The Sahel crisis since 2012


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THE SAHEL CRISIS SINCE 2012

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The ‘perfect storm’ that enveloped Mali in 2012 has since escalated into a protracted and widespread crisis across the Sahel. The region currently hosts multiple, moving threats (Figure 1), which are most active in the three states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In those states alone, between 2012 and 2019, there have been 1,463 armed clashes, 4,723 civilians killed, at the hands of 195 violent armed groups, in 1,263 discrete locations.¹ Violence reached its highest level to date in 2019 and continues at heightened frequency, suggesting a dangerous threshold has been reached.

Both violence itself, and the patterns of alliances across a proliferation of active groups, have shifted significantly since 2017. This briefing will review how two distinct strategies of local alliance formation – one predominantly hierarchical, and the other, based to a greater extent on horizontal coalition building – determine the level and modalities of violence. We conclude by analysing what recent changes imply for future crisis, civilian risk and the strategic leveraging of the current COVID – 19 global pandemic by armed actors.

Figure 1: Violent Events by Actor Type across the Sahel, 2017-Mid 2020.

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¹ All data sourced from Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED). Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen, ‘Introducing ACLED: An armed conflict location and event dataset’, Journal of Peace Research 47, 5 (2010), pp. 651-660. ACLED is a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project. ACLED tracks reported political violence from four main types of sources: 1) local, regional, national and continental media reviewed on a daily basis; 2) reports from NGOs or international organizations used to supplement media reporting; 3) selected social media accounts, including Twitter and Telegram; and 4) information and data provided through partnerships with local conflict observatories in hard-to-access cases. See www.acleddata.com for further details.
In 2019, Burkina Faso replaced Mali as the epicentre of the Sahel crisis. Jihadi groups such as Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) consolidated their hold on several regions after opening new fronts the previous year. These groups have exploited local ethnic cleavages while self-defense groups, vigilantes, and community-based militias have become increasingly embroiled in counter-terrorism efforts. This has triggered cyclical episodes of localized intercommunal violence characterized by tit-for-tat killings between jihadi militant groups on one side, and communal self-defense groups on the other. At the same time, the global dimension of the conflict is reflected in complex alliance structures, as actors such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda compete for dominant positions in the region.

Meanwhile, Burkinabe government forces have further contributed to violence by stepping up military operations across several regions, including Otapuanu in Burkina Faso’s East (Est and Centre-Est); and Doofu in the North (Nord, Centre-Nord, and Sahel). These operations are reportedly accompanied by human rights abuses and summary executions, following a pattern observed since the insurgency began in earnest in late 2016.2 The heavy-handed tactics deployed by state forces and its arming of local communities have significantly aggravated the deteriorating security situation, by fueling militant recruitment and contributing to a drastic increase in civilian

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targeting. For example, ACLED data shows that civilian fatalities in Burkina Faso alone rose over seven-fold between 2018 and 2019, from a recorded 173 conflict-related civilian fatalities in 2018, to over 1,200 the following year.

While 2019 saw the peak of violence to date (Figure 1), 2020 is likely to surpass it. Based on the current trajectory, the border region between Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria will be crisis hotspots in 2020. Further, internal political vulnerabilities may interact with the activities of armed groups in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, southern Mali and Guinea and put these areas at risk of significant instability. New spaces of activity may join ongoing, proximate conflicts: Nigeria’s Islamic State Western Africa Province (ISWAP)/Boko Haram has become a regional threat in Niger and Cameroon’s north; the Fulani community in Nigeria’s northwest is both the target and perpetrator of extreme local violence; and Chad is beginning to experience insurgency attempts in several discrete spaces simultaneously. As the constellation of armed actors becomes increasingly complex, and the geographies of violence shift, the Sahel crisis is growing, mutating, and becoming more brutal, with civilians bearing the brunt.

Previous research documented the conditions which facilitated the emergence of jihadi groups in the region. In this briefing, we turn our attention to how these groups evolved and strategically transformed since their establishment, focusing on processes of alliance formation across groups. Given the regional nature of the Sahel’s conflict system and associated humanitarian crisis, we deliberately apply a transnational lens in our analysis, to more effectively track cross-border movements, shifting transnational geographies of violence, and alliance formation across multiple countries of activity.

Conflict in the Sahel expanded geographically and witnessed the formation of several alliance structures. This occurred in three phases, at each stage of which, Sahel militants followed a similar overarching approach of effectively tailoring a global narrative to local conditions in order to recruit members and draw in allied groups. Several successful African jihadist movements have leveraged local social and political dynamics, and tailor their struggle primarily toward addressing local – not global – grievances. As such, the formation and consolidation of alliances

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with local groups, and the localizing of global narratives, became cornerstones of the evolving crisis. Beyond these broad similarities, we argue that the precise strategies of alliance formation differed. JNIM sought to integrate local groups in a more nodal network that appealed to a broader base of local communal groups: a strategy we refer to as ‘pastoralist populism’. ISGS sought to integrate local groups in a hierarchical system of allegiance and affiliation to IS central, and pursued a campaign of violence escalating in brutality and cyclical attacks through ‘pillage and reprisal’.

Both ISGS’ and JNIM’s distinct processes of alliance formation shaped the level, modalities and geographies of violence in the region (see Figure 2). On the one hand, more horizontal local alliance building – as pursued by JNIM – corresponds to relatively more contained violence and a broader coalition-building process. On the other, a hierarchical strategy of localization – as pursued by ISGS – corresponds to a more brutal and radicalized form of violence, with particular ramifications for civilian security. Both represent the dynamic opportunities leveraged by armed groups in the region, and also point to the risk of further deepening crisis; escalating violence towards civilians; and a looming confrontation between Al-Qaeda and IS in the region. Below, this briefing analyses these processes of alliance formation, and corresponding patterns in violence, over three phases of crisis.

Figure 2: Map of Conflict Events in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (2012-Mid 2020)

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Phase 1: Southward expansion and the creation of JNIM

The onset of crisis was mainly contained to Mali’s northern and central regions. In January 2012, a Tuareg rebellion against the government in Bamako swept northern Mali with the aim of independence. Simultaneously, mutinous soldiers, dissatisfied with central management of the ongoing insurgency, ousted then-president Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) in a coup d’état, further destabilizing the state. In April 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared independence for northern Mali as the unrecognized state of Azawad. In these northern regions, jihadi militants – including Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad (MUJAO), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – assisted in the spring offensive against the Malian army. The jihadis soon hijacked the rebellion and overran the MNLA to effectively

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control northern Mali’s major towns of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu. Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM ruled the north for the remainder of the year.\(^7\)

The following phase of the crisis saw an expