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Extremism in Burkina Faso: Recommendations for Stabilization and Recovery

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Executive Summary

Since the dissolution of the Blaise Compaoré regime in 2014, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have spread across Burkina Faso, attacking state security services and communities alike. In 2020, violence against civilians in particular exploded, and further escalated in 2021. A number of researchers have attempted to understand the conflict drivers and origins of the violence, but even as the number of attacks has increased and the humanitarian crisis has worsened, there is still much we do not know. Specifically, the composition and motivations of the different VEOs operating in Burkina Faso remains opaque, due in no small part to the multiplicity of actors and their shifting alliances.

This report examines the rise of violent extremism in Burkina Faso and highlights how the country's recent political history has contributed to the problem. Three major VEOs operating in the Sahel are profiled as well: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), AQIM's affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and Ansarul Islam. By understanding the evolution of VEO activity in the region's newest area of operation, Burkina Faso, and the complex array of actors, ideologies, motivations, and tactics, the international community will be better positioned to develop a strategy to help stabilize the region.

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1.   Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Blaise Compaoré regime in 2014, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have spread across Burkina Faso, attacking state security services and communities alike. In 2020, violence against civilians in particular exploded, and further escalated in 2021. A number of researchers have attempted to understand the conflict drivers and origins of the violence, but even as the number of attacks has increased and the humanitarian crisis has worsened, there is still much we don't know. Specifically, the composition and motivations of the different VEOs operating in Burkina Faso remains relatively opaque.

This report examines the rise of violent extremism in Burkina Faso and highlights how the country's recent political history has contributed to the problem. Three major VEOs operating in the Sahel are profiled as well: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), AQIM's affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and Ansarul Islam. By understanding the evolution of VEO activity in the region's newest area of operation, Burkina Faso, and the complex array of actors, ideologies, motivations, and tactics, the international community will be better positioned to develop a strategy to help stabilize the region.

Following this introduction is a brief overview of Burkina Faso's political history from colonization to the 2020 re-election of Roch Marc Kaboré. The second section on the rise of extremism in Burkina Faso analyzes the ideology, group organization, motivations, and tactics for AQIM, JNIM, and Ansarul Islam. It also includes key contextual information on the impact of the 1987–2014 Compaoré regime on VEO activity in Burkina Faso. The third section describes the ongoing violence in significant detail and examines the implications of the extremist groups' tactics, with a particular emphasis on the interwoven linkages between VEOs in Burkina Faso. Understanding the context from which this threat has emerged is essential to crafting an appropriate international and domestic response. By analyzing group ideology and motivations, we are able to draw out lessons from the patterns and distinctions among these countries and about the circumstances that allow violent extremism to emerge and spread. These appear in the last section of the report.

2.   Overview: Burkina Faso's Political History

Violent extremism in the Sahel is concentrated along the borders of three countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. After Somalia, the Sahelian region has experienced the second greatest number of violent extremist attacks in Africa over the last year.[1] More than 1,000 violent episodes resulted in at least 8,000 fatalities and millions displaced in 2020 alone.[2] Within this triangle of violence, Burkina Faso has emerged as a new epicenter for VEO activity. VEO groups began operating in Burkina Faso in 2015, but since 2020 the country experienced a dramatic increase in the intensity of the violence (as shown in Figure 1): at least 1,600 fatalities in 2020 and 2,400 deaths in 2021.[3] There are also at least 1 million people currently displaced.[4] The Northwest, Center-North, and Eastern regions of Burkina Faso have borne the brunt of VEO activity, but attacks have now spread to all regions of the country. As a result, the country, with a population of just 20 million, is now in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, having at least 4 million, roughly 20% of its population, in need of humanitarian assistance.[5]
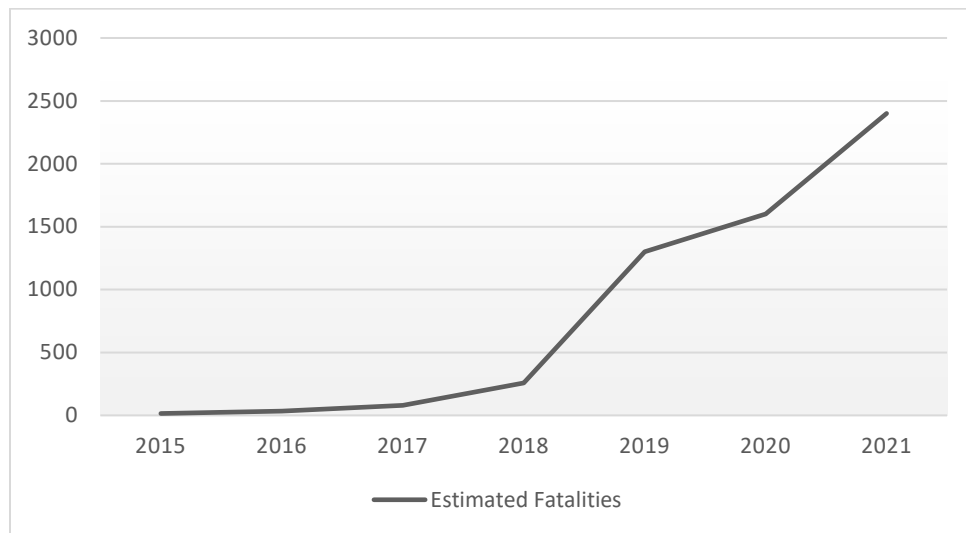
Source: ACLED and Various News Reports

Figure 1. Burkina Faso: Estimated Fatalities due to VEO Activity over Time

Burkina Faso, a landlocked country located in the heart of West Africa, is a former French colony (see Figure 2). Previously known as Upper Volta, the country gained independence in 1960 and suffered a series of coups: between 1960 and 2014, there were 10 attempted or successful coups.[6] In 1983, Thomas Sankara, an ideological Marxist with

a dedicated following, came to power promising a significant break from the past. In 1987, Blaise Compaoré, a former loyalist to Sankara, seized power in a violent coup d'état, killing Sankara in the process. For nearly three decades, Compaoré ruled Burkina Faso with an iron fist, securing office through electoral manipulation, allowing regular elections to be held that were neither free nor fair.

Figure 2. Political Map of Burkina Faso

In 2011, fissures among the military and citizenry started to show. Protests and military rebellions erupted across the country over rising prices and lack of pay. The government responded forcefully at first, but became more accommodating as the months wore on. In June 2011, it was announced that a committee would be formed to consider reforms to the country's constitution, but key members of the political opposition refused to participate, fearing that the reform process was merely a backdoor to Compaoré maintaining power.[7] Indeed, in 2014, Compaoré attempted to amend the constitution so that he could run for office in 2015, having served four terms under different constitutions. This move was met with intense protests. The military intervened in late October 2014,

dissolving parliament and announcing a transitional government. Compaoré fled to neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, where he currently lives in exile.

