, namely the spread of VEO operations from the Sahel region southward into several of the coastal states on the Gulf of Guinea. It will then look at each type separately and, drawing on analysis of similar trajectories elsewhere in the region, highlight the ways in which kidnapping is being used as a strategic tool by VEOs in their expansion into northern Benin. A brief exploration of the phenomenon of kidnap for ransom is presented thereafter. The report concludes by setting out recommendations for national and regional policymakers.

Methodology

The report draws on primary and secondary data collected between May and October 2023.

Primary data included around 30 interviews held in the towns of Matéri and Tanguiéta, Atacora department, and in Ségbana and Karimama, in Alibori. Additional data was collected during a two-day resilience dialogue organised in the capital of Atacora, Natitingou, in October 2023, during which communities from Matéri and Tanguiéta highlighted the importance of kidnappings as a destabilising force. Since mid-2021, these two areas have been the most affected by VEO expansion and, since 2022, by kidnappings. A further dozen interviews were conducted remotely in the wider region and in Europe to gain a broader understanding of the kidnapping industry in Benin. Stakeholders included local authorities such as mayors and community

representatives as well as law enforcement. Stakeholders also included local residents and leaders of the herder and farmer communities, as well as victims of kidnappings or their families. Finally, journalists, local and international researchers, and NGOs working with affected communities in the area were also interviewed.

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. The quantitative data used throughout this report derives from a consolidated database prepared by the authors, covering the period from 2016 until 30 November 2023. The data set comprises primarily data provided by the Clingendael Consortium and from the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data project (ACLED), and is supplemented by incidents reported during the qualitative research, as outlined above.[7]

This report builds on other research streams that the GI-TOC has been conducting in West Africa, in particular on national parks, on the engagement of armed groups in illicit economies in new territories (in the early phases of expansion) and on accelerant markets, among which is kidnapping. Northern Benin is of particular interest because it lies at the intersection of all of these dynamics.

Limitations of kidnapping data

As noted, the quantitative incident database on which this report draws is primarily based on incidents collected by ACLED. According to ACLED, the data tag 'abduction/forced disappearance' is used 'when an actor engages in the abduction or forced disappearance of civilians, without reports of further violence'.[8]

Consequently, it is important to highlight the limitations of this data set for the subsequent analysis, particularly on the dynamics of the for-profit kidnapping market. Crucially, the incidents recorded are likely to represent a material undercount of those occurring in the area, since ACLED only captures political violence and protest and does not include events of a purely criminal nature. So while the evolution of kidnappings carried out by VEOs and other political or identity militias can be analysed using ACLED data, it poses an obstacle for assessing the evolution of kidnappings carried out by criminal groups or those with purely financial motivations for the abduction of an individual or group.[9] Finally, there are inherent difficulties in attributing incidents to specific VEOs with high levels of confidence, and so it is possible – even likely – that using ACLED data to track and analyse VEO kidnapping will yield an undercount.[10]

Violent extremism: expansion in northern Benin

The current security crisis in the Sahel has its roots in the 2012 Tuareg uprising in northern Mali but has since developed into a quagmire of competing interests, involving a plethora of armed actors, and has spread across half a dozen countries in West Africa. While there have been various ethno-political elements at play over the past decade, violent extremist groups now lie at the heart of the conflict. Since 2012, the extremist insurgency has spread across large swathes of Burkina Faso, while neighbouring Niger has been battling insecurity at its Sahelian borders as well as those with Nigeria and Chad.

The insurgency that has spread across the Sahel should be considered as both a religious campaign and a social movement, with many socio-economic factors driving the proliferation of non-state armed actors in the region – from state weakness to corruption and crackdowns on political opposition.[11] Currently, violent extremist groups, most prominently JNIM and IS Sahel, pose a significant threat to the territorial integrity and security of several coastal states in West Africa.

Threat of violent extremism in the north of West African littoral states

Conflict fatalities in Burkina Faso have risen year on year, surging particularly after the two military coups in 2023.[12] The country is now the epicentre of the Sahel security crisis, with a record proportion of Burkinabè territory controlled by non-state actors, millions displaced, thousands of schools shut down and dozens of

towns under siege from violent extremist groups.[13] As VEOs in Burkina Faso extended their presence further and further south, JNIM and IS Sahel have been able to use the country as a springboard for expansion into the littoral states.[14]

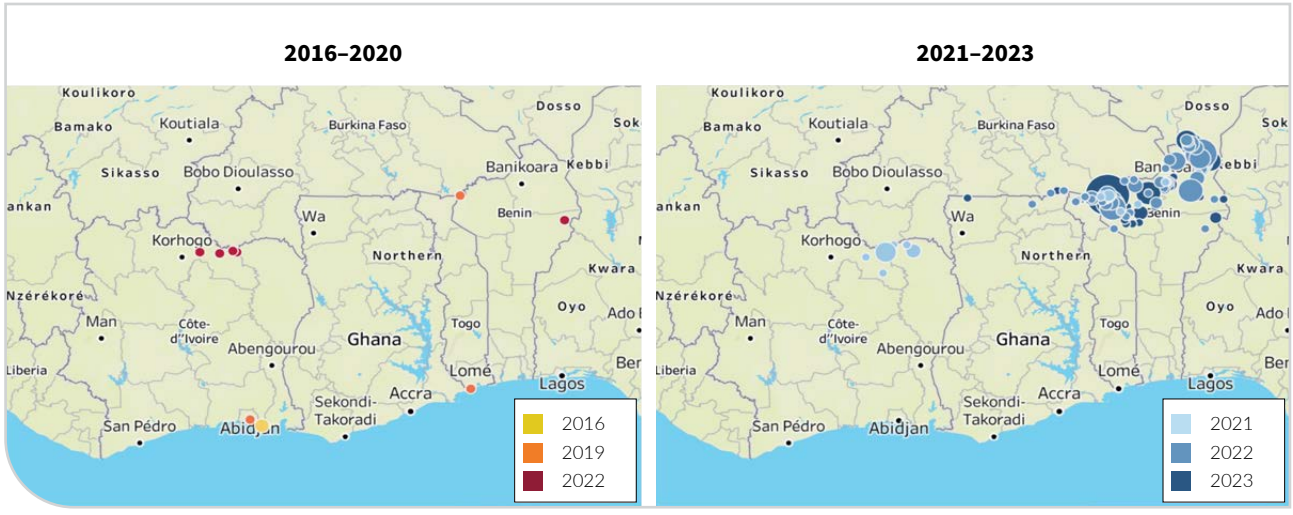
In 2016, Côte d'Ivoire was the first of these coastal nations to experience an attack on its territory by armed extremists, when gunmen from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) killed at least 19 people in March of that year at a beach resort in Grand-Bassam, near to the country's commercial capital, Abidjan.[15] However, 2021 marked a watershed for Côte d'Ivoire and the rest of coastal West Africa, as multiple cross-border attacks on military infrastructure in its northern regions triggered a heavy security response.

In 2020, attacks had still been sporadic across the coastal states of Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo, with six recorded attacks and armed clashes involving VEOs (resulting in 35 civilian and security force fatalities).[16] This changed in 2021 when JNIM attacks – primarily against military and other state security targets – proliferated in northern Côte d'Ivoire's Zanzan and Savanes districts, as well as in Benin's Atacora department on the border with Burkina Faso. Togo also experienced its first VEO attack when suspected JNIM fighters attacked a military position in Sanloaga village in the Savanes region's Kpendjal prefecture in November 2021.[17]

While the wave of extremist attacks in Côte d'Ivoire was stemmed from 2022 onwards, largely thanks to a hugely enhanced security presence, alongside concerted efforts to support economic development,[18] the picture in Togo and Benin was drastically different. From 18 separate violent events involving a VEO in Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo in 2021, the number grew fivefold over the course of 2022 to 93, made up almost entirely of incidents in Benin (74) and Togo (18). By November 2023, the total number of VEO violent incidents in the coastal states had surpassed the total for the previous year, with 166 in total.[19] This was driven by Benin, which by the end of November 2023 had already registered 107% more violent incidents involving VEOs (153) than the whole of 2022.[20]

Across Benin, including in the northern departments, political violence has tended to be communal and local in character – with farmer–herder tensions stemming from competition over land for agriculture and pasture, leading to attacks and counterattacks, stolen livestock and destroyed crops, playing an important role.[21] Existing fault lines were exploited by JNIM, and to a lesser extent IS Sahel, to gain influence in northern Benin, as such groups have done across the Sahel.[22]

Chart 2: Violent extremist activity in coastal West Africa, 2016–2023



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Note: Events include political violence, as well as strategic developments such as looting, property destruction, movement of forces, arrests and other events.

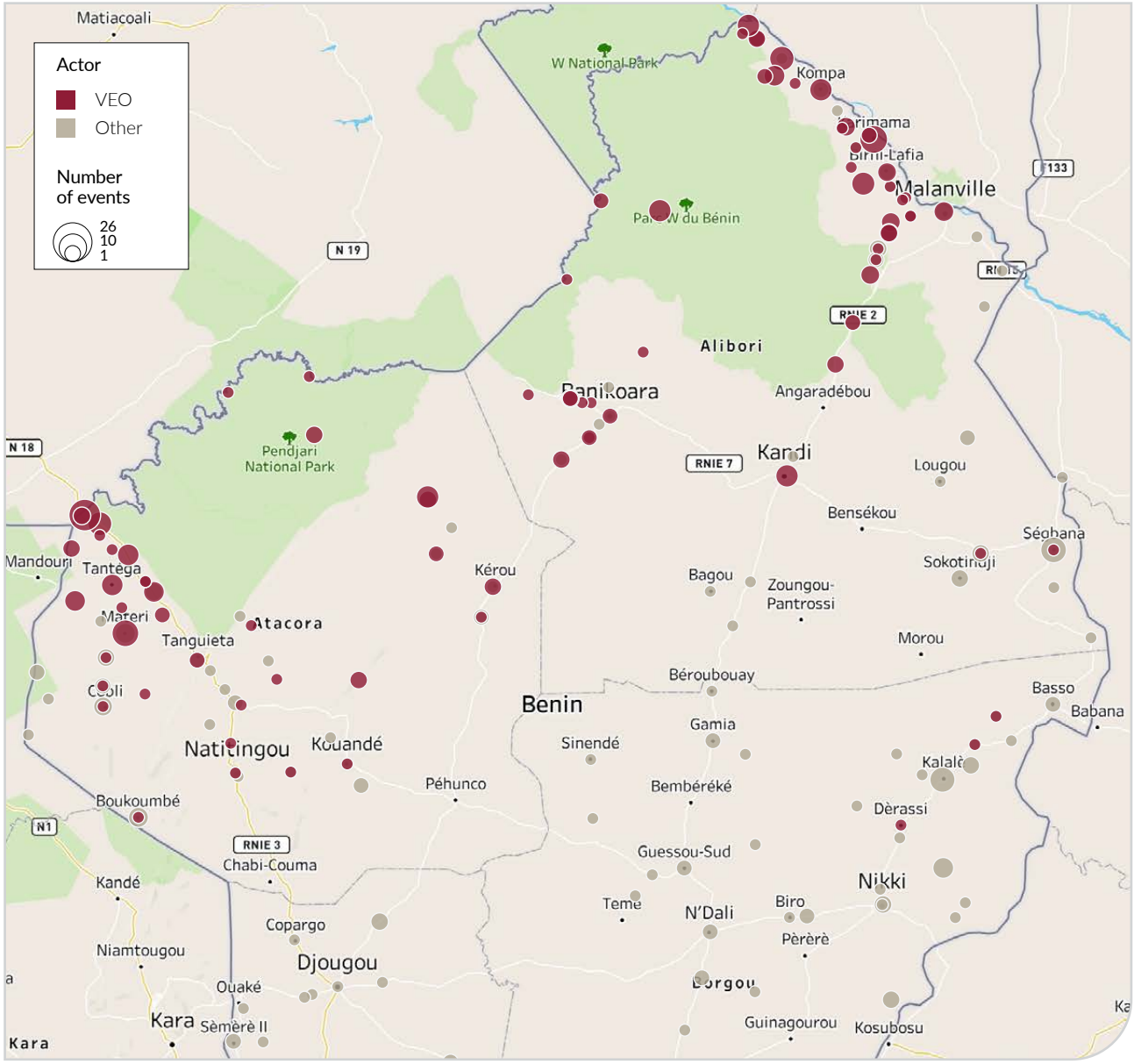
Whereas non-VEO-type violence was the most common form in Atacora and Alibori up until 2021, the proportion of political violence involving VEOs has increased in both departments each year. As of the end of November 2023, VEOs had been involved in 69% and 76% of conflict events in Atacora and Alibori respectively.[23]

Opportunism and exploitation: geographies at play

The geography of the extremist presence in northern Benin is particularly important in understanding how VEOs were able to penetrate the country. The spillover of violent extremism into the country can be attributed to both pull and push factors, with endogenous and exogenous circumstances playing a role in its proliferation.[24]

While a handful of incidents involving suspected VEOs have taken place in the Borgou department,[25] the overwhelming majority of extremist violence is concentrated in Atacora and Alibori, in particular near the border (see Chart 3). The former is dominated by JNIM, whose presence has become increasingly familiar to local populations over the past year, which highlights the importance placed on earning local support.[26] While research has revealed more about the subgroup dynamics at play and the most important JNIM leaders

Chart 3: Violent extremist organisations account for most political violence in Atacora and Alibori.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

involved in the group's expansion into Benin (two groups, one expanding into Atacora led by Idrissa Dicko – more commonly known as Mouslimou – and another unit that has a presence in Alibori, led by Abu Anifa),[27] local communities do not make the distinction. While some analysts indicate the two leaders may employ different tactics with regards to kidnapping or other types of behaviour – suggesting for example that Anifa is more violent – this is currently not clear from the existing data.

