

Dangerous Liaisons

Exploring the risk of violent extremism along the border between Northern Benin and Nigeria

Kars de Bruijne
Clara Gehrling

Clingendael Report



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Executive summary

It is generally accepted that violent extremism is a problem in northern Benin. Currently, attention is overwhelmingly devoted to northern Alibori and western Atacora and this problem is viewed as a ‘spillover’ from the Sahel. But this is only part of the story.

This report points to a number of disturbing signals which, in combination, point to a problem of violent extremism along Benin’s border with Nigeria.

1. Suffocating canaries in coal mines indicate dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. A **variety of strange signals in Northern Benin along the border with Nigeria** are like these canaries: they point at dangerous liaisons between violent extremist groups. Closer relationships with bandit groups seem to facilitate this. This report makes the following observations:
 - Banditry is re-emerging in JNIM’s zones of operation in Benin. Those bandits seem to have Nigerian connections.
 - Violent extremists are present in Kainji Lake National Park (Nigeria) just across the border from the Borgou Department. Evidence suggests this involves Sahelian extremists (likely JNIM). Another group would be Darul Salam – a group linked to Boko Haram, if not fully affiliated – with an open attitude towards bandits.
 - There has been a strong increase in the movement of unidentified armed actors along the Borgou border with Niger State and in banditry-related incidents since March 2023. The evidence suggests that there is a direct link with those operating in Kainji Lake National Park.
 - Since March 2023, unidentified armed groups have had a concealed presence in the Forêt de Trois Rivières between southern Alibori and the Borgou Department.
 - Bandits and unidentified armed groups are known to move towards Kebbi State from Sokoto. It is alleged that these include various Darul Salam fighters with links to the Sahel.

2. There are deep connections between North West Nigeria and North East Benin due to **longstanding social, ethnic and religious connections**, particularly in the former 'cross-border' Borgu Empire:
 - The northern-most border area (North East Alibori and Kebbi State) sees intra-ethnic cross-border connections between the Hausa and the Nigerian Zamfara Fulbe respectively. A risk in this area are ethnic tensions between the Hausa and the Fulbe.
 - The area of the former Borgu Empire (Borgou Department and Niger State) has a distinct cross-border political entity. On both sides of the border, people tend to identify as one Bariba/Boo community with shared customary institutions. There are high farmer-herder tensions involving autochthonous Fulbe. There is also a fear of kidnapping by Zamfara Fulbe.
 - Another risk in the former Borgu Empire concerns the Dambanga hunting groups. These groups operate cross-border in defiance of a Benin government ban but are pitched against extremists in Kainji and have been used by the Nigerian military. This discrepancy can generate tensions between the two countries.
 - Two non-violent reformist movements – the Yan Izala movement and the Jama'at Tabligh – are present along the border. Their reach has grown strongly in the border area of Northern Benin during the last ten years.

3. A well-developed cross-border trade system operates between the Nigerian and Beninese border. This system generates livelihoods for many people in the area. **Livelihoods are at risk:**
 - There is a variety of markets and crossings connecting North West Nigeria and Northern Benin. Unidentified armed groups and Darul Salam operate in these hubs.
 - People's livelihoods are highly dependent on cross-border trade. Interviews revealed frustration and a strong sense of grievance towards both Nigerian and Beninese government policies that are perceived to put livelihoods under stress.
 - On the one hand, consistent problems reported are a ban on cereal exports and soybeans, and accompanying border restrictions. Both have a negative impact on livelihoods.
 - On the other hand, the end of fuel subsidies in Nigeria at the time of research for this report had a severe impact on people's livelihoods (and on communities in general).

4. The above three main observations suggest that **a very problematic situation is emerging along the Nigerian-Benin border**. Not only are there numerous indications of extremist activities and a link between bandits and extremists along the border but also there are clear social links that facilitate cross-border exchange and real livelihood needs that create vulnerabilities to recruitment. The governments of Benin and Nigeria urgently need to move into action. Three things could be done:
- Coordinate and step up the military response by: revamping regional security cooperation within ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States); bilateral security cooperation for hot-pursuit, intelligence sharing and coordination; and a joint strategy for cross-border hunting groups.
 - Prioritise people's livelihoods. This should involve cushioning livelihood effects of the ban on cereals (and cutting of fuel subsidies) to reduce vulnerability to recruitment.
 - Be more flexible and agile to respond to rapidly changing context by closely monitoring border markets for sudden vulnerabilities, and demanding more flexible donor programming and funding so that programming can be really flexible.

Introduction

For years, politicians, researchers, policy makers and security officials have speculated about links between extremists in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

Ten years ago a study pointed to Benin as a potential link between Nigeria and the Sahel. Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan similarly warned about the training of Boko Haram fighters in Mali and Niger.¹ In 2015, emerging Islamic State affiliates in the Sahel and Lake Chad spurred new speculation. In 2019, the UN Security Council warned of the emergence of a joint Islamic State logistical base in Nigeria's Sokoto.² And in 2020, the International Crisis Group warned that Nigeria's North West region could soon become a corridor for Sahelian extremists.³

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- 1 Blum, C. (2014). Cross-Border Flows between Nigeria and Benin: What are the Challenges for (Human) Security? *FES Peace and Security Series* No. 15. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/10883.pdf>. In 2013, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs also stated its military had acquired evidence of Boko Haram fighters training in Mali's north. Cummings, R. (2017). A Jihadi Takeover Bid in Nigeria? The Evolving Relationship between Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida, *CTC Sentinel*, 10(11). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-jihadi-takeover-bid-in-nigeria-the-evolving-relationship-between-boko-haram-and-al-qaida/>.
 - 2 United Nations Security Council. (2019). Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council. <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2019%2F570&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>; Similarly, The Soufan Center raised the possibility of ISGS and ISWAP merging cells in North Western Nigeria, not far from the borders of Mali and Burkina Faso. The Soufan Center. (2019). *IntelBrief: The Sahel is a Growing Arena of Competition for Jihadist Groups*. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-sahel-is-a-growing-arena-of-competition-for-jihadist-groups/>.
 - 3 International Crisis Group. (2020). *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem*. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>. On Al Qaeda speculation see Zenn, J. and Weiss, C. (2021). *Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise*. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15(5), 46–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27073436>.

It is clear what motivates these warnings: a link between Lake Chad and the Sahel is a major opportunity for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State to boast about their profiles as leaders of global jihad.

Yet, for just as many years, these ideas have been dismissed as lacking sufficient empirical basis. This report warns that evidence of a link between the Sahel and Lake Chad is now mounting.

Mounting evidence

In March 2023, a report from the Hudson Institute led to the realisation that Nigerian extremists had expanded further into North West and Central Nigeria than was publicly known. This came on the back of incidents where extremists from Burkina Faso had crossed into Nigeria in 2020 as well as attempts to create an extremists bridgehead in Benin towards Nigeria (March-June 2022).⁴

This report presents evidence from the border area between Nigeria and Benin that points to a worrying reality. While still at the early stages, there are indications of a sustained presence of violent extremists along the Nigerian-Beninese border. Data from the Clingendael Institute shows a peak in the movement of unidentified armed groups in 2023 along Benin's border with Nigeria. Of concern is that more than one group seems to be involved. For the first time, there is substantial evidence that some of these include extremists from both the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

A game-changer?

It is important to understand the emergence of nascent links between extremists from the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, as this could be a game-changer for West Africa.

One reason is that it might change regional responses to violent extremism. Current responses include semi-ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing' such as the G5-Sahel, Multinational Task Force (Sahel) the Accra Initiative and Conseil d'Entente (West Africa). For these ad hoc coalitions a key problem has been that

4 De Bruijne, K. (2022). Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours. The Clingendael Institute.

Nigeria – still West Africa’s largest military and economic power – has remained at a distance. A Nigerian entry into the fight with West Africa’s most successful insurgency movement since the jihadist movement in the 19th century could set in motion new dynamics.

Another reason is that the newest expansions of violent extremism should be a wake-up call for West African and Western governments alike. It is clear that the response in the Sahel has been ineffective. The response has been largely one of playing catch up; violent extremist organisations (VEOs) continue to outperform West African armies as well as Western and Russian support to these armies. While hardly a novel insight at this point in time, the presence of VEOs in the Benin-Nigeria border zone shows once again that extremists are more resilient militarily than the state is. VEOs also have social agendas that speak to people’s needs in ways that West African states and donor programming have not been able to do. The response can no longer be business as usual.

Research design

This report adopts the following research design.

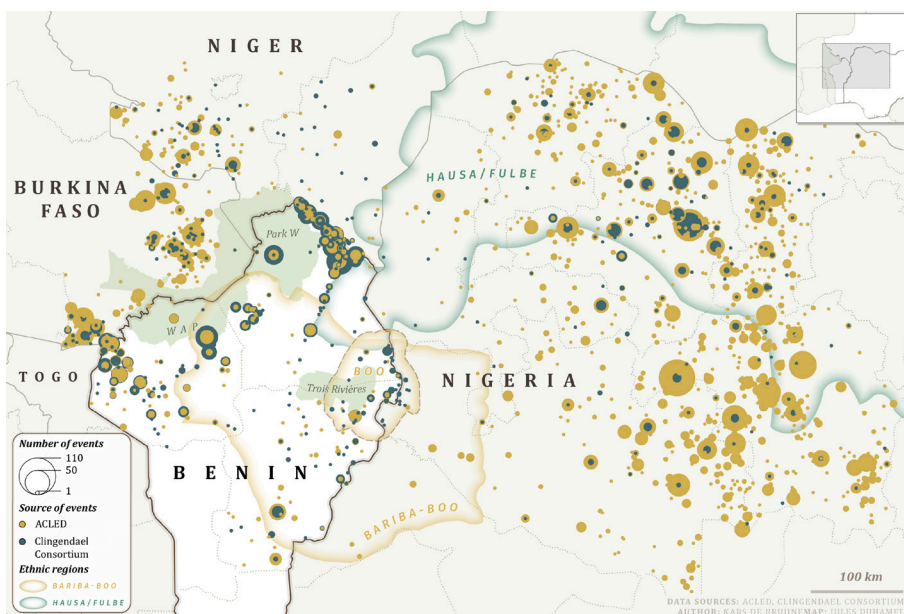
It starts by exploring the nascent indications of violent extremists along the border between Northern Benin and North West Nigeria. Subsequently, it explores specific links between Nigeria and Benin, ranging from social and ethnic links to religious ties and cross-border trade connections. It seeks to identify the existing risk factors that could facilitate further immersion and expansion of violent extremists in the area.

Two specific areas are researched. The border between Northern Benin and North West Nigeria comprises several distinct zones. In the North, the border area between North East Alibori (Benin) and Kebbi State (Nigeria) is mainly populated by the Hausa and Fulbe and formed part of the Sokoto caliphate in the 19th century. Below this area is the border between the Borgou/South East Alibori in Benin and Niger State in Nigeria. This area is inhabited by the Bariba and Boo (and the Fulbe) and largely overlaps with the pre-colonial Borgu kingdom.

Methodology

This report relies on a mixed method design used on both sides of the border.

Figure 1 Political violence and disorder along Benin's border (2021-2023)



First, four quantitative sources. First, ACLED data on Nigeria, Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso. Second, a database on Northern Benin (since March 2020) from a consortium led by the Clingendael Institute on all forms of political violence and disorder. Third, data collected in North West Nigeria (Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi and Niger State) since May 2023 on all forms of political violence and disorder. These sources allowed us to trace in detail the activities of armed groups and the changes in modalities and locations. Fourth, a database seeking to track the movement of violent extremist actors in Benin (since early 2021), Niger and Burkina Faso (since July 2022). Figure 1 shows all data.

Second, qualitative data was collected in both Nigeria and Benin. About 20 interviews based on a semi-structured set of questions (Annex 1) were conducted in North West Nigeria with informed experts and insiders on the presence and nature of violent extremist groups in Kebbi and Niger State (reflecting the two cross-border zones of interest). The data was collected from

November–December 2023 by Dr Murtala Ahmed Rufa’i and James Barnett. In addition, about ten targeted interviews were conducted in Kebbi and Niger state by a Nigerian security specialist.

In Benin in November 2023, 50 key informant interviews were carried out based on a standard list of questions (see Annex 1). The sampling involved 25 interviews in each of the two zones of interests: the North-Eastern Alibori-Kebbi state border and the Borgou-Niger state border. Interviews were conducted in 14 villages (see Figure 2). Although this data was ethnically diverse it was unbalanced in its gender representation, with only five out of the 50 interviewees being female.

Figure 2 Interview locations in Benin



Report structure

The report starts with a primer on violent extremist groups in Nigeria (Chapter 1). It then moves on to examine indicators that point to violent extremism along the border between Nigeria and Benin (Chapter 2).

The subsequent chapters explore the social and economic risks in more detail. Chapter 3 considers cross-border ethnic relations and social tensions and also explores cross-border religious movements.

Chapter 4 considers cross-border trade and identifies specific challenges to people's livelihoods – with cereals and fuel being risk factors.

Finally, this report ends with a summary and recommendations for the government of Benin, the federal governments of Nigeria and the state governments of Kebbi and Niger.

1 A primer on violent extremism in North West Nigeria and Benin

The North West of Nigeria is the heartland of criminal gangs, known as ‘bandits’. But North West Nigeria also has a violent extremism problem.⁵

Some years ago, the state governors in Nigeria expressed concern over VEO intrusions into the North West. In June 2019, the commander of the Joint Task Force Operation Hadarin Daji, Jide Ogunlade, stated: ‘Jihadists and terrorists have now infiltrated the ranks of bandits that are operating in the bushes of Zamfara’, adding that ‘banditry is now heading towards terrorism’.⁶ According to the International Crisis Group, two Boko Haram splinter factions have encroached into the North Western region where they tap into community grievances and form alliances with herder-affiliated militias and criminal groups.⁷ A recent article has argued that violent extremists from each of the three principal factions in Nigeria – JAS (Boko Haram), ISWAP (Islamic State’s West Africa Province) and Ansaru (Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan) – have established a certain foothold in North West Nigeria.⁸

1.1 The basis: banditry in North West Nigeria

The starting point for any meaningful analysis of conflict dynamics in North West Nigeria is banditry (see Figure 3). The total number of bandits is estimated to be in the low tens of thousands.⁹ Their activities range from kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, rape and armed motorcycle raids on villages to, increasingly, forced labour,

5 Zenn, J. (2012). Boko Haram’s Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria. CTC Sentinel, 5(10). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/boko-harams-dangerous-expansion-into-northwest-nigeria/>.

6 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

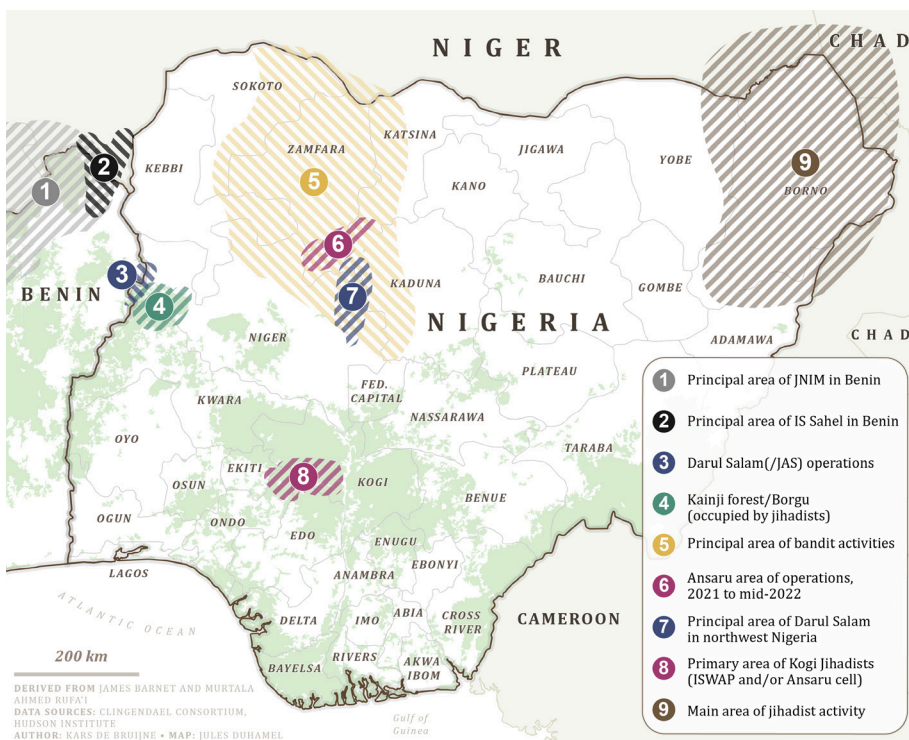
7 Ibid.

8 Barnett, J. and Rufa’i, M. (2023). A “Sahelian” or a “Littoral” Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria’s Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

9 Aljazeera, 2022. Who are the ‘bandits’ terrorising Nigeria’s ‘Wild Wild West’? <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/3/29/who-are-the-armed-bandits-of-northwest-nigeria>.

extortion/taxation and mining.¹⁰ Banditry has resulted in several thousand deaths, the displacement of millions of people, and large-scale economic destruction. The states of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara have been particularly affected.¹¹

Figure 3 Main areas of armed violence



10 Premium Times. (2022). Merchants of Terror (1): Paying blood taxes, helpless communities sustain Nigeria’s terrorists. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/557418-merchants-of-terror-1-paying-blood-taxes-helpless-communities-sustain-nigerias-terrorists.html>; Premium Times. (2022). Merchants of Terror (2): Inside the multi-million naira farming sustaining Nigeria’s terrorists. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/561000-merchants-of-terror-2-inside-multi-million-naira-farming-sustaining-nigerias-terrorists.html>; Premium Times. (2022). Merchants of Terror (3): A reporter’s journey into enclaves of Nigeria’s terrorists. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/562694-merchants-of-terror-3-a-reporters-journey-into-enclaves-of-nigerias-terrorists.html>; Premium Times. (2024). Investigation: Inside illegal mining operations of notorious Nigerian terrorist. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/653658-investigation-inside-illegal-mining-operations-of-notorious-nigerian-terrorist.html>.

11 Folahanmi, A. (2023). Contested Forgiveness: Unsolicited Amnesty and the Reintegration of ‘Repentant’ Bandits in Northwest Nigeria. *Peace Review*, 35(3), 511-523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2023.2208539>; Ojo, J. S. et al. (2023). Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria. *Democracy and Security*, 19(4), 319-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2023.2164924>.

Banditry dates as far back as pre-colonial times when highway robbery and cattle rustling were common.¹² Over the last few decades, banditry has greatly increased due to factors such as political and economic neglect, resource competition, ethnic and religious tensions, corrupt distribution policies, and population growth.¹³ But the banditry problem took on a new dimension in 2011. A key factor was the radicalisation of long-standing competition over ancestral land and water resources. This rivalry – between the predominantly nomadic Fulbe herders and the mainly sedentary Hausa farmers – was further fuelled by environmental degradation, allocation policies favouring farmers, and an influx of arms in the region. All of these factors undermined traditional mediation systems and led to a sharp intensification of the conflict.¹⁴

The first bandit group, known as *Kungiyar Gayu* (group of youths), emerged in 2011 in Zamfara state and was led by the Fulbe's Kundu and Buharin Daji, with the aim of addressing long-standing injustices that the pastoral communities felt subjected to.¹⁵ This opened the gateway for a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Armed vigilante groups, known as *yan sa kai*, first emerged within the Hausa communities and they mainly targeted the ethnic Fulbe.¹⁶ To protect their cattle from theft and to avenge vigilante violence, Fulbe militias, referred to as *yan-bindiga*, also began to form.¹⁷ Between 2011 and 2014, the Fulbe militia groups

12 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>

13 Ibid; Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>; International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

14 Hassan, I. and Barnett, J. (2022). Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem: Explaining the Conflict Drivers. Centre for Democracy and Development. <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/reports/northwest-nigeria-s-bandit-problem-explaining-the-conflict-drivers>.