In November 2015, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected President of Burkina Faso in what was widely considered a free and fair election.[8] Kaboré is a longtime Burkinabè politician, serving as, among other positions, Compaoré's transportation minister (1989–92), prime minister (1994–96), and special advisor to the president (1996–97). In 1997, he was elected to the National Assembly as a member of the ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party. After climbing party ranks, Kaboré was elected president of the National Assembly in 2002 and president of CDP in 2003. In 2014, Kaboré resigned his position as head of the CDP, in solidarity with the protests against Compaoré's attempt to alter the constitution, and formed the opposition party, the Movement of People for Progress.

During President Kaboré's first term in office, the security situation in Burkina Faso rapidly devolved. In 2015, Burkina Faso experienced its first terrorist attacks, when violent extremists bombed the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino Café in Ouagadougou. In response, the Kaboré administration sharply increased spending on the military, launching several special operations;[9] created a security "bubble" around the country's largest cities;[10] agreed to arm civilians for voluntary defense forces to provide security in remote areas; and tacitly supported the *Koglweogo*, a local defense militia. Despite—or in some cases because of—these initiatives, Burkina Faso is now experiencing the highest level of VEO activity in the Sahel.[11] From June 2019 to June 2020, the majority of violent VEO attacks, some 561, occurred in Burkina Faso. Comparatively, 361 occurred in Mali and 118 in Niger, in the same timeframe.[12]

Unsurprisingly, security and development dominated the issues in Burkina Faso's most recent general election, held in November 2020. Opponents of incumbent President Kaboré accused him of reneging on promises to improve the economy and stabilize the country. Many opponents urged the government to attempt to negotiate with some of the VEO groups to put an end to the violence. Kaboré rejected this approach and denied that his development program had failed. On November 22, Burkinabès re-elected Kaboré with 58% of the vote. His closest rivals, Eddie Komboigo and Zephrine Diabré, came in a distant second and third, with 15.5% and 12.5%, respectively. Although the opposition claimed irregularities, and there were issues with conducting polls in areas of the country due to security concerns, the opposition ultimately accepted the outcome and congratulated Kaboré.

Kaboré's second administration has faced a challenging atmosphere of rampant poverty and disenfranchisement, particularly in the regions increasingly subjected to terrorism. International organizations have accused the Burkinabè security forces and civilian defense forces of human rights abuses committed during operations to counter extremist groups. Moreover, the civilian defense forces, significantly less armed than the

military, have come under attack by VEOs.[13] However, Burkina Faso's security strategy seems likely to stay the course, although the Kaboré government reportedly had been negotiating in secret with extremists to secure some sort of a ceasefire in late 2020 and early 2021.[14] No peace agreement emerged, and by the end of 2021, Kaboré's government was in crisis. In late November, protests broke out over the continuing deterioration of the security situation after an attack in the north of the country led to at least 57 fatalities, including an estimated 53 security forces.[15] Reports that the forces had been without supplies for weeks and had requested assistance inflamed the protesters.[16] In response, Kaboré's prime minister resigned and Kaboré appointed a new prime minister in December.

3.   The Rise of Extremism in Burkina Faso

While VEOs were active in the Sahel beginning in the early 2010, violent attacks by extremist organizations first occurred in Burkina Faso in 2016, seemingly tied to the departure of Compaoré and the moderating effects of his mediation with extremist groups. However, consideration of Burkina Faso's economic and political dynamics highlights the social shifts that provided fertile ground for extremists' messages to develop and take root—offering a conducive environment for homegrown and external extremist organizations. In fact, an understanding of the domestic roots that nourished the rise of extremism suggests the importance of developing recommendations centered on regional, ethnic, and religious grievances.

Compaoré's Mediating Role and Moderating Effect

An important ally of France, the Compaoré regime became a key partner in France's fight against terrorism in West Africa. Since 2010, French special forces have been stationed in the capital, Ouagadougou. In 2012, as extremist violence in neighboring Mali intensified, Compaoré and his ministers acted as mediators between Malian government forces in Bamako and Ansar Dine, an Islamic paramilitary group allied with Tuareg rebels and AQIM.[17] Compaoré's role as a peace-broker may have helped to initially shield Burkina Faso from Islamist insurgent activity, as several credible reports indicate that Compaoré had added an agreement for terrorists to avoid attacking targets in Burkina Faso to the negotiation agenda.[18] It is believed that this agreement led Burkina Faso to be viewed as a "neutral" party to the conflict and, as such, VEOs limited their attacks to neighboring countries, sparing Burkina Faso. There are also allegations that Compaoré allowed some groups to use Burkina Faso as a sort of safe haven in exchange for not attacking targets in the country.[19] In 2013, the Burkinabè administration and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)[20] formally approved the French intervention in Mali. Alongside fellow ECOWAS states, Burkina Faso contributed troops to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali. As the Mali crisis escalated, Compaoré maintained his lines of communication with regional jihadist groups and continued to act as a chief negotiator in hostage rescue operations.

While his influence rose externally, Compaoré faced strong domestic challenges. In 2014, Compaoré attempted to amend the Burkinabè constitution to stand for a fifth consecutive term. Miscalculating the intensity of the social fallout and protest that ensued, Compaoré ultimately stepped down when the military dissolved the government and promised to hold democratic elections. Extremists capitalized on the subsequent power

vacuum by encroaching on vast swaths of ungoverned space in the far-north and eastern border region.[21] The disbandment of Compaoré's elite Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP) in 2015 after an attempted coup further increased vulnerability to extremist violence. RSP personnel were highly trained in counterterrorism operations and served as a credible force behind Compaoré's agreements with extremist groups.[22]

The ongoing crisis in Mali has greatly contributed to the spread of regional terrorism and fueled cross-border assaults in the far north of Burkina Faso. Since 2015, there has been a surge of attacks on soft and hard targets by an array of regionally active terrorist organizations. This intensification in Burkina Faso largely points to AQIM and its affiliates and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) and its affiliates. Once confined to the far northeast of the country, terror attacks in Burkina Faso have accelerated in frequency and sophistication. Kidnappings, village incursions, and assaults on the military utilizing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have become widespread. Most alarmingly, violence has spread from northern and eastern Burkina Faso—by December 2020, armed groups and violence against civilians had caused widespread displacement with all 13 provinces hosting internally displaced people fleeing violence.[23]