VEO violence in Alibori is concentrated first and foremost along the border with Niger, in Karimama and Malanville communes, with an important cluster of incidents taking place in and around Banikoara. In contrast to Atacora, the identity of perpetrators for each incident is less clear, with both JNIM and IS Sahel operating. The first attack for which IS Sahel explicitly claimed responsibility came at the beginning of July 2022 and since then there have only been a handful of incidents confidently attributable to the group.[28]

VEO presence in northern Benin is far less entrenched than it is in the Sahelian states, with armed attacks in Benin largely carried out by militants based in Burkina Faso or Niger. Border areas are particularly vulnerable to violence and insecurity, and armed groups of all types often use them as bases for military operations and as pools of potential recruits.[29]

The border areas in northern Benin are especially susceptible to incursion, and subsequent implantation, by VEOs due to the vast national parks that sit on the borders of Burkina Faso and Niger (Pendjari National Park in Atacora and Park W in Alibori). Park W, in particular, has been used by violent extremists as a gateway to Benin and as a launchpad for further expansion southwards.[30] In addition to serving as rear bases for militants, the national parks are also hubs of illicit economies.

Far from being distinct phenomena, VEOs are intimately involved in the local illicit and informal economies, which are crucial to their governance strategies in the areas they control (or seek to control).[31] In fact, illicit actors (namely smugglers and poachers) played a key role in helping JNIM to enhance its presence in the tri-border area by leveraging their knowledge of the terrain.[32]

National parks and borderlands are both areas in which state governance tends to be patchier, which has contributed to the overlap between instability and illicit economies.[33] Grievances arising from attempts to protect the national parks, and the consequent disruption to local socio-economic and cultural practices that relied on access to the park and its resources, have been exploited by JNIM to garner legitimacy in the eyes of communities on the outskirts of the WAP complex.[34] In February 2023, for example, it is reported that suspected JNIM militants conducted a recruitment campaign in several villages on the outskirts of Pendjari National Park, during which they asked local residents about the details of ongoing land disputes and offered to defend the interests of victims.[35]

National parks, including Park W, have also been identified as an area in which violent extremist groups can harbour their kidnapping victims until release.[36] Since the May 2019 kidnapping incident mentioned in the introduction, the first known VEO attack in Beninese territory, there have been 21 other incidents involving VEOs in the Pendjari National Park and 14 for Alibori's Park W, with an additional 34 events involving VEOs recorded in towns and villages in Benin on the outskirts of the park complex.

In June 2023, presumed JNIM or IS Sahel militants brutally killed two poachers in Park W, which suggested worsening relations between poachers and militants.[37] In October 2023, suspected JNIM opened fire on poachers in the same park.[38] On the other side of the country, in July 2023, suspected JNIM fighters fired warning shots in the Pendjari park, reportedly to frighten some fishermen.[39]

Clashes between VEO elements and hunters have been reported by local communities in northern Benin, citing several reprisal attacks on poachers for ending their collaboration with the armed extremists (see the 'Violent extremist organisations: Kidnapping types' section for more details on the links between hunters and VEOs). A number of these incidents involved kidnapping, either directly or indirectly, and underscores the importance of abductions and violence against civilians more broadly to VEOs strategic objectives.

Strategic use of violence: civilian targeting

Violence by JNIM spiked in northern Benin since late 2021.[40] While the group has a regular presence in certain areas, primarily in Karimama commune, as of the end of 2023, the group does not currently have any strongholds or areas where its influence is uncontested in northern Benin. In other words, they have not been able to turn any areas into a safe haven as of yet. This makes it a crucial moment for a deep dive into JNIM's kidnapping activity to provide insight into how the group engages in kidnapping in the early stages of an insurgency.

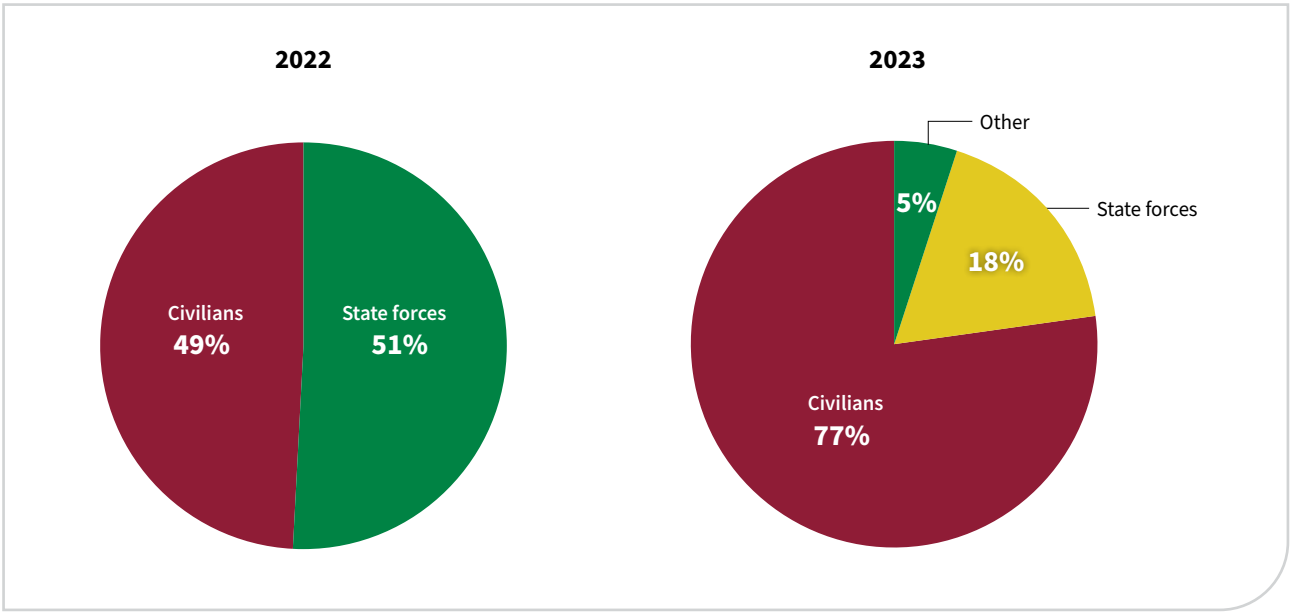
One way in which JNIM pursued legitimacy in the earliest stages of its expansion into northern Benin was by showing (at least some) restraint in targeting civilians.[41] In 2021 and the first half of 2022, violence against civilians at the hands of VEOs was comparatively measured, (there were only five recorded incidents of civilian targeting by VEOs in the first six months of 2022, compared to 26 in the latter half of the year).

This is not to say that civilians were not targeted at all; there were a number of instances of fairly violent forced recruitment. In their early interactions with civilians, JNIM units in Park W used threats and forced recruitment – a tactic that was less common in their initial approaches to civilian communities in Burkina Faso.[42] But on the whole, as in neighbouring Burkina Faso, JNIM largely refrained from launching large-scale attacks on villages and communities.

According to an NGO operating in northern Benin that monitors the movement of violent extremist groups, 'JNIM has adopted an anti-government posture rather than an intimidating and terrorizing the population one'.[43] Attacks have mostly targeted the defence and security forces (through direct attacks or improvised explosive devices, IEDs) as well as park rangers in the WAP complex, who are often considered a legitimate target by the group. In 2022, state forces and civilians were more or less equally targeted and/or involved in political violence at the hands of VEOs (49% and 51% of attacks respectively).[44]

The general trend seems, however, to have shifted in 2023. Over the course of the year, civilians bore the brunt of the vast majority of violent incidents involving VEOs (see Chart 4). There are likely to be multiple reasons for this, including an increase in reprisals against locals suspected to collaborate with the government, and JNIM's difficulty in garnering local support in Atacora, and thus relying heavily on violence against civilians to recruit, and to instil fear in those who refuse to join them.

Chart 4: Victims of VEO violence in northern Benin.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Among the most violent attacks in which JNIM are suspected to have been involved took place in July 2022, when ten pastoralists were killed near Materi, reportedly because they had refused to enlist in the armed group.[45] In May 2023, approximately 20 civilians were killed and more disappeared in Kaobagou and Guimbagou, Atacora province.[46] A dozen people were also kidnapped as part of these attacks. JNIM militants had entered the villages to demand residents leave; farmers refused to leave their fields and their homes, and so they were either kidnapped or killed. This incident is, however, somewhat of an anomaly, as the trigger was a conflict between two ethnic groups in which JNIM got involved only at a later stage.

Nevertheless, such large-scale violence against civilians remains a relatively rare occurrence, but it shows that JNIM increasingly does not shy away from targeting civilians (though the group does not claim such attacks[47]) when confronted with community disobedience and resistance, if they perceive it to further their strategic objectives.[48] Indeed, where communities resist – either unilaterally or in coordination with the state – this has repeatedly resulted in increased violence from JNIM.

Kidnapping: an entry point for violent extremist organisations

Emergence of the violent extremism kidnapping threat

GI-TOC research has underscored that kidnapping is one illicit economy that is particularly closely linked to conflict and instability.[49] The nascent stages of VEOs' territorial infiltration – before regular, direct attacks on defence and security forces, intimidation of the population or continuous presence in villages or markets – are, in certain contexts, accompanied by higher levels of kidnappings of foreign nationals. This was the case in Burkina Faso and Mali, for example.[50]

In Benin, the violent extremism-related kidnapping landscape shares some characteristics with that of other countries in the region. In May 2019, two years before VEOs started claiming attacks in northern Benin, the kidnapping of two French nationals and murder of their Beninese guide in the Pendjari National Park was the first event to be attributed to a VEO in Benin.[51]

The first VEO kidnapping in Benin mirrors the way in which events unfolded four years earlier in Burkina Faso in April 2015 with the kidnapping of Iulian Ghergut, a Romanian national working in a manganese mine in Oudalan region, near the Nigerien and Malian borders. Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui, then senior member of al-Mourabitoun – a violent extremist group close to AQIM – claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.[52]

Both kidnappings were well prepared and executed with similar modus operandi: multiple cars in a convoy, the killing or injuring of the driver or guide, the kidnap and driving towards the north. But the similarity ends there. While the two French hostages were freed a week later in northern Burkina Faso by a French military operation,[53] Iulian Ghergut was moved to the group's stronghold in northern Mali, spent eight years in captivity and was only released in August 2023.[54]

The two French hostages were en route to northern Mali when they were intercepted. This is typical for Western hostages taken in the Sahel, who are held in captivity by senior JNIM units in their safe heavens of far north Mali. According to an expert in kidnapping for ransom by JNIM, 'once the hostages have reached Mali, there is no liberation [by means of a military operation] possible, it is the start of a different and much longer process: the negotiation for a ransom payment'.[55] The French military, aware of this, intervened quickly and followed the hostages as they moved towards northern Burkina Faso, striking as soon as the convoy stopped for a break.[56] Two other hostages, an American and a South Korean, were liberated that same night.

