

Policy Paper

Militarized Border Security Will Not Stop the Spread of Extremism

By Laura Sanders, Rida Lyammouri, Jordan Moss

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Communities in northern Côte d'Ivoire report an ongoing pattern of questioning, ethnically-motivated arrests, and abuse, in contrast to the good relationships with local forces and police they had until two years ago*. In one case, the national army arrested a number of men, beat them, and held them for up to two months**. In response to extremist attacks, Côte d'Ivoire has increased the military presence in the north, creating a special forces' base and sending more military personnel to the area. This response will not reduce the spread of extremism and may play into the terrorists' hands, building resentment against the state and stoking ethnic tensions. Ghana, Togo, and Benin seem poised to make the same mistake, taking measures to contain extremism that will increase rather than mitigate risk.

About Policy Center for the New South

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The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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* Author Interviews.

** Henry Wilkins, "Ethnic Fulanis in Ivory Coast Allege Persecution by Security Forces," 8 April 2022.
<https://www.voanews.com/a/ethnic-fulanis-in-ivory-coast-allege-persecution-by-security-forces-/6521590.html>

Coastal West African governments are rightly worried about the risks of extremism and conflict. Violent incidents in the northern zones of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin confirm the region is increasingly at risk. What was once the 'Northern Mali Conflict' and then the 'Sahel Conflict' now threatens most of West Africa. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) maintain a strong presence and are expanding despite almost a decade of aggressive counterterrorism efforts by national, regional, and international forces. The ability of VEOs to relocate and adapt has been essential to their continued success. They relocated from Algeria into the Sahel to avoid pressure from Algerian forces, and later expanded from Mali into Niger and Burkina Faso, forcing the French into a regional operation.

VEOs have not stopped in Niger and Burkina Faso. They are making a concerted southward push into northern zones of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. In 2021, Côte d'Ivoire experienced at least 13 attacks¹, totaling 17 violent incidents linked to al-Qaeda affiliated groups since 2020. However, it is important to note that the jihadist presence in northern Côte d'Ivoire began emerging as early as 2015, hinting at planning and strategizing before engaging in violence². So far in 2022, Benin has reportedly been the target of at least 21 attacks³, the two attacks in Porga and Monsey were claimed by al-Qaeda affiliated group Jama't Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM)⁴. Togo has lost eight soldiers and seen 13 others wounded in an attack also claimed by JNIM⁵. Even in Ghana—which has avoided attacks thus far—local youths are being recruited into VEOs, armed groups are increasingly crossing the borders, and local authorities are preventing attempted attacks⁶.

Government responses thus far have focused on border security and increased military presence in border zones. In November 2021, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) held a three-day conference of technical experts and representatives from the governments of Ghana, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo to boost border management. They signed a common declaration for security⁷, including joint military operations and patrols, harmonization of operating procedures, information sharing, and border delimitation and demarcation. National policies on countering violent extremism (CVE) now prioritize border security in all four countries. In Ghana, the military has deployed to the border to tighten checkpoint searches of vehicles for and for checks on passengers' paperwork⁸. April declarations by Ghana's National Security Minister cited military counterterrorism operations in border zones as the principal form of security⁹. In January 2021, Togolese authorities announced the suspension of the annual transhumance campaign,

1. Michael Phillips, "Militants are Edging South Toward West Africa's Most Stable and Prosperous States," 2 March 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sahel-based-militants-edging-south-toward-west-africas-most-stable-and-prosperous-states-11646221800?page=1>

2. Héni Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broker Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines," ACLED 2021. <https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/>

3. Bol News, "Benin at War with Terrorism After 20 Armed Attacks," 27 May 2022. <https://www.bolnews.com/international/2022/05/benin-at-war-with-terrorism-after-20-armed-attacks/>

4. Twitter Account, "#Benin des combattants affiliés au jnim revendique dans une vidéo non officielle l'attaque contre l'armée béninoise à la frontière burkinabé," 02 December 2021. <https://twitter.com/FadimaAbou/status/1466489662026002433?s=20&t=4KQLrjQJgcBPdehQt0caGg>; MENASTREAM Twitter Account, "#Benin: In an unofficial audio, #JNIM claimed responsibility for the 26 April attack on a police station in Monsey (Karimama), #Alibori, saying it seized weapons and ammo (15 AKs, 2 handguns, about 100 AK mags, 2 ammo boxes, and a large sum of cash)," 02 May 2022. <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1521062771873439745>