15 Jamiu, A. (2022). A Rural Crime Wave in Nigeria: How the farm banditry crisis is fueling vigilantes hellbent on reprisals against ethnic Fulanis. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-rural-crime-wave-in-nigeria/>.

16 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

17 Ibid.

and bandits rapidly grew in their numbers and size, some motivated by self-protection or ethnic affiliation, and others by economic opportunism.¹⁸

It is very difficult to make a distinction between these Fulbe militias and criminal gangs, which has given rise to 'banditry' being used as a general term.¹⁹ Today, bandits in the highly affected states of the North West (Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara) are estimated to number around 30,000 operating in about 100 gangs (most of them being based in Zamfara).²⁰ Bandit gangs draw on the grievances of Fulbe herders and they use anti-government discourse to rally support.²¹ However, bandits mainly engage in economic activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and looting. In recent years, the gold mining sector has also been targeted by bandit gangs. Particularly Zamfara State and its

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- 18 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>; Folahanmi, A. (2023). Contested Forgiveness: Unsolicited Amnesty and the Reintegration of 'Repentant' Bandits in Northwest Nigeria. *Peace Review*, 35(3), 511-523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2023.2208539>.
- 19 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>; Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>.
- 20 Locci, A. (2023). Nigeria's "Wild West": Insecurity, Pastoralism and Banditry in the Muslim North. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/nigerias-wild-west-insecurity-pastoralism-and-banditry-in-the-muslim-north-117452>; The size of the gangs can considerably vary from more than 1,000 fighters to as few as ten. The organisational structure of these bandit warlords can be defined as a form of hierarchy. They each have a leader (Kachalla) who is supported by a deputy and another person in command (Smally) who will replace the Kachalla during operations when he is absent. During significant operations, it is common for three or four gangs to join forces, and each 'Kachalla' group contributes personnel and motorcycles for the endeavour. Madueke, K.L. (2023). Driving Destruction: Cattle rustling and instability in Nigeria. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Kingsley-L-Madueke-Driving-destruction-Cattle-rustling-and-instability-in-Nigeria-GI-TOC-January-2022.pdf>.
- 21 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>.

increase in artisanal gold production has attracted gangs who have begun to tax mining.²²

The result is that some leaders are referred to as ‘bandit warlords,’ as some of them govern and rule over vast territory – in what could be seen as proto-states (others remain mainly extractive).²³ Among the most notorious, for instance, are the bandit warlords Dogo Gide and Kachalla Turji.²⁴ Dogo Gide controls agriculture and rules through neo-feudal sharecropping agreements. Another, Turji, builds mosques in local villages while dispensing harsh justice against petty criminals.²⁵

Because bandits dominate the (crowded) violence landscape, it has been difficult for violent extremists to enter this market of violence; instead violent extremists have had to define their position vis-à-vis the bandits.²⁶ Despite the obvious links that are present, the relationship between these two groups remains as an unattended marriage. By and large, violent extremists abide by some form of political ideology which contradicts the often more economically driven bandits.²⁷

22 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>; Premium Times. (2024). Investigation: Inside illegal mining operations of notorious Nigerian terrorist. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/653658-investigation-inside-illegal-mining-operations-of-notorious-nigerian-terrorist.html>.

23 Barnett, J. (2021). The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria: A rare look inside the lives and minds of those responsible for killing and displacing thousands of civilians in Nigeria. The New Lines Magazine. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-bandit-warlords-of-nigeria/>; Barnett, J. and Rufa’i, M. (2021). The other insurgency: Northwest Nigeria’s worsening bandit crisis. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigerias-worsening-bandit-crisis/>.

24 Similar figures are Dankarami, Dangote, Halilu, Shehu Rekeb, Ado Aleiro, Hassan Dantawaye, Alhaji Shingi.

25 Barnett, J. (2021). The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria: A rare look inside the lives and minds of those responsible for killing and displacing thousands of civilians in Nigeria. The New Lines Magazine. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-bandit-warlords-of-nigeria/>.

26 According to some reports the jihadists have successfully penetrated the ranks of bandit gangs in the states of Niger, Kaduna and Zamfara by tempting them with promises of logistical and intelligence support. Furthermore, they have deployed special envoys with the purpose of luring bandits into their ranks, and as part of their recruitment effort they have employed religious preachers who have preyed on grievances of injustice and alleged mistreatment suffered by herders. Daily Trust. (2021). Investigation: Boko Haram, Others In Mass Recruitment of Bandits. <https://dailytrust.com/boko-haram-others-in-mass-recruitment-of-bandits/>.

27 Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a “Banditization” of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

Another factor is that some bandits have amassed significant power and are not inclined to cede control to extremists. A final problem is that bandit groups are fragmented, which results in complex alliance puzzles for extremists – aligning with one set of bandits often pits them against other bandit gangs.²⁸

1.2 Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP)

The first extremist group is the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP was formed as a result of a split within Boko Haram – a group operating in North East Nigeria – in early 2016.

ISWAP has sought to expand from North East Nigeria. In the North Central region, it has done so with some success. Some reports of ISWAP activity come from the Central region where, in Kogi State, ISWAP allegedly absorbed an 'indigenous' jihadist movement, albeit the resulting network appears to operate rather autonomously.²⁹ Yet, in the North West this has proved to be difficult. ISWAP has sought to recruit bandits to support its agenda, but the group's rather strict code prohibiting the killing of Muslims, cattle rustling and all other banditry-related activities was not readily accepted.³⁰

An ISWAP presence in the North West was attempted by the future ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi (the son of 'Boko Haram' founder Muhammed Yusuf) in 2016. Al-Barnawi relocated commanders to the North West seeking to recruit bandits and to establish ISWAP cells. But senior ISWAP defectors have argued that once they had reached the North West, al-Barnawi lost command as some commanders joined bandit gangs.³¹

ISWAP tried again in 2019. This time it forged links with North Western communities along the border with Niger Republic: Magaba, Dankwo and

28 Ibid; Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

29 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

30 Ibid.

31 Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

Derin-Deji, Kebbi State.³² ISWAP offered cost-of-living support through monthly stipends being paid to some members and it reportedly leveraged discontent among certain communities by sponsoring clerics (both from the community and outsiders) critical of corruption and democracy.³³

In July 2022, ISWAP was successful, for the first time, in launching an attack on Kuje Prison (close to Abuja) in collaboration with other extremist groups.³⁴ Another attack followed on Kainji Lake prison (some sources claim ISWAP presence in the adjacent Park, see below). ISWAP participation in this operation mainly came from the presence in Kogi State and ISWAP main presence in North East.³⁵ The leader for some of these operations was Abu Ekrima who headed a recruitment and prisons break cell. Throughout 2023, Abu Ekrima visited four times Benin (specifically in Kalale).³⁶

1.3 Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

Another Islamic State-related group – the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP, formerly known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara or ISGS) – has also operated briefly in North West Nigeria.

In October 2018, violent extremists suspected of being affiliates of ISGS entered the communities of Tangaza and Gudu in Sokoto State in North West Nigeria from the Republic of Niger. These communities referred to them in

32 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

33 Ibid.

34 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>. ISWAP also staged an attack on the Wawa Prison facility in Kainji, but see below; Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>; International Crisis Group notes that there are indications of transactional relationships between ISWAP and various armed groups in the North-West. International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

35 Notes from James Barnett, 22 February 2024.

36 Source A, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024.

Hausa as ‘Lakurawa’.³⁷ The group was initially welcomed at local level because the Lakurawa provided protection against bandits. However, the relationship deteriorated due to ISGS’ strict mode of governance. In 2019 an unconfirmed attack in Sokoto State bordering the Republic of Niger was claimed by the Islamic State official media.³⁸

In Benin, ISGS operations date back to 2019 when some ISGS presence was reported in Malanville commune and Karimama communes, with reports of their locations in Park W, Woro Chateaux, Malanville town and Karimama. Shortly afterwards, in 2020, ISGS presence was reported across the border in Katanga, Niger.³⁹ However, it was only in September 2022 that ISGS re-appeared. ISSP claimed responsibility for two attacks near Guéné, Alibori department. The first on 2 July in Torouzougu and the second on 4 July near Alfakoara.

Since September 2022, there have been no claims by ISSP in Benin. At the same time, ISSP presence in the form of localised networks and collaboration with other violent groups continues. A key example comes from Rountu Tanda, a hamlet along the Niger-Benin border.⁴⁰ Before 2022, one individual lived with his family and close associates in Rountu Tanda, before moving to an undisclosed village in Benin where he pledged allegiance to JNIM. Yet later, the individual with two associates travelled to Abala (Mali) where they pledged allegiance to ISGS. The individual was killed in October 2022 by JNIM but associates kept their allegiance to ISGS (they moved temporarily to Benin but returned). Since August 2023 tensions between this ISGS group and JNIM have mounted; JNIM issued threats in August 2023 but in December 2023 and January 2024 infighting took place in the village and surroundings, including targeted killings by JNIM on 19 December, 19 January and 23 January (the latter failing, as the person fled towards the Nigerian border).⁴¹

37 Barnett, J. and Rufa’i, M. (2023). A “Sahelian” or a “Littoral” Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria’s Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

38 Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a “Banditization” of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

39 De Bruijne, K. (2022). Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin’s Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours. The Clingendael Institute.

40 Geocoordinates: 12.0208, 3.2749.

41 Information from undisclosed sources during 2023 and 2024.

1.4 Darul Salam (/JAS)

A third extremist group is Darul Salam, a peculiar offshoot of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (JAS), better known as Boko Haram. Boko Haram has been most successful in establishing a foothold in the North West and forming alliances with bandits. Three reasons might explain this.

First, its commanders have enjoyed a considerable degree of operational autonomy enabling them to merge with bandit groups that are loosely structured. Second, Boko Haram seems to have refrained from condemning bandits who have targeted Muslims, as the group has aligned itself with the ultra-takfiri ideology which rationalises its tactics by declaring 'non-convert' Muslims to be 'apostates'. This includes almost anyone who does not opt to live under the Boko Haram caliphate.⁴² Third, Boko Haram may readily claim bandit activities as its own: a gang qualifies as a 'cell' as long as it attributes attacks to religious motives, regardless of whether this claim bears any truth.⁴³

'Darul Salam' is currently the most significant violent extremist group operating in Nigeria's North West. After the killing of Boko Haram's leader Shekau by ISWAP in North East Nigeria, an estimated 2,000 Boko Haram fighters relocated to North Western Nigeria in Zamfara, Niger and Kaduna States. As Barnett and Rufa'i show, one 'Sadiku', collaborated with the remnants of the defunct Darul Salam to facilitate the relocation of Boko Haram fighters to the North West.⁴⁴ Sadiku is known to have pledge allegiance to Boko Haram leaders (Shekau and Bakura). Generally, people and security forces across Nigeria tend to reference 'Darul Salam' when being interviewed. Darul Salam is linked to attacks on the Abuja-Kaduna railroad, the Kuje Prison escape and the attempted Wawa Prison escape.

42 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>; Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

43 See for example the Kankara abduction in December 2020 as explained in Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

44 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>. See also an upcoming study on the history of Darul Salam.

However, Darul Salam is a complex outfit.⁴⁵ A key point is that it remains unclear how much operational control Sadiku has over 'Darul Salam' (with some arguing that Darul Salam and Sadiku's men remain distinct entities).⁴⁶ Moreover, there are likely bandits among reported 'Darul Salam' presence. For example, various of Sadiku's fighters have collaborated with local bandits under the cover of 'Darul Salam' but seemingly for economic purposes, as they extract revenue through abductions and cattle rustling.⁴⁷ Ideological disagreements result in occasional rifts. Finally, it is not clear how independent some of the ideological Darul Salam commanders (hence not bandits) operate from the Sadiku network (including not for groups collaborating with these commanders).⁴⁸

Because of this complexity 'Darul Salam' is best used as a catch-all for all non-ISWAP, non-Ansaru Nigerian jihadists/extremists.⁴⁹ Some but not all of the fighters may have pledged loyalty to the current JAS leader (via Sadiku).

1.5 Ansaru

A fourth extremist group that operates in North West Nigeria is Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan, known as Ansaru. The group – also a splinter of Boko Haram – was active between 2011 and 2014 but following the arrest of its leader in 2016 it became completely dormant.⁵⁰ In 2019 the group resurfaced but in name only as it shares little else with the defunct group and its members.⁵¹

45 We owe this point to James Barnett.

46 Notes from James Barnett, 22 February 2024.

47 A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

48 Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist. Notes from James Barnett, 30 April 2024.

49 At local level the relationship between Darul Salam and bandits might be less cordial; Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

50 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

51 Zenn, J. (2023). Brief: Dogo Gide's Bandits in Northwestern Nigeria Potentially Aligning With Jihadists. The Jamestown Foundation. Terrorism Monitor 21(17). <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-dogo-gides-bandits-in-northwestern-nigeria-potentially-aligning-with-jihadists/>. The group has been silent for a year; Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

Early on, Ansaru was linked to aggrieved Fulbe herdsman communities, but Ansaru '2.0' sided with non-Fulbe Muslim communities plagued by bandit gangs mainly made up of Fulbe herdsman.⁵² However, this relationship remains ambiguous. Ansaru released a Fulfulde note urging the Fulbe to join its movement in 2019.⁵³ Ansaru allegedly collaborated with the notorious bandit warlord Dogo Gide (Kwiambana Forest, Kaduna and Zamfara State and more recently Niger) in order to protect him during an attack on another gang leader and through arms deals.⁵⁴ In around 2020 there was talk of Ansaru attempting to form a relationship with other smaller violent groups located in Zamfara State (Munhaye, Tsafe, Zurmi, Shinkafi and Kaura Namoda Local Government Areas (LGAs)).⁵⁵ Due to these ties there have been some reports of bandit-related activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and the sharing of operational knowledge (e.g. assembling IEDs – improvised explosive devices).⁵⁶ Ansaru '2.0' was suspected of communicating with its Sahelian counterpart, JNIM, which might be an indication that parts of its membership are still composed of the initial Ansaru that was active until 2014.

Ansaru seems to be largely dormant, after having lost its stronghold Damari in July 2022. Yet some cells could exist in Kaduna State (Birnin Gwari), Zamfara State (Rafi Forest), Western Katsina (Batsari, Dan Musa, Funtua and Kankara

52 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

53 Zenn, J. and Weiss, C. (2021). Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15(5), 46-58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27073436?seq=1>.

54 Daily Trust. (2021). Investigation: Boko Haram, Others In Mass Recruitment of Bandits. <https://dailytrust.com/boko-haram-others-in-mass-recruitment-of-bandits/>; Zenn, J. (2023). Brief: Dogo Gide's Bandits in Northwestern Nigeria Potentially Aligning With Jihadists. The Jamestown Foundation. *Terrorism Monitor* 21(17). <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-dogo-gides-bandits-in-northwestern-nigeria-potentially-aligning-with-jihadists/>; Barnett, J. et al. (2022). Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? *CTC Sentinel*, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>.

55 Trying to convince them by supplying AK-47 rifles from al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) at a very low market price. International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

56 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

LGAs) and in the Falgore Forest in Kano State.⁵⁷ Around December 2023, Ansaru reportedly clashed with Dogo Gide in the forest of Gajeren Kauye bordering Katsina State after their alliance broke down.⁵⁸

1.6 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)

A fifth extremist group is Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). JNIM operates in the Sahel and increasingly the littoral states. The extent to which it operates in North West Nigeria is so far unclear and the subject of investigation (below).

JNIM is the main violent extremist actor in the Sahel and coastal African states, and it operates in a hierarchical but decentralised fashion. There is a central leadership and regional commanders who run Katibats as well as local area commanders who run Markaz'.⁵⁹ In the context of North West Nigeria, two Katibats might be relevant: a Katibat led by Idrissa Dicko (Mouslimou) and a Katibat from Torodi (led by one Abu Hanifa), both operating in Benin from bases in the Sahel (Burkina Faso and Niger, respectively).

The Katibat led by Mouslimou has an open presence in the Est and Centre-Est regions of Burkina Faso (its main bases are in the Est region) but with a variety of area commanders along the borders with Ghana, Togo and Benin. This Katibat originates from the Ansarul-Islam movement (not to be confused with Ansaru in North West Nigeria) from northern Burkina Faso and includes remnants of ISGS who joined the movement after being defeated from 2018-2020 in the Est region. Katibat Mouslimou operates in two areas in Benin: Western Atacora and the Bariba Plain, (an area between Parc Pendjari and W in Atacora and Alibori). This Katibat has a Fulbe membership but also seems to operate on a cross-ethnic basis (e.g. with the Gourmanche occupying leadership positions) using religious and socioeconomic narratives to expand and recruit.

57 *ibid.*

58 Premium Times. (2024). Terrorists fight each other in Nigeria, decimate notorious Dogo Gide's group. <https://www.premiuntimesng.com/news/top-news/659315-terrorists-fight-each-other-in-nigeria-decimate-notorious-dogo-gides-group.html>.

59 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E., Berger, F. (2023). Non-state armed groups and Illicit economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, ACLED. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JNIM-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economiesin-wWest-Africa-GI-TOC-ACLED-October-2023.pdf>.

The Katibat led by Abu Hanifa is a Katibat with a presence around Torodi (Niger) along the border with Burkina Faso's Est region. It is probably responsible for activities in northern Alibori department as well as along the Benin-Niger border. Some argue that this Katibat originally stems from Katibat Serma and has an important Tolebe core (a sub-group of the Fulbe often of Nigerien origin).

2 Canaries in the coal mine

For years, there have been fears of dangerous liaisons between extremist groups in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.⁶⁰ So far, there is little concrete evidence as only three pieces of evidence allude to some low-level links: 1) *Lakurawa* presence by ISGS (a group from the Sahel in North West Nigeria); 2) the *Group-of-Twelve's* visit to Kainji Lake in Nigeria. In this security incident in June 2020, African Parks (a non-governmental organisation), in collaboration with Benin's security services, encountered and subsequently followed a *Group-of-Twelve* extremists on their journey from Burkina Faso via Benin; and 3) reported operational links between ISWAP and ISGS.⁶¹

But just as suffocating canaries in coal mines indicate dangerous levels of carbon monoxide, there is consistent evidence that these links are now developing. These links are facilitated by an apparent mixture of various violent extremist groups and cross-border banditry.

In order to make this argument we rely on data on the movement of violent extremists collected since early 2021 in Benin, data from 2022 up until December 2023 in Tillaberi and the Dosso regions (Niger Republic), the Est region (Burkina Faso) and, finally, on newly collected data on all forms of political violence from May to December 2023 in North West Nigeria. We supplement this with over 30 interviews conducted in North West Nigeria with informed experts and insiders and 50 sampled interviews with the population in Benin along the border with Nigeria (see Introduction).