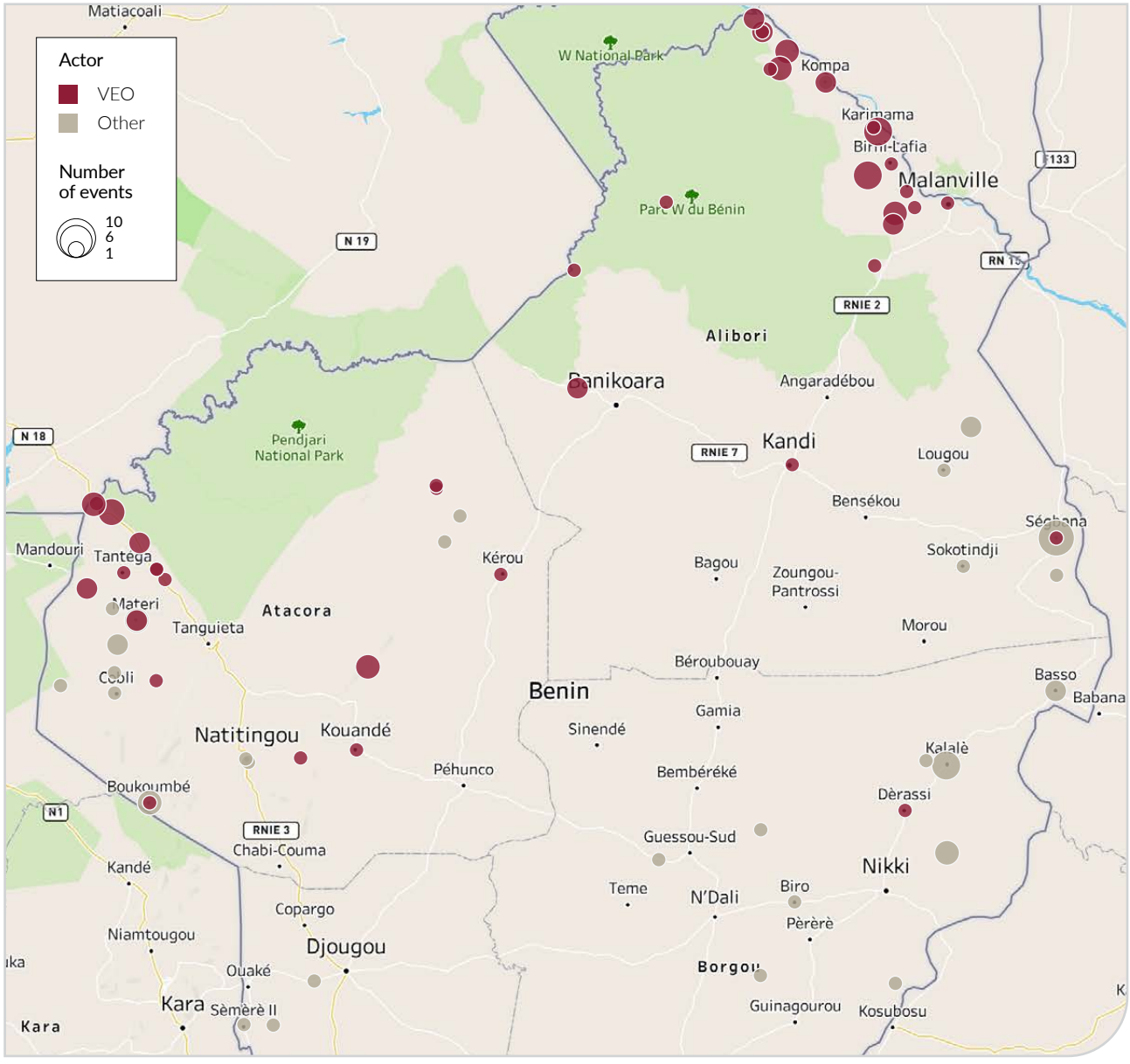
Once VEOs have established a presence in a certain location, the presence of foreign nationals tends to reduce in response to the heightened security threat. It is at this stage that local people become the primary targets of VEO kidnapping. As well as in the Sahel, kidnappings by VEOs also increased in Côte d'Ivoire as armed actors sought to infiltrate local communities in the north.[57]

Current kidnapping landscape in northern Benin

Kidnapping incidents were rare in Atacora and Alibori until the end of 2021, and almost entirely unrelated to VEO activities. However, in 2022 there were 24 separate kidnappings across both departments. By November 2023, that figure was 75, more than three times the previous year's total. While not all kidnapping incidents are attributable to a specific perpetrator type (due to the lack of reliable data), VEO-attributed incidents still account for more than two-thirds of kidnappings in northern Benin since 2021; between 2022 and 2023, 38% of all recorded kidnappings are attributed to JNIM, with a further 29% recorded as having been perpetrated by either JNIM or IS Sahel.[58]

In terms of geography, all but one kidnapping attributed to VEOs in the country occurred in Atacora and Alibori, which are also the two departments most affected by armed violence of other forms (most of which is also perpetrated by suspected VEOs), including armed attacks, IEDs and intimidation. These incidents cluster either close to the Benin–Togo–Burkina Faso tri-border area in Atacora, or along the border with Niger in Alibori.

Chart 5: Kidnapping incidents in northern Benin, 2016–2023.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Note: Clear divergence of locations of VEO kidnapping incidents and non-VEO kidnapping incidents help in identifying distinct patterns.

While there are a material number of non-VEO kidnappings within the two departments, these tend to be concentrated further away from the northern border, primarily in Alibori's Ségbana commune. Most non-VEO kidnapping incidents typically occur even further south in the Borgou department.

National parks are particularly important zones in which illicit economic activities, including the kidnapping market, intersect with conflict dynamics across northern Benin (in the shape of the WAP complex) and West Africa more broadly.

Kidnapping incidents within the parks themselves are rare – unsurprising given that this is not where civilian populations are concentrated – although not unheard of. For example, in March 2023, armed individuals suspected to belong to either JNIM or IS Sahel kidnapped two poachers in Park W.[59] Instead, the WAP complex is primarily used as a hideout for the hostages.[60] Similar dynamics have also played out in Côte d'Ivoire, where militants utilise the Comoé National Park, which lies on the border with Burkina Faso to the north and Ghana to the east, as a place to hide hostages.[61] Likewise, in Nigeria, forests such as those in the Kainji National Park, among others, play an important role in kidnapping incidents as secluded areas in which hostages are kept, as explored later in this report (see 'Kidnap for ransom' section).

The following two sections of the report analyse the two major types of kidnapping separately, namely kidnappings carried about by VEOs and kidnappings for ransom (it should be noted, however, that the two are not always mutually exclusive and there have been reported cases of armed extremist kidnappings for ransom beyond the 2019 incident highlighted above).

Violent extremist organisations: kidnapping types

In northern Benin, kidnappings by VEOs can be categorised into four main types. All four contribute to the expansion of VEOs in the country, who use kidnapping as a tool (alongside threats, direct attacks, IEDs and other forms of violence) to extend their areas of influence and enforce their rules on these areas.[62]

The first kidnapping type that has played out in northern Benin since the beginning of 2022 is kidnapping for forced recruitment.[63] The second is kidnapping for intelligence gathering. Thirdly, VEOs often carry out kidnappings as a punishment. And lastly, they engage in kidnapping for the purpose of intimidation.[64] However, this is not to say that VEOs make use of each type equally, and certain types of kidnapping can be more commonly carried out than others. As the various types of kidnapping serve different functions, they are often employed at different stages of VEOs' penetration in a country, and Benin is no exception. All four kidnapping types in the context of northern Benin outlined above – namely to grow their ranks, to gather intelligence, for punishment and to intimidate – have also been tracked in VEOs' kidnappings in Mali and Burkina Faso.

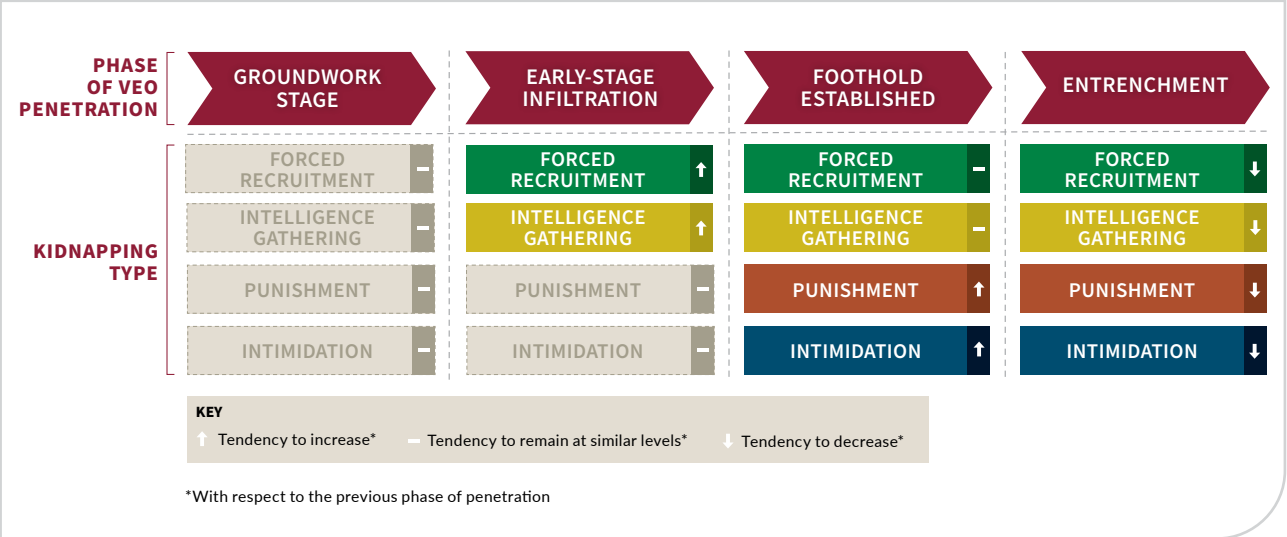
Phases of VEO penetration

While VEOs operate across much of the Sahel and coastal West Africa, they are at drastically different stages of penetration in the various countries in which they are present. As discussed in the previous section, VEOs are far more entrenched in the Sahel, having consolidated control over swathes of territory, primarily in Burkina Faso and Mali, over the past decade. In Benin, on the other hand, the first signs of VEO activity did not emerge until 2019 (although there is some evidence to suggest non-violent activity in the country in earlier years).[65]

While the different stages of VEO penetration in Benin (or elsewhere) are not always clear-cut – they can overlap and VEOs can even be in different phases in different areas of the country – for analytical purposes, we can identify four broad phases of VEO penetration. These are the groundwork stage; early-stage infiltration; foothold established, and entrenchment.

Among the first manifestations of VEO presence tend to be reconnaissance visits, visiting (and subsequently preaching in) mosques, supply procurement and other non-violent activity. This is the groundwork stage, which in Benin can be considered to have taken place until 2021.

Chart 6: Kidnapping type–phase of penetration matrix.



Source: Authors

Note: This generalised framework is based on dynamics in both Benin and Burkina Faso.

From the end of 2021, VEOs began making more regular incursions into northern Benin and conducted a number of direct attacks on military targets. Attacks continued into 2022, as part of JNIM's early-stage infiltration into Atacora and Alibori. As outlined earlier in this report, however, militants focused primarily on state forces, with only five reported incidents of civilian targeting at the hands of suspected VEOs by mid-2022.