5. Agence France-Press, "Al-Qaida Affiliate Claims May Attack in Togo," 3 June 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/al-qaida-affiliate-claims-may-attack-in-togo-6602469.html>

6. Author interviews with Ghanaian CSOs.

7. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, "SBS Ghana project strengthens cooperation on border management between Ghana, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo," 16 November 2021, <https://www.icmpd.org/news/sbs-ghana-project-strengthens-cooperation-on-border-management-between-ghana-burkina-faso-cote-d-ivoire-and-togo>

8. Youtube, "How travellers bypass security at Ghana's border to enter Togo | Citi Newsroom," 31 January 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSPrJoi64Sg>

9. Evans Annang, "We're on Red Alert for a Possible Terrorist Attack on Ghana-National Security Minister," 04 April 2022, <https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/local/were-on-red-alert-for-a-possible-terrorist-attack-on-ghana-national-security-minister/zpdfjb4>

citing COVID-19 concerns. In Benin, additional military personnel were deployed to secure the border and new border control measures are in place¹⁰.

Stronger border security will be ineffective, as it was in the Sahel, because it reflects a misframing of what's happening on the ground. The trend of VEO expansion and their southward shift is often described as the 'spread' or 'spillover' of extremism. Much like the rhetorical Red Wave of the Cold War, these metaphors capture the mobility of the threat, but not the character of extremism or modern warfare. They evoke the image of extremists physically moving and pushing a discrete front line across the region like a conventional army. This conceptual framework points to a militarized approach of borders, arrests, and killings. If extremists are steadily moving across territory, it seems logical to reinforce borders—to hold the front line and prevent extremism from invading; if individual extremists slip through the cracks, they should be imprisoned or killed.

However, VEOs are not traditional armies. They do not move across territories with marching troops in formation. Instead, they spread ideas and exploit the grievances of target populations to shift local loyalties and behaviors. Extremist groups don't tend to dominate and govern areas; they seek to control people and incite violence to destabilize governments. Often, this entails building links to communities with existing grievances against the state, or inflaming existing conflicts. In other cases, they radicalize vulnerable individuals who may carry out attacks to attract the attention and the respect of extremist groups. A VEO group might retroactively claim credit for such events when it advances their interests, even if the organization itself did not plan or execute the attack.

In other words, movement of people across borders is not the core problem. As VEOs seek to catalyze conflict in West African communities, CVE efforts must support civilians to resist VEO narratives and pressures. Communities and individuals under pressure are vulnerable not because they are near borders but because of existing internal dynamics. The ideological divide between the north and south further exacerbates conflict. The northern regions are under strain in all four coastal countries because national governments have favored the south, leaving northern regions economically underdeveloped and poorly connected to the rest of the country in terms of infrastructure and communications. Lack of government services and investment has created resentment and the belief that national institutions do not serve the people. Weak land tenure systems, historical divide-and-rule policies, and the absence of effective justice systems allow intercommunal conflicts and grievances to fester.

When communities support or tolerate extremists, they may be motivated by economic need, fear of violence, family and ethnic loyalty, attractive VEO narratives, or alienation from the state. Given the many threats to survival in remote, undeveloped areas, communities 'hedge' by developing relationships with multiple forces that might provide them services or safety. For example, a person may cooperate with police and also share information with extremist groups in a strategy of maximizing financial assets and simultaneously avoiding being targeted by either actor. Additionally, people who might oppose extremism may cultivate alliances with extremists and/or opt to avoid clashing with them simply to secure their survival if VEOs take control and there is no protection from the state. For those who regularly cross borders, and move into and out of government-controlled areas for their livelihoods (trade, farming, or herding), hedging is a particularly rational survival strategy. Measures such as increasing the cost of crossing borders put burdens on economic options and familial and community engagement, undermining people's livelihoods and pushing them to more drastic strategies.

Border militarization will have perverse impacts and further exacerbate the conflict. Border control will not stop the spread of extremism or reduce the risks to the coastal countries. The vulnerability of these countries depends on local dynamics—the degree and quality of governance,

10. Virgille Ahissou, "Attacks in North Benin Park Kill 8 Including French Citizen," 11 February, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-burkina-faso-travel-benin-cotonou-ed441432e8ee548233e65be5f8d816ff>

the resolution or aggravation of grievances, and the availability of basic services (including human security and justice). Extremist narratives are already widespread and will continue to circulate unhindered by physical borders.