60 International Crisis Group. (2020). Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling back the Mayhem. Report n°288. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

61 Involving communication support and perhaps logistical and strategic support. Interview with a security analyst in March 2021. This would involve better coordination between ISGS and ISWAP under the Al Furqan office (a province under the Islamic State). Hamming, T. (2023). The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State's Global Network. CTC Sentinel, 15(1). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-general-directorate-of-provinces-managing-the-islamic-states-global-network/>.

2.1 Re-emergence of banditry in VEO zones of control, Benin

The first indication of increasing connections between Nigeria and Benin comes from western Atacora and northern Alibori – areas experiencing high levels of violent extremist activity. But there is also one curious activity: cross-border banditry in both areas since 2023. While banditry in northern Benin is not a new phenomenon, it mostly disappeared when VEOs began to operate in 2021.

After years of relatively few reports, by April 2023 kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling resurfaced in both areas. VEOs generally kidnap in Benin to punish former collaborators and the authorities, and recruit both forcefully and incidentally to collect information. There have been at least 65 kidnapping incidents since early 2023 (some by VEOs).⁶² However, since April 2023 there have been eight instances of kidnapping for ransom in areas where VEOs operate. For example, on 6 June 2023 an important member of the Fulbe community from Dassari, Atacora department, was released after a ransom of 6 million CFA was paid. On 1 July 2023, two Fulbe were kidnapped in Cobly, Atacora, with the kidnappers demanding a ransom of 10 million CFA.⁶³

Cattle rustling also reappeared in 2023. VEOs can engage in cattle rustling.⁶⁴ The type of cattle rustling incidents reported so far mainly involve small numbers

62 Tagziria, L., Berger, F. and Mossi, A. (forthcoming). Spilling over: kidnappings by violent extremist organisations in northern Benin.

63 See some other examples: On 20 November 2023 an unidentified armed group abducted a herder in Nodi (Materi, Atacora). The kidnappers contacted his family and demanded a ransom of 4 million CFA; On 16 November 2023, an unidentified armed group abducted a Fulbe from his home in Tapoga (Cobly, Atacora). A ransom of 300,000 CFA has been demanded for his release; Around 19 October 2023 (in the week of), an unidentified armed group abducted and later released a man in Keremou (Banikoara, Alibori). The man is believed to have paid a ransom, of an unknown amount, to secure his release; On 11 October 2023, an unidentified armed group abducted a Fulbe herder in the Samahoun district of Tchahoun Cossi (Materi, Atacora). A ransom of 15 million CFA has been demanded. Negotiations are continuing; On 29 August 2023, an unidentified armed group abducted a Fulbe in Cobly (Cobly, Atacora). The group has demanded a ransom but has not specified the amount; On 21 July 2023, overnight, an unidentified armed group abducted a wealthy Fulbe herder near Materi (Materi, Atacora). The kidnappers demanded that the victim's brother pay a ransom of 5 million CFA, but this has not been paid. An investigation has been opened and a search is underway; On 12 May 2023, an unidentified armed group abducted a herdsman in Boukoumbe (Boukoumbe, Atacora). The kidnappers initially demanded 10 million CFA but later lowered this to 6 million CFA before releasing the victim. An investigation has been opened.

64 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (2023). With key shifts in dynamics entrenched in 2022, cattle rustling is set to remain a major threat in Nigeria and Mali in 2023. <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-006/02-with-key-shifts-in-dynamics-entrenched-in-2022.html>.

and occur around the parks, likely for the purpose of direct consumption. Yet, there are also incidents of larger numbers of cattle being stolen in the Materi and Kerou communes, Atacora, an area with a strong JNIM influence. Reports show that these cattle are moved to Burkina Faso and Togo in order to be sold.

Both instances are slightly atypical for JNIM operations in the area, which tend not to involve kidnapping for ransom and rustling of larger numbers of cattle for commercial exploitation.⁶⁵ These incidents may mean that the modus operandi of VEOs has simply changed, but it raises suspicions that there might be other groups operating alongside, or perhaps in collaboration with, JNIM in Benin.

Reinforcing these suspicions is a rising number of incidents that do not at all fit VEO modus operandi. For example, on 2 November 2023, an unidentified armed group robbed a man and stole his cattle while he was leaving the market in Guene, Malanville commune. On 3 December a car was highjacked by a group armed with two AK-47s and a few handmade guns between Goungoun and Baffo. On 15 December, a car was highjacked between Karimama and Sakawan by armed men. On 24 December, a motorcycle was highjacked between Guene and Torozougou at 2pm by two men armed with homemade guns. On 30 December, a bandit was caught by local people around Mokole after he attempted to highjack a car between Mokole and Tounga Ali (a new event). And on 15 January, a small alcohol shop was robbed at gun point in Fouet (Angaradebou); the bandits stole 800,000 francs and a bicycle. Hijacking cars and robbery are not consistent with VEOs mode of operations.

Even more peculiar is that these incidents involve individuals coming from Nigeria. For example, the bandit caught at Mokole was Nigerian. Moreover, armed men from Nigeria spent time in Benin (e.g. on 4 December at Tobossi, Malanville when nine bandits stayed at the home of an accomplice; on 9 December, at Gorou Soundoukou (Madecali) four armed men with AK-47s spent the night before continuing their journey to Guéné. Nigerian intelligence sources argue that a Fulbe Nigerian bandit leader had re-settled in northern Alibori.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Although JNIM large scale cattle rustling is common in the Sahel.

⁶⁶ Links would develop due to a cattle rustling economy. Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

Qualitative interviews in the border areas reinforce both the inference that banditry is re-emerging and that a link with and/or from Nigeria is being forged. Around 60% of the interviewees point to the fact that bandits from Nigeria have obtained houses in Benin, particularly around Kandi and Malanville, Alibori departments, and Kalale and Sokotindji, Borgou Department. These houses in Benin host the family of bandits. One person from Malanville noted, for example, that ‘Everyone knows that bandit leaders are in Nigeria. But their family is here in Malanville or in Kandi.’⁶⁷ Another person noted, ‘There’s a gang leader who built his house in Kalale last year. The police came there looking for him several times, but he was in Nigeria.’⁶⁸ These interviews are consistent with accounts from Nigeria stating that Nigerian bandits increasingly seek refuge in Benin because the Nigerian military targets their families.⁶⁹ Some sources argue that Nigerian bandits in Benin are active in the transportation of drugs, cigarettes and fuel.

In short, there is evidence of a re-emergence of banditry in northern Benin. There is also evidence that some of this relates to bandits coming from North West Nigeria.⁷⁰

But what is very puzzling about this is that such banditry takes place in zones where VEOs are present. This type of co-existence is uncommon for JNIM and raises a number of questions around the relationship between these groups. The least worrying relations would be a form of simple competitive co-existence, mainly because JNIM does not have complete control over the areas. But there might also be more developed relationships where there are de facto agreements. Perhaps bandits are allowed to operate as long as JNIM does not have full operational control. Or more active forms of collaboration are developed.

67 Interview 1 in Malanville (14 November 2023).

68 Interview 2 in Neganzi (23 November 2023).

69 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist. Various interviewees pointed to similar strategies by Beninese criminals. Someone from Bessassi noted ‘The police carry out operations and arrest people. But I don’t think that this can stop because families are divided on both sides of the border.’ Interview 1 in Bessassi (24 November 2023).

70 It is important to note that the re-emergence of Nigerian bandits builds on a history before the advent of violent extremism. For example in 2016 kidnapping for ransom became more common in the Borgou and was in part driven by Nigerian bandits linking up with young Fulbe groups in Benin. Interview with a Western security analyst specialising in Benin, July 2023.

2.2 Kainji Lake National Park, Nigeria

A second signal comes from across the border in Nigeria: the Kainji Lake National Park. As mentioned above, early information of a link of this area and violent extremist was the Group-of-Twelve, which left Burkina Faso, via Benin, for Kainji Lake in Nigeria in 2020. There has been little information since and this section seeks to provide an update

As a start, Barnett and Rufa'i demonstrated that Francophone extremists (most likely JNIM) attempted to move into Kainji Lake National Park around mid-2021, in an attempt to recruit local bandits and Fulbe leaders.⁷¹ Figure 4 shows a number of incidents picking up on this line of thought. In 2021 there were two incidents that point towards an extremism problem in the Kainji Lake National Park: on 8 March 2021 a militia member killed a security guard in the park and on 4 September the district head of Wawa (Niger State, Nigeria) was abducted by unidentified militia members.⁷² By the end of 2021, the Niger state government warned that these incidents were related to a VEO presence in the 'Kainji National Park and around the vast areas of the park up to Babanna, a border town between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin' and that the group was 'poised to establish a caliphate in the area that will deal with issues of criminality and other related matters'. A group – though not at all clear if these involved extremists – from the same area also kidnapped a traditional ruler in the Borgu kingdom, 'the Dodo of Wawa'.⁷³

Such signals continued during 2022. On 25 January 2022, Nigerian forces attacked the park and claimed to have dislodged a group of ISWAP fighters

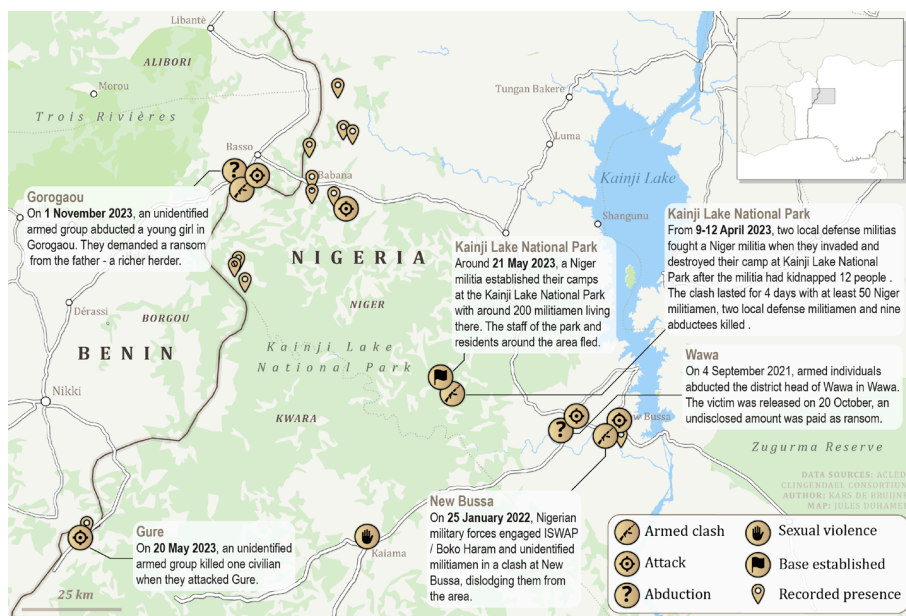
71 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

72 See ACLED data. The kidnapped district head would later report to the emir (the head of the cross-border Borgu Kingdom) that the group already had local support. New Telegraph. (2021). N'Central groans under ISWAP, B'Haram attacks. <https://newtelegraphng.com/ncentral-groans-under-iswap-bharam-attacks/>.

73 The Dodo of Wawa kidnappers were dressed in military outfits and demanded a ransom. This points at bandit modus operandi, particularly as in the same period, armed bandits had kidnapped some district heads within Niger state. Thanks to Kingsley Madueke for pointing this out.

(although no evidence was provided that this was really an ISWAP group).⁷⁴ Apparently this mission was not as successful as claimed, as in mid-2022 Nigeria's senate called for another operation because three LGAs around Kainji Lake National Park (Kaiama, Babanna and Wawa) would have become 'enclaves' and experienced rising levels of 'recurrent kidnappings'.⁷⁵ By October 2022, another operation took place when the Nigerian military, in collaboration with 'local self-defence militias' (which most likely include the Dambanga – a hunting militia also active in Benin) attacked the group of extremists alleged to be 'ISWAP/Boko Haram'.⁷⁶

Figure 4 Political violence around Kainji Lake National Park (2021-2023)



74 Independent. (2022). FG Orders Military To Flush Out ISWAP, Armed Bandits From Kainji National Park. <https://independent.ng/fg-orders-military-to-flush-out-iswap-armed-bandits-from-kainji-national-park/>; Tribune. (2022). FG orders military to dislodge ISWAP terrorists, bandits from Kainji National Park. <https://tribuneonline.com/fg-orders-military-to-dislodge-iswap-terrorists-bandits-from-kainji-national-park/>.

75 Business Day. (2022). Senate alerts on terrorists' enclaves in Kwara, Niger states. <https://businessday.ng/news/article/senate-alerts-on-terrorists-enclaves-in-kwara-niger-states/>.

76 CKN News. (2022). Prison Escapee Shot Dead By Military In Jos. <https://www.cknnigeria.com/2022/11/prison-escapee-shot-dead-by-military-in-jos.html>. More on these local militias below.

VEO presence around Kainji Lake came into full focus with the bold attack on Wawa Prison in October 2022. This high-security facility holds senior Boko Haram and other violent extremist fighters from Nigeria's North East but also from the Sahel. The attack was foiled, as Nigerian forces allegedly knew about the intended attack months beforehand. Nigerian security forces pointed at ISWAP and led by the commander Abu Ekrima.⁷⁷ Barnett and Rufa'i claim that the identity of the assailants is difficult to pinpoint, as there is evidence of the potential involvement of Ansaru and even extremists from the Sahel.⁷⁸ Indeed, interview conducted in Nigeria for this report on the Wawa attack point to the involvement of multiple groups (the ISWAP-Kogi cell, Sahelian fighters and Ansaru)⁷⁹ but also find additional evidence of a strong role by Sahelian extremists. Military sources argue that the goal had been to free the few detained Sahelian "jihadists" and that one reason why the attack failed was insufficient knowledge of the area.⁸⁰ Moreover, most of those killed had 'plaited hair, facial marks and were slim, tall, and dark in complexion'.⁸¹ These characteristics are considered to be typical of people from the Sahel.

From early 2023 onwards, incidents around Kainji Lake clearly increased – particularly along the access roads to and from the forest (29 incidents in 2023 vs five in 2022).⁸² For example, in April 2023 communal self-defence militias attacked a large unidentified armed group in the forest for four days (9-12 April 2023) during a kidnapping exchange.⁸³ In May 2023 local and government sources claimed that an unidentified armed group of no less than 200 men had set up a base at a former camping site, where they chased away all the rangers.

77 Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

78 Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2023). A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict. Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/sahelian-or-littoral-crisis-examining-widening-nigerias-boko-haram-conflict#7>.

79 Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023. Interview on 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist. Another source points at the presence of Beninese among the attackers.

80 Interview N1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

81 Interview N1 & N2, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

82 This holds true despite improved reporting. ACLED-only events number 12 (2023) and 5 (2022).

83 Leadership. (2023). Amid Renewed Attacks: Villagers Mobilise, Kill 50 Bandits In Self-defence. <https://leadership.ng/amid-renewed-attacks-villagers-mobilise-kill-50-bandits-in-self-defence/>. This comes after a large group moved into the area from Benin in March 2023.

From there they began to exert influence as far as the Beninese border.⁸⁴ During the remaining year most activity involved armed men on motorcycles, particularly on the three main roads in the border between Benin and Nigeria (Babanna). Moreover, other violent engagements were reported, such as kidnappings, killings – even of a child on 13 August 2023 around New Bussa – and the targeting of vehicles.

Hence, there is a clear problem in Kainji Lake National Park which involves a variety of extremist groups and bandit groups. But the key question is: which group is or what groups are now operating from the Park? We consider three related signals and then explore this question in greater detail.

2.3 Unidentified armed actors in border communes, Benin

A third canary in the coal mine comes from the border between Benin and Nigeria. Specifically, the area that overlaps with the former Borgu Empire: from Madecali to the Nigerian border, the Segbana commune (Eastern Alibori) and the Kalale and Nikki communes (Eastern Borgou).

There have been suspicions of violent extremist activities in the area since 2020.⁸⁵ For example, the Group-of-Twelve visited Kalale. Previous research in 2020 and early 2021 pointed also towards VEO procurement and recruitment.⁸⁶ Other examples include an attempt by JNIM to create a bridgehead to Nigeria⁸⁷ as well as the killing of the head of the Dambanga hunters in Kalale – which some

84 The Punch. (2023). Bandits occupy Kainji National Park, Customs checkpoint. <https://punchng.com/bandits-occupy-kainji-national-park-customs-checkpoint/>.

85 In Eastern Alibori, there have been suspicions of Segbana being involved.

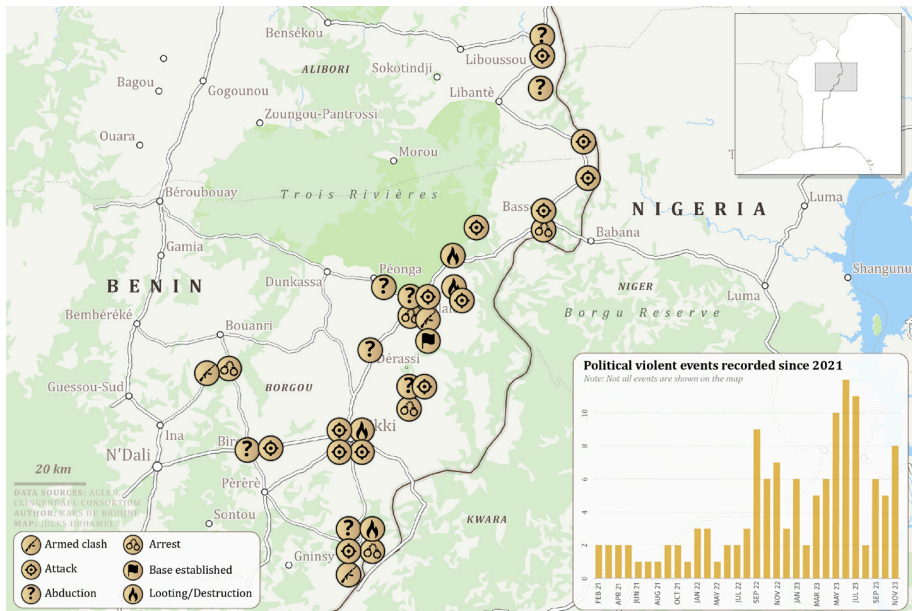
86 De Bruijne, K. (2021). Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover. The Clingendael Institute. E.g. “On September 28 a jihadist and his wife were arrested in Bessassi for having a link with Nigeria, which led to new arrests and weapon seizures a day later. On November 4, presumed jihadists from Nigeria stole cattle in Bessassi. On December 13, a beheaded corpse was found in Derassi (10km from Kalale) under suspicious conditions. In early 2021 another arrest was made of someone who had been trying to recruit the youth from Kalale for over a year.”

87 De Bruijne, K. (2022). Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin’s Northern Jihad from the perspective of its neighbours. The Clingendael Institute.

have attributed to violent extremists.⁸⁸ Yet, all evidence found so far has involved isolated incidents.

Our quantitative data points to an alarming and atypical change from early 2023 onwards. People in eastern Borgou and eastern Alibori have observed armed actors on motorcycles (with peaks in March and October/November 2023), reported experiencing more abductions, and witnessed more violence against civilians. Figure 4 presents an overview, showing an unequivocal increase (the map shows activities by governmental and unidentified armed actors only).