This changed in the summer of 2022. In the latter six months of the year, 104 incidents involving VEOs were reported in northern Benin, 26 of which were reported incidents of civilian targeting.[66] It is clear from mid-2022 that JNIM has established a foothold in a number of communes across Benin's Atacora and Alibori communes.[67]

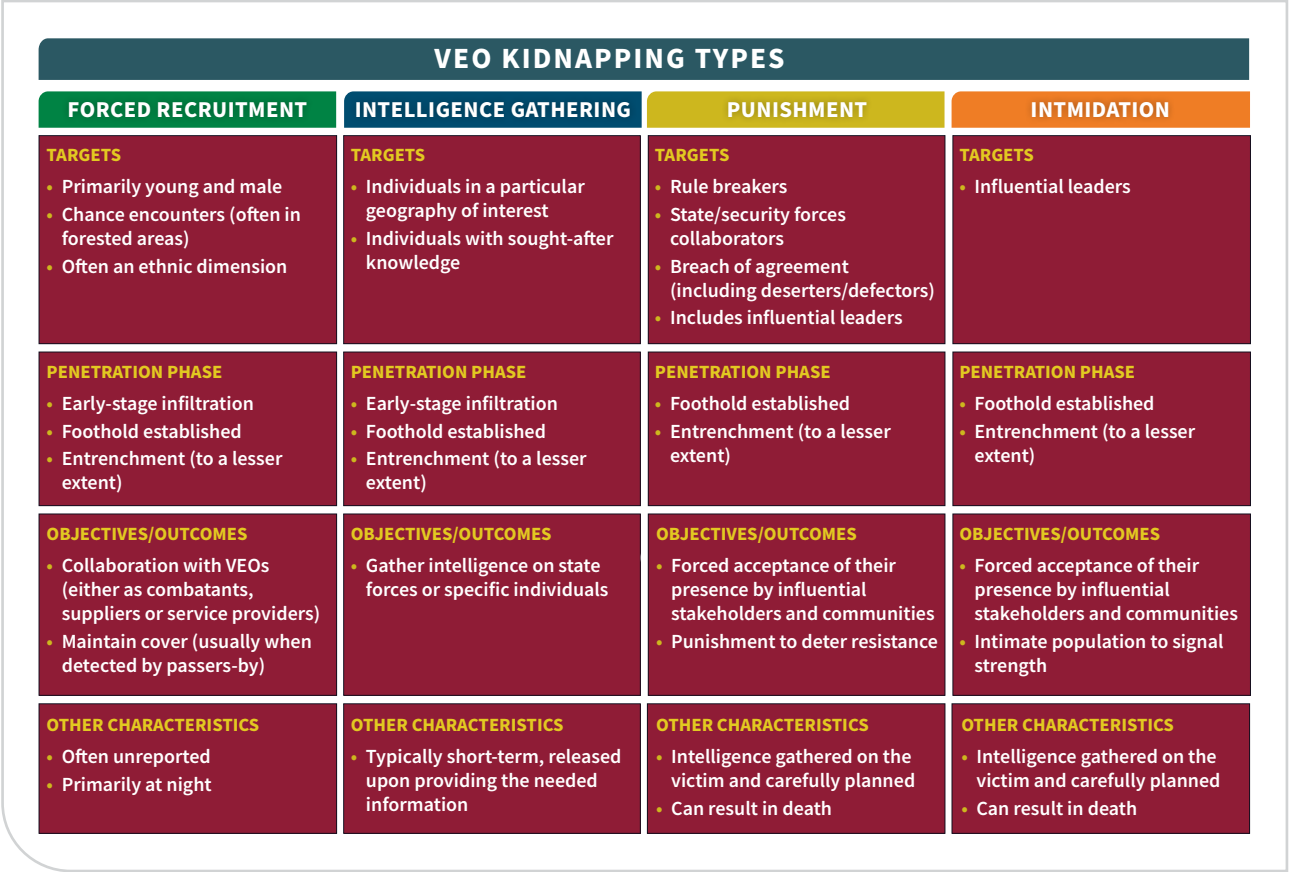
The final stage of VEO penetration included in the analytical framework presented in this section is entrenchment. Often, where non-state armed actors not only have a permanent presence and exert high levels of control over local populations, but have also developed a system of governance (including service provision as well as justice provision and dispute mediation, for example), they may strategically opt for restraint in their levels of violence against civilians.[68]

While the groundwork stage tends to be characterised by non-violent activity, the use of violence is a key feature of the VEOs' early-stage infiltration. Levels of violence against civilians by VEOs can often reflect the degree of territorial control exerted by specific groups, with more violence typically in areas that are contested and where such control is fragmented and unstable.[69] Kidnappings are one important exemplification. These typically manifest during the earlier-to-middle phases of infiltration, once the group has some degree of influence in an area but has not yet consolidated overall and uncontested control.

Indeed, kidnapping incidents – often alongside other forms of civilian targeting – tend to spike as the group starts increasing their operations in a new area. Kidnapping numbers remain high until the group manages to assert a strong, largely uncontested, level of influence (in other words, the entrenchment phase, which has not yet been achieved in any area of northern Benin), after which the numbers tend to decrease (although groups often continue to conduct some kidnappings for vetting purposes or when suspicious of someone's activity).[70]

In the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, for example, the number of kidnappings increased steadily between 2016 and 2020 (from one recorded case to 29), spiking in 2021 with at least 60 incidents in the region as JNIM increased its operations; in 2022, once JNIM were entrenched in the country's Sahel region, and their influence was largely uncontested, the number of kidnappings dropped considerably to 24.[71]

Chart 7: Types of kidnapping by violent extremist organisations in northern Benin.



Source: Authors

Having set out the general timelines associated with kidnappings by VEOs, the remainder of this section of the report explores the four types of kidnapping in greater detail (see Chart 7).

Forced recruitment

The first type of kidnapping, which has taken place in northern Benin (in particular in the Atacora department) since early 2020, is the abduction of young men (and to a lesser extent women) for recruitment. Kidnapping for forced recruitment is difficult to identify and analyse (as explored later in this section), but this research has identified some broad drivers and dynamics.

This type of kidnapping started taking place in the early stages of extremist infiltration, before VEOs conducted large-scale attacks on the security and defence forces and were keeping a low profile.[72] Some of the victims – who were mostly likely to have been targeted for specific, mainly ethnic, reasons – came back to their communities after weeks or months, while others never returned.

Community leaders in Matéri and Tanguieta, two communes of Atacora, explained that they think most abductees likely ended up joining the ranks of VEOs or working with them in one way or another.[73] Often, if these individuals return to their original communities, they are widely thought to collaborate with the armed actors by gathering intelligence from their home area or by providing the groups with basic supplies such as food and fuel.[74] Community members in Atacora have reported the recruitment of women into JNIM's ranks, primarily to spy and to provide food to the militants. According to one, 'we have caught a few cases of women going to grind cereals three times a week – so a significant number of times, more than is needed to feed her family only – so we know she's bringing it to these people [the VEOs].'[75] While it is difficult to substantiate such allegations, it is a common perception among the communities of northern Benin.

In some cases, abductions for forced recruitment are carried out opportunistically or out of the need to maintain the group's cover. In other words, individuals who happen to come across members of the extremist groups can be kidnapped to prevent them from reporting to the authorities. This occurs most often in the national parks, Pendjari and Park W, largely affecting hunters, fishermen, herders living in the bush, as well as young men from surrounding communities engaging in illicit activities in the park.[76]

These activities often take place at night, when access to the park is easier due to fewer security patrols. However, for the same reason it is also when the militants move around in the parks. If they cross paths, the victims can be kidnapped for the simple reason that they saw the faces of VEO members, potentially recognisng some of them, and thus could go to the police to report them.[77] Community members report that some VEO militants come from their own communities, enhancing risks of identification.[78]

At the same time, because these professional hunters operate in contravention of state rules, they represent ideal recruits.[79] Focus group discussions in Tanguiéta commune, with villagers living on the edge of the park, confirmed that hunters in Pendjari park were the first to know of the VEOs presence there and collaborated with them by providing resources (food, fuel and motorbikes) in exchange for allowing them to continue poaching and even protecting them from park rangers.[80]

As highlighted at the beginning of this analysis, there a several difficulties in quantifying and analysing kidnappings for forced recruitment. Firstly, there are challenges in classifying the manner of recruitment. Communities and parents typically do not use the word 'kidnappings', but rather expressions such as 'he disappeared', 'he left looking for something better, a better opportunity' or similar phrases that do not convey any compulsion by force.[81] The reality is blurred: while some join these groups willingly (for example after having been offered money),[82] testimonies confirm that others were clearly forcibly recruited through kidnapping.[83]

Secondly, communities, including the parents of these young men (and to a lesser extent women), typically do not go to the police to say that their children have disappeared. At most, they may raise the issue within their community, but are afraid of their children being accused of VEO membership and arrested.[84] Long-standing distrust of the police by many communities in these areas also contributes to under-reporting.

Thirdly, some members of the community blame the victims themselves, regardless of the way in which they were recruited, further contributing to under-reporting. According to communities, often the young people recruited (forcibly or otherwise) were already at the margins of society, involved in illicit activities in the past and considered 'bad apples' and viewed with suspicion by elements of the community.[85] This is particularly relevant in cases involving victims engaging in illicit activities in the national parks as described. This does not, however, hold for all profiles of those kidnapped.

Finally, other common practices are often confused with kidnapping, which complicates the picture. The trafficking of young men and women is a regular occurrence, in Atacora in particular, which obscures who the perpetrators are and their motivations. Local communities often refer to them as 'cultural kidnappings', which include both the recruitment of young girls for forced marriage (which JNIM advocates against) and young men for forced labour, often in Nigeria.[86] These are not conducted by VEOs, but rather by local populations or individuals from neighbouring countries. While kidnapping for trafficking falls outside of the scope of this report, it is mentioned here to underscore the difficulty in accurately assessing the phenomenon of forced recruitment in northern Benin.

Intelligence gathering

Intelligence gathering is another significant motivation behind kidnappings in northern Benin. This has been identified by previous research in the Sahel as key for VEO expansion, especially in the case of JNIM.[87] In the Sahel, and to an extent in northern Benin, JNIM tries to leverage violence in a targeted manner to achieve a specific purpose, although manifestations of violence vary to some extent, shaped also by the

target.[88] Indiscriminate violence is against the group's ultimate goal, which is to win the hearts and minds of communities and pose as a legitimate governance provider (an alternative to the state).[89] Intelligence gathering – and a system of information sharing – is critical in the group's strategy to use targeted violence to garner legitimacy and control.[90]

As noted above, some people are recruited to spy on their communities and gather intelligence on the whereabouts of specific individuals or about defence and security forces positions.[91] However, when the spies they have recruited do not have the necessary information, or when the group does not have anyone in a given community or area, they resort to kidnapping for interrogation. Victims of such kidnappings are usually selected either due to their presence in a location of strategic interest to JNIM, or because of their profile (hunters know topography of the parks well, for example) – or both. These kinds of kidnappings are typically short term (ranging from just a few hours to a couple of days) and the victim is released upon providing the information demanded of them.

A notable example of this took place in Loumbou-Loumbou (Karimama, Alibori department) in September 2022, when alleged JNIM elements attacked a military camp under construction, burning buildings and trucks, and kidnapping three workers (two of whom managed to escape).[92] The third was held hostage by the armed group for several days, during which they allegedly interrogated him and asked for the construction plan of the camp, before releasing him.[93]

While this incident was somewhat unique in that it occurred during an unusual phase of erratic behaviour on the part of the Anifa-led JNIM unit in Alibori, as a rushed response to IS Sahel presence in the department,[94] numerous other incidents of kidnapping for the purposes of gathering intelligence have been reported in northern Benin.[95] For example, in November 2023, two individuals were abducted by suspected VEOs in the village of Bonwalou in Karimama, questioned about the Beninese Armed Forces (Forces Armées Béninoises, FAB), and then released.[96] Six months earlier, presumed JNIM militants kidnapped a person during Ramadan celebrations in a village in Kouande, questioned extensively and then released without ransom.[97]

Punishment

In addition to forced recruitment and intelligence-gathering, JNIM in particular have used kidnapping as a way of shaping the behaviour of the local communities that they seek to control in northern Benin. This type of kidnapping can either be punitive (to deter resistance) or intimidatory (to signal strength and thus encourage collaboration or recruitment).