Border strengthening often entails increased military presence in border areas, and militarization of existing border measures with new weaponry and surveillance equipment. These measures are increasing. In June 2022, Togo announced a state of emergency in northern parts of the country following recent attacks. Additionally, the Togolese government has recently acquired Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, Turkish unmanned combat vehicles designed for counter-terrorism operations. Togo is using these drones to patrol land areas of the northern border, reportedly including over Burkina territory. Reportedly, Togolese Army suspected to have carried drone attack on a Burkina village killing at least 16 civilians¹¹. On July 1, a drone was observed over the town of Comin-Yanga¹². On July 10, 2022, air strikes accidentally killed seven civilians, mostly children, and injured at least two others¹³. Benin is seeking to obtain similar equipment. While this equipment may enable high-profile killings of extremists and better border surveillance, these gains are outweighed by the costs of militarization. One analysis showed no evidence that militarized police are an asset in counterinsurgency: *“states with militarized units within their national or federal-level police are generally less likely to achieve favorable counterinsurgency outcomes ... while militarization provides police with greater coercive capacity, it also impedes information collection and contributes to indiscriminate violence”*¹⁴.

Militarization is likely to alienate the remote communities that could be the most important allies in the counter-extremism effort. Communities that have generally had very limited engagement with their governments will see this increased government presence and surveillance as a threat to their safety driven by central politics rather than a desire to meet citizen needs. Locals, particularly those who are already vulnerable, including ethnic minorities, young people, and women, will probably begin avoiding government personnel. They may reduce their movements, weakening both livelihoods and social ties. They may move to crossing illegally and at night, increasing their exposure to violence and interaction with criminals. As their legal livelihoods are challenged, they may turn to smuggling and/or seek alliances with non-state actors, including VEOs, to seek support and protection.

Bawku in Ghana is an excellent example; community members cite 13 paths to Burkina Faso or Togo within walking distance, according to interviews conducted by the authors. They cross frequently to attend cultural events, visit neighbors, access their farms, and go to markets. The governments of Ghana and Togo would likely struggle to manage this traffic. Significant amounts of training, personnel, and equipment would be required to monitor routes effectively. Eventually, communities would probably explore new crossings to avoid harassment by state authorities, which can include corruption, taxation, delays, and documentation requirements. As a result, any border security measures must be accompanied by community-state trust-building to avoid further tensions between local people and the police and/or the military. Local communities in these remote spaces are already enmeshed in complex ethnic tensions and a delicate balance between traditional and state authorities.

11. Twitter Account, “#Burkina Selon une source locale ,l’armée #Togolaise est soupçonnée d’être à l’origine des tirs d’obus sur le village de #Pognoa_sankoado en territoire #Burkinabè. Le bilan provisoire fait :16morts en majorité des femmes qui étaient au moulin ,il y’a des enfants également.,” 01 August 2022, https://twitter.com/Ision_LibreS/status/1554072481404788736?s=20&t=n3hdYd5Zy6psFG7PxoJkIA

12. Africa Intelligence, 7 July 2022. “Lomé’s turn to succumb to charms of Turkish TB2 combat drones.” <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2022/07/08/lome-s-turn-to-succumb-to-charms-of-turkish-tb2-combat-drones,109798099-art>

13. Peter Sassou Dogbé, “Togo: Au Moins Sept Enfants Morts dans une ou Plusieurs Explosions dans l’Extrême Nord du Pays,” 10 July 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220710-togo-au-moins-sept-enfants-morts-dans-une-ou-plusieurs-explosions-dans-l-extr%C3%AAme-nord-du-pays>

14. Erica de Bruin, “Policing Insurgency: are militarized police more effective?,” 12 June, 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2021.1980186?journalCode=fswi20>

In an attempt to restrict the spread of extremism, officials often prohibit or impede behaviors, such as motorcycle riding¹⁵, which they associate with VEOs, despite these activities being essential to local daily life. By doing so they expose their lack of responsiveness to citizens, and create incentives for people to avoid government representatives. Residents near Porga, Benin, reported in April 2022 that women crossing the border to return from their fields in Togo faced random checks that included border officials emptying the women's bags of harvested corn and millet on the ground¹⁶. Poorly conceived policies and perceived injustices such as these will shift public opinion against the state, creating a more favorable environment for extremist narratives.