Figure 5 Political violence alongside Kalale, Nikki and Segbana borders (2021-2023)



88 L'investigateur. (2022). Kalalé : le Sieur Dambanga, Chef des Chasseurs tué par des individus armés non identifiés. <https://investigateur.bj/?Kalale-le-Sieur-Dambanga-Chef-des-Chasseurs-tue-par-des-individus-armes-non>. The killing, however, coincided with the death of the king in Nikki and a general uptick in violence and threats around those in and close to the court. At the same time, the killing took place two days after the failed attack on the Wawa facility in Nigeria. Given the role of Dambanga in Nigeria and their collaboration with the Nigerian state in the Kainji Lake National Park, there are possible connections.

Three trends stand out. First, there are many sightings of armed actors on motorcycles (sometimes transporting goods, such as fuel). In March 2023 in the Segbana commune there were various armed groups spotted on motorcycles (e.g. 1 March in Bouaina, 12 March in Bedia, 25 March in Dakou, 28 March in Moro Moro). In the Kalale commune there were also such reports on 26 February in Gidan, 31 March in Zambara, 8 April in Basso, 19 June in Basso, 2 July in Basso and many more.

Second, there have been various attempts of recruitment. In Segbana, an unidentified armed group approached mostly young Fulbe, promising wealth and other benefits with all of them being given a certain period of time to consider the offer (May 2023). In the Kalale commune, a group of eight young people disclosed that they had joined an armed group after several weeks of training and had been offered 400,000 CFA per month (June 2023).

Third, there has been a sharp increase in abductions. In November 2023 in Segbana, an unidentified armed group abducted two individuals in Guene Laaga (Segbana, Alibori) demanding a ransom of 5 million CFA for each person. This was the fifth kidnapping in two months. On 9 November 2023 some individuals received threatening phone calls warning that they would be abducted or killed if anyone collaborated with the authorities in Segbana. In Kalale, abductions, among other activities, were reported on 29 September in Tasso, and on 6 July and 15 June in Sakabansi. In the interviews our sources said, 'Now the kidnappings have started. They kidnap you and then they call your family to tell them to pay 10 million. It's really serious.'⁸⁹

A qualitative probe into the dynamics pointed to a clear link with Nigeria. One key piece of evidence is that the increase in activity in Benin around March 2023 is matched with similar dynamics on the Nigerian side of the border. One source from Nigeria reported that by February/March 2023 larger groups of VEOs had transited the Kainji Lake National Park on the eve of the 2023 presidential elections. An estimated 35-50 members were on foreign motorcycles heavily loaded with goods, some of the fighters were dark in complexion, and carried flags with Arabic inscriptions.⁹⁰ Another source from a small Nigerian town (Gidan Malam) bordering Benin witnessed movements into Nigeria by a group

⁸⁹ Interview 2 in Sokotindji (17 November 2023).

⁹⁰ Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

carrying different types of weapons and being accompanied by women and children.⁹¹ A local hunter and farmer from Nigeria confirmed that three separate groups had been seen moving towards Benin after stopping in the village of Gidan Malam to buy goods.⁹² Two other sources confirmed the mass migration of this group.⁹³ Hence, four qualitative sources provide strong evidence for a cross-border link.

Another stream of evidence comes from events around October 2023. Nigerian sources report that fighters left the Kainji Lake National Park and returned to Benin with more fighters than when they first entered Nigeria. The fighters in question spoke both Fulfulde and Arabic, while some spoke French.⁹⁴ One witness said that the fighters had moved in three groups and that all of the groups moved at night with their children, women and weapons.⁹⁵ Local communities fled when they saw them, but the fighters urged these communities to remain calm as they said that they meant no harm to the general public.⁹⁶ They bought some goods in the shops and left the same night.

All this combined makes for a third indication of the emergence of strange liaisons between Nigeria and Benin and dangerous ties between extremists and bandits. There has been a clear increase in activities in Borgou Department which seem to bear the hallmark of banditry (mainly kidnappings). This activity is connected to Nigeria as the movements by large groups of armed actors between Benin and the Kainji Lake National Park (Nigeria) in March and October 2023 indicate. 'Banditry' in the Borgou may thus not be what it seems; at a minimum it is best qualified as a blurring of banditry and violent extremism but it might be violent extremism in disguise.

2.4 Forêt de Trois Rivières, Benin

A fourth signal comes from the Forêt de Trois Rivières (an area adjacent to Segbana, Gogounou (Alibori) Kalale, Bembereke commune (Borgou)). This forest has had the status of a classified forest since 1949 and is the largest forest in

91 Interview N1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

92 Interview N2, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

93 Interview N3, N4, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

94 Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

95 Interview N5, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

96 Interview N5, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

Benin.⁹⁷ While agricultural activities are officially prohibited, it is an important economic area with cotton and agricultural production. The thick vegetation is more dispersed at this location.⁹⁸

The forest is under similar pressures to the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex (WAP complex): a burgeoning population in need of a livelihood, a need for environment protection, the effects of economic interests of larger corporations and hunting groups, as well as tensions between forest guards and parts of the population. For example, in early August 2023, forest guards sought to enforce the park law by targeting farmers who 'own' fields in the forest and its surroundings in Nassiconzi (Kalale Commune). Some farmers were denied access to their fields while others were arrested and forced to pay 75,000 CFA despite having lost their agricultural lands – and thus their incomes. More than 100 farmers were affected. In the following days the same thing occurred in Zambara and Kalale. Less than a year before (October 2022) there had been a riot, clashes and arrests in Gbessakperou, Kalale, when local people attacked forest guards after the guards had warned the population not to encroach into the forest.⁹⁹

But coming from this forest are also growing signs of movement by armed actors. In interviews with sources from communes bordering the forest (both in Alibori and Borgou) regular references were made to sightings of armed men in the forest.¹⁰⁰ People in Zambara and Segbana (directly adjacent to the forest) but also in Bessassi, Basso and Neganzi (all very nearby) and in some communes in Alibori pointed towards the sudden presence of armed men in the forest.

Someone from Bessassi said, 'It's not the banditry that bothers us most. What bothers us is that we're afraid and we're very worried because the young people

97 For more information on the forest: Forest ecosystems sustainability & climate adaptation by integrated soil fertility management in "Trois Rivières" forest reserves (Benin, West Africa).

98 Angles d'Ortoli, N. and Torne Celer, S. (1999). Les hommes et la forêt: analyse du système agraire de villages riverains à la forêt classée des trois rivières (nord Bénin) en vue de l'élaboration d'un plan d'aménagement participatif. Projet Arboral. <https://agritrop.cirad.fr/564038/>.

99 On 12 June 2023, forest guards arrested a farmer in Sebana (Kalale, Borgou). The man was accused of setting fire to various areas in the forest and was placed under arrest pending his trial.

100 Similar reports also came from Guene Laaga and Lougou which suggest that Forêt de la Sota (further north) might also be used. For example, 'When chopping wood in the forest, we sometimes come across jihadists on motorbikes. They have two types of weapons and we know that these are dangerous people. But there's never been an incident. They wave and ask for directions. Sometimes they don't tell you anything.' Interview 1 in Guene Laaga (21 November 2023).

are meeting a lot of armed people inside the forest, which is protected. We don't know if they're up to something.'¹⁰¹ In Zambara village, someone said, 'We've seen a few armed people come and go in the bush. Sometimes they gather in the protected forest to rest and get water from the river. Sometimes they even carry large quantities of petrol on their motorbikes.' Another person stated, 'Armed men are seen passing by from time to time on their way to Nigeria. They are often on motorbikes.'¹⁰² In Neganzi someone made a direct reference to violent extremism: 'In Neganzi, we've been encountering more and more armed jihadis in the bush recently.'¹⁰³

These impressions by the population are supported by quantitative data collected for this report (see Figure 6). There were seven confirmed incidents throughout 2023 that were in or directly adjacent to the forest (and more observed movements by unidentified armed actors within 15 kilometres thereof).¹⁰⁴ On 16 April 2023, an armed group shot and injured a hunter in the forest. The hunter had been searching for game when he came across the group who had captured/kidnapped three people. As the hunter tried to save them, he was shot but managed to escape. On 12 June 2023, four members of an unidentified armed group were spotted on two motorcycles in Neganzi heading towards Forêt de Trois Rivières .

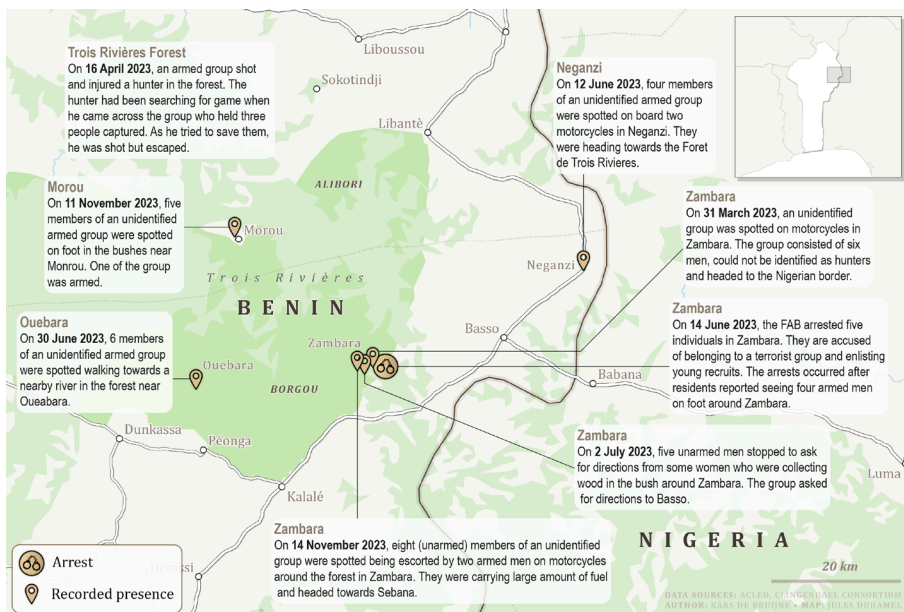
101 Interview 1 in Bessassi (24 November 2023). In the same village another said 'Here, what we notice a lot is that there are a lot of movements by suspects inside the classified forest. I don't know what they're doing there, maybe they're trafficking timber too, but one thing's for sure, they're getting through a lot.' Interview 2 in Bessassi (24 November 2023).

102 Interview 2 in Zambara (24 November 2023); Interview 3 in Zambara (24 November 2023).

103 Interview 2 in Neganzi (23 November 2023).

104 For June 2022 there is information on a group demanding people (including fishers) to leave the area.

Figure 6 Movement of forces around the Forêt de Trois Rivières (2023)



Apart from the accidental altercation with the hunter, there is no known engagement between these groups and the surrounding communities. Similarly, the interviews did not point to any contact with the general population. This suggests that the forest might for now only serve as a conduit to and from Nigeria. Moreover, as mentioned above, there seems to be a link through the transportation of fuel by these unidentified armed groups, particularly around the economic hub of Basso. All of this should once more raise serious concerns of a violent extremist link; the forest seems to play a role in the link between Sahelian extremists and Nigeria.

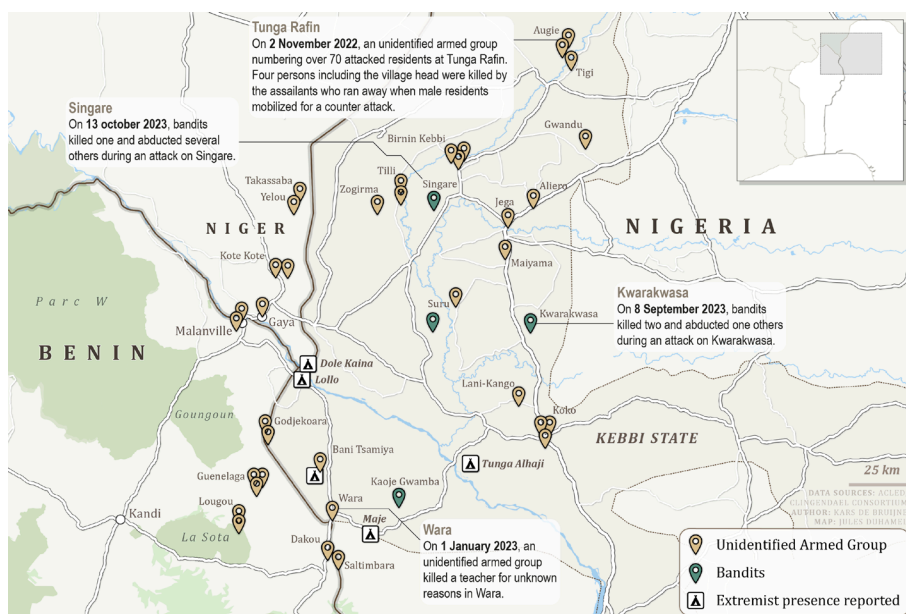
2.5 Kebbi State – Nigeria, Benin, Niger

A distinct signal comes from the border between Kebbi State (Nigeria), Benin and Niger Republic; hence the Hausa-Fulani area that overlaps with parts of the former Sokoto caliphate. In this area, a different dynamic seems to be at play albeit with similar characteristics of banditry and violent extremism.

From the above is clear that banditry in North West Nigeria is particularly pronounced in Sokoto and Zamfara State. Yet, sources familiar with banditry

in North West Nigeria argue that from early 2022 onwards, cattle were moved towards – among other areas – Kebbi State to protect them against bandit activity in Zamfara and Sokoto. But the effect was less availability of cattle in Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto, which in turn led bandits to follow the herds and arrive in Kebbi State. This happened in 2022/2023. Also internal competition among bandits seems to have led some bandit leaders, particularly older ones, to move into Kebbi State.¹⁰⁵

Figure 7 Bandit and Unidentified Armed Groups in and along Kebbi State (2022-2023)



Quantitative evidence supports the idea of an influx of bandits into Kebbi. An official in Dole-Kaina (Nigeria, but close to the Benin border) noted a sudden increase in kidnappings in his area, with an estimated 22 kidnappings between March and October 2023 versus just three kidnappings in all of 2022. The official attributed this increase to the influx of Fulbe and Tuaregs from other parts of Nigeria.¹⁰⁶ Data collected for this project on incidents of political violence and

105 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

106 Interview K1, K2, K4, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

disorder in the area similarly shows that for the first time there is some banditry in Kebbi State (Figure 7, bandits in blue).

Yet, there is similar evidence for extremist presence too. One piece of evidence is from Southern Kebbi (Bagudo LGA, Nigeria). Specific information comes from Tsamiya, a village on the Benin-Nigeria border that is a connection to Segbana town (in Benin). The son of Sadiku (a key figure in Darul Salam who pledged allegiance to Boko Haram's leaders) was married in this village.¹⁰⁷ Members of different extremist groups attended the ceremony, including some from the Benin Republic.¹⁰⁸ Significantly Alhaji Bello Dogo – a senior Darul Salam figure who, with others, resettled in Benin after 2020 – was among those who attended the wedding.¹⁰⁹

There is also information that points to a more settled extremist presence. One piece of evidence comes from Dole-Kaina – a border town between Nigeria and Niger within a kilometre of the Benin border, people have reported cross-border movements of armed actors into the village from the Benin Republic (officials argue these are violent extremists).¹¹⁰ In the area, there are two reported incidents of recruitment.¹¹¹ Other sources mention an unknown number of extremists in Lollo, Maje and Tungar Alhaji (the black stars, Figure 7) arguing that some of these come from Benin.¹¹² Nigerian security officials also report that extremists have increased their presence.¹¹³

2.6 What group(s) operate(s) along the Nigerian-Benin border?

The big question is: who is responsible for activity in Kainji Lake, the presence of armed actors in Benin's border communes, the movement in Forêt de Trois Rivières and activity in Kebbi state's border with Benin? The honest answer is that this is not fully clear. The landscape is fragmented with variable degrees of evidence for Darul Salam, ISWAP, JNIM and bandit groups.

107 Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

108 Interview DS1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

109 Interview NS1, DS1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

110 Interview K3, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

111 Interview K1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

112 Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

113 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

The centre: Darul Salam in Kainji Lake and the Borgou

A starting point is the presence in Kainji Lake. From the available data presented above – particularly in relation to the Wawa attack – there is some evidence of varying quality for JNIM, ISWAP, Darul Salam and Nigerian bandits in and around Kainji Lake Park. Recent evidence suggests, for example, that the alleged ISWAP leader of the Wawa attack – Abu Ekrima – visited an individual in Kalale (Benin) four times throughout 2023 and engaged in (online) recruitment.¹¹⁴ Another source reports recent ISWAP presence in Kainji Lake forest.¹¹⁵

While likely a mixture of groups, evidence at least points to sustained operations of Darul Salam/JAS in the (former) Borgu Empire. For example, one security source argues that the key group is Darul Salam – the group formed around resettled JAS fighters by Sadiku.¹¹⁶ Another points to senior Darul Salam individuals who hail from Babanna, a town just across the border with Nigeria.¹¹⁷ A third source – with links to one of the groups – claims that Darul Salam is mainly operating from Babanna and Dakari (where Mamman and Mohammed Umar would lead operations).¹¹⁸ A local source from Dakari reported that bandits threatened a family member, who invoked Darul Salam for help. When the bandits killed the family member, Darul Salam paid the funeral bill.¹¹⁹

This is reinforced by the fact that presence in Kainji Lake Park and in Benin for the past three years has involved a mixture of bandits and extremists – which fits Darul Salam more open attitude to bandits. For example, some sources point to links between extremists in Kainji Lake Park and some bandit leaders (e.g. Darul Salam helped to resettle bandit leader Alhaji Buba to Kainji Lake).¹²⁰ Further evidence of bandit activity is extreme violence around the park towards the population (e.g. the killing of a child) which does not match the violent extremist groups (except for ultra-takfiri groups such as Boko Haram). Despite evidence that all extremists seem to have had a (temporary) presence in the area, this turns the odds against sustained presence of Ansaru, JNIM and ISWAP. Ansaru has been clashing with bandit groups over the past years. ISWAP and JNIM are

114 Source A, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

115 Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

116 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

117 Interview 19 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

118 Source A, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

119 Undisclosed, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

120 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

generally too doctrinal for bandits as they impose too many restrictions. Instead, this fits the looser and more flexible relationship that (some parts of) Darul Salam have with bandit groups.

However, evidence suggests that Darul Salam's relationship with the bandits might have changed. By the end of 2022 and the early months of 2023 a conflict would have emerged between bandit leader Alhajji Buba and Darul Salam (who had helped Buba resettle) after complaints by the population and a conflict with another bandit group.¹²¹ Vigilante groups (the Dambanga hunters, see below) would have collaborated with Darul Salam in fighting this bandit group. Since then some sources report a stronger community approach by Darul Salam, including forming relationships with local leaders.¹²² One source from a hunting group reported restrictions on hunting, including restrictions on hunting in the park and the performance of medical rituals and enforcement of prayer instead.¹²³

This leads to our final observation on the dangerous connections that are emerging in the border area. ISWAP has certainly been present alongside Darul Salam and bandits (albeit not as a leading group). Yet, also Sahelian extremists are linked to those present in Kainji Lake. Sahelian extremists were not only reported around the Wawa attack, but the data in this report points at continuous movement by unidentified armed groups between Benin and this area in Nigeria (which based on the movement of these groups is highly likely JNIM). This is reinforced with evidence from Benin, where Nigerian bandits appear in Beninese territory (adjacent to) where JNIM is operating. Moreover, evidence from an informed security analyst suggest that links exist between JNIM and Darul Salam in Kainji Lake and Baguda LGA (Niger state).¹²⁴ All in all, this suggests dangerous liaisons between Sahelian and Nigerian extremists in the form of co-existence between JNIM and Darul Salam/JAS.