Although violent extremist groups operating in West Africa (and other parts of Africa and the Middle East) who espouse radical Islamist views are often simply considered 'terrorists', they are also major actors in civil wars. They simultaneously engage in terrorist tactics – such as violence against civilians that is deliberate, sensational, often indiscriminate and commonly with a broader symbolic aim – and behaviour akin to insurgents in a rebellion, primarily territorial expansion, among others.[98] As such, the actions of VEOs in Benin can be examined through the lens of strategic violence in civil wars rather than just as a form of terrorism.

Civil war scholars highlight rebel group strength and capability as an important factor in the decision to use violence against civilians: weaker groups (such as those who have not yet established themselves in a particular area) are less able to offer material incentives to civilians in order to earn their support (or at least their tacit acceptance), and therefore must rely instead on violence as a coercive strategy.[99]

Kidnapping is one such form of violence. VEOs in Atacora and Alibori have been warning local populations that as long as they respect the rules imposed by the group, they will be spared violence.[100] These rules include religious edicts (for example respecting sharia and wearing a veil), as well as bans on sharing information or otherwise collaborating with the authorities.[101]

But they can also include general directives, and where these are contravened, the perpetrators are punished, in some cases through the use of kidnapping. In August 2023, for example, a farmer in Guene (Malanville) was reportedly kidnapped by suspected VEOs for cultivating crops on land that the militants claimed belonged to them.[102]

As with most kidnappings recorded across the region, but particularly in northern Benin, where access to information is limited, in the majority of cases in which an individual was abducted, there is limited information on the fate of the victims. Those abducted may be released, but in other cases they will be killed at a later stage. This is particularly the case where kidnapping is used as a tool for punishment. However, given that the kidnapping incidents still include the abduction of the hostage, even if they are later killed, this research considers kidnapping for punishment as a distinct type of kidnapping employed by VEOs in northern Benin.

Usually, forced disappearances for the purposes of intimidation or punishment are targeted, meaning that the victim has been identified, intelligence has been gathered on the victim (often with the help of young recruits, as described in the previous section) and the kidnapping itself is carefully planned.

Where ordinary civilians are targeted by the violent extremists, it is often as punishment for collaborating with (or at least aiding in some way) government authorities. At least a dozen civilians were kidnapped on suspicion of collaborating with government forces between 2022 and 2023, the majority of which occurred in Karimama and Malanville (Alibori department).[103] In March 2023, presumed VEO militants kidnapped a man whom they believed to be collaborating with communal authorities in Malanville's Guene district.[104] In July 2023, in Karimama, suspected JNIM kidnapped – and later killed – a man for working with the army.[105] It is likely that more of these incidents took place, but many are not reported to the authorities or the media, and when they are the motives behind them are not always clear.

The growing number of kidnappings that appear to be reprisals for sharing information with the state highlights the manifest dangers involved in the government using communities to gather intelligence on VEO movements. Although a degree of community policing is widely regarded as central to law enforcement, the push by the Benin government to encourage communities to engage with authorities in reporting extremism exposes them to greater risk of VEO attack.[106]

VEOs also target individuals as a punishment for breaching a perceived agreement between the two parties. These can include those who fail to provide services requested or demanded by the VEOs, members of the VEOs who desert the group or individuals who have committed some other form of perceived breach of trust.

Currency traders, cattle traders, hunters and shopkeepers, for example, are common victims. Sometimes, those who have been engaging with VEOs (for example to provide food or intelligence) decide they do not wish to continue, and breach the agreement they have with them.[107]

Hunters are particularly relevant in this context. As highlighted earlier, in the earliest days of extremist group presence in northern Benin, hunters operating in the Pendjari and W parks often collaborated with VEOs, providing food and other resources.[108] There have also been reported cases of local hunters providing the VEOs with intelligence. According to a security source, in one instance, a hunter in Park W from the Karimama area was provided with a mobile phone and regular credit top-ups in order to feed the VEOs with information on the movements of the Beninese military.[109]

In exchange for their logistical support, VEOs allowed them to continue operating in these areas. However, this service-based relationship broke down from 2021 onwards as increased pressure from the armed forces and other security services heightened the risks of association with violent extremists. This led many hunters and poachers to withdraw their logistical support (see box 'VEOs and illicit economies' for more detail).[110] VEOs may then kidnap them as a form of punishment (or to send a message that breaching agreements with them will be punished).[111]

While not reported to the police or in the media, these kidnappings are, however, talked about within communities. These types of kidnappings are thought by local and traditional authorities to have increased.[112] In early March 2023, for example, two poachers were kidnapped by alleged JNIM or IS Sahel militants in Park W in Alibori.[113]

Box 1: VEOs and illicit economies

As highlighted above, local citizens who engage in activities rendered unlawful by the state, such as hunting in protected areas of the national parks complex, are particularly relevant to the analysis of VEO recruitment and behaviour.

Since 2017, the African Parks Network (APN) has been in charge of managing the Pendjari National Park and, in 2020, they took on the same responsibilities in Park W. Conservation measures, imposed shortly after APN took control of the two parks, drastically limited hunting activities in Matéri commune, for example, but also had an impact on fishing, herding and farming.[114]

Local hunters thus became ideal recruits, as they know the national parks well, are typically armed and had become positioned in opposition to state authorities as a result of their involvement in hunting in breach of state regulations.

The conservation measures imposed by the APN in 2017 also limited access to and movement around the park itself, which impacted on local livelihoods and led to friction with the authorities. VEOs capitalised on these frustrations – a strategy used successfully in other parks and protected areas in Burkina Faso and Niger – offered hunters unimpeded access to the park in return for joining the group or providing them with supplies.[115] At the same time, however, they also issued strict guidance on which animal species they could and could not kill in accordance with their interpretation of Sharia law.[116]

In addition to hunters, VEOs work with a wide range of intermediaries who have been recruited in the early stages (forcibly or willingly) to supply them with fuel, food, trafficked medical products, cattle and other basic commodities.[117] Among the most significant hotspots of illicit trafficking in northern Benin are the border towns of Malanville and Kourou-Koualou, on the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso, respectively.[118]

Areas like these underscore the links between illicit economies, violent extremists and broader instability. In Kourou-Koualou (adjacent to Pendjari National Park), for example, the disputed nature of the territory, as well as the rapid progression of violent groups, created a security vacuum that enabled illicit economies such as oil smuggling to thrive.[119] The FAB have since strengthened security measures in and around the disputed territory, which some have argued has led to increased violence against civilians (including kidnapping) in retaliation.[120]

Similarly, in towns and villages on the outskirts of Park W in Alibori, the instability created by intercommunal tensions makes those communities highly susceptible to infiltration. In the village of Issènè, in the commune of Malanville, for example, extremist groups reportedly supplied weapons to Fulani herders in 2022, following a local dispute with Dendi farmers the previous year.[121]

The particular combination of the national park environment and widespread reliance on illicit and informal economies in northern Benin make the region particularly vulnerable to VEO expansion. And kidnappings, as highlighted in other sections of this report, are one tool through which VEOs shape their relationship with the communities operating in this environment.

Changes in conflict dynamics, such as clashes between hunters and VEOs, are an important yardstick of the armed groups' relationship with local communities. Monitoring local dynamics to identify tensions is an important mechanism for designing interventions, as they can provide insights into the degree of legitimacy VEOs enjoy at any given time. In other words, when violence spikes between VEOs and certain elements of the community – such as hunters – this could be interpreted as a sign of fraught relations (noting at the same time, however, that an absence of violence does not necessarily reflect local support).

In addition to people with a service-based relationship with elements of the armed groups, VEOs also target individuals for deserting, defecting or reneging on promises to join the groups. This can be the result either of increased pressure from the authorities (compared to the early days of VEO infiltration when their movements and communications were under less scrutiny), with the higher risk of arrest now outweighing the benefits, or because for one reason or another they no longer want to accept the rules or terms imposed on them by the group.[122]

In June 2023, suspected JNIM militants kidnapped a young man in Gouande, Materi, who is believed to have deserted from the armed group.[123] Deserters have also been pursued after having left their local areas entirely. In one instance, a Beninese trader (who allegedly supplied medicine to suspected VEOs) who months earlier had been kidnapped by the armed actors, was killed. After he was able to escape from being held hostage, he went to live in neighbouring Niger in a small village called Tenda, less than 20 kilometres from the main border crossing between Malanville and Gaya. He was recognised at a market there, followed back to his home village in Monsey, kidnapped and eventually killed by a member of the VEO.[124]

Even people that never formally joined or actively collaborated with the VEOs are at risk of victimisation. There have been reports of individuals who had made perceived promises to VEOs to join them, but later reneged, being kidnapped and/or killed. While the victims will sometimes be forced to become members (in other words, forced recruitment, as described above), the individuals can be released after a certain amount of time and subsequently forced to flee (often to neighbouring Nigeria), or they can simply be killed.

Several such incidents were reported during our data collection, and included the tracking down of the individual by VEOs, with sources noting that many of these cases ended in the killing of the victim.[125] For example two young Fulani men were kidnapped in Karimama in early 2022 and brought to Niger where they were killed, most likely by IS Sahel, because they had promised to join them (having even been paid a sum of money by the VEO) but later retracted.[126] In November 2023, suspected JNIM militants kidnapped two young men in the village of Petchinga, Karimama, who reportedly refused to join the VEO.[127]

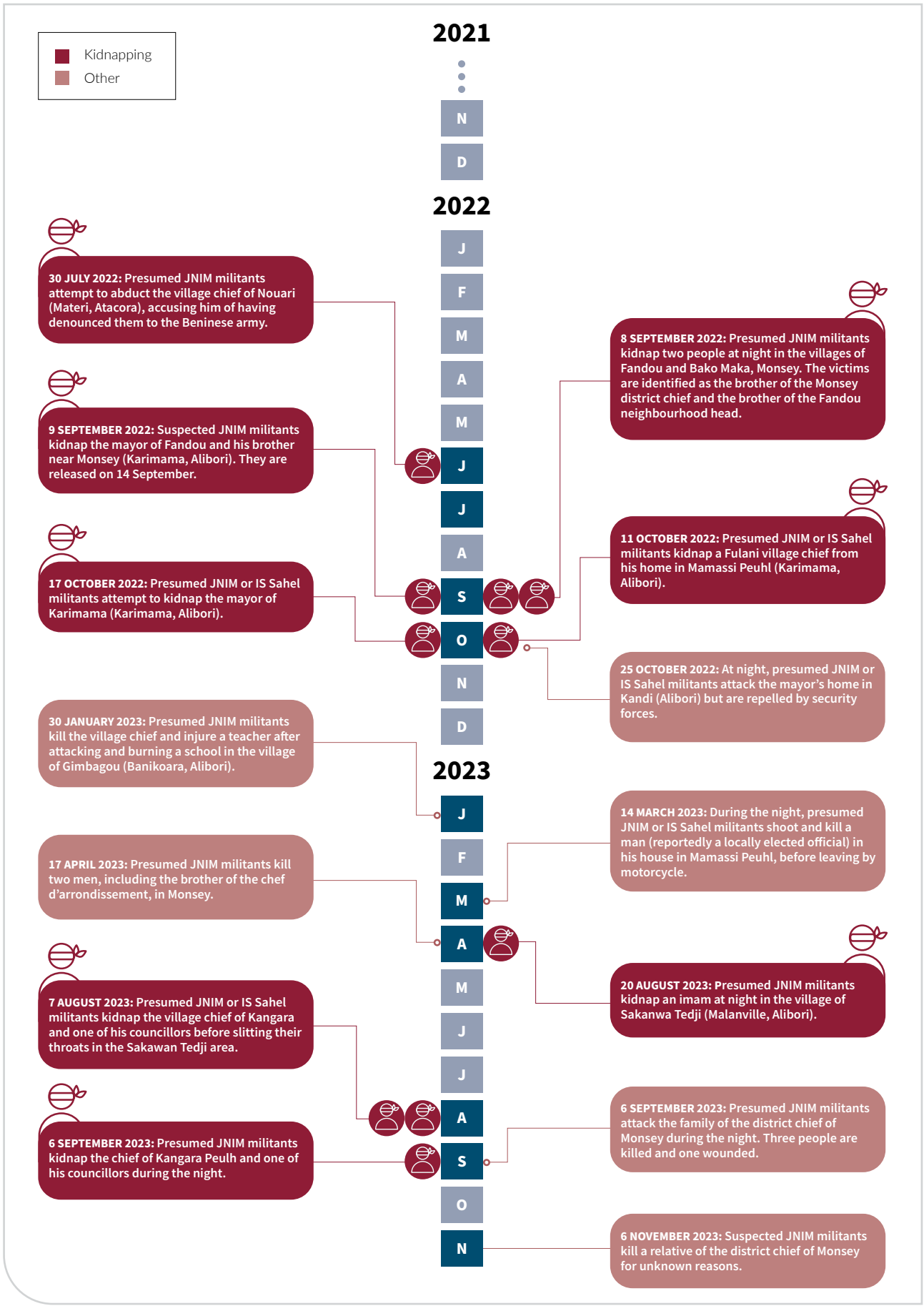
Intimidation

While a wide range of people can be targets of kidnappings, traditional and local authorities (village chiefs), religious leaders and anyone who is influential or occupies a strategic position within the community JNIM is trying to govern are particularly vulnerable. The families of these individuals are also often at risk. When VEOs target community leaders and others in positions of authority, the strategic aim is generally to coerce them into supporting them (or at least to intimidate them into not actively acting against them), to threaten others to join their cause, or in some cases, to physically remove or displace symbols of the state.[128]