The Spillover of Violent Extremists

After Compaoré left power in 2014, the security situation in Burkina Faso dramatically changed and has steadily deteriorated since. In 2015, there were four terrorist attacks, confined mainly to the west and north of the country, carried out by jihadists who crossed the border from neighboring Mali.[24] In January 2016, Burkina Faso suffered a major terrorist incident that brought it to the attention of the international community: AQIM and its affiliate, Al-Mourabitoun, attacked the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino café on Kwame Nkrumah Avenue in Ouagadougou, which was popular with expatriates, killing 30. The two jihadi groups had merged just one month earlier, in December 2015. Over the course of the rest of the year, an additional 15 attacks left 34 dead.[25] On August 13, 2017, gunmen returned to Kwame Nkrumah Avenue, killing 18 people and injuring 25 more when they opened fire on the Aziz Turkish restaurant. Responsibility was claimed by JNIM. In 2017, Burkina Faso experienced an estimated 53 attacks, resulting in at least 80 fatalities.[26]

In 2018, Burkina Faso experienced an estimated 150 terrorist attacks, primarily in the northern and eastern regions. These included kidnappings, attacks using IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs, targeted assassinations, and attacks on defense and security forces. The largest of these—and the "most sophisticated terrorist attack" in the country's history at that point—occurred in March 2018, when at least 8 people were killed and an additional 80 were injured in twin attacks in Ouagadougou that targeted the French embassy and the General Staff of the Burkinabè armed forces.[27] AQIM-affiliated JNIM claimed responsibility for the attack, which it called retaliation for a previous raid carried out by French soldiers in northern Mali as part of Operation Barkhane.[28] Other incidents included

an August 11, 2018, IED attack on a police convoy in eastern Burkina Faso that killed 5 police officers and 1 civilian and an October 3, 2018, attack on security outposts in the Sahel region carried out by up to 30 militants.[29] More than 1,300 civilians were killed in Burkina Faso in 2019, and an estimated 1,600 were killed through 2020.[30] The conflict continued to deepen in 2021 and it is believed that at least 2,400 were killed in 2021. In November 2021, an estimated 50 security forces and an unknown number of civilians were killed by extremists in the northern region of Soum.[31]

Attacks on Ouagadougou and expanding violence in the eastern part of the country highlight a rapidly deteriorating and fluid situation. According to the United Nations Refugee Commission, Burkina Faso is now one of the fastest growing humanitarian crises in the world. Estimates suggest that more than 4,000 people are fleeing their homes daily and that more than 1 million people are currently displaced.[32] The pattern of escalation previously seen in Mali and Niger now threatens Burkina Faso's nearly 20 million citizens.[33]

Social Drivers of Extremism

In addition to attacks perpetrated by regional VEOs, Burkina Faso is experiencing a proliferation of violence due to overlapping intercommunal conflicts, primarily based in rural areas, that are intersecting with the state's response to terrorism and insecurity. Groups that formerly lived together relatively peacefully are now taking up arms against each other. Historically, ethnicity and religious identities have not been salient cleavages in Burkinabè society. Although the Mossi are the dominant ethnic group, the country is diverse and communities are generally socially and economically integrated. The rise of militant groups and intercommunal violence is threatening the country's societal fabric and a long tradition of cooperation. Burkina Faso's different religious communities have generally lived together harmoniously, but underlying tensions exist. Muslims represent 60% of the population; Christians and Animists represent 25% and 15%, respectively. Many communities and families are mixed—though Islam is dominant in the northern and western regions—and the country does not have a history of religious violence. However, the Muslim community has long expressed its frustration at its marginalization from politics and governance. Only one president has been Muslim—the rest have been Christian. Both Islam and Christianity have recently seen a rising religiosity, and Burkina Faso's narrative of "peaceful coexistence" has begun to suffer. [34]

The ouster of Compaoré did not result in the economic and democratic reforms that many of the 2011 and 2014 protesters had hoped for. Instead, a new political elite, which looks suspiciously like the old political elite, took control of the country. In addition to these frustrations, Compaoré, over his 27 years in power, had maintained a tenuous hold on a variety of competing interests in rural Burkina Faso, where the state's reach was never very strong. Without him in power, intercommunal conflicts, many of them land-based, have erupted across the rural parts of the country.

Banditry is also rampant in the farthest reaches of Burkina Faso, perpetrated by a combination of VEOs and criminal syndicates and enabled by little government presence. Self-defense movements such as the *Koglweogo* have formed to combat both terrorism and intercommunal conflicts. These groups have either the tacit support or the explicit blessing of the government to operate, and are engaging in community protection in the Center-North and Soum regions.[35] Security providers, in the form of loosely regulated self-defense groups and state security forces, have been accused of a number of human rights abuses, leading to new grievances.

A.   Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Motivation

AQIM is the oldest and, until recently, the most active group operating in the Sahel.[36] AQIM initially began as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an outgrowth of the Algerian civil war. Formed in 1998, the GSPC sought to overthrow the government in Algiers and establish an Islamic state that would enforce Shari'a.[37] The organization expanded on this goal in the early 2000s to include the overthrow of the governments of Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as the "reclamation of lost Islamic lands" in southern Spain.[38] In pursuit of its objectives, the group initially focused its attacks on Algerian government and military targets, gaining notoriety for mass-casualty suicide attacks, which had previously been unheard of in the country. The GSPC pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2006 and officially became AQIM in early 2007, marking the first "transnational jihadist presence" in the region.[39] Despite this alliance, however, AQIM's goals remained largely consistent.[40] Since 2007, AQIM has focused on expanding its presence to diversify and strengthen its fundraising opportunities and find new, "durable" spaces in which to operate, train, and recruit.[41] This shift in the group's priorities and operational and geographical focus resulted from AQIM's reduced presence and influence in Algeria following the implementation of stringent counterterrorism measures by the government of former Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, as well as from the wider fundraising opportunities and increased operational freedom afforded by the vast Sahel region.[42]

Although armed terrorist organizations have been a fixture in the Sahel since the 1990s, it wasn't until March 2012 that the region achieved notoriety when AQIM, the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), an offshoot of AQIM founded in 2011,[43] and Ansar al-Din, an Islamic Tuareg group established in December 2011, took control of northern Mali.[44] Subsequent counterterrorism operations seriously damaged AQIM, weakening its operational hold on its territory and inflicting heavy casualties among both key senior figures and regular fighters. Despite this, the group took advantage of the chaos in Libya after the fall of longtime leader Muamar Qaddafi to establish a safe haven in southern Libya. From there it was able to capitalize on the dire socioeconomic

conditions in the Sahel region and replenish its numbers by recruiting from among the local population. AQIM's extensive recruitment base has also enabled it to attract fighters from across North Africa and even from among West Africa's Fulani, Songhai, Dogon, and Bambara communities, in countries in which it has not yet carried out suicide attacks.[45]