Past efforts to reinforce borders in West Africa have generally increased corruption, discriminatory practices, and risks to vulnerable groups. Border officials are widely seen as corrupt, and recent COVID-19-related border closures have increased demands for illegal taxes and fees¹⁷. Despite official border closures, West African governments have been unable to effectively stop the movement of goods or people. The closures have increased the price of travel, with more people traveling further for informal crossings, or paying bribes to border personnel. This has had negative impacts on local economies, while incentivizing smuggling and illegal crossings. In some cases, it has also created anti-government sentiment and suspicion about the true intentions behind the closure. Border policies are often applied with ethnic and gender bias such that those who are already vulnerable face the greatest harassment and extortion.

Women, for example, may face sexual harassment or extortion at border crossings¹⁸. Fear of the military and the police may keep them away from border crossings and cut them off from income-generating activities. In the Sahel, stationing additional military personnel in border communities has limited women's access to water points and other community infrastructure, as women avoided engaging with male soldiers due to gendered social restrictions or fear of sexual and gender-based violence. The resulting reduction in access to resources, state services, and economic opportunities increases the inclination of women to identify with those that could protect them against abuses by state security forces.

Similarly ethnic minorities, such as the Fulani, may be disproportionately impacted¹⁹. The Fulani are vulnerable due to longstanding state and social exclusion heightened by their frequent movements of cattle across borders. The Fulani are often scapegoated as extremists based on their ethnicity and movements. In the detentions in Côte d'Ivoire, described above, the victims believed they were targeted because they are Fulani. In Ghana and Benin, they face discrimination during border-related abuses, including extra-judicial detention, confiscation of documents, and excessive 'taxation'²⁰. Tightening borders would only inflame this existing grievance. In the Sahel, VEOs used ethnic exclusion of the Fulani and promises of safe movement and resources to recruit members of Fulani community.

There is also a high risk of human-rights abuses as governments move additional soldiers or police into the border zones. These new arrivals are most likely less aware of local dynamics, do not have relationships with communities and traditional authorities, and tend to take a more violent approach. In the Sahel, surges in military and police presence have often been associated with

15. Brahima Ouedraogo, "Burkina Faso cracks down on motorbike-riding extremists," 21 September, 2018. <https://apnews.com/article/6b9256460d6f43e893410618eb402a82>

16. Author interview.

17. "Covid-19 and Africa: Socio-economic implications and policy responses," OECD. (n.d.). Retrieved July 8, 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-and-africa-socio-economic-implications-and-policy-responses-96e1b282/> f

18. Jacqueline Klopp. "Corruption, gender, and small-scale cross-border trade in East Africa: A review." <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dpr.12610?af=R>

19. Author interviews.

20. Author interviews in Ghana and Benin.

surges in state abuses against citizens. Those abuses have created an opportunity for VEOs to cast themselves as the protectors of the population against an abusive state. In Burkina Faso, “allegations of abuse by security forces and pro-government militias are trending dangerously up” and, each time said abuses occur, “confidence in the state decreases and the chance that angry men will support the jihadists increases”²¹.

A more nuanced framing provides the opportunity for a broader set of possible responses from national governments and the international community. Extremism spreads as VEOs influence people and communities to turn away from national governments and support or enable violence. Stopping this spread requires a focus on the resilience and security of people and communities—not territory—at risk. Policies that strengthen communities and build stronger relationships between citizens and the state are the only ways to successfully counter VEO narratives and recruitment. Effective CVE strategies should be civilian-led efforts to address community priorities, deliver government services, and rapidly resolve grievances and disputes. As we have seen in the Sahel and around the world, these strategies require a nuanced, locally specific approach. Nonetheless, four overarching vulnerabilities show the commonalities between Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin, as well as the persistence of the dynamics that made the Sahel vulnerable.

The North/South divide.

None of the coastal countries has successfully overcome their north-south divides, which are rooted in colonial trade patterns and religious and ethnic divisions. In each one, majority Muslim northern regions see less government investment, less government-citizen engagement, and worse social and economic indicators than the more heavily Christian southern areas. In each country, government investment, infrastructure, and service provision favor the south, with resulting higher poverty rates and lower socio-economic indicators in the north. The cultural and political ties between ethnicity and land mean that these disparities often run along ethnic lines and fuel ethnic tensions. Even in Ghana, which has seen significant economic growth and poverty reduction, gains have favored the south while portions of the north remain underserved. This dynamic is heightened in areas like those around the town of Dollar Power, where territorial disputes between Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire mean that government services are absent and criminals are able to control communities. Citizens talk of ‘the two Ghanas’ and identify more closely with their local community than they do with the Ghanaian state. The celebration of Ashanti culture within the national identity of Ghana exacerbates this dynamic by equating Ghanaian identity with a certain ethnicity, rather than with diversity and inclusion.

In this context, the threat in the north must be seen not only as geographic proximity to the Sahel conflict, but the result of center-periphery dynamics, just as it was in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. VEO narratives of government ethnic bias, exploitation, and corruption resonate among northern citizens who have long felt neglected. The weakness of state services provides an opening for VEOs to position themselves as alternative providers of economic opportunity, security, justice, or other services.

Lack of government responsiveness to citizens

While the coastal countries have much more extensive government reach and service provision than their counterparts in the Sahel, people in the north of each country often see state actors, especially security and justice actors, as unresponsive and corrupt. Communities see the national government, in particular, as pursuing its own interests at the expense of local people, rather than responding to the needs and priorities of communities. As in the Sahel, this grievance is

21. Sam Mednick, “Burkina Faso army blamed for extrajudicial torture, deaths,” 24 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-army-blamed-for-extrajudicial-torture-deaths/2020/08/24/ad86a104-e5e0-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html

particularly acute in the areas of justice provision and security—services that VEOs readily offer to recruits. In the northern coastal states, locals claim that authorities deliberately exacerbate small conflicts to create more opportunities for corruption. They blame both traditional chiefs and local elected leaders for manipulating ethnic grievances, excluding youth and women’s voices, and even engaging in illegal activities such as kidnapping. As in the Sahel, unclear relationships between traditional and central government structures mean that conflict responses are unpredictable, opaque, and lack local credibility.

Security forces are particularly criticized as not understanding or caring about local issues. They are seen as overly politicized, imposed from the outside (or from other ethnic groups), and often inflaming existing conflict. In Benin, this dynamic is particularly visible around the role of the African Parks Network (APN) in managing the national park complexes; many locals view the Government of Benin’s decision to bring in APN as the imposition of an authority which does not answer to the public or respect either traditional or democratic systems of governance²². Across the region, there is high unmet community demand for civil-military engagement within local meetings, patrols, and citizen security efforts.

Lack of natural resource management

The confluence of population growth, economic pressure, and environmental degradation have made competition over natural resources (especially land and water) pressing daily concerns for most communities. As communities struggle to maintain their livelihoods, the absence of effective natural resource governance creates unnecessary conflicts and often incentivizes overuse and further degradation of land. In Ghana, wealthy remote landowners (based in Accra or elsewhere) monopolize land while others struggle to access enough land for subsistence. Communities perceive that gold mining concessions are given by the politicians without local input, while foreigners get away with illegal rosewood cutting, meaning the two most valuable resources are extracted at the expense of local systems. This strips credibility from local leaders who are unable to protect the land or are seen as hypocritical when they then try to prevent local use of resources. In all four countries, the failures of national governments to enact regional and local policies to protect grazing land and transhumance pathways pit farmers and herders against each other. The lack of functional mechanisms to address the resulting conflict fuels cycles of grievance, vengeance, and resource destruction. As chieftaincy and ethnic politics are tied closely to land, vulnerable populations, such as the Fulani, often face layers of social, economic, and ethnic exclusion, which is easily exploited by VEOs²³.