In northern Benin, there was no recorded kidnapping of influential leaders until mid-2022 (see Chart 8). However, from July 2022 onwards, the FAB visibly strengthened their physical presence in many of the villages across northern Benin affected by the spread of violent extremism.[129] This inspired a degree of confidence among some segments of the population, who increasingly confided in, and collaborated with, members of the military.

Furthermore, new regulations were introduced around this time requiring local authorities to register all new residents (nationals and foreign nationals alike).[130] Given the risk this new scrutiny on new arrivals to an area posed to VEO members seeking to infiltrate new communities, local authorities were increasingly exposed to VEO targeting, either as punishment for collaboration (see previous section) or as a warning to village chiefs and others to refrain from working with the FAB.

Chart 8: VEO violence against influential leaders in northern Benin.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Between July and October 2022, six incidents of kidnapping of influential people were recorded in Atacora and Alibori.[131] Five of them took place in Karimama, a commune in Alibori at the border with Niger and next to the Niger river, close to Park W. This commune is one of northern Benin's main violent extremism hotspots, with frequent reports of IED incidents, attacks against rangers and security forces, kidnappings, radical preaching in mosques and other forms of VEO presence.[132]

Notably, in October 2022, a village chief of Mamassi Peuhl (a village in Karimama) was kidnapped by violent extremists.[133] He remains in captivity and, while the circumstances of his kidnapping remain unclear, he was known to be close to the authorities and was allegedly reported by members of his community to a VEO for sharing information with the army.[134] A week later, armed militants tried to kidnap the mayor of Karimama, but they were unsuccessful.[135] Similarly, in Atacora's Materi commune, suspected JNIM fighters attempted to abduct the chief of a village called Nouari, on the basis that he had reported their movements to the armed forces.[136] These cases underscore the intersecting drivers and desired outcomes of the different types of kidnapping by VEOs, as they not only serve to scare other potential future collaborators, but they can act as a form of punishment in and of themselves.

After ten months of respite, August and September 2023 saw the return of VEO kidnappings of influential leaders.[137] During the first week of August, VEOs kidnapped the village chief of Kangara, a village in Karimama, and a councillor, before transferring them to Malanville where they were killed.[138] A few weeks later, presumed JNIM militants kidnapped an imam in the village of Sakanwa Tedji in Malanville.[139] Finally, a village chief and one of his advisors was kidnapped by suspected JNIM elements in Kangara Peulh, another village in Karimama.[140]

Kidnap for ransom

As in the Sahel, violent extremists in northern Benin typically engage in kidnappings for strategic purposes, rather than financial. Since 2019, there have been only 13 reported incidents of kidnapping in Atacora and Alibori in which a ransom was demanded (see Chart 9).[141] This represents just 13% of the 101 recorded kidnapping incidents in northern Benin. While this is likely to be an undercount given the sensitivity in reporting ransom requests and data-collection challenges, the small proportion does likely indicate that many kidnappings are not primarily ransom-driven.

Chart 9: Recorded kidnapping incidents in northern Benin involving a ransom.

Date	Department	Commune	Notes	Ransom	Suspected perpetrator
19-Oct-20	Atacora	Natitingou	Unknown gunmen abducted and ransomed a male civilian in the Fulani hamlet of Moukokotammou, in the Chirimina quarter of Natitingou.	Unknown	Unidentified
01-Feb-22	Alibori	Ségbana	In Ségbana, a local councillor and a wealthy cattle breeder from the Fulani community was kidnapped in February 2022 and a ransom of 7 million Naira was demanded.	7 000 000 Naira (€15 000)	Unidentified
02-Sep-22	Atacora	Tanguieta	Suspected JNIM kidnapped an eldery Fulani person in Ndahonta. The kidnappers demanded a CFA10 million ransom.	CFA10 000 000 (€15 260)	JNIM
01-Mar-23	Alibori	Ségbana	A Hausa money dealer was the victim of a kidnapping and was released after emptying his cash box and handing it over in March 2023.	Unknown	Unidentified

Date	Department	Commune	Notes	Ransom	Suspected perpetrator
12-May-23	Atacora	Boukoumbe	An unidentified armed group abducted a herdsman in Boukoumbe. The kidnappers initially demanded CFA10 million but later lowered this to CFA6 million before releasing the victim.	CFA6 000 000 (€9 156)	Unidentified
02-Jun-23	Atacora	Cobli	An unidentified armed group abducted an elderly Fulani man in Tokibi. He was released several days later, on 6 June, after paying a ransom of CFA6 million.	CFA6 000 000 (€9 156)	Unidentified
21-Jul-23	Atacora	Materi	An unidentified armed group abducted a wealthy Fulani herder near Materi. The kidnappers asked the victim's brother for a ransom of CFA5 million but it has not been paid.	CFA5 000 000 (€7 630)	Unidentified
29-Aug-23	Atacora	Cobli	An unidentified armed group abducted a Fulani individual in Cobly). The group demanded a ransom but did not specify the amount.	Unknown	Unidentified
11-Oct-23	Atacora	Materi	An unidentified armed group abducted a Fulani herder in Samahoun district of Tchahoun Cossi. A ransom of CFA15 million was made.	CFA15 000 000 (€22 890)	Unidentified
19-Oct-23	Alibori	Banikoara	A man in Keremou was abducted and later released. The man is believed to have paid a ransom, of an unknown amount, to secure his release.	Unknown	JNIM/IS Sahel
3-Nov-23	Alibori	Ségbana	An unidentified armed group abducted two individuals in Guenelaga. A ransom of CFA5 million for each of the victims has been made.	CFA10 000 000 (€15 260)	Unidentified
16-Nov-23	Atacora	Cobli	An unidentified armed group abducted a Fulani from his home in Tapoga. A ransom of CFA300 000 was demanded for his release.	CFA300 000 (€458)	Unidentified
20-Nov-23	Atacora	Materi	An unidentified armed group abducted a herder in Nodi. The kidnappers contacted the family and demanded a ransom of CFA4 million.	CFA4 000 000 (€6 104)	Unidentified

Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Kidnap for ransom by suspected VEOs

Only in two of these 13 cases in which a ransom was reportedly demanded were the believed perpetrators identified in the reporting as JNIM or IS Sahel.[142]

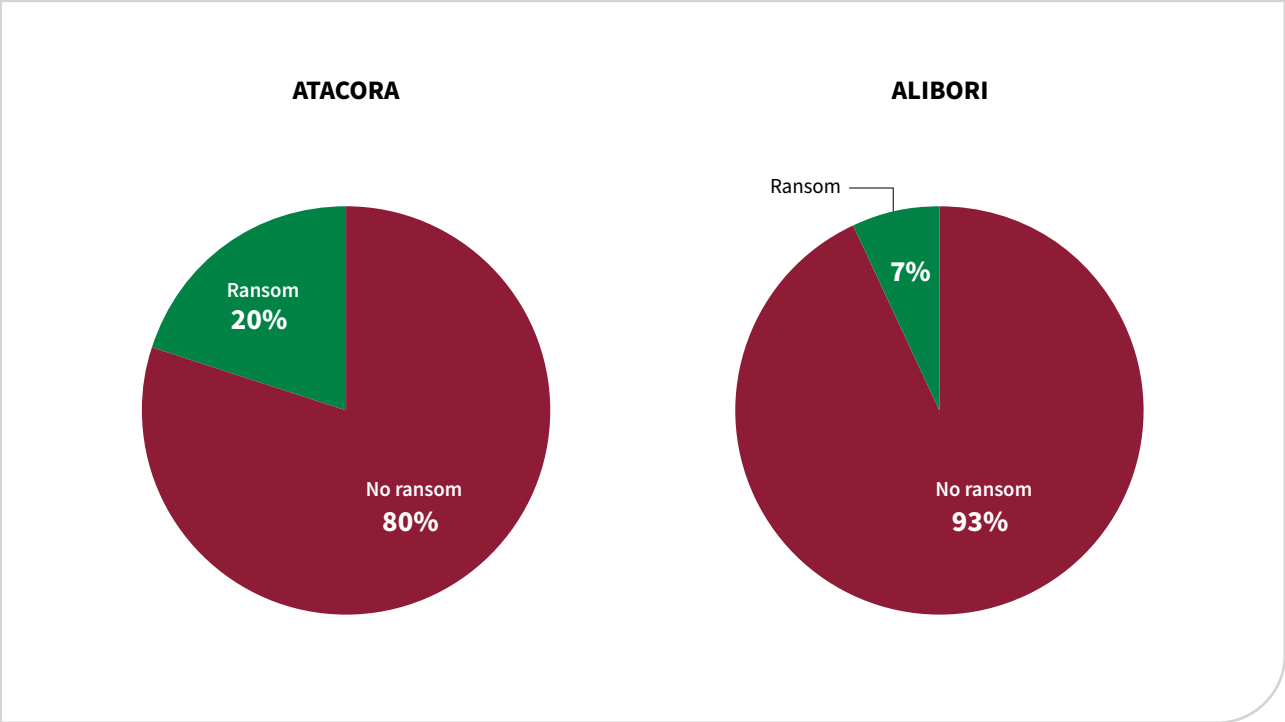
In one, suspected VEOs (most likely JNIM) targeted a wealthy pastoralist and demanded a ransom of CFA10 million (€15 260).[143] Given the level of suspicion and fear in communities (who do not even say the word 'jihadist' in case they are overheard or being spied on), talking about ransoms, which equate to armed group financing, is extremely sensitive.[144]

Kidnappings for ransom are generally well prepared given that they target individuals known to be wealthy, such as pastoralists, a key target for VEOs and other armed groups alike. They are most likely spied on for

several days to work out their habits and that ransom negotiations take place directly between the family of the victim and the VEO.[145]

Overall, however, ransoms are not considered to be the primary driver of the majority of kidnappings by JNIM and IS Sahel in northern Benin.[146] This mirrors trends in the Sahel, where in recent years strategic interests – in the shape of recruitment, intimidation, punishment and intelligence gathering – have repeatedly superseded profit-seeking as the primary motivations behind most kidnapping incidents targeting locals (see Box 2).[147]

Chart 10: Proportion of kidnapping incidents in northern Benin reportedly involving a ransom.



Source: Clingendael Consortium/ACLED; authors

Box 2: Kidnapping as a source of armed group financing in the Sahel

The kidnapping industry in the Sahel has changed drastically since the start of the security crisis in northern Mali in 2012. In the first decade of the 2000s, al-Qaeda affiliate groups were kidnapping and ransoming Westerners throughout the Sahel.