AQIM's "wide geographical reach" is the result of the way in which al-Qaeda leadership has divided the organization's areas of operation among its many global branches and affiliates.[46] AQIM has been tasked to cover both a large swath of North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia) and, through JNIM, much of West Africa and the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger).[47] As a result, AQIM's area of operations is the largest of the two al-Qaeda branches in Africa (the other being al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP) and significantly wider than any other analogous African jihadist organization.[48]

Tactics

AQIM is one of the region's wealthiest and best armed terrorist organizations. In 2014, according to the most recent data available, its annual budget was estimated to be $15 million, funded via criminal activities, including protection rackets; money laundering; muggings; trafficking in people, arms, cigarettes, and drugs; and kidnapping for ransom.[49] AQIM's first significant kidnappings occurred in 2003, before its merger with al-Qaeda, when it abducted 32 Western tourists. By 2013, ransoms had yielded some $100 million for the organization and had become its primary source of funding, allowing it to spread its influence across the Sahel region.[50] Operation Sérval, the French-led military mission to prevent the complete collapse of Mali that began in January 2013, however, had a deleterious effect on AQIM's kidnap-for-ransom operations, such that by 2015, smuggling—in particular, drug smuggling—had replaced ransoms as AQIM's key means of making money.[51] Although the specific levels and amounts of expenditure are not entirely clear, it is believed that the money is used primarily to pay fighters, fund and develop a network of loyal tribes and other terrorist groups, and strengthen and deepen AQIM's influence throughout the Sahel region by providing governance in areas in which there is little or no government presence.[52]

The suicide-bombing campaign carried out by AQIM and its network represents the "widest-reaching efforts" of any of the key African jihadi terrorist organizations.[53] As of October 2020, these groups had carried out suicide attacks in eight countries: Mali, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Niger, and Burkina Faso.[54] By contrast, Boko Haram conducted suicide attacks in four countries (Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad) between 2011 and 2017, while al-Shabaab carried out suicide attacks in five countries (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Uganda) between 2007 and 2018.[55]

AQIM was the most active VEO in Burkina Faso in 2015 and 2016, claiming responsibility for the armed attack on the Splendid Hotel and a number of other attacks on

military and police personnel and facilities. After its merger with JNIM, AQIM activities in Burkina Faso were sporadic and infrequent. AQIM was initially led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, until 2012 when he was pushed out of the group by his successor, Abdel Malek Droukdel. In June 2020, French special forces claimed to have killed Droukdel and several members of his inner circle in a battle in northern Mali. Droukdel's death has had a significant impact on AQIM's activities in the region. In November 2020, AQIM appointed Abu Ubayda Yusef al-Annabi, as emir.[56] All three AQIM leaders are Algerian, which factors into the group's reach and approach. Al-Annabi has reportedly decried the "Sahelization" of AQIM, preferring that the group focus its efforts on Algeria.

B. Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

Motivation

JNIM was founded on March 2, 2017,[57] by Iyad Ghaly, the leader of the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA),* which aimed to create Azawad, an independent region of Mali. Rather than a single organization, JNIM comprises four groups: the Sahara branch of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Macina Liberation Front (FLM) [58]

In addition to its formal organization, JNIM has other affiliates in the Sahel, namely Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso, led by Jaffar Dicko,[59] as well as Ansar Dine Sud, Katiba al Mansour, and Katiba Serma.[60] JNIM shores up the capacity of these component forces. For example, JNIM has provided training and operational support to Burkina Faso's Ansarul Islam.[61] Collectively, JNIM has emerged as the most active violent extremist group in the Sahel. In 2019, JNIM was responsible for 65% of all terrorist fatalities in the Sahel.[62] Macina Liberation Front (MLF), known as Katiba Macina, a Fulani-dominated terror group which seeks to resurrect the ancient Fulani empire from Mali to Burkina Faso[63] and also has strong links with Ansarul Islam,[64] has been most active in Burkina Faso.[65] JNIM has also fought in support of the Fulani (against Bambara communities), reflecting the Fulani origins of the Katiba.[66] In fact, JNIM's seeming support of the Fulani has resulted in a backlash—the Fulani are frequently the targets of citizen defense groups, as they are considered sympathizers of violent extremist groups.[67] In realty, little evidence points to Fulani support of VEOs.[68] Altogether, JNIM has about 2,000 fighters, recruited from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; it can bring together about 100 fighters to launch attacks.[69]

JNIM adheres to Salafist-Jihadist ideology, similar to AQIM. In that regard, JNIM aims to restore a caliphate in a Salafi-Islamist state. According to al-Qaeda, Muslims are under attack worldwide; only al-Qaeda can fight the oppressors of Islam; and if one does not support al-Qaeda, one supports the oppressors.[70] Its solution is to wage "violent jihad targeting mainly Western powers."[71] To al-Qaeda, the United States is the main reason for

the problems in the Middle East. Among its goals is the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from the Middle East.[72]

JNIM shares al-Qaeda's objectives, including toppling governments to implement their version of Shari'a, removing Westerners from Muslim countries, and addressing economic and social issues.[73] Like al-Qaeda, JNIM prizes a slower, more deliberate approach to institute Shari'a.[74] JNIM opposes all Western forces, including those from the United States, Germany, France, Netherlands, and Sweden; the United Nations (UN) Mission for Stabilization in Mali (MINUSMA); and local government forces (including those from Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Niger), viewed as collaborators with Western governments.[75]

Tactics

As a branch of al-Qaeda, JNIM is the franchise's wealthiest affiliate.[76] JNIM's funding is primarily through kidnapping. Other sources include drug and human trafficking, robbery, and other criminal activities.[77] Even though JNIM first attacked Burkinabè forces in July 2017,[78] at the time it was focused on Mali, with Burkina Faso and Nigeria as secondary interests. In the last year, however, Burkina Faso has quickly become the newest frontier in violent extremist activity.[79] In 2020, Burkina Faso sustained 516 attacks by militant groups, compared with 361 in Mali and 118 in Niger.[80]

JNIM does not have a centralized structure. Rather, each of its affiliates maintains its head, while JNIM acts as an umbrella organization for the four groups.[81] Al-Mourabitoun has stated specifically that it retains operational independence.[82] With this structure, JNIM provides the groups with cover for attacks—they are not easily individually attributed to a group; JNIM assumes responsibility for attacks[83]—as well as the notoriety. JNIM's decentralized structure has also allowed it to dominate the region in that several groups can stage attacks in its name.