Youth disengagement and manipulation

West African countries have largely failed to create the social, economic, and leadership opportunities to meet the needs of the growing youth bulge. In under-developed northern communities in particular, young people struggle to find their role in society. Without quality education or economic opportunities, they are often idle or underemployed. Many turn to VEOs out of economic need. Traditional leadership systems generally prize age and leave little room for youth voices or leadership. This fosters resentment and frustration among young people, who see their elders and their governments as failing to respond to the many threats they face. In the Sahel, VEOs have exploited cultural dynamics around masculinity, particularly the absence of viable routes for young men to attain adult status and respect in their communities. Malam Ibrahim Dicko, the founder of Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso, for example, earned the loyalty of young men by critiquing the existing social order and promoting economic inequality. He honed

22. Author interviews.

23. Sanders, Laura. To Protect Coastal West Africa, Protect the Peuhl. <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/protect-coastal-west-africa-protect-peuhl>

in on a flashpoint issue, the large dowries demanded by traditional religious authorities to perform marriage ceremonies—a financial burden that limited the ability of young men to become men in the eyes of their community. In addition to the ideological draw, VEOs have captured young men's desire for respect and agency by projecting an image of masculine strength and agency through violence.

In many areas, political parties attempt to capture these young people by creating gathering places for them branded with party colors, hiring them to act as party agents in the run-up to elections, and paying them to carry out riots and attacks. In addition to the obvious dangers to both public safety and democracy, young people accustomed to being paid as local agents and agitators (and alienated from other forms of community or economic engagement) are ideal targets for international extremist networks looking to gain a local foothold.

Nations and international supporters continue to wrongly pursue border security as a priority, despite its drawbacks. Although border militarization has not limited the spread of violence extremism in the Sahel and is likely to play into the hands of VEOs in the coastal states, it is currently the cornerstone of CVE policy in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Nuanced, locally-specific strategies are essential to minimize the potential damage of this approach and to address vulnerabilities to extremism, rather than creating new ones.

1. **Any border security strategy must enable trade, communication, and travel.** The most important function of a border is to allow legitimate ways of crossing. Increasing the burden of legitimate behaviors will make communities more vulnerable, alienate essential allies, and lead people to see border officers as the enemy.
2. **Border security must serve and engage border communities and their leaders.** Those who live in border zones understand local dynamics better than external forces. They have critical information both about what is normal in border areas, and what is changing. They also have the most to lose from extremist influence.
3. **Women must be part of border security at all levels.** Due to their high vulnerability and limited access to male-dominated information channels, women and girls often maintain heightened security awareness and complex informal communications networks. Security forces should seek socially acceptable ways to solicit feedback from women on the behavior of security personnel, high risk areas, and tangible measures to improve community safety.
4. **International supporters, particularly those supporting border policing and military action, must use nuanced political-economy analysis to understand the complex motivations of key actors.** In a region rife with coups, international supporters must remember that those in power may fear their own militaries and act to undermine their effectiveness, even as they ask for international military support. At the same time, political actors may have an interest in strengthening those units they trust as tools of political oppression rather than national defense.
5. **Governments must focus on person-to-person engagement and service delivery.** Perceptions of government, borders, and VEOs are at least as important as territorial control. Feelings of trust, progress, hope, and belonging are powerful inoculations against extremism. Communities in border areas must feel that they are essential partners and that government efforts are designed to protect them, not territory.
6. **Governments must promote transparency and allow debate around the VEO threat and CVE activities.** The impulse to restrict information and close media space leads to rumors, suspicion, and the inability to properly inform citizens about what is happening in their communities. Instead, governments should welcome public dialogue and scrutiny, and should promote the idea that local people are key CVE partners.

The current trajectory of the coastal states is alarming. While VEOs launch nearly daily attacks, national governments are taking counterproductive measures. Together, these two dynamics put communities in a hopeless pinch. Le Monde quoted on 08 July 2022 a local high school principal in northern Benin: *"Today, we don't talk about terrorists in public because we are afraid of two things: the jihadists and the government. The first kill you, the second puts you in prison²⁴."* Without an immediate and dramatic change of approach, Benin and the other coastal countries will see their citizens make the same decisions their Sahelian counterparts have made: they will collaborate with extremists to keep themselves alive as best they can.

It is not too late to avert this disaster. The international community, local organizations, and especially national governments must embrace the lessons of the Sahel and implement realistic and context relevant CVE and peacebuilding strategies. We must reframe the problem around the vulnerability and needs of the most vulnerable communities and move away from militarized responses.

24. Emilien David, "Au Bénin, le silence des autorités face à la percée djihadiste," 07 July 2022, Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/07/07/au-benin-le-silence-des-autorites-face-a-la-percee-djihadiste_6133847_3212.html

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