The kidnapping and ransoming of foreign nationals brought in significant revenues for extremist groups operating in northern Mali, and to some extent supported their later expansion across the subregion after 2012. Between 2003 and 2012, almost 100 Westerners (mostly tourists)[148] were kidnapped in the Sahel, generating a total of nearly US$90 million in ransoms, according to some estimates, for AQIM alone.[149] Kidnapping for ransom was therefore extremely lucrative and arguably the biggest source of financing for al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel at that time.

By 2017, the kidnapping industry had drastically changed. As foreign visitors dwindled, this forced a change in strategy. Sahelians became the primary targets; 97% of those abducted in Mali since 2012 have been locals.[150] Ransom requests became far less commonly reported, as well as substantially lower in value in cases in which they did occur. As such, financial motives seem to have given way to other strategic objectives.

Kidnap for ransom by non-VEOs

Since 2016, Benin has experienced waves of kidnappings where a ransom was reportedly requested. Thought to have evolved from a combination of banditry since 2005 and an imported crime from Nigeria, so-called criminal kidnappings are primarily an intra-herder phenomenon in Benin.[151]

Targets are typically from the herder community, often wealthy families that own or trade cattle. Of the 19 reported kidnapping incidents involving a ransom in Atacora, Alibori and Borgou, the victim was a cattle herder, breeder or trader, and/or a member of the Fulani community in 13 of them.[152] In some cases incidents reportedly involve the cooperation of someone from within the family itself.[153] These kidnappings are sometimes linked to cattle rustling, where the aggressors simultaneously steal cattle and take the herders hostage, reflecting trends evident elsewhere in the Sahel.[154]

In terms of geography, a number of kidnappings (31 since 2022) where the perpetrator is not thought to be linked to VEOs have been reported in the north of Alibori, (especially in the districts or towns bordering Niger) and in Atacora department, in the Matéri and Tanguieta communes in particular (with victims being kept at the Togolese border in the Boukoumbé mountains).[155] However, these kidnappings for ransom, believed to be perpetrated by actors other than JNIM and IS Sahel, have been largely concentrated further south, primarily in the neighbouring Borgou region and further south in Plateau.[156]

Until the middle of 2020, kidnappings for ransom had chiefly been understood as an intra-Fulani phenomenon that was dealt with by the community.[157] Since then, incidents surged and targeted a broader profile of individuals, both within the Fulani community, and beyond it, including a local official,[158] a school director,[159] and a businessman.[160]

In Ségbana commune alone, at least 16 successful kidnappings for ransom were recorded between 2020 and 2023.[161] The ransoms demanded ranged between CFA300 000 to CFA20 million (€457 to €30 490), with negotiations often bringing down the actual amount paid.[162] Because of the increase in cases and the high ransom figures involved, the issue started to become more publicised and so started to be taken seriously by the authorities.[163]

As the increase in kidnap for ransom occurred in parallel to the expansion of violent extremist groups into Benin, naturally many were concerned that the two phenomena were related and that kidnappings were funding JNIM and IS Sahel units operating in Benin.[164] However, sources pointed to a number of indicators which, when analysed together, suggest a slightly distinct phenomena, perpetrated by different actors.

The first is the timelines: kidnapping, primarily among the Fulani community, were a common occurrence in Benin long before the arrival of VEOs. And while the arrival of VEOs is likely to have disrupted existing criminal dynamics, it is unlikely that it would have put an end to so-called criminal kidnappings altogether. The second is that the geography is for the most part different: JNIM and IS Sahel established in Burkina Faso and Niger operate mostly in the north of the two most northern regions of Benin (Atacora and Alibori). A different set of actors, including bandits and Nigeria-based VEOs, tend to operate further south along the border with Nigeria.

Thirdly, there are notable differences in modus operandi. Reported kidnappings for ransom by unidentified perpetrators are typically carried out by groups on motorbikes. Most victims are driven away towards Nigeria, crossing forests and waterways, and travelling along tracks that are not frequently used. The kidnappers leave a Nigerian telephone number that the victim's family can call to make contact and negotiate the ransom.[165]

Once the funds have been collected by the family, they agree on a meeting point, often in Nigeria itself or in border areas, with Kainji National Park being a particular hotspot both for storing hostages and negotiating their release.[166] The ransom amount itself is often negotiated in Naira, the Nigerian currency. As one local leader in Ségbana explained:

> When they kidnap their victims, they take them into the bush to Nigeria and ask their parents to come and pay the money. The parents know who to call to get the money. They get together or sell their oxen to raise the money and then go and pay the kidnappers. The kidnappers tell them where to leave the money and at night they make a rendezvous. They hide somewhere where they can see the person, but he doesn't see them. When the money is deposited, they then tell the person who brought the money to turn around or go somewhere to find his kidnapped relative.[167]

All these elements point in the direction of a distinct phenomenon to abductions by JNIM and IS Sahel units operating at the borders of Niger and Burkina Faso, indicating instead a stronger link to actors in Nigeria.

Potential alliances between extremist elements in the Sahel and non-state armed groups in Nigeria (whether bandit groups or VEOs) have been a concern for over a decade. It has been suggested that one potential driver of JNIM expansion into northern Benin in the first place was the group's desire to create a corridor from the Sahel to Nigeria.[168] The kidnapping incidents reportedly conducted by Nigerian-based actors in areas under JNIM influence have further fuelled such concerns.

The geographic expansion of VEOs based in Nigeria and the Sahel bring their areas of operation increasingly close to each other. Nigeria-based VEOs have been moving into the north-west of Nigeria since 2013, and more recently 'incursions by members of [violent extremist groups in north-west Nigeria] into villages in the Alibori and Borgou departments to stock up on supplies, pray and preach to the population' have also been documented.[169]

In November 2021, a Niger State official claimed that the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) was trying to establish a 'caliphate' around the Kainji National Park (where, as mentioned, kidnappers are known to keep their hostages).[170] At the beginning of 2022, Nigeria's federal government ordered a large-scale military operation aiming to flush suspected-ISWAP elements out of the national park.[171] In October 2022, Nigerian military repelled a raid on a military base that holds captive a number of senior VEO leadership, in the town of New Bussa in Niger State, on the outskirts of the Kainji National Park.[172]

It is not clear which actors are predominantly behind the increasing incidence of kidnapping for ransom phenomena in northern Benin, although existing evidence suggests that they are based in Nigeria. Further, potential alliances between the different non-state armed groups and criminal actors operating in northern Benin and north-west Nigeria continues to require further investigation.

Conclusion and recommendations

Since 2021, JNIM, and to a lesser extent IS Sahel, have enhanced their operations and presence in northern Benin.[173] Civilians have borne the brunt of growing extremist violence. One facet of this increase in violence has been the surge in kidnappings reported since 2019, rising from just one recorded incident to 75 in 2023, 69% of which over this period are believed to have been at the hands of JNIM or IS Sahel.

This increase in kidnappings has caused widespread suffering for victims and their families. Further, given that VEOs in Benin are leveraging kidnappings to expand their recruits, gather intelligence, and punish individuals perceived to have breached promises to the groups, it also has major ramifications for wider society in the form of increased strength and influence for extremist groups.

Based on the findings of this research, and building upon existing literature on the expansion of VEOs into coastal West Africa, the links between armed actors and illicit economies, and the use of kidnapping as governance tool, we outline the following policy recommendations:

- **Develop an effective protection programme for defectors.** Many of the targets of kidnappings carried out by VEOs are individuals who have defected. Aside from the moral imperative to preserve life, defectors are a key source of information and so protecting them from reprisals is crucial for gathering intelligence. Furthermore, stronger guarantees of protection (together with a comprehensive amnesty programme as recommended above) are likely to incentivise defection in greater numbers. State authorities must ensure that defectors are not put at greater risk of reprisal by VEOs by releasing (suspected) former armed extremist group members without adequate risk mitigation measures and protection, to be tracked and used as bait in an effort to target other VEO elements.
- **Explore amnesty programmes for individuals who have joined VEOs.** Kidnapping for forced recruitment is one mechanism used by VEOs to bolster their ranks. Victims who seek to defect are not only at risk of punishment at the hand of VEOs, but are also likely to be targeted by state authorities (often sent to the Court for the Repression of Economic and Terrorism Crimes) with minimal scrutiny of their specific circumstances. Under the former president, Mohamed Bazoum, Nigerien authorities recognised the need for dialogue with violent extremists, and introduced a programme encouraging militants to defect as well as to prevent radicalisation in the first instance.[174] The Beninese government should adopt a similar approach and make dialogue an important feature of its counterterrorism strategy. Any demobilisation, deradicalisation and reintegration programmes should include vocational training or other pathways to gainful employment.
- **Reinforce local infrastructure to bolster community resilience towards kidnapping and other forms of violence.** Telephone network coverage in northern Benin, particularly those prone to kidnapping, needs to be strengthened. Doing so would facilitate communication and enable local residents to rapidly alert family members and the authorities alike in the event of a kidnapping. Furthermore, greater investment in the development of the road infrastructure, in particular rural roads, is paramount. Poor road conditions exacerbate safety hazards, forcing people to drive more slowly, leaving them more vulnerable to attacks. Improved roads would also allow the FAB to intervene more quickly and efficiently when reports of an abduction first emerge.
- **Incorporate kidnapping incidents into ECOWAS and national data collection mechanisms seeking to understand VEO activity.** Past experience in Burkina Faso underscores the correlation between kidnapping and the implantation of violent extremist groups in new areas. As they seek to gain a foothold, kidnappings increase as part of a broader strategy of intimidation and intelligence-gathering. Once their influence in a particular area is consolidated, kidnapping is less useful and cases decline. As such, the pervasiveness of kidnapping can act as a barometer of VEO entrenchment in a given area. To the extent feasible, ECOWARN databases should include data on ransoms, and be gender disaggregated.
- **Rebuild international cooperation structures with neighbouring countries.** In 2022, the governments of Benin and Niger signed a military cooperation agreement, which among other things provided a framework for intelligence sharing. However, in the wake of the coup d'état in Niger in July 2023, and in response to perceived antagonism on the part of President Talon's government, the military junta in Niger declared the agreement null and void. Given the particular geography, the movement of conflict actors across borders and the various push and pull factors driving the spillover of violent extremism into northern Benin, the government should immediately seek a resolution to the diplomatic standoff and re-establish military collaboration in the fight against VEOs and by extension, their ability to carry out kidnappings. In addition to targeted action against VEOs, further cooperation is required between Benin and Nigeria to strengthen law enforcement and military capacity to identify, track, disrupt and apprehend cross-border kidnapping operations and perpetrators.

Notes

1 For the purposes of this report, 'northern Benin' refers to the two northernmost departments of Atacora and Alibori.

2 The data on kidnapping incidents used in this report derive from a database consolidated by the authors. The database is built primarily on data provided by the Clingendael Consortium and from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED), supplemented by primary data collected by the authors. See the methodology section for further details.

3 A total of 20 recorded incidents. This, however, only includes kidnapping incidents of a political nature; kidnapping incidents involving purely criminal actors are not included in the database. See the methodology section for further details.

4 *Bénin: les deux touristes français ont été enlevés, leur guide assassiné*, France24, 5 May 2019, https://www.france24.com/fr/20190505-benin-deux-touristes-francais-enleves-guide-tue.

5 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/.

6 GI-TOC, Resilience to illicit economies and instability – Community dialogue, Natitingou, October 2023. Illicit economies can be defined as 'all markets in which there is illegality, whether that be in the sourcing or production, transport, sale or diversion of commodities from legal to illegal channels (see for example, 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/). While kidnapping for ransom is an overtly criminal market, where there is no ransom (as is the case in most of the kidnappings explored in this report), there is no transfer of value. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this report, kidnapping is analysed as an illicit economy, while recognising that financial incentives are not always relevant.

7 Six events were added to the database by the GI-TOC.

8 Furthermore, if fatalities or serious injuries are reported during the abduction or forced disappearance, the event is recorded as an 'attack' event instead. Therefore, the number of 'abductions/forced disappearances' in the ACLED database is an undercount of the total number of kidnappings. To adjust for this discrepancy, the GI-TOC added a supplementary 'kidnap' variable to the consolidated database, which codes all incidents as either a kidnap-related incident or not based on the ACLED 'sub-event type' *and* the incident notes. ACLED Codebook, available at: https://acleddata.com/knowledge-base/codebook/.