Al-Qaeda's custom of forging alliances and entrenching itself in local communities aims to advance its goal of building a Salafi state,[84] which reflects JNIM's practices of partnering with other groups. JNIM is well integrated in the communities they operate: running hospitals; facilitating services, such as cellular access; helping to arrange marriages; providing vehicles, money, and weapons; and improving security.[85] JNIM exploits local grievances and inter-ethnic tension, and uses existing criminal networks[86] to further entrench itself in communities. JNIM's strong connections to local communities have also allowed it to build a network of informants.[87]

JNIM's targets are security forces and symbols of government; civilians are not generally central to JNIM's mission, but this may be changing as FLM has risen in prominence within the group.[88] It is estimated that more than a majority of JNIM attacks in northern Burkina Faso are now being carried out by FLM.[89] The attacks on the French embassy in Ouagadougou on March 3, 2018, is among the group's most notorious in

Burkina Faso. Other attacks by JNIM have targeted French forces, MINUSMA, and local armies in the Sahel (such as the G5 Sahel).[90] Between March 2017 and June 2018, JNIM carried out 6 attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali, killing at least 44 people.[91] In August 2019, JNIM provided fighters to ISGS for an attack on Burkinabè forces in Koutougou.[92] More recently, in April 2020, JNIM carried a large-scale attack on the Burkina-Mali border against ISGS. By attacking government security forces, teachers, and others seen as government allies, jihadist extremists—like Ansarul Islam, ISGS, and Katiba Macina—undermine government authority, which is already severely lacking in the more remote parts of the country.[93] Ansarul Islam and Katibat Macina's radicalization narratives, in particular, emphasize the government's marginalization of communities and general lack of interest from the center.[94]

Due to its diffuse structure and loose affiliation of groups, JNIM also appears to take a different approach to its operations in the different regions of Burkina Faso. In the north, JNIM groups leverage grievances between the Fulani and other ethnic groups and seem to target civilians more than in other regions.[95] In eastern and southwestern Burkina Faso, where valuable gold mines are located, JNIM groups seem much more interested in controlling mines and key transportation routes.[96]

While JNIM largely adheres to al-Qaeda's ideology, the group has exhibited some important breaks. Outside the Sahel, al-Qaeda sought to distinguish itself from the Islamic State (IS) by promoting a less brutal version of Shari'a.[97] Similarly, JNIM has attempted to convey that they are less brutal than ISGS, limiting their operations to their main areas of interest.[98] At first, AQIM and ISGS did not fight each other in the Sahel.[99] In fact, the relationship between the two groups in the Sahel seemed less oppositional (at first) than the al-Qaeda–IS relationship outside the Sahel—a phenomenon some have called the "Sahelian exception."

Analysts differed on explaining this Sahelian exception. Some sought to identify areas of cooperation between AQIM/JNIM and ISGS. As evidence, some writers cite the joint attack on MINUSMA's base in November 2017, the reports of JNIM providing fighters for ISGS's attack on Nigerien troops in May 2019, and the inclusion of JNIM fighters within the ISGS December 2019 attack on Nigerien troops.[100] AQIM also appeared to praise the ISGS attack on 13 French military officers.[101] Others noted that personal connections between members of the group likely resulted in a less adversarial relationship.[102] In January 2016, AQIM said of ISGS, "it is still a normal relationship and we have a connection with them."[103] Besides personal connections, fighters often had multiple affiliations with armed groups—rather than a strict allegiance to one—further facilitating a less adversarial relationship.[104]

In the last year, the Sahelian exception appears to have ended. Starting with a clash in a Burkinabè border town in July 2019, JNIM and ISGS fought nearly 50 times over the course of a year.[105] Together, the groups lost approximately 300 fighters in the clashes.[106]

In May 2020, the Sahelian exception unraveled publicly, an article in the ISGS newsletter *al-Naba* admitting to the fighting between the groups and accusing JNIM of working with government forces to drive ISGS out.[107] A second important rift between them developed when the government and French forces extended an invitation to al-Qaeda to negotiate.[108]

As the relationship between JNIM and ISGS has grown more adversarial, ISGS has increased in prominence, which has attracted a number JNIM fighters to ISGS.[109] The JNIM-ISGS split is most pronounced in Burkina Faso and parts of Mali.[110] In fact, the majority of the fighting between ISGS and JNIM took place in Burkina Faso,[111] some in Burkina Faso having expressed a preference for JNIM over ISGS, viewing them as kinder.[112]

C. Ansarul Islam

Motivations

Ansarul Islam (Defenders of Islam) was founded in 2016 in the Mondoro forests, among the rural villages in the Mopti Region of Mali. The commune consists of 22 villages near the northern border of Burkina Faso. The organization was founded by Ibrahim Malam Dicko (Boureima Dicko), a prominent Imam from the northern town of Djibo, Burkina Faso. Born in the Soum province of Burkina Faso, Dicko attended conventional and Koranic schools in Burkina Faso and Mali, and he also taught in Niger.[113] His skills as an orator and in anti-establishment discourse led to the founding of a religious association, al-Irchad. Following his rise to prominence as an Imam and preacher in Soum, Dicko traveled to northern Mali and trained with Amadou Koufa, the leader of the Katiba Macina. The visions of Dicko and Koufa were well aligned. In December 2016, Ansarul Islam began its campaign of violence in Soum.[114] Dicko rooted many of his arguments in the economic and social disenfranchisements of northern Burkina Faso. The region lacks investment in infrastructure and attention from the government in Ouagadougou.[115]

Under Ibrahim Dicko, Ansaroul Islam was aligned to the Fulani-dominated MUJAO. In turn, MUJAO pledged allegiance to Abu al-Sahrawi, the former emir of the al-Qaeda–affiliated al-Mourabitoun movement, which then pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015. In May 2015, MUJAO split with al-Mourabitoun and rebranded itself as ISGS, under the leadership of al-Sahrawi. Ansarul Islam has received significant tactical and material support from JNIM and its affiliates including al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine Subgroups,[116] Katiba Macina, and Katibat Sèrma/Katibat AAA (Almansour Ag Alkassoum).