The north Kebbi-Alibori border: bandit-extremist liaisons

A similar though less detailed observation holds for the Kebbi-Alibori border where there are dangerous liaisons between extremists and bandit groups. But what extremists operate there?

121 Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

122 Source C, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

123 Source B, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024.

124 Interview 22 March 2024 with a Nigerian security specialist.

The identity of these groups is more unclear. One – unlikely – group could be ISSP. There was movement from Abala into the Dosso region of Niger Republic (particularly around October and November 2023) with a focus on Fulbe camps around Falwel.¹²⁵ From Falwel the information dries up but sources suggest that there are movements towards the Benin border, as well as Sokoto and Kebbi State, Nigeria.¹²⁶ However, there is no information on ISSP settling in the area.

Another theory is that Darul Salam also has a presence along the Kebbi-Alibori border. This would be consistent with the information from the marriage ceremony in Kebbi state where Darul Salam figures were present. A Nigerian official also pointed to Darul Salam, but this source also argued that these ‘extremists’ kept their families in Benin, which actually indicates bandit groups.¹²⁷ A source with links in these extremist groups suggests that Darul Salam is present but only with a small cell operating in Baguda LGA. This cell would also be in touch with Sahelian extremists.¹²⁸ But this cannot explain all activity, particularly not further north.

A final possible explanation comes from information on collaboration between a small Sahelian extremist group – according to a JNIM source – operating in Benin along the Nigerian border¹²⁹ and a Nigerian cattle-rustling syndicate operating in Baguda LGA led by one Turji (nicknamed after Bello Turji).¹³⁰ A separate piece of evidence involves the arrest of a Nigerian herder coming from Benin asking for (specific types of) cattle for the Sahel in exchange for arms and training of bandits in Nigeria.¹³¹ On a different occasion, one source reported that bandits from Niger State were trained in Benin on how to use IEDs (they were transferring these skills to bandit groups in Zamfara state).¹³²

125 E.g. On 30 November 2023, 30 suspected IS Sahel were spotted near Banizoumbou Issa;

On 29 November 2023, about 50 suspected IS Sahel in Kaberi; Suspected IS Sahel militants use the transhumance route between Dogondoutchi, Boureimi, Lido (Dogondoutchi, Dosso), Karakara, Zabori and Gueza (Gaya, Dosso) and leave to and from Nigeria.

126 Interview 21 December 2023 with a security specialist.

127 Interview 23 October 2023 with a Nigerian security specialist.

128 Source A, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

129 Interview Nigeria Intelligence officer, December 2023.

130 Undisclosed Data collection note North West Nigeria, 19 March 2024.

131 Interview Nigeria Military officer, December 2023.

132 Undisclosed, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 19 March 2024.

Hence, the only clear conclusion that can be drawn from this evidence is that there are links between bandit groups and extremists, as well as evidence of some links forged between the Sahel and Nigeria along the Kebbi-Alibori Border. The available information does not allow drawing any conclusion on exactly which groups operate in the area and/or are dominant. The landscape seems very fragmented.

The Sahel and Lake Chad

But one thing keeps generating questions. JNIM's doctrinal stance does not fit in with Darul Salam and/or bandits groups. The major unknown therefore is what type of relationship is forged.

Is the relationship between JNIM and these groups based only on short-term common interests (e.g. around fuel trading or joint places for Rest and Recuperation (R&R))? A form of clandestine cohabitation? Or is there a longer-term collaboration in the making that bears similarity to the jihadization of banditry processes that took place in the Sahel (e.g. Tillabery, Niger and the Est Region, Burkina Faso)? For example, the reported changes in the Darul Salam approach towards local populations seem to be more consistent with the JNIM approach. It remains unclear how relationships will unfold.

2.7 Summary

It is generally accepted that violent extremism is a problem in northern Benin. Currently, attention is overwhelmingly devoted to northern Alibori and western Atacora and this problem is viewed as a 'spillover' from the Sahel. But this is only part of the story.

Suffocating canaries in coal mines indicate dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. A variety of strange signals in Northern Benin along the border with Nigeria are like these canaries: they point at dangerous liaisons between violent extremist groups along Benin's border with Nigeria. Closer relationships with bandit groups seem to facilitate this. This chapter points to a number of disturbing signals which, in combination, point to a problem of violent extremism:

- Banditry is re-emerging in JNIM's zones of operation in Benin. Those bandits seem to have Nigerian connections.
- Violent extremists are present in Kainji Lake National Park (Nigeria) just across the border from the Borgou Department. Evidence suggests this

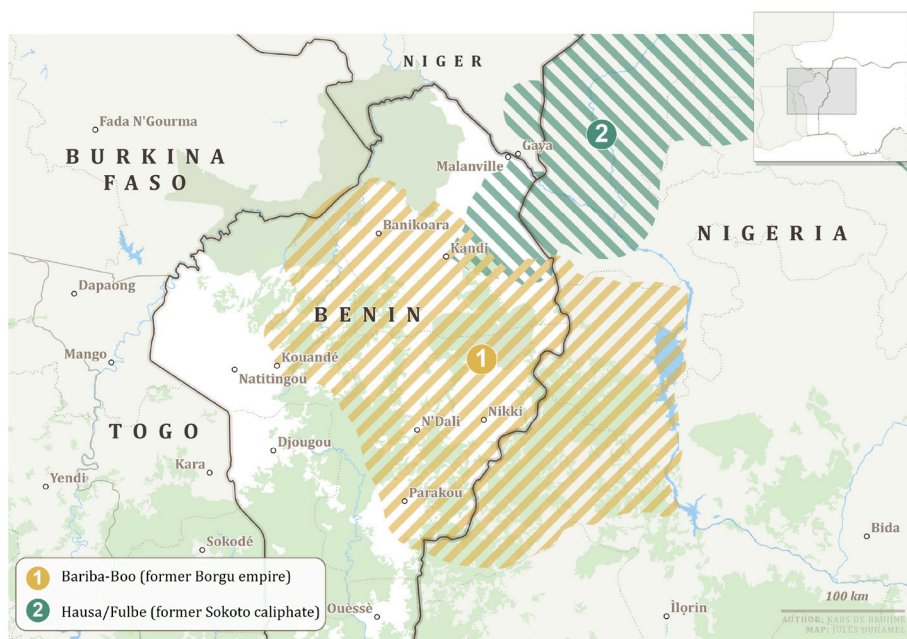
involves Sahelian extremists (likely JNIM). Another group would be Darul Salam – a group linked to Boko Haram, if not fully affiliated – with an open attitude towards bandits.

- There has been a strong increase in the movement of unidentified armed actors along the Borgou border with Niger State and in banditry-related incidents since March 2023. The evidence suggests that there is a direct link with those operating in Kainji Lake National Park.
- Since March 2023, unidentified armed groups have had concealed presence in the Forêt de Trois Rivières between southern Alibori and the Borgou Department.
- Bandits and unidentified armed groups are known to move towards Kebbi State from Sokoto. It is alleged that these include various Darul Salam fighters with links to the Sahel.

3 Northern Benin, North West Nigeria: social and religious ties

The current borders between Benin and Nigeria were demarcated during colonial times. The demarcation of these borders separated people sharing similar cultural backgrounds. Today, there remain strong cross-border links despite the national boundaries, including shared socio-political institutions and economic activities.¹³³

Figure 8 Ethnic regions



133 Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria's foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

The border between Benin and Nigeria can be divided into three ethnic zones (see Figure 8). First, there are the Hausa and Fulbe in the northern parts of both countries – the area between Kebbi State in Nigeria and Alibori in Benin. This area overlaps with parts of the 19th century Sokoto caliphate. Second, in the centre are the Bariba and Boo – the area between the northern parts of Benin’s Borgou Department and mainly Nigeria’s Niger State. This area overlaps with the pre-colonial Borgu Empire. A third area is from the Yoruba, Gun and Ajo-speaking groups in the southern part of Benin’s Borgou Department and most of Nigeria’s Kwara State. This pre-colonial Oyo empire falls outside the scope of this study.

3.1 The northern link: the Hausa and Fulbe

In the areas between North East Alibori and Kebbi State, key groups are the Hausa and Fulbe (with smaller numbers of Zerma and Kanuri) and all have close cross-border links.

The Hausa are overwhelmingly concentrated in the northern parts of Nigeria and in the Niger Republic. The Hausa are also present in northern Benin. Their arrival in Benin dates back as far as 1897, when Hausa settlers arrived with the Europeans.¹³⁴ Others migrated to Benin from Nigeria, particularly Hausa fishermen from Kebbi State who settled in Monsey, Alibori Department.¹³⁵ The Hausa in Nigeria, Benin and Niger share a common identity.

Cross-border connections are facilitated by the Hausa practices of having open relations with other ethnic groups with frequent intermarriages, making the Hausa politically and socially active.¹³⁶ But the real facilitator of these cross-border connections are the Hausa language and the Hausa’s role in commerce. Hausa are traditionally involved in long-distance trade, which has helped to make Hausa a lingua franca for commerce and communications. In northern

134 Joshua Project. n.d. Hausa in Benin. Retrieved from https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12070/BN#:~:text=Togo%2C%20and%20Benin-.The%20Hausa%20in%20Benin%20have%20been%20there%20as%20far%20back,long%20distance%20trading%20for%20centuries (accessed in November 2023).

135 République du Niger. (2003). Mémoire de la République du Niger: Affaire du Différend Frontalier (Bénin/Niger). Cour Internationale de Justice. <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/125/8285.pdf>.

136 And some have achieved considerable wealth; Joshua Project. n.d. Hausa in Benin. Retrieved from https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12070/BN (accessed in November 2023).

Benin, Hausa is used for wider communication – notably in large towns and market villages.¹³⁷ Hence, a trader from northern Benin noted that in order to sell at the market in Nigeria, it is necessary to speak at least Hausa and Ffulde.¹³⁸ Moreover, the Hausa's role in cross-border trade also places them in an important position. For example, a fuel vendor from northern Benin stated, 'If you want to excel at transporting fuel, you have to be friends with the Hausa.'¹³⁹ Based on profitable business practices and common trade, the Hausa enjoy good relations with their Nigerian neighbours, particularly the Kanuri.¹⁴⁰

The countries of Benin and Nigeria are further connected through the cross-border presence of the ethnic Fulbe. The Fulbe in Benin have different subgroups divided both in terms of castes and in terms of their Fulbe origin. The Fulbe who are common along Alibori's border with Nigeria are not the Barugabe Fulbe who are indigenous/autochthonous to Benin – such as the Korakube (the Borgou Fulbe who have been settled there for centuries).¹⁴¹ Instead, the Fulbe along the border with Kebbi State and Alibori are often labelled as Zamfara Fulbe – that is, Fulbe who originate from Nigeria.¹⁴² Zamfara Fulbe are present in Benin for two key reasons. One is that droughts in the 1970s led to Fulbe migration from northern Nigeria to northern Benin. Another reason is that one transhumance route runs from Kandi via Segbana into Nigeria.¹⁴³ Cross-border relations between the Fulbe in Nigeria and Benin involve, among other things, a barter system of exchanging zebu and taurine breeds of cattle. This barter system takes place between nomadic Fulbe pastoralists (often from Niger and Nigeria) and local Fulbe herders.¹⁴⁴

137 Aziz, M.Y.A. (2016). The emergence of Hausa as a national Lingua Franca in Niger. Université Ahmed Draïa – Adrar.

138 Interview 2 in Madecali (14 November 2023).

139 Interview 1 in Malanville (14 November 2023).

140 Interview 3 in Madecali (14 November 2023).

141 "Social divisions within the Fulbe community in Northern Benin." Undisclosed report; Britannica. (2024). Niger. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Niger-state-Nigeria>; Whati, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. n.d. Alibori. <https://beninpolitique.org/alibori/>.

142 Interview 1 in Madecali (14 November 2023).

143 Den Haan, L. J. (1997). Agriculteurs et éleveurs au Nord-Bénin : Ecologie et genres de vie. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/18519864.pdf>.

144 Houessou, S.O. et al. (2020). The role of cross-border transhumance in influencing resident herders' cattle husbandry practices and use of genetic resources. *Animal*, 14(11), 2378-2386. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1751731120001378>.

3.2 The centre: the cross-border Borgu Empire of the Bariba

There has been evidence of violent extremism in the area between Borgou and southern Alibori, Benin, and Niger State, Nigeria, since early 2023. The main ethnic groups in this area are the Bariba and the Boo as well as the Fulbe and the related Gando (a Fulbe subgroup with links to the Bariba).¹⁴⁵ The area used to be the Borgu Empire – an empire extending from Nikki, Illo and New Bussa (see Figure 8).

In 1898, the British and the French partitioned the Borgu Empire between Nigeria and the Benin Republic. They established the administrative Borgou Department in Benin (comprising the Nikki Kingdom – Nikki, Parakou, Djougou, Kouande, Kandi and Bembereke). In Nigeria this empire was split between Niger State and Kebbi State and was called the Borgu Emirate (comprised of the Bussa Kingdom and Illo Kingdom in northern Bussa, specifically Illo, Kaoje, Koenji, Agwara, Rofia Aliyara, Wawa, Kaima, Kenu, Okuta, Ilesha, Gwanara and Yashkikera).¹⁴⁶

Cross-border connections

The former Borgu Empire used to be a confederation of various kingdoms, with the Nikki (Benin), Bussa and Illo (Nigeria) as primary power centres. The leaders of the primary kingdoms in the former Borgu Empire – Illo, Nikki and Bussa – governed their territories autonomously.¹⁴⁷ Although each kingdom had its own political identity, they were connected by shared elements such as a similar caste system, a governing dynasty rooted in the cultural legend of Kisra, gift

145 The Bariba are a mixture of various ethnic groups. These include the Beke, Batonu, Bokobaru, Kienga, Kanberi, Zana, Boko, Laru and the 'Kisra'. These groups formed the social stratification within the Bariba. The Kisra were the most prominent group settling in the Borgou Empire and formed the 'ruling houses' (from which the traditional authorities are selected). Anene, J. C. (1965). The eclipse of the Borgawa. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3(2), 211–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41971158>. Another prominent group within the Bariba are the Wangara. This group relocated from the Songhay Empire to the Borgu Empire in the 16th century and actively contributed to the economic development and spread of Islam. Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria's foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

146 Asiwaju, A. I. (1999). Transfrontier Regionalism: Perspectives on the European Union and post-colonial Africa with special reference to Borgu. In *Transfrontier Regionalism. The revival of regional integration in Africa*. IFRA-Nigeria. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.590>.

147 Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria's foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

exchanges, participation in each other's traditional festivals, and using the same ritual and ceremonial instruments.¹⁴⁸

Today, the Bariba continue these interactions. At leadership level consider, for example, the communities of Babanna (Nigeria) and Basso (Benin) where the royal house of the two towns is the same.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, who becomes the king of Illo (Kebbi State) and Nikki (Borgou Department, Benin) is subject to the consent of the emir of Borgu (in New Bussa, Niger State).

Relations are particularly strong between the ethnic and linguistic groups and subgroups that form the Bariba. One example is the Gani Festival, which is organised by communities from both countries. This annual festival brings people together from Nikki, Benin and New Bussa, Nigeria. The festival is a uniting force and cultural marker. Another is the turbaning ceremony in which people from either side of the borderlands participate.¹⁵⁰ Communities are also linked by agricultural work in fields that straddle the border. A community member from Bessasi noted, 'My farm crosses the border, so when I go to work, I sometimes see my Nigerian brothers working on the other side of the border. If you're in the field, you don't think of the border, so you can cross the border without knowing.'¹⁵¹ Nigerians also cross the border to attend schools or to work in Benin.¹⁵²

Finally, there are cross-border hunting connections. The Boo – not formally Bariba as such, but they are tied to the Bariba in *plainsanterie* relations – are key hunting groups and they engage in cross-border activities. 'The Boo share their activities [across borders, KdB], including [...] hunting.'¹⁵³ Another person pointed

148 Asiwaju, A. I. (1999). Transfrontier Regionalism: Perspectives on the European Union and post-colonial Africa with special reference to Borgu. In *Transfrontier Regionalism. The revival of regional integration in Africa*. IFRA-Nigeria. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.590>.

149 Note that Babanna is where Darul Salam would be present.

150 Isyaku, S. S. (2018). Benin - Nigeria Relation: A Study of Borderland Communities. *RIMA International Journal of Historical Studies (RIJHIS)*, 2(1), 94-120. Department of History, Sokoto State University Nigeria.

151 Interview 2 in Bessasi (24 November 2023).

152 Interview 3 in Basso (22 November 2023).

153 Interview 3 in Basso (22 November 2023). Someone also noted 'You know, in Boo culture, hunters occupy a very important place. After the kings and nobles, it's the hunters. They are in contact in all areas where there are Boo. Whether in Benin or Nigeria'; Interview 3 in Neganzi (23 November 2023).

out that ‘no country is going to separate us from our Boo identity’.¹⁵⁴ And a final comment: ‘Hunters are part of our cultural heritage, no matter what anyone says, where there are Boo and Bariba, there will always be hunters.’¹⁵⁵

The Nigerian Borgu Emirate

Nigeria’s Borgu emir does not have the same influence as his counterpart in Benin. There are three reasons for this. One is that the ethnic composition of the area crucially changed after the building of the Kainji Dam. A resettlement scheme between 1964 and 1968 saw many communities along the River Niger resettling in the Borgu Emirate.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, the British conquest of northern Nigeria and the colonial administration produced waves of migration into the Kainji Lake area (Hausa, Sorko, Zabarma, Nupe, Yoruba, Igbo, Esan and Igala) settling in places such as Wawa, Gungun Bussa, Shagunu and Agwara.¹⁵⁷

The effect was that the emir had to adapt. For that reason, parts of the Hausa Emirate system are now integrated into the Borgu Emirate. Furthermore, non-Bariba ethnic groups, such as Nupes, Yorubas, Igbos, and Isokos can hold traditional titles in the Emirate. They also play an important role in consultations regarding development issues. For now, this has led to collaboration with one interviewee calling the New Bussa ‘a mini-Nigeria’.¹⁵⁸ A traditional ruler noted, ‘Our main language of communication is Bissan, spoken by a majority of the indigenous people, but every Borguian can understand and speak the Hausa language.’¹⁵⁹ Inter marriages, interfaith relations, interethnic consultations and coexistence are common.

154 Interview 2 in Guene Laaga (21 November 2023).

155 Interview 1 in Lougou (20 November 2023).

156 Bako, U.Y. et al. (2023). Re-examining the history of migration and resettlements in the modern Borgu Emirate of Niger State since 1954. *Ikenga International Journal of the Institute of African Studies*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.53836/ijia/2023/24/1/002>.

157 This influx significantly boosted the region’s economic activities, notably trade and fishing. A challenge in the emirate is that territorial claims (to land) as a result of complex intergroup relations due to resettlement have led to competing claims. Ibid.

158 Bako, U.Y. et al. (2023). Re-examining the history of migration and resettlements in the modern Borgu Emirate of Niger State since 1954. *Ikenga International Journal of the Institute of African Studies*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.53836/ijia/2023/24/1/002>.

159 Ibid.

3.3 Cross-border religious movements

A final cross-border social dynamic is religious movements that operate cross-border. Generally North West Nigeria and northern Benin share a Muslim identity. The customary institutions are mainly Sufi stemming from 19th century jihads and most people adhere to a strand of Maliki Suni and some Sunni reformist movements. Here we explore two reformist movements with some Wahabi orientation: the Yan Izala movement and the Tabligh movement with a cross-border presence.