9 Where the motive behind the event is unclear, inclusion is determined by likelihood. In other words, events that could be political (whether that's VEOs or communal/ethnic armed groups), but are probably not criminal, are included in the ACLED database. Email exchange with an ACLED researcher, July 2023.

10 In many cases, ACLED codes 'unidentified armed group' ('inter' code 3, political militia) as conducting abductions or other types of violence when they have strong reasons to believe the armed group is a political militia but do not have clear details on the actor's identity. For example, there may be various reasons why an attack is likely to have been conducted by JNIM (e.g. other nearby attacks in which JNIM were confirmed as the perpetrators), but it could also have been, for example, a militia composed mostly of Fulani individuals unaffiliated with JNIM or IS Sahel. In these cases, the actor is coded as an 'unidentified armed group' to reflect the lack of clarity.

11 See for example: International Crisis Group, The social roots of jihadist violence in Burkina Faso's north, Africa Report n°254, 12 October 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-faso-north; and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, Rethinking the response to jihadist groups across the Sahel, Africa Programme Research Paper, Chatham House, March 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/rethinking-response-jihadist-groups-across-sahel.

12 Tweet from data analyst José Luengo-Cabrera (@J_LuengoCabrera), 14 December 2023, https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1735366710817927220.

13 Burkina Faso crisis continues to spiral, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 29 August 2023, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/burkina-faso-crisis-continues-to-spiral/.

14 The risk of spillover of violent extremism into the coastal states had been well-documented in the preceding years. See for example, International Crisis Group, The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa, Africa Briefing n°149, 20 December 2019, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-05/b149-jihadi-west-africa.pdf.

15 Ivory Coast: 16 dead in Grand Bassam beach resort attack, BBC News, 14 March 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35798502.

16 See ACLED, www.acleddata.com.

17 *Togo: Attaque terroriste à Kpendjal*, TogoWeb, 10 November 2021, https://togoweb.net/urgent-togo-attaque-terroriste-a-kpendjal/.

18 International Crisis Group, Keeping jihadists out of northern Côte d'Ivoire, Africa Briefing n°192, 11 August 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire.

19 Although there have been no reports of direct attacks by violent extremists in Ghana, across 2022 and 2023 there have been three recorded incidents involving suspected extremist militants, including arrests and reported presence.

20 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

21 For more detailed analysis of the drivers of communal violence in northern Benin, see Kars de Bruijne, Laws of attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover, Clingendael Institute, June 2021, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/laws-of-attraction.pdf.

22 Ibid.

23 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

24 Kars de Bruijne, Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours, Clingendael, December 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/conflict-in-the-penta-border-area-1.pdf.

25 In June 2023, for example, a group of eight young people disclosed that they had joined an (unspecified) VEO in the

village of Zambara, in Borgou's Kalale commune. They reported to have undergone several weeks of training and had been offered CFA400 000 (€ 612) per month.

26 ELVA, An assessment of the experiences and vulnerabilities of pastoralists and at-risk groups in the Atakora department of Benin, January 2023, https://elva.org/wp-content/uploads/Analytical-Report-EN-At-Risk-Groups-in-Atakora-Elva-31-January-2023.pdf.

27 Kars de Bruijne, Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours, Clingendael, December 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/conflict-in-the-penta-border-area-1.pdf.

28 Aimé Akéké, *Terrorisme au Bénin: l'Etat islamique revendique une attaque*, Banouto, 18 September 2022, https://www.banouto.bj/article/securite-humaine/20220918-terrorisme-au-benin-letat-islamique-revendique-une-attaque.

29 OECD/SWAC, *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa, West African Studies*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.

30 International Crisis Group, Containing militancy in West Africa's Park W, Africa Report N°310, 26 January 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w.

31 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/.

32 Ibid.

33 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/.

34 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/.

35 Kars de Bruijne, Despite military progress, it's not going well in northern Benin, Clingendael, November 2023, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/despite-military-progress-its-not-going-well-northern-benin.

36 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/.

37 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data. See Box 1, 'VEOs and illicit economies' for further details on the relationship and violence dynamics between VEOs and poachers in northern Benin.

38 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

39 Ibid.

40 There are, however, reports of a JNIM presence in the country as far back as 2018, as the VEO sought to establish roots through location reconnaissance missions, strategic alliances with communities, intelligence gathering and so on.

41 Jeannine Ella A Abatan and William Assanvo, Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin, ISS, June 2023, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Eng-WAR-42.pdf.

42 Heni Nsaiba, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ACLED–GI-TOC, October 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/; In July 2022, suspected JNIM did, however, kill ten pastoralists in a village near Materi reportedly for refusing to enlist: ACLED.

43 Interview with ELVA, June 2023, by phone.

44 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 *Le nord du Bénin touché par deux nouvelles attaques meurtrières en deux jours*, *Le Monde*, 4 May 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/04/le-nord-du-benin-touche-par-deux-nouvelles-attaques-meurtrieres-en-deux-jours_6172074_3212.html.

48 In Alibori, where IS Sahel also has a presence, increased violence against civilians by JNIM may be a result of competition. Given the contested nature of VEO control in this area, JNIM leaders may fear civilian collaboration with IS Sahel, resulting in greater levels of violence. Furthermore, the continued military pressure exerted upon VEOs across northern Benin may also play an important role, as JNIM and IS Sahel members may target civilians who they suspect of siding with the state.

49 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/.

50 Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/.

51 *Français disparus au Bénin : selon des sources sécuritaires, « la thèse d'un enlèvement se précise »*, *Le Monde*, 9 May 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/05/09/francais-disparus-au-benin-selon-des-sources-securitaires-la-these-d-un-enlevement-se-precise_5459939_3212.html.

52 Islamist group says holding Romanian hostage seized in Burkina, Reuters, May 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sahara-militants-idUSKBN0O41GF20150519.

53 *Bénin: les deux touristes français enlevés ont été libérés, deux militaires français tués pendant l'opération*, France Info, 10 May 2019, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/benin/benin-les-deux-touristes-francais-enleves-ont-ete-liberes-deux-militaires-francais-tues-pendant-l-operation_3437181.html.

54 Romanian hostage seized in Burkina Faso mine released after eight years, Reuters, 9 August 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-hostage-seized-burkina-faso-mine-released-after-eight-years-2023-08-09/.

55 Interview with a French military officer in the region at the time, by phone, August 2023.

56 Ibid.

57 Flore Berger and Anicet Zran, North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire: Between illicit economies and violent extremism, GI-TOC, September 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/north-east-cote-d-ivoire-illicit-economies-violent-extremism/.

58 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

59 Ibid.

60 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/.

61 Flore Berger and Anicet Zran, North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire: Between illicit economies and violent extremism, GI-TOC, September 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/north-east-cote-d-ivoire-illicit-economies-violent-extremism/.

62 Given that the security situation is so volatile, and that it is not always possible to distinguish between the different groups, the term VEO is used to describe general trends and events, and specific names of groups are used when the perpetrator of a particular incident has been confirmed. As mentioned earlier in the report, while JNIM is the dominant extremist actor operating in Atacora, the situation in Alibori is less clear-cut, with IS Sahel also operating there, albeit to a lesser degree.

63 With this type of kidnapping anyone can be targeted, for the most part, no matter who they are or their role in society. This notwithstanding, VEO activity in northern Benin is often highly sensitive to the ethnic make-up of local communities, both in terms of campaigning and recruitment. Kars de Bruijne, Despite military progress, it's not going well in northern Benin, Clingendael, November 2023, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/despite-military-progress-its-not-going-well-northern-benin.

64 Kidnapping is one example of a tactic used in one of the five strategies of terrorism as set out by Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, namely intimidation. See Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, The strategies of terrorism, *International Security*, 31(1), 49–80.

65 While the first violent incident on Beninese territory related to VEOs took place in May 2019, evidence suggests JNIM interest and activity in the country over the previous years too. Examples include a video from 2018 in which JNIM leaders called on members of the Fulani community to 'pursue jihad' in Benin (among other countries), as well as reports that militants from Mali conducted reconnaissance missions in Benin's Park W as early as 2014. International Crisis Group, The risk of jihadist contagion in West Africa, Africa Briefing n°149, 20 December 2019, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-05/b149-jihadi-west-africa.pdf.

66 Clingendael Consortium/ACLED data.

67 IS Sahel's presence in Benin is far less consolidated than JNIM's and thus cannot be considered to have established a foothold in the country.

68 Heni Nsaiba, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ACLED–GI-TOC, October 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/.

69 See Stathis Kalyvas, Wanton and senseless? the logic of massacres in Algeria, *Rationality and Society*, 11 (3), 243–85; and Stathis Kalyvas, The logic of terrorism in civil war, *Journal of Ethics*, 8 (1), 98–137.

70 Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/.

71 Data from ACLED, cited in Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/.

72 Interview with ACLED experts, by phone, June 2023.

73 Interview with community leaders, Tanguiéta and Matéri, June 2023.

74 Interview with a community leader, Matéri, June 2023.

75 GI-TOC, Resilience to illicit economies and instability – Community dialogue, Natitingou, October 2023.

76 Interview with security representatives, Atacora, June 2023.

77 Interview with an NGO supporting communities facing VEOs threats in Atacora and Alibori, 28 June 2023, by phone.

78 Local citizens who have encountered VEO elements in their villages report the latter speaking local languages, including Bariba, Dendi and Zarma, for example. Several participants at a community dialogue in Atacora reported personally knowing of residents who have joined VEOs or help them in various ways. GI-TOC, Resilience to illicit economies and instability – Community dialogue, Natitingou, October 2023.

79 In addition to hunters who form part of professional hunting associations and are generally afforded high levels of respect by society, low-level poachers – often socially marginalised – can also be targeted. Interview with community leaders, Atacora and Alibori, June 2023.

80 Focus group with communities from Tanguieta commune, October 2023.

81 Interview with stakeholders in Atacora region, including families of young men who 'disappeared', June 2023.

82 Reports of VEOs offering up to CFA100 000, a motorbike or a phone have been described by communities in Atacora and Alibori.

83 Interview with a local authority, Materi, June 2023, and telephone interview with researcher on violent extremism in northern Benin, June 2023.

84 Focus group with communities in Atacora and Alibori, June 2023.

85 GI-TOC, Resilience to illicit economies and instability - Community dialogue, Natitingou, October 2023; Interview with an NGO supporting communities facing VEOs threats in Atacora and Alibori, 28 June 2023, by phone.

86 Interview with local authorities, Matéri and Tanguiéta, June 2023.

87 Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/.

88 The evidence clearly supports the fact that JNIM operate in this way, based on ACLED data and past GI-TOC research in Burkina Faso showing the same strategy employed there. However, whether this also applies to IS Sahel, whose presence in northern Benin is far less consolidated and to whom far fewer kidnapping incidents have been attributed, is unclear, given the lack of reliable data.

89 Heni Nsaiba, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ACLED–GI-TOC, October 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/.

90 Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/.

91 This is not to say that the victims have been ideologically recruited – in other words, brainwashed – but rather that they obey orders through fear of punishment. In the case

of the poachers kidnapped in Karimama in March 2023, the attackers coerced them into collaborating with them through threats of violence should they disobey.

92 RFI, *Bénin: que sait-on de l'attaque de Loumbou-Loumbou?*, 24 September 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220924-b%C3%A9nin-que-sait-on-de-l-attaque-de-loumbou-loumbou.

93 Interview with several international and local sources who closely followed this case, by phone, June 2023.

94 Discussion with an expert on security in Benin, November 2023.

95 Interview with a local authority, Materi, June 2023.

96 Clingendael/ACLED consortium data.

97 Ibid.

98 Stathis N. Kalyvas (2018), Jihadi rebels in civil war, *Daedalus, 147 (1), Ending Civil Wars: Constraints & Possibilities,* pp. 36-47. For further reading on the use of terrorist tactics in the context of civil war, see Virginia Page Fortna (2015), Do terrorists win? Rebels' use of terrorism and civil war outcomes, *International Organization*, 69(3).

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