The organization is largely made up of members of the Fulani and Rimaibe ethnic groups, but also includes members from the Mossi, Bellah, Dogons, and Songhai people. The ethnic protectionist elements have led some to call Ansarul Islam a "self-defense" group, using communal support in Soum province, while offering a protection network.[117]

Ansarul Islam adheres to Salafist-Jihadist ideology and seeks to implement an Islamic extremist agenda to revive the Fulani Macina Kingdom.[118] Ibrahim Malam Dicko's radio sermons in Soum grew in prominence by memorializing the ancient Fulani kingdom of Djeelgodji. The Kingdom of Djeelgodji is based in a revival of the Seku Amadu (Seeku Aamadu) empire.[119] The Fulani empire disappeared after the French colonization of West Africa in the 19th century.[120] Dicko's ideology gained popularity through his addresses on societal divisions, corruption, and exploitation by the state and traditional leaders.[121] His messages resonated among the Fulani, in particular. The Fulani, Burkina Faso's second largest ethnic group, are mainly found in Soum. The Fulani are divided into the nobles and Rimaibé, or slave descendants. Rimaibé were assimilated by the Fulani.[122] While slavery no longer exists as an institution in these communities, families' ancestral lines are known.[123]

Malam Dicko's extremist rhetoric eventually isolated him from the community.[124] He then left for Mali, where France's Operation Serval captured him in 2013. Upon release from prison in 2015, he formed Ansarul Islam.[125] The message seemed the same, but the modus operandi was not: Malam turned to violence.[126] While the activities of Ansarul Islam itself appear to be declining, extremist violence in Burkina Faso continues, propagated by other groups. The principal groups involved with violent extremism are Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and Islamic State in West Africa.[127] There also appears to have been coordination among smaller extremist groups.[128]

Ibrahim Malam Dicko's rejection of traditional practices in Islam may relate to the disillusionment in Burkina Faso's religious leaders. During Burkina Faso's fourth republic, comprising the reign of Compoaré, Islamic scholars turned critical toward the government. In particular, young Muslims were mobilized to question the role of the state and distribution of political power.[129] Historically, Islam has been marginal to Burkina Faso's political and social history, despite its dominance among the population. Even the Compoaré administration, which seemed to reach out to Muslim leaders, ultimately led to disappointment; many Muslim leaders were indeed influential within the government but tended to further their own ends.[130]

In Burkina Faso, the Fulani have also been on the receiving end of reprisals for terrorist attacks. As noted in the previous section, many communities believe that the Fulani support or form part of VEOs.[131] In turn, many of the self-defense armed groups comprise members of Mossi, Bella, and Foulse tribes, which many consider aligned with the government.[132] In fact, the brunt of the violence against the Fulani has been in Mossi-dominated Center-North.[133] The main nonstate actors attacking the Fulani are the Koglweogo, a self-defense group. Koglweogo began attacking the Fulani after a Mossi chief was killed by jihadists; Koglweogo avenged his death by attacking the Fulani.[134]

Most Fulani reject violent extremism.[135] In part, this links back to Ansarul Islam: Malam Dicko was himself a Fulani, and there were many Fulani in Ansarul Islam. On the

other hand, many analysts believe the Fulani composition of Ansarul Islam was due more to the availability of a large Fulani population in Soum, rather than the Fulani electing to join an ethnic armed group. Koglweogo have also been involved in clashes in the east, where VEOs have spread and a sizable Fulani community exists.[136] Jihadists take advantage of local grievances rooted in economic marginalization and disenfranchisement. One source is the restriction on farming caused by the designation of protective areas. Residents also have not benefited from the mining concessions, tourism, or cotton farming now prevalent in the region.[137] The lack of economic development and poor infrastructure in northern Burkina Faso has rippled through Fulani communities, who are desperate for protection from both state security services and local defense militias. In southwestern Burkina Faso, traditional hunters known as Dozos have formed another self-defense group and clashed with jihadists.[138] To date, the Fulani in Burkina Faso have not formed self-defense groups to counter the Koglweogo and others. [139]

Tactics

Ansarul Islam primarily operates in the northern Soum province of Burkina Faso and southern Mopti region of Mali, claiming the Mali-Burkina Faso border as their primary territory. The group is reported to operate bases in the Foulsare forest, in the south-west of Gao province and the Fhero forest, in Burkina Faso's Soum province. Their presence along the porous border and alignment to Fulani nomadic culture allows the group to launch attacks in both countries.[140] Pressure by international military and security forces has caused the terror group to disperse into smaller cells along the Mali-Burkina Faso border.[141] The restriction of their operational environment has limited Ansarul Islam's ability to conduct attacks and operations.

The strategic restructuring into small terror cells and the decentralized command structure has made Anasaul Islam difficult to track. Ansaroul Islam has assaulted the National Gendarmerie, the Burkinabè military, and French counterterrorism force bases and patrols.[142] The militant groups utilize readily available small arms and mortars for the majority of their attacks.[143] On December 16, 2016, Ansarul Islam launched an attack on a military outpost in Nassoumbou, Soum Province, Burkina Faso with Ansar Dine subgroup Katibat Serma. Attackers utilized AK-47's and rocket-propelled grenades to overwhelm an elite Burkinabè army unit, killing 12 soldiers.[144] The brazen attack signaled an operational escalation by Ansarul Islam to hard targets.

AQIM commanders have historically assisted Ansarul Islam with training and recruitment, as well as material and financial resources.[145] After receiving knowledge and technical capabilities from JNIM, Ansarul Islam incorporated IEDs to target military and police convoys.[146] Strategically, the group does not focus on holding territory. Following attacks on hard and soft targets, members quickly disperse via flatbed all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles. While the group participates in criminal activity and looting before withdrawing, the political and religious agenda established by Dicko remains paramount.

In May 2017, a report indicated Malam Dicko died from natural causes while suffering from malnutrition and exhaustion.[147] Following Dicko's death, the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, reported group strength as 200 members with operational strongholds in southern Mali and the Soum province of Burkina Faso. Leadership of the organization passed on to Dicko's younger brother and former third-in-command, Abdoul Salam Dicko (Djaffar Dicko).[148]

Following Dicko's death in the Foulsaré forest, the group began to decline, with attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali dropping. Reports suggest that Ansarul Islam fighters may have joined the Ansar Dine subgroup, the MLF, or ISGS. In October 2020, the French military killed 50 Ansarul Islam members operating in Mali near the border of Burkina Faso.[149] Pressure from international and Burkinabè security forces has splintered the group into smaller cells. As reports continue to emerge of extrajudicial killings by internal security forces,[150] the Ansaroul Islam network inside Burkina Faso will allow JNIM and AQIM affiliates access to Fulani recruiting opportunities.[151]

D. Comparing AQIM, JNIM, and Ansarul Islam

Table 1 below provides a summation of the motivations and tactics of the three primary extremist organizations operating in Burkina Faso. While all three share the goal of establishing an Islamic state and imposing some version of Shari'a, they differ in meaningful ways. In particular, JNIM has a stated desire to help communities address pressing economic and social issues, something that may have broader appeal. Additionally, the groups' approaches are quite different. AQIM has funded itself largely from criminal activities and is known for its suicide operations, having staged attacks in eight countries in the Sahel. JNIM is less structured than AQIM, comprising a loose affiliation of groups with sometimes conflicting goals and approaches. Regional differences within JNIM's activities in Burkina Faso have also emerged. In eastern and southwestern Burkina Faso, JNIM has increasingly attacked mining sites and transit routes. In the north, although traditionally focused on attacks on security forces, FLM attacks have increasingly targeted civilians and security forces alike. Ansarul Islam is focused on engaging state and regional security forces.