The first movement is the ‘Yan Izala’, which originated in 1978 under the leadership of Sheikh Ismail Idris in Jos, Plateau State. The Wahabi movement emerged in opposition to the prominent Sufi brotherhoods of the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya.¹⁶⁰ The Yan Izala movement considers these orders to be ‘un-Islamic,’ calling for a stricter interpretation of Islam.¹⁶¹ Izala primarily leveraged its support from the youth and less privileged segments of the local communities, preying on dissatisfaction with politics and the perceived elitism of the northern Sufi movements (co-opted by the British colonial authorities).¹⁶² In Nigeria, offsprings of this movement formed the basis of Boko Haram.

Yan Izala expanded into adjacent northern Benin through Salafi scholars such as Abubakar Gumi and al-Banna, while Nigerian preachers and theorists spread their views into Benin via the media. In the early 2000s, Yan Izala vied for influence over a mosque in Malanville and sponsored Koranic schools in Malanville, Madecali and Monkassa.¹⁶³

160 Insamer. n.d. Beninese Muslims. https://en.insamer.com/beninese-muslims_1102.html; IFRI. n.d. From Rebellion to Cooperation: The Evolution of the Izala Movement in Nigeria. <https://afrique.decryptages.wordpress.com/2019/06/14/from-rebellion-to-cooperation-the-evolution-of-the-izala-movement-in-nigeria/>.

161 Ibid.

162 Loimeier, R. (2012). Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum*, 47(2-3), 137-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971204702-308>; IFRI. n.d. From Rebellion to Cooperation: The Evolution of the Izala Movement in Nigeria. <https://afrique.decryptages.wordpress.com/2019/06/14/from-rebellion-to-cooperation-the-evolution-of-the-izala-movement-in-nigeria/>.

163 Houénou, A. S. (2016). Menaces terroristes: Le Bénin entre réalité et impuissance. *DSI (Défense et Sécurité Internationale)*, 124, 40–45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48605019>; De Bruijne, K. (2021). Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover. The Clingendael Institute.

Our interviews highlighted the fact that the Izala movement is well established along the border, with both travelling preachers and those who have settled permanently. In the border zones from north Alibori to deep into Borgou Department, the movement is seen as a Nigerian movement, but there is a strong presence in Guene Laaga, Kalale, Segbana, Lougou, Madecali and Malanville.¹⁶⁴ People first reported a presence in early 2010 in Segbana and most observations were from 2016 onwards.

The second movement is the Sunni pacifist Jama'at Tabligh movement. This movement has its roots in India, where it began as a missionary movement to counter conversion attempts by Hindu revivalists at the beginning of the 20th century. The Tabligh propagates an egalitarian position that repudiates ethnic distinctions or caste hierarchies.¹⁶⁵ The Tabligh expanded to more than 150 countries, including Benin and Nigeria.¹⁶⁶ Their presence in Nigeria can be traced back to 1956 when Pakistani preachers visited the city of Lagos, with ten more arriving in 1960. In the 1980s, the Nigerian branch of the Tabligh split and over 300 Tablighi centres were established in Nigeria.¹⁶⁷ Tabligh members were among those who joined MUJAO early on in Mali and Hamadoun Kouffa and Iyad ag Ghaly held important roles within the Tabligh.¹⁶⁸ For this reason, the movement is sometimes viewed with suspicion but is in reality a pacifist movement that

164 Interviews in all these areas (November 2023).

165 Jourde, C. (2011). Sifting Through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel: The Case of Mauritania. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <https://africacenter.org/publication/sifting-through-the-layers-of-insecurity-in-the-sahel-the-case-of-mauritania/>.

166 Pew Research Center. (2010). Muslim Networks and Movements In Western Europe. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2010/09/Muslim-networks-full-report.pdf>.

167 Janson, M. (2013). The Global Meets the Local: The Tablighi Jama'at Contextualised. In Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at, 69-98. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

168 Ibrahim, I.Y. (2018). Islam and Political Contestation in the Sahel: Protests, Riots, and Jihadist Insurgencies in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. University of Florida. https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/EO/05/27/11/00001/YAHAYA_IBRAHIM_I.pdf; Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T. (2015). The roots of Mali's conflict. Moving beyond the 2012 crisis. The Clingendael Institute.

rejects the use of violence and does not seek to intervene in politics, with Tabligh leaders openly condemning jihadist violence.¹⁶⁹

In Benin, the movement only arrived in 1986 (first in the south), but it is viewed as being more of a Beninese movement than the Yan Izala.¹⁷⁰ This might be due to its base in Parakou from where it branched out.¹⁷¹

The Tabligh movement has also grown in the border area between Nigeria and Benin. Many interviewees were familiar with the movement; one stated that, ‘The Tabligh [...] go from village to village to pray, [...] coming to Baninzi every week for years’, while someone else said that, ‘The Tabligh go from town to town to preach, like the prophet.’¹⁷² Other villages that are regularly visited are Madecali, where the Tabligh maintain a seasonal presence, and Monkassa.¹⁷³ A well-known Tabligh area is Tsamiya (indeed, the village where Sadiku’s son held his marriage).

3.4 Social, ethnic and religious connections

How do these social, ethnic and religious connections connect with the risk of violent extremism in Benin and Nigeria? A key point is that dependencies between ethnic groups foster resilience against violent extremism and should be supported. But there are real vulnerabilities.

In the Northern area (the Hausa-Fulbe area that belonged to the former Sokoto caliphate) there are familiar tensions with – and stereotypes of – the

169 In 2012, Gao’s Tabligh leader strongly condemned VEO violence and advocated against its followers joining MUJAO. Ibrahim, I.Y. (2018). Islam and Political Contestation in the Sahel: Protests, Riots, and Jihadist Insurgencies in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. University of Florida. https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/05/27/11/00001/YAHAYA_IBRAHIM_I.pdf; Lecocq, B. and Schrijver, P. (2007). The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25(1), 141-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589000601157147>.

170 As visiting missionaries often preached in English, the ability to expand into Benin was initially limited. Janson, M. (2013). The Global Meets the Local: The Tablighi Jama’at Contextualised. In Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama’at, 69-98. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

171 Interviewees mentioned that this was the case since around 2017, although this could not be confirmed.

172 Interview 3 in Malanville (14 November 2023).

173 Interviews in Madecali and Monkassa (November 2023).

Fulbe community. For example, a trader from Malanville expressed the opinion that the Fulbe ruin the market as they raise their prices during negotiations.¹⁷⁴ Another trader from Malanville noted, 'There are also the Fulbe. They are often violent.'¹⁷⁵ A third said, 'The Fulbe in Nigeria are the same as here – they're not serious.'¹⁷⁶ A businessman from Monkassa stated, 'Often it's the Fulbe who cause complications, a Fulbe will never tell you the truth and will always try to deceive you.'¹⁷⁷ The origins of these tensions are in part related to farmer-herder tensions, land use and ownership, but there is also a clear connection to the strong tensions in North West Nigeria between Fulbe and Hausa.¹⁷⁸

In the former Borgu Empire there are three separate social, ethnic and religious risks that open up opportunities for Violent Extremist Originations. First the role of Fulbe in the former Borgu empire. Fulbe in the former Borgu Empire attained a relatively elevated social status. In part this was a result of the Bariba practice of sending Fulbe to school, as Western education was negatively perceived.¹⁷⁹ Another was that the French colonial regime slowly elevated Fulbe leaders into elite positions in Borgou Department.¹⁸⁰ A final reason is the role of the Gando – originally a Fulbe/Bariba slave caste. The Gando status is obtained hereditarily (enslaved by the Bariba) or when Bariba parents reject newborns (accused of sorcery) who are then brought up by the Fulbe. But during colonial times, it was particularly the Gando who received education (as Fulbe elite were themselves also suspicious of colonial powers and hence send in those with the lowest social status) allowing them to climb the social ladder and to hold political and administrative positions.¹⁸¹ Particularly in the Borgou Department, Gando play important political roles (e.g. Kalale).

174 Interview 4 in Malanville (16 November 2023).

175 Interview 2 in Malanville (14 November 2023).

176 Interview 3 in Malanville (14 November 2023).

177 Interview 2 in Monkassa (19 November 2023).

178 De Bruijne, K. (2021). *Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover*. The Clingendael Institute.

179 Iroko, A. F. and Igue, O. J. (1975). *Les villes yoruba du Dahomey: L'exemple de Ketu*. <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/850358>.

180 Bierschenk, T. (1992). *The Ethnicisation of Fulani Society in the Borgou Province of Benin by the Ethnologist*. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32(127), 509–520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4392398>.

181 Hahonou, E.K. (2011). *Past and present African citizenships of slave descent: Lessons from Benin*. *Citizenship Studies*, 15(1), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2011.534932>

Yet despite this different social states there are clear tensions. Fulbe are predominantly involved in livestock activities and previous research shows persistent farmer-herder tensions and violence.¹⁸² Interviews with community members in Borgou Department underscore this. In Sokotindji, Kalale and Basso respondents openly dismissed the Fulbe (habitually considering every Fulbe to be a herder, despite many exceptions). For instance, one resident from Basso stated that, 'Relations with other communities are sometimes tense, especially when the Fulbe come to destroy our fields. Sometimes there are fights and the police have to be called.'¹⁸³ Another commented that, 'If you ask any farmer, he'll tell you there are two problems in his life: problems with the authorities and problems with the Fulbe. We can't do anything about the authorities because they're the ones in power, but the Fulbe and the way they destroy our fields are likely to lead to conflict one day.'¹⁸⁴ A respondent in Kalale said, 'Here the Fulbe are the real problem because their oxen destroy all the fields.'¹⁸⁵

Moreover, some Fulbe are viewed with more disdain than others; Zamfara Fulbe (those who originate from Nigeria). In various cases, people linked the whole group to kidnapping incidents and an increase in general criminal incidents. One person stated, 'The ones I avoid the most are the Zamfara Fulbe, they're real savages. If you meet them at night, you're in trouble. They can kidnap you or steal your goods. They're mean, even towards their own Fulbe brothers in Benin,'¹⁸⁶ and 'It's often the Zamfara Fulbe who are dangerous. If you come back from the market at night, they can hurt you.'¹⁸⁷ Given the observed spreading of banditry (often with a Fulbe link) towards Kebbi and the presence of Darul Salam (with also Fulbe among them) in the area, such prejudices can become recruitment grounds.

182 Biao, C. and De Bruijne, K. (2023). Twilight Institutions: Land conflict and hybrid authorities in Benin's Borgou department. The Clingendael Institute.

183 Interview 2 in Basso (22 November 2023).

184 Interview 1 in Basso (22 November 2023).

185 Interview 2 in Kalale (23 November 2023).

186 Interview 2 in Sebana (20 November 2023). While this is partly true, there are also cordial relationships between them and the autochthonous Fulbe in Benin: 'The Fulbe of Nigeria get on well with us. We share good grazing grounds and we alert each other when there are military raids. We have a WhatsApp group where we share information to avoid problems. '; Interview 1 in Bessassi (24 November 2023).

187 Interview 2 in Segbana (18 November 2023).

A second risk emerges around the hunting groups in the former Borgu Empire. While there is a history of tension between hunting groups and Fulbe groups, there is a different concern. Hunting groups such as the Dambanga operate across borders and have allegiance to the cross-border customary authorities (the Nikki king and the Borgu emir). In Nigeria, Dambanga hunting groups are more openly pitched against whatever armed/extremist group operates from Kainji Lake National Park. This is because extremists targeted the customary system in 2021 (a system which hunting groups defend). Moreover, that the hunting groups are part of communal armed groups that have fought against whatever armed groups holds out in Kainji Lake (2022), and because the Nigerian government has linked up with communal hunting groups on two occasions (2022).¹⁸⁸

The problem is that in Benin, the hunters are *de facto* banned by the government, which creates a discrepancy between the Nigerian and Beninese response.¹⁸⁹ Over the course of this research, almost no one in Benin was willing to answer questions about the hunters. But those who did speak out were very clear on the role the Dambanga presently play: 'The Dambanga have always been there [...] It's not the politicians who are going to chase them away. They are Boo, so they are in contact with the Dambanga Boo of Nigeria.'¹⁹⁰ When the violent extremism problem in the area increases, the different treatment of the hunters in Nigeria and Benin is poised to become a source of friction.

Finally, the increasing role of the Tabligh and Yan Izala is partly a concern (although it should not be overstated). It is important to realise that these movements are not violent or inherently linked to violent extremism. But the bigger point is that there is an overlap between the ideology of these reformist movements and the jihadist/extremist doctrine – such as strict interpretation of Islamic law, a firm rejection of Western ideas, complicit African elites,

188 Some evidence suggests that extremists groups in the area have at some point worked with the hunting groups. Source C, Data collection note Niger and Kebbi state, 22 March 2024

189 Though some evidence suggests that the government of Benin is sometimes compromising on the hunters locally, with 'low key' collaboration around anti-crime and recently violent extremism (in Zougou Pantrossi and Gounarou, Gogounou). It is not clear whether this is national policy or a purely local response.

190 Undisclosed interview.

and a strong concept of a cohesive global Muslim community point of view.¹⁹¹ As evidence from the Sahel shows, those who are attracted to these stricter forms of reformist movement ideologies are more susceptible and more at risk at some point in their lives to join a violent group.

3.5 Summary

There are deep connections between North West Nigeria and North East Benin due to longstanding social, ethnic and religious connections, particularly in the former 'cross-border' Borgu Empire:

- The northern-most border area (North East Alibori and Kebbi State) sees intra-ethnic cross-border connections between the Hausa and the Nigerian Zamfara Fulbe respectively. A risk in this area are ethnic tensions between the Hausa and the Fulbe.
- The area of the former Borgu Empire (Borgou Department and Niger State) has a distinct cross-border political entity. On both sides of the border, people tend to identify as one Bariba/Boo community with shared customary institutions. There are high farmer-herder tensions involving autochthonous Fulbe. There is also a fear of kidnapping by Zamfara Fulbe.
- Another risk in the former Borgu Empire concerns the Dambanga hunting groups. These groups operate cross-border in defiance of a Benin government ban but are pitched against extremists in Kainji and have been used by the Nigerian military. This discrepancy can generate tensions between the two countries.
- Two non-violent reformist movements – the Yan Izala movement and the Jama'at Tabligh – are present along the border. Their reach has grown strongly in the border area of Northern Benin during the last ten years.

191 The Tabligh are not a Salafi tradition. Ibrahim, I.Y. (2018). Islam and Political Contestation in the Sahel: Protests, Riots, and Jihadist Insurgencies in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. University of Florida. https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/05/27/11/00001/YAHAYA_IBRAHIM_I.pdf.

4 Northern Benin – North West Nigeria: cross-border trade

This chapter explores the strong cross-border trade connections between northern Benin and Nigeria. Today, cross-border trade in this zone emanates from price differentials between the countries and Nigeria's significant oil wealth which, coupled with its interventionist economic policies, results in widespread market distortions and inefficiencies.¹⁹² It explores the presence of vulnerabilities that could be exploited by violent extremists.

The transit trade into Nigeria is one of the largest economic driving forces for Benin. It results in government revenue and formal and informal beneficiaries.¹⁹³ It has been suggested that up to 75% of the Beninese GDP comes from informal cross-border trade.¹⁹⁴ Cross-border activities between Nigeria and Benin are more prevalent in the southern parts of the border area.¹⁹⁵

This chapter makes two observations on the link between cross-border trade and violent extremism. First, it highlights the key trade routes and hubs along Benin's northern border with Nigeria and notes the overlap between the locations of unidentified armed group and violent extremists and these trade hubs.

192 But the area has long been well known for cross-border trade: during the colonial period the conflicting economic policies of the French and British led to incentives to move goods across the border. Historically, this type of long-distance trading attracted armed bandit problems – particularly in the Borgu Empire. Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria's foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

193 Golub, S. S. and Mbaye, A. A. (2019). Benin's informal trading with Nigeria. Research project of Economic Development and Institutions (EDI). <https://edi.opml.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Benin-informal-trading-with-nigeria.pdf>.

194 Blum, C. (2014). Cross-Border Flows between Nigeria and Benin: What are the Challenges for (Human) Security? *FES Peace and Security Series* No. 15. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/10883.pdf>.

195 Porto-Novu (Benin) to Badagry (Nigeria) and the swamp areas of Ouémé. Kwarkye, S. and Matongbada, M. (2021). Nigeria's border closures haven't served their purpose. Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/nigerias-border-closures-havent-served-their-purpose>.

Second, it points out how cross-border trade is key to people's livelihoods and how livelihood vulnerabilities have emerged that risk being exploited by violent extremists. One example is a ban on cereal and soja exports, which has increased community vulnerabilities. Another problem is the plummeting fuel trade after the new Nigerian president cut subsidies in April 2023.

4.1 Goods, trade routes and hubs

A large variety of goods are moved across the border, both prohibited and non-prohibited. Non-prohibited commercial goods are agricultural products, fuel and vehicles.