Table 1. Motivations and Tactics of AQIM, JNIM, and Ansarul Islam

VEOs in the Sahel	Motivations	Tactics
AQIM	AQIM's goals are to establish an Islamic state that would enforce Shari'a, toppling governments that do not align with its objectives, and attacking government and military targets.	AQIM raises money from criminal activities, including protection rackets; money laundering; muggings; trafficking in people, arms, cigarettes, and drugs; and kidnapping for ransom.[152] It also uses suicide bombings and IEDs in its attacks.
JNIM	JNIM shares al-Qaeda's objectives: toppling governments to implement their version of Shari'a, removing Westerners from Muslim countries, and addressing economic and social issues.	JNIM does not have a centralized structure. It is comprised of four main affiliates: Sahara branch of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front (FLM)[153] Other affiliates include: Ansarul Islam, Ansar Dine Sud, Katiba al Mansour, and Katiba Serma. Each group maintains its head, while JNIM acts as an umbrella organization. JNIM's targets include security forces and symbols of government; civilians are not central to JNIM's mission, but attacks on civilians by one of its affiliate members (FLM) have increased in recent years.[154]
Ansarul Islam	Ansarul Islam adheres to Salafist-Jihadist ideology and seeks to implement an Islamic extremist agenda to revive the Fulani Macina Kingdom.[155]	Ansarul Islam employs small terror cells and decentralized command structure. It has assaulted the National Gendarmerie, the Burkinabè military, and French counterterrorism force bases and patrols.[156] The militant groups utilize readily available small arms and mortars for the majority of their attacks.[157]

As the above descriptions demonstrate, AQIM has entered into a number of alliances with other terrorist organizations in the Sahel in an apparent effort to improve resource mobilization, increase its operational capability, and strengthen its resiliency and longevity. While at one point AQIM, Ansarul Islam, and JNIM cooperated, this relationship has evolved over time, as a result of competition between groups, changing fortunes, and leadership clashes. Figure 3 provides an overview of the complex relationship between AQIM, JNIM, and Ansarul Islam, and key affiliates.
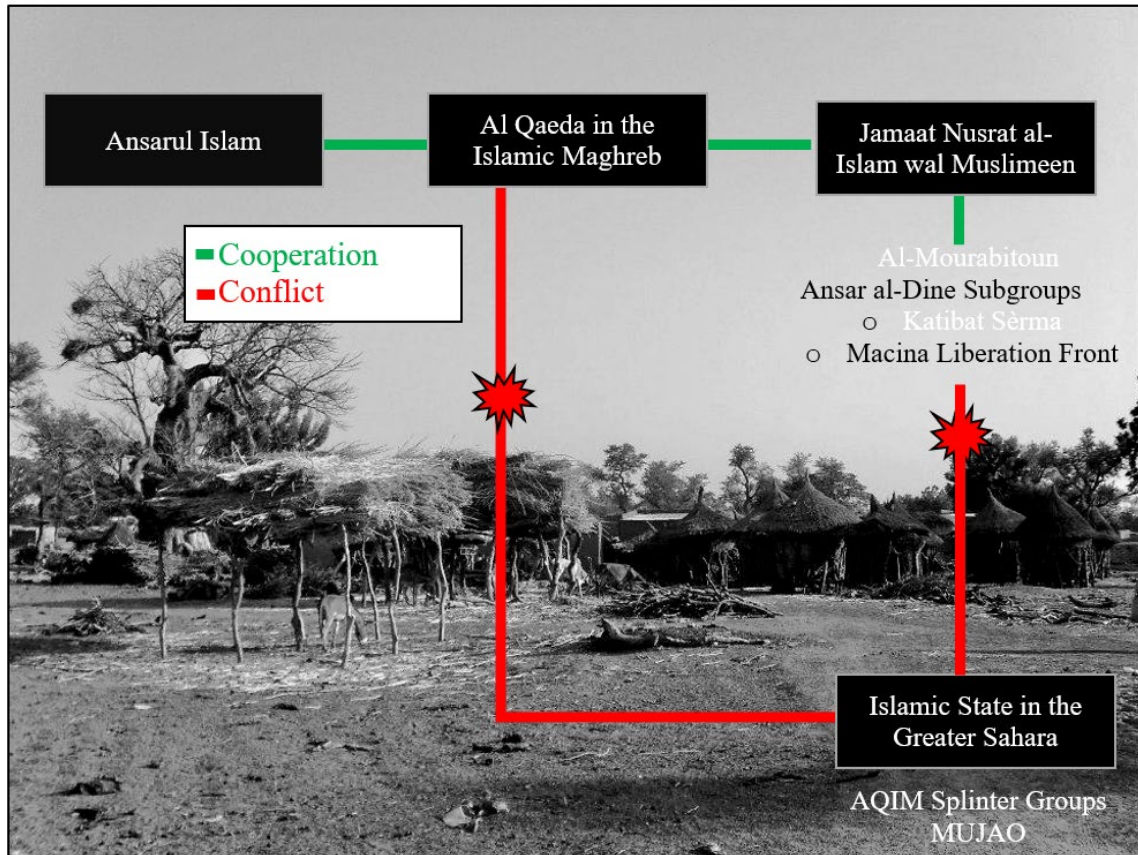
Lâ-Todin, Passoré Province -north central Burkina Faso. Photo: Austin Swift

Figure 3. Burkina Faso VEO Relationships (December 2020)

Not all alliances have endured, however. In December 2012, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of AQIM's top commanders, broke with the organization and founded the Al Mulathamun Brigade (AMB), swearing allegiance to Ayman al-Zwahiri and claiming to act in al-Qaeda's name.[158] In August 2013, following a slew of high-profile, large-scale attacks that drew international condemnation, including on the In Amenas natural gas facility in Algeria that killed 69 civilians, the AMB merged with MUJAO, with which it had often coordinated attacks, to form Al Mourabitoun. In December 2015, however, following the terrorist attacks in Bamako, Mali, the previous month that killed at least 25 people, Al Mourabitoun was "reintegrated into AQIM's overall structure."[159] The group did maintain some degree of autonomy following the merger, as demonstrated by AQIM's careful delineation of Al Mourabitoun's involvement in the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou and the March 2016 attack in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast.[160] Al Mourabitoum would maintain its autonomy as it fell under JNIM's orbit.