The border between Alibori Department and Kebbi State mainly sees goods moving out towards Nigeria. These are mostly food items, automobiles, second-hand goods, cosmetics, beverages, drugs, textiles and fuel products.¹⁹⁶ The border area between Niger State and Borgou Department mainly involves the export of timber, oil, medicines, sugar and soy beans.¹⁹⁷ Goods imported into Benin include fuel products, medicines, oil, building materials, onions and garlic. Prohibited items include textiles, rice, second-hand goods, spirits and, more recently, cereals.¹⁹⁸ Other prohibited goods involve narcotics, small firearms and light ammunition. Human trafficking is also widespread.¹⁹⁹

There are two main methods for moving goods: large convoys and small-scale, informal cross-border trade. Truck convoys are authorised through agreements between Beninese importers and senior Nigerian customs authorities. A predetermined flat fee is paid for each truck. Small-scale taxi and motorcycle transportation takes place on roads that are familiar to smugglers linking both sides of the border, as well as on waterways and through official routes. Other

196 Other imports are cow skin, spices, unprocessed food items and mosquito coils. Liman, A. (2022). Smuggling Networks in North-Western Borderlands of Nigeria: A Social Network Analysis. *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences*, 12(1). Faculty of Social Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

197 Interviews (November 2023).

198 Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria's foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

199 E.g. 200,000 children in West and Central Africa are subjected to forced labour and trafficking. Blum, C. (2014). Cross-Border Flows between Nigeria and Benin: What are the Challenges for (Human) Security? *FES Peace and Security Series* No. 15. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/10883.pdf>.

forms of transportation include boats using the intricate canal system in the Borgou area.²⁰⁰

The movement of goods – whether licit or illicit – is controlled by well-organised networks. Those who move goods can be heavily equipped (sometimes armed). Moreover, the networks operate based on trust and having important connections, often rooted in religious or ethnic ties. Kinship networks serve as important facilitators of illicit trade between Benin and Nigeria – particularly involving the Yoruba (whose general geographical area is not part of this study) and the Hausa.²⁰¹

Routes and hubs in Borgou/South East Alibori and Niger State

Figure 9 shows the key areas for the licit and illicit movement of goods are around the forest areas between Kainji Lake and the Forêt de Trois Rivières. The main route runs from the Beninese town of Basso to Babanna, Nigeria. An alternative route is from Basso to Negansi from where traders and goods cross into Kapu, Nigeria. As a Bariba trader from Baninzi noted: ‘The market is very important, it’s the lifeblood of the local economy, we go to the market either in Babanna or Kapu.’²⁰²

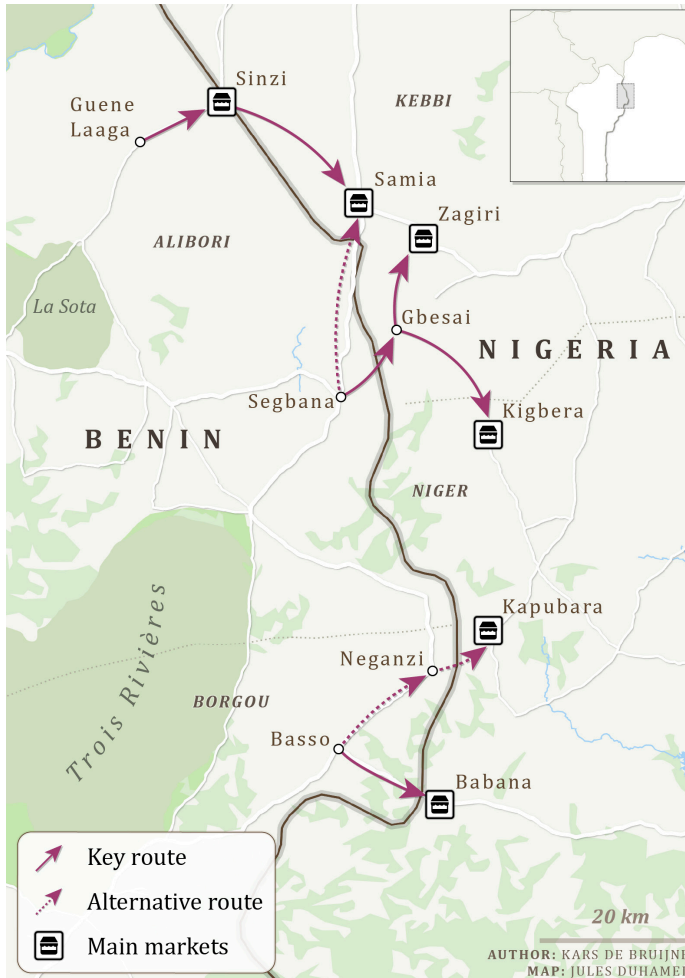
Further up in Segbana are two additional routes. One route leaves from Segbana to the Nigerian border town of Gbesai from where people can reach the large markets in Zagiri, Kigbera and Lou. A second route linking Guene Laaga, Benin and the Nigerian town of Sainji is a final connection, providing access to the important markets of Sainji and Tsamiya in Nigeria.

200 Benjamin, N. and Mbaye, A. A. (2012). *The Informal Sector in Francophone Africa: Firm Size, Productivity, and Institutions*. Published by the World Bank Agence and Française de Développement. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-9537-0>.

201 Golub, S. S., and Mbaye, A. A. (2019). Benin’s informal trading with Nigeria. Research project of Economic Development and Institutions (EDI). <https://edi.opml.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Benin-informal-trading-with-nigeria.pdf>; Benjamin, N., Golub, S., Mbaye, A. A. (2015). Informality, Trade Policies and Smuggling in West Africa. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 30(3), 381-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2015.1068203>.

202 Interview 2 in Baninzi (19 November 2023).

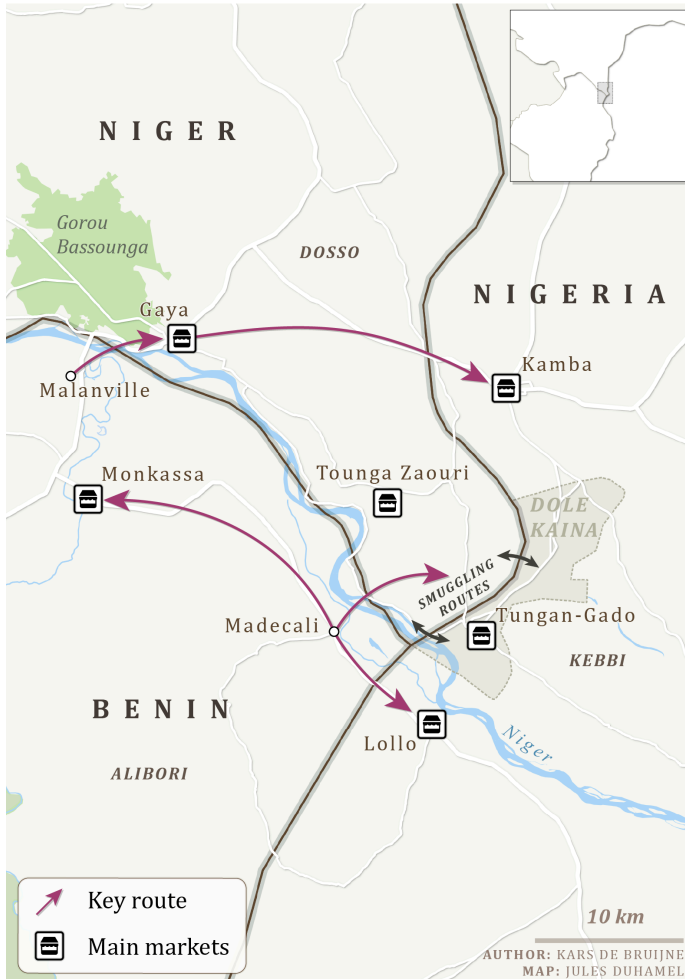
Figure 9 Routes & hubs between Borgou/Alibori and Niger State



Routes and hubs in North East Alibori and Kebbi State

Figure 10 shows the routes further up north, between the city of Malanville (Benin), Gaya (Niger Republic) and Kamba (Nigeria). In Malanville the local communities rely on the market in Gaya, although as of January 2024 the border is officially closed due to ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) sanctions on Niger. In Madecali, the markets of Lollo and Tungan-Gado in Nigeria are the most important. Monkassa, Tounga Zaouri and Kamba in Nigeria are also frequently visited.

Figure 10 Routes & hubs between Alibori and Kebbi State



A key hub is the Niger River. In Gaya and Malanville a number of new piers and jetties are under construction in villages on both sides of the Niger River.²⁰³ Along the river towards Nigeria, border communities are involved in various

203 Sampaio, A. (2023). Reserve Assets: Armed Groups and Conflict Economies in the National Parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ant%C3%B4nio-Sampaio-Eleanor-Beavor-et-alReserve-Assets-Armed-groups-and-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa-May-2023-web.pdf>.

smuggling routes (e.g. in numerous small border towns around Dole-Kaina, situated on the border between Niger's Dosso Region and Nigeria's Kebbi State). Smuggled goods are kept in warehouses and, in some instances, private houses.²⁰⁴

Overlap between trade hubs and violent extremist presence

The observed locations of unidentified armed groups, bandits and violent extremists is concerning. Darul Salam's alleged influence as well as the observed movement of armed groups in 2023 took place on the Basso-Babanna axis as well as on the Basso-Kapu axis. Moreover, the alleged Darul Salam presence in Kebbi State is in Tsamiya (with a commercial connection to Segbana) and Lollo and Dole-Kaina (the heart of riverine smuggling in Benin). In this context, sources allege that different extremist groups are using the informal cross-border trade routes connecting Kebbi and Benin.²⁰⁵

In Niger state, Borgu LGA sources state that they have witnessed the arrival of new commercial agents operating many new and otherwise unknown bureau de change and operators starting businesses in the border communities.²⁰⁶

Other sources allege that some of the traders operating along the border are sponsored by extremist groups that have an interest in profiting from cross-border business activities.²⁰⁷

4.2 People's livelihoods and cross-border trade

Trade and the resulting cross-border movement of goods is key to the livelihoods of most people in northern Benin. But it is around these livelihoods that the risks of extremist violence emerged in 2023.

The crossing from Basso-Babanna provides an insight into the deep connections between people's livelihoods and cross-border trade. From Basso, goods from Cotonou enter Nigeria. Many businessmen/women from different parts of Nigeria come to Basso to buy these materials. For instance, every week, 1,000 bags of rice are exported from Benin via Basso to Babanna for redistribution to New Bussa and

204 Liman, A. (2022). Smuggling Networks in North-Western Borderlands of Nigeria: A Social Network Analysis. *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences*, 12(1). Faculty of Social Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

205 Interview K4, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

206 Interview C1, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

207 Interview K1, K2, K4, Barnett and Rufa'i, Data collection note North West Nigeria, 4 December 2023.

other neighbouring towns. Basso is also a supplier of timber, not only to Babanna and Bussa but also to other states in Nigeria such as Kebbi, Sokoto and Katsina. Moreover, most of the bottled water in Babanna is supplied from Basso.²⁰⁸ The town's weekly markets play a crucial role in the economic relationship between the two communities and the livelihoods of local people. The Nigerian Babanna market serves as an economic centre for many Beninese towns, including Kalale, Neganzi, Baninzi, Bessassi and Zambara. As a trader in Kalale said, 'If you are a trader in Kalale, if you want to survive, you have to know about the Babanna market.'²⁰⁹ The Monday markets are when traders from different parts of Nigeria and Benin exchange millet, maize, beans, cotton, livestock and poultry.²¹⁰

For the border communities this informal trade is their primary means of income. Many are involved in cross-border trade as traders of fuel, soy beans, corn, meat and timber or as transporters thereof. For example, a meat vendor in Segbana said, 'There's not a week that goes by when young people don't empty the village to go to the market in Babanna. Even when the border was closed, people found a way to cross.'²¹¹ Another stated that, 'If you don't have any money at home, you can buy certain products on credit [...]. For example, at the beginning of 2021, I had a big family problem [...] I negotiated with my partner in Nigeria, he gave me some products on credit for my shop. That really solved my problem.'²¹² This forges a symbiotic relationship between communities: 'Benin exports cashew nuts, soybeans and maize to Nigeria. Nigeria exports petrol, medicines and sugar to Benin.'²¹³

However, interviewees noted the mounting difficulties in continuing this cross-border trade. Communities report increasing challenges in collaboration with border authorities, mainly due to new trade restrictions. The transhumance ban, in place for many years, is still a challenge for pastoralists. But a clear complaint is the export ban on cereals by the Benin government in 2022 which was

208 Isyaku, S. S. (2018). Benin - Nigeria Relation: A Study of Borderland Communities. *RIMA International Journal of Historical Studies (RIJHIS)*, 2(1), 94-120. Department of History, Sokoto State University Nigeria.

209 Interview 2 in Kalale (23 November 2023).

210 On other days, activities take place in shops and at some market locations, like those selling grains and other foodstuffs.

211 Interview 1 in Sebana (20 November 2023).

212 Interview 1 in Baninzi (20 November 2023).

213 Interview 2 in Kalale (23 November 2023).

meant to ensure that food produced in Benin remains there for local consumption in the face of high world prices as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Interviewees in the Borgou Department point out how soybeans (a cereal) have been an important export commodity for the community, allowing them to have market access and a livelihood. But with the ban, trade is restricted; as a resident from Basso noted ‘border markets are important, but since the ban on soybean exports, their importance is no longer felt’.²¹⁴ This ban affects not only the commercial market but also livelihoods. For instance, a cereal vendor from Madecali said: ‘It is the ban on exports of food products and soybeans that has caused me so much suffering.’²¹⁵ The closure of the borders and the ban on exports of cereal products has created a lot of problems for us,’ said a trader in Neganzi.²¹⁶ A soybeans trader from Garou noted that, ‘Since last year, the government has made us suffer a lot. I used to trade in soybeans.’²¹⁷

In the context of a mounting violent extremist presence in the area and the role that VEOs could play in (some) cross-border trade, these are clearly vulnerabilities that should be urgently managed.

4.3 Livelihoods at risk after the ending of Nigerian fuel subsidies

Along the Nigerian-Benin border one key trade that affects people’s livelihoods is fuel. This is not only directly the case as many people are involved in moving fuel across the border but also indirectly as fuel prices have a direct impact on the costs of commodities moved by motorised transport.

After the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), fuel became the item that was most intensively smuggled across the Nigerian-Benin border from Nigeria, replacing agricultural produce.²¹⁸ Until recently, Benin relied on a network of smuggled fuel from Nigeria. The illicit fuel trade covers 80% of the national demand and employs an estimated 40,000 people (the same as the whole public sector in

214 Interview 1 in Basso (22 November 2023).

215 Interview 1 in Madecali (14 November 2023).

216 Interview 1 in Neganzi (23 November 2023).

217 Interview 3 in Garou (12 November 2023).

218 Aluede, J.A. (2017). Nigeria’s foreign policy and trans-border crime: A historical analysis of the Nigeria-Benin border, 1960 – 2013. School of Postgraduate Studies University of Lagos.

Benin).²¹⁹ Particularly young people struggling to secure formal employment work as transporters or retailers.²²⁰ The main triggers for the fuel trade in the border zone have been the large subsidies in Nigeria and price deregulation in Benin, which created large price differentials and incentives for trade.²²¹

The illicit fuel trade is deeply embedded in the local economy with officials either ignoring it or being involved themselves.²²² This cross-border fuel smuggling is based on ‘tarqaqe’ – a strategy that bypasses informal negotiations by using illegal routes and relying heavily on the assistance of informants or border communities to succeed.²²³ In the former Borgu Empire, the key crossing is at Basso-Babanna, with Babanna having about four fuel stations that provide fuel, gas and kerosene to the immediate communities. From Basso in Benin’s Borgou Department, trucks export fuel to neighbouring towns as well as by roadside black marketeers (an estimated 100 drums of fuel on a weekly basis). This excludes unofficial transportation by motorcycles, which is a massive business in Babanna where jerricans are filled with fuel pre-emptively waiting to be exported to Basso.²²⁴ In the northernmost hub there are dozens of fuel stations in North West Nigeria (e.g. Kamba). The towns that are involved in the smuggling of fuel (e.g. Lollo and Dole-Kaina) have a support infrastructure comprising banks, filling stations and large markets.²²⁵

219 Golub, S., Mbaye, A. A., Golubski, C. (2019). The effects of Nigeria’s closed borders on informal trade with Benin. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-effects-of-nigerias-closed-borders-on-informal-trade-with-benin/>.

220 Golub, S. S. and Mbaye, A. A. (2019). Benin’s informal trading with Nigeria. Research project of Economic Development and Institutions (EDI). <https://edi.opml.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Benin-informal-trading-with-nigeria.pdf>.

221 Benjamin, N. and Mbaye, A. A. (2012). The Informal Sector in Francophone Africa: Firm Size, Productivity, and Institutions. Published by the World Bank Agence and Française de Développement. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-9537-0>.

222 Reuters. (2023). As Nigeria scraps fuel subsidy, a vibrant black market collapses. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/nigeria-scraps-fuel-subsidy-vibrant-black-market-collapses-2023-06-26/>.

223 Liman, A. (2022). Smuggling Networks in North-Western Borderlands of Nigeria: A Social Network Analysis. *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences*, 12(1). Faculty of Social Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

224 Isyaku, S. S. (2018). Benin - Nigeria Relation: A Study of Borderland Communities. *RIMA International Journal of Historical Studies (RIJHIS)*, 2(1), 94-120. Department of History, Sokoto State University Nigeria.

225 Liman, A. (2022). Smuggling Networks in North-Western Borderlands of Nigeria: A Social Network Analysis. *Sokoto Journal of the Social Sciences*, 12(1). Faculty of Social Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

A blow to livelihoods and risks to peoples livelihoods

In the border region between Benin and Nigeria's Niger and Kebbi states, the fuel business is a common factor. Around 22 of the 50 interviewees had a link to this trade, either as full-time transporters, or having been transporters in the past or engaging therein as a sideline. Mainly young people dominate cross-border transport activities. By the end of May 2023, the new Nigerian president, Tinubu, put an end to the fuel subsidies (there are sound economic justifications for ending the subsidies).²²⁶

Cutting subsidies had a major effect on the black market fuel vendors, commercial drivers and the whole support structure. Fuel doubled in price, with various effects on people's livelihoods. A resident of Garou explained, 'Here in Garou, almost all the young people made a living from selling fuel. So now you understand why we're suffering so much since this decision was taken. The nightclubs are closed, even the two bars behind customs, which used to be very lively, no one goes there anymore because there's no money.'²²⁷ A trader said 'The main change in my life over the last year has been the money. Before, I used to make a lot of money with the fuel I brought in, but now it's become very complicated.' A resident from Kalale explained that 'Kalale is very much affected by this situation. Many young people in Kalale are traffickers.'²²⁸ But the effect extends beyond all of those who are directly involved in the trade because all prices rise due to the increased cost of transport. A businessman from Baninzi said 'This decision is a disaster for us, the retailers, because we can no longer get by. There were a few traders who managed to take a little from their profits or their reserves to trade. But after a few months, even they had to give up.'²²⁹

The problem is that violent extremists operate in the immediate surroundings, which poses two risks. First, there is a large reservoir of experienced young men who have lost their livelihoods, have no real alternatives, are angry, and are able to move between countries. This is a potential recruitment pool. Second, the cutting of fuel subsidies is a decision (even though taken by a president from another country) that has reinforced anger towards the state. For example, someone from Garou said 'since last year, the government has made us suffer.

226 PCW. (2023). Fuel subsidy in Nigeria - issues, challenges and the way forward. <https://www.pwc.com/ng/en/assets/pdf/fuel-subsidy-in-nigeria-issues-challenges-and-the-way-forward.pdf>

227 Interview 2 in Garou (12 November 2023).

228 Interview 5 in Kalale (24 November 2023)

229 Interview 1 in Baninzi (19 November 2023).

I used to trade in soybeans. They created problems with soybeans, and now they've got together with Nigeria to create problems with fuel too.²³⁰ A resident from Guene Laaga said 'I think this whole thing is a joke. The politicians want to make us suffer.'²³¹ Similarly, a resident from Basso noted 'I don't think the politicians give a damn about our population, they just want to serve their own interests. That's why they decided to take this decision.'²³² While another person from far north in Madecali stated 'the government has abandoned us here (...)'²³³ This narrative is extremely concerning, particularly in an area where there is violent extremist presence.

4.4 Summary

This chapter finds that a well-developed cross-border trade system operates between the Nigerian and Beninese border. This system generates livelihoods for many people in the area. **Livelihoods are at risk:**

- There is a variety of markets and crossings connecting North West Nigeria and Northern Benin. Unidentified armed groups and Darul Salam operate in these hubs.
- People's livelihoods are highly dependent on cross-border trade. Interviews revealed frustration and a strong sense of grievance towards both Nigerian and Beninese government policies that are perceived to put livelihoods under stress.
- On the one hand, consistent problems reported are a ban on cereal exports and soybeans, and accompanying border restrictions. Both have a negative impact on livelihoods.
- On the other hand, the end of fuel subsidies in Nigeria at the time of research for this report had a severe impact on people's livelihoods (and on communities in general).

230 Interview 1 in Garou (12 November 2023).

231 Interview 4 in Guene Laaga (21 November 2023).

232 Interview 2 in Basso (17 November 2023)

233 Interview 5 in Madecali (15 November 2023).

Recommendations

This report concludes with three recommendations, most notably for the governments of Benin and the federal governments of Nigeria.

Cease the Talon-Tinubu entente: coordinate the military response

The relationship between Nigeria and Benin has been complex since 2015. Then president Muhammadu Buhari was accused of supporting former president and opposition leader Boni Yayi in the contentious elections of 2016 against sitting president Patrice Talon. Relations deteriorated in August 2019 when Nigeria closed the border with Benin, officially because of the large-scale smuggling of rice from Benin into Nigeria and fuel from Nigeria to Benin.²³⁴ Sources suggest that the move was read by Benin as an attempt at destabilising the Talon regime.²³⁵

However, the election of Bola Tinubu has led to a major entente in relationships between the two countries. Soon after Tinubu's election, Talon appointed Shegun Bakari as Benin's foreign minister – a Yoruba just like Tinubu (6 June 2023), which widely seen as an attempt to reset relationships with Nigeria. Tinubu and Talon met in Paris (June 2023) where Talon reportedly voiced his strong support for Tinubu to become chairman of ECOWAS.²³⁶ The presidents met again in July (in the run-up and aftermath to Niger's coup), at Benin's independence celebrations

234 The Africa Report. (2019). Nigeria-Benin border closure: bully boy tactics to crush a weaker rival. <https://www.theafricareport.com/17737/nigeria-benin-border-closure-bully-boy-tactics-to-crush-a-weaker-rival/>.

235 Africa Intelligence. (2024). Benin, Nigeria: Tinubu and Talon entente benefits billionaire Tony Elumelu. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2024/01/19/tinubu-and-talon-entente-benefits-billionaire-tony-elumelu,110149915-art>.

236 Africa Intelligence. (2023). Spotlight | Nigeria, West Africa: New chair Tinubu formulates plan to revitalise ECOWAS leadership. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2023/07/26/new-chair-tinubu-formulates-plan-to-revitalise-ecowas-leadership,110007476-eve#:~:text=While%20some%20were%20surprised%20at,New%20Global%20Financing%20Pact%20summit>.

(August 2023, where Tinubu called the two countries ‘conjoined twins’) and in December 2023 when both discussed in detail plans to improve trade relations.²³⁷

This political/economic entente should be followed with improved security collaboration in three ways:

1. **Explore revamping regional security cooperation within ECOWAS.** Regional military cooperation in West Africa around violent extremism is (supposed) to take place within the Accra Initiative and the *Conseil d’Entente*. There are a myriad of reasons for such ad hoc cobble- together coalitions instead of the permanent multilateral organisation ECOWAS (see also the G5-Sahel, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)-Lake Chad, and the plan for the MNJTF/AI).²³⁸ But one reason for ad hoc coalitions over ECOWAS has been the rather inward-looking role and weakening hegemony of Nigeria in the region over the last decade.²³⁹ Under Tinubu this role might be changing (e.g. see the more outspoken and forceful position vis-à-vis Niger’s coup) and a direct link between Nigeria’s domestic problems of violent extremism and the problems in the Sahel could generate an opportunity for more vigour and determination in Nigeria’s foreign security policies, including within ECOWAS which Tinubu presently chairs. Despite other problems that could make a more active ECOWAS role complex (most notably the emergence of the AES – Alliance of Sahel States) it is an opportunity that should be explored, despite the lack of confidence in ECOWAS. The fact that the Benin-Nigeria border is a purely littoral affair might prove helpful.
2. **Quickly develop bilateral security cooperation particularly around hot-pursuit, intelligence sharing and coordination.** The general trend in littoral West Africa has been a bilateral rather than multi-lateral reflex when

237 De Coning, C. (2023). Ad-hoc initiatives are shaking up African security. Training for Peace. <https://www.thecable.ng/tinubu-to-talon-theres-a-lack-of-synergy-between-nigeria-and-benin-republic-we-are-one>.

238 See for example, de Coning, C. (2023). Ad-hoc initiatives are shaking up African security. Training for Peace. <https://www.thecable.ng/tinubu-to-talon-theres-a-lack-of-synergy-between-nigeria-and-benin-republic-we-are-one>; Kwarkye, S., Abatan, J. E. and Matongbada, M. (2029). Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states? Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>.

239 Economist Intelligence. (2022). Nigeria’s weakening hegemony in West Africa. <https://www.eiu.com/n/nigerias-weakening-hegemony-in-west-africa/>.

countries actually experience incidents of violent extremism on their soil (see, Côte d'Ivoire with Burkina Faso in 2020, Togo with Burkina Faso in 2022, and Benin with Niger in 2021 and Burkina Faso in 2023). While multilateralism is ultimately needed, a bilateral reflex between Nigeria and Benin would also be very welcome. This report makes clear that a security response on one side of the border (e.g. targeting the families of bandits in North West Nigeria) has effects on the other side. Quick wins would be to: ensure the ability of both Benin and Nigeria to engage in hot-pursuit operations (whereby security organisations can operate on the soil of the neighbour when pursuing extremists); share intelligence on movements and presence of extremists and bandit groups (particularly as information from Nigeria suggests a blind spot on developments in Benin); and generally share information on military and security operations, as there appears to be strong waterbed effects, where bandits and violent extremists resettle in response to military operations (presently mainly from Nigeria to Benin). Such initiatives could be implemented at relatively short notice.

- 3. Develop a shared Beninois-Nigerian approach to hunting groups.** A looming problem is the different treatment of the same hunting groups (particularly the Dambanga) by Nigeria and Benin. In Nigeria, security actors have worked with these hunters vis-à-vis violent extremists whereas in Benin hunting groups are de facto banned (which to quite some extent relates to a perception of hunter loyalty to former president Boni Yayi, the opposition). Moreover, hunters in Nigeria have occasionally worked alongside suspected extremists. The present set-up is untenable, as Benin's policy to ban hunters is not effective in the Borgou because hunting groups can take on a significant role elsewhere (which might become a factor in upcoming elections). While the first response should be from state security forces, there is a need to consider a role for the hunting groups who perceive themselves as protectors of the community – and exclusion is already generating grievances in areas outside of the Borgou. The key challenge for Nigeria and Benin is to consider how to engage constructively with the Dambanga (and other hunters) without creating a civil defence force and the excesses that accompany such forces.²⁴⁰

240 E.g. at this very early stage there might be scope for strengthening internal trial mechanisms.

Prioritise people's livelihood: cushion the effect of economic policies

A second line of action should take place in the economic sphere. Action could be taken by the federal governments of Nigeria and the government of Benin separately. Yet, there is scope for specific coordination and policy making in the border zones through the Nigerian National Boundary Commission (NBC) and Benin's Agence Béninoise de Gestion Intégrée des Espaces Frontaliers (ABeGIEF), which have benefited from the general entente between the two countries.²⁴¹ Moreover, the recent resuscitation of the Nigeria Benin Joint Commission, which included reference to the interconnection between insurgency and the standards of living in border areas.²⁴²

4. Cushion the effects of the ban on cereals (and cutting of fuel subsidies).

Since 2021 Benin has seen a variety of export restrictions.²⁴³ The most significant export restrictions were introduced in February 2022 with export taxes on rice, soya, cotton, processed and unprocessed cassava, shea butter and yams, in an effort to keep domestic prices low.²⁴⁴ This was followed by a full ban on soybeans in October 2022.²⁴⁵ These export bans are not unique for West Africa, as global developments have led many countries to adopt bans: Covid-19 led to shortages and inflation; and the war in Ukraine has

241 Nan News. (2024). National Boundary Commission resolves 15 interstate boundary disputes in 2023 – DG. <https://nannews.ng/2023/12/21/national-boundary-commission-resolves-15-interstate-boundary-disputes-in-2023-dg/>.

242 NTA. (2024). Minister Okays Establishment of Benin-Nigeria Permanent Commission. <https://nta.ng/2024/02/08/minister-okays-establishment-of-benin-nigeria-permanent-commission/>.

243 Gouvernement de la République du Bénin. (2021). Arraînement des camions de vivriers dans le Nord-Bénin: Les mesures du Gouvernement portent déjà leurs fruits. <https://www.gouv.bj/article/1373/arraînement-camions-vivriers-dans-nord-benin%C2%A0-mesures-gouvernement-portent-déjà-leurs-fruits/>; Bénin web TV. (2021). Bénin: levée de la mesure d'interdiction d'exporter les produits vivriers. <https://beninwebtv.com/benin-levee-de-la-mesure-dinterdiction-dexporter-les-produits-vivriers/>.

244 Commodafrica. (2022). Le Bénin taxe la sortie des produits alimentaires pour lutter contre l'inflation et éviter les pénuries. <https://www.commodafrica.com/02-02-2022-le-benin-taxe-la-sortie-des-produits-alimentaires-pour-lutter-contre-linflation-et-eviter/>.

245 24heures au Bénin. (2022). Soutien à la transformation locale: L'exportation du soja grain interdite dès avril 2024. [https://24haubenin.com/?L-exportation-du-soja-grain-interdite-des-avril-2024](https://24haubenin.com/?L-exportation-du-soja-grain-interdite-des-avril-2024;); A related problem for Benin's border communities was Tinubu's lifting of the rice export ban, which had led to a large illegal rice smuggling economy from Benin to Nigeria. Rural 21. (2013). Advocacy for free trade. https://www.rural21.com/fileadmin/downloads/2013/en-02/rural2013_02-S16-17.pdf.

restricted grain and maize export to Africa and led to a strong rise in prices.²⁴⁶ As a result, not only Benin but other governments (Ghana,²⁴⁷ Togo,²⁴⁸ Côte d'Ivoire²⁴⁹ and Burkina Faso²⁵⁰) have pursued export restrictions of cereals – e.g. rice, wheat, rye, oats, barley, millet, maize, grain and others. As this

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- 246 Bouët, A., Laborde Debucquet, D., Traoré, F. (2023). West Africa faces mixed food security impacts from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In *The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Global Food Security*. Section Four: Country Impacts and Responses: Sub-Saharan Africa, Chapter 29, 150-153. https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294394_29; Since the summer of 2023 also the price of rice is sharply increasing. France 24. (2024). La flambée des prix du riz et le spectre d'une crise alimentaire en Afrique. <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20240130-la-flambée-des-prix-du-riz-et-le-spectre-d-une-crise-alimentaire-en-afrique>.
- 247 Deutsche Welle. (2022). Ghana extends ban on grain exports. <https://www.dw.com/en/ghana-extends-ban-on-grain-exports/a-61955785>; AgFlow. (2023). Agricultural Markets News. <https://www.agflow.com/agricultural-markets-news/ghana-still-bans-corn-export-and-imports-hit-27-million/>.
- 248 Afreepress. (2021). Il faut désormais une autorisation pour sortir les céréales du Togo. <https://afreepress.net/2021/06/30/togo-il-faut-desormais-une-autorisation-pour-exporter-les-produits-de-grande-consommation/>; Togofirst. (2021). Togo: tour de vis sur l'exportation de certains produits de grande consommation. <https://www.togofirst.com/fr/gouvernance-economique/1905-9989-togo-nouveau-tour-de-vis-sur-les-exportations-des-produits-de-grande-consommation>; though not too effective. Togofirst. (2022). Togo: saisie d'une cargaison de céréales destinée à l'exportation illicite. <https://www.togofirst.com/fr/securite/2104-9822-togo-saisie-d-une-cargaison-de-cereales-destinee-a-l-exportation-illicite#:~:text=La%20cargaison%2C%20apprend%2Don%2C,produits%20qui%20occasionne%20des%20sp%C3%A9culations>.
- 249 Gouvernement de Côte d'Ivoire. (2023). lutte contre la cherté de la vie: le gouvernement suspend à titre conservatoire l'exportation du riz local et du sucre jusqu'au 31 décembre 2023. https://www.gouv.ci/_actualite-article.php?recordID=15705; YopL.frii. (2023). Bonne nouvelle pour les Ivoiriens: Le gouvernement a annoncé une exonération de taxes sur ces produits. <https://yop.l-frii.com/bonne-nouvelle-pour-les-ivoiriens-le-gouvernement-a-annonce-une-exoneration-de-taxes-sur-ces-produits/>; Studio Tamani. (2024). L'interdiction d'exportation de la Côte d'Ivoire impacte les prix de certains produits. <https://www.studiotamani.org/157278-linterdiction-dexportation-de-la-cote-divoire-impacte-les-prix-de-certains-produits>.
- 250 Deutsche Welle. (2021). Interdire les exportations des produits est-ce efficace ? <https://www.dw.com/fr/afrique-de-l-ouest-sahel-cereales-interdiction-exportations-cherte-prix/a-58206998>; Burkina24. (2022). Burkina: L'exportation de céréales reste suspendue. <https://burkina24.com/2022/11/16/burkina-lexportation-des-cereales-reste-suspendue/>; Agence Ecofin. (2023). Le Burkina Faso autorise uniquement les exportations de grains vers le Niger. <https://www.agenceecofin.com/cereales/1508-110910-le-burkina-faso-autorise-uniquement-les-exportations-de-grains-vers-le-niger>; Bamada.net. (2023). Suspension temporaire de l'exportation des céréales au Burkina Faso pour garantir la sécurité alimentaire nationale. <https://bamada.net/suspension-temporaire-de-lexportation-des-cereales-au-burkina-faso-pour-garantir-la-securite-alimentaire-nationale>.

reports shows, these economic regulations have had an impact on the livelihoods of border communities. While there are very defensible rationales for the policy (ensuring sufficient food in country, promoting domestic processing, raising money for subsidies on other goods, lowering government expenditure) there are also countervailing arguments that need to start playing a stronger role now. In a context where violent extremists operate it is very dangerous to implement policies with strong livelihood consequences. What needs to happen in addition to a military response, is a set of actions that help to cushion the effects of these policies for border communities. For cereals this can, for example, involve collective buying of cereals at Nigerian market prices by the state, or outright supplementation of people's income. For fuel (although see below) this might involve sponsoring alternative trade and livelihoods, although the IMF recently suggested that Nigeria should work on a quiet reintroduction of the subsidies.²⁵¹ While such advice might be economically not sound and involves technical challenges (e.g. ensuring complementarity on both sides of the border, preventing smuggling of goods from other areas), it will ultimately be cheaper than a military response.

Develop more flexibility in the responses

A final recommendation is a call for more flexibility and agility to respond directly to a changing context of violent extremism.

5. **Closely monitor the border market for cereal and fuel along Nigeria's border.**

Fieldwork for this research in Benin was done in November 2023 and showed strong livelihood effects. Yet, a massive drop in the naira exchange rate vis-à-vis the CFA has created new incentives, as Nigerian exporters obtain CFA for their exports which can be exchanged at higher naira rates.²⁵² For the fuel market, the effect has been that fuel smuggling from Nigeria to Benin started to pick up again in early 2024 (mostly due to 'kpayo' – smuggled fuel).²⁵³ For the cereal market this has meant that rather than a concern

251 Financial Times. (2024). Nigeria's economic crisis puts fuel subsidies under scrutiny.

<https://www.ft.com/content/29752a06-adea-4175-b278-22e0632c375a>.

252 Business Day. (2024). Weaker naira seen fuelling cross-border petrol market. <https://businessday.ng/news/article/weaker-naira-seen-fuelling-cross-border-petrol-market/>.

253 Instad. (2024). Indice Harmonisé des Prix à la Consommation du mois de janvier 2024.

<https://instad.bj/publications/publications-mensuelles/prix>.

about cereal moving out of Benin, there has been an influx in cereals.²⁵⁴ Aside from the substantial effects, the real issue is that border markets with Nigeria experience unrivalled trade dynamics and that – as a consequence – vulnerabilities to violent extremism are also very dynamic. In the context of violent extremist presence in these areas, there is urgent and constant need for up-to-date and near real-time information on which societal groups lose out. The Beninese and Nigerian governments should, in light of these vulnerabilities, have a flexible response and request that their donors give them the necessary space.

6. **The need for more flexible donor programming.** The final recommendation concerns donors who seek to support the response to violent extremism by West African states. Violent extremists do not think in terms of national states and their activities transcend state boundaries. Yet, many donor response mechanisms are bound by these national boundaries and priorities set back home. An additional problem for Benin's border with Nigeria is that most international programmes do not consider that Nigeria is part of the violent extremism spill-over problem from the Sahel. Yet, as this report shows, there are connections. There should be a push for more flexibility in programming mandates such that programming can respond to developments and speak to the spirit rather than the letter of mandates.

254 The Punch. (2024). Traders in massive food diversion to Niger Republic, Cameroon, others.

<https://punchng.com/traders-in-massive-food-diversion-to-niger-republic-cameroon-others/>

Annex 1 Questionnaires

Key informant interview questions, Benin

Q1: How have you sustained your family and how has your life been over the past year?

Q2: What relationship does your community have with communities on the other side of the border? Probe: With which groups specifically? And what are the shared activities that you have with them?

Q3: There are also religious relationships with Nigeria. Are you aware of the following Sunni movements: Yan Izala, the Tabliq? Do these presently operate in Benin and since when? Are there any other religious movements that come from Nigeria?

Q4: We then move on to the economic relationship with Nigeria. How important is the market on the other side of border for the community and for you?

Q5: What are the three most important goods that move from your town over the border and vice versa? Who is involved in transporting these goods? Which routes are used?

Q6: Some argue that there are more cattle coming in from Nigeria and being sold in Benin. Have you noticed any change during the last year?

Q7: In June 2023 fuel subsidies were cut in Nigeria and the prices went up there. Has there been any change in the fuel situation in your area? Is more/less fuel being smuggled? Are other people involved?

Q8: What is the safety and security situation in your area? What about kidnapping, cattle rustling and banditry?

Q9: In Nigeria, there are large bandit groups. It appears that some of these groups move their families to Benin to live here. To what extent do you think that this has occurred in your area?

Q10: There are large hunting groups in the area. What contacts do these groups have with Nigeria?

General questions, Nigeria

Q1: Over the past two years there have been reports of VEOs present in/around Kainji National Park in Nigeria. For example, there was an attack in October 2022, on the Wawa detention center in Kainji, and there are claims that Sahelian fighters were involved. What are your insights on this? Numbers, social identities, where would Sahelian fighters come from, main type of economic activity?

Q2: Towards the North (Kebbi State border with Benin) there may have been activity recruitment from Nigeria into Benin (e.g. in Segbana from Bagudo LGA and Dandi LGA (Kebbi State)). Any reading on this? What groups could be linked?

Q3: How would you describe the nature of the relationship between bandit groups along the border with Benin and with Ansaru, ISWAP and Boko Haram/ Darul Salam? IS there a potential for them to cooperate beyond an ad hoc basis?

Q4: Apart from violent extremism, what social/ethnic groups are most prominently involved in the cross-border trading from the Bagudo LGA and Dandi LGA (Kebbi State) towards Benin?

Q5: The Borgu LGA (Niger State, Nigeria) seems to be a shared ethnic zone with the Borgou region in Benin. What cross-border social links do you see? To what extent do hunting groups operate in the Borgu region of Nigeria (please share names).

Q6: What do you consider are the most lucrative goods and specific smuggling hubs in Northern area (Kebbi-Benin) and the Southern area (Kainji, Nigeria)? What are the main modes of trafficking across the border; what routes are key?

Q7: Cattle rustling seems to be on the increase in Benin. Are you aware of any changes in the links on cattle between Benin and Nigeria since 2022?

Q8: To what extent are you aware of cross-border kidnapping between Nigeria and Benin? Is it organised with specialised network (and who?) or is it rather opportunistic activity by individuals/group?

Q9: In June 2023 fuel subsidies were cut in Nigeria and prices went up. What has been the consequence for smuggling to Benin and for those involved in the trade? How did both groups respond?