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4.   Conclusions

Over the past several years, the crisis in Burkina Faso has continued to deepen and expand, with no end in sight. Widespread frustration with the lack of jobs and infrastructure has made Burkina Faso a fertile recruiting ground for jihadists, including smaller groups that are not affiliated with the larger organizations like AQIM and have not pledged allegiance to a radical Islamist ideology.[161] An increasingly tenuous security situation in the country has enabled VEOs to force state officials out of rural areas and an increasing number of cities, leading to fears that the influence of these organizations could spread to the country's south, giving them access to seaports through which they could smuggle drugs, weapons, and other illegal goods to fund their activities.[162] There are also fears that the violence in Burkina Faso could spill over into neighboring countries, compounding the increasing instability in the Sahel, or beyond. In addition, three key Islamist terrorist groups—Ansarul Islam, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, and ISGS—have reportedly established a front in northern and eastern Burkina Faso.[163] News reports in August 2020 indicated that al-Qaeda–linked JNIM and ISGS, a regional offshoot of the IS, are in open conflict in Burkina Faso, their clashes fueled by territorial disputes and ideological differences.[164] To move forward, there is a need to understand the relative strengths of the extremist groups, while fully exploring the options for negotiation and protecting civilians and engaging affected communities.

There is ongoing debate over whether AQIM has been defeated or is resurgent. While some experts believe that the group's resiliency and adaptiveness will enable it to continue to advance its agenda in the Sahel region, many others argue that AQIM was already in decline before the killing of its former leader, Droukdel, in June 2020.[165] AQIM has lost significant influence in Algeria, where counterterrorism operations have forced its retreat toward Mali and dismantled many of its logistics and communications cells.[166] The group has also experienced significant personnel losses, including the reported defection of fighters to ISIS in 2014 and 2017, and killings in military operations of several key leaders, including Bilel Kobi, Droukdel's special envoy in Tunisia; Béchir ben Néji, AQIM's emir in Tunisia; and Adel Seghiri, who was responsible for the group's propaganda.[167] The group suffered a further blow in December 2020 when a raid by the Algerian army in the city of Jijel killed Leslous Madani (aka Abou Hayane), responsible for AQIM's Eastern region and the Shari'a Committee of the group, and Herida Abdelmajid (aka Abou Moussa Al-Hassan), who was responsible for propaganda and media aid.[168] In addition, AQIM's operational capabilities have reportedly been weakened since the March 2018 attacks in Ouagadougou, with decreases in both the number and the efficacy of subsequent attacks.[169]

Despite the November 21, 2020, appointment of 51-year-old Algerian and jihad veteran Yazid Mebarek (aka Abu Ubayda Yusef al-Annabi) to replace Droukdel as the leader of AQIM, some analysts believe the selection of another Algerian to lead the organization is a further sign of its weakening influence throughout the Sahel. Instead, better equipped and more "prestigious" local jihadi groups, particularly JNIM, continue to gain power and prominence and operate independently despite their official affiliation with AQIM.[170] Furthermore, AQIM is reportedly currently unable to provide many of its cells with "even minimum material support," forcing these groups to engage in criminal activities to procure funds to support themselves. These illicit activities have created a paper trail of evidence for local authorities to follow and thus further undermined AQIM's long-term prospects.[171]

JNIM still dominates in Burkina Faso, but ISGS has gained ground in the Sahel. As attacks by ISGS increased, foreign and regional governments in the Sahel now consider the group as the biggest threat in the region. A strengthened ISGS will also pose a threat to JNIM eventually. JNIM's offer to accept negotiation with Mali was seized upon by Burkina Faso's political actors; the move aligns with the peace talks underway with Afghanistan's Taliban—to which JNIM has declared its allegiance.[172] Implicit in the negotiation offer is that JNIM's focus on "far enemies" (in line with AQIM's ideology) suggests that if left alone, JNIM would not attack foreign partners.[173]

While Kaboré repeatedly dismissed the possibility of negotiating with terrorist groups, it is likely that some members of his government held tentative talks with extremists in late 2020 and early 2021. Furthermore, understanding JNIM's offer to meet with government interlocutors is instructive. While JNIM has offered to enter into negotiations, it does so from a place of self-interest and relative weakness. Moreover, a peace agreement with JNIM brings additional uncertainty. It is not clear whether a weakened JNIM will result in fewer civilian casualties. JNIM has suffered defections of fighters to ISGS, as ISGS's attacks have gained notoriety and the group has grown in capacity.[174] Understanding the changes in the security landscape, the motivations of the armed actors, and the impact negotiations will have on the intensity of violence, serve as important steps to resolving the conflict. Questions that need to be asked and answered include:

1. Can JNIM's offer of negotiation be seen as a sign that the conflict is "ripe for resolution"[175]—implying that stability may be in sight for some parts of the Sahel?

2. How can Burkina Faso's military, its allies, and international partners respond to direct engagement with JNIM in a way that saves face for the government?

3. How can negotiations diminish the potential for JNIM and its affiliates to play spoiler?

4. What implications does a weakened JNIM have for violence against civilians?

The Sahel's VEO fighters have demonstrated fluid allegiances—readily switching to groups that appear stronger. As the violence in Burkina Faso continues, approaching its eighth year of affecting a growingly frustrated population, it is crucial that the government take a more nuanced approach to combatting VEO activity, one that explicitly accounts for the motivations and tactics of the disparate groups.

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14. ABSTRACT

This report examines the rise of violent extremism in Burkina Faso and highlights how the country's recent political history has contributed to the problem. Three major violent extremist organizations (VEOs) operating in the Sahel are profiled as well: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), AQIM's affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and Ansarul Islam. By understanding the evolution of VEO activity in the region's newest area of operation, Burkina Faso, and the complex array of actors, ideologies, motivations, and tactics, the international community will be better positioned to develop a strategy to help stabilize the region.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

Burkino Faso; Combating Terrorism; countering violent extremism (CVE)

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19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
Major, Philip L.

19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER *(include area code)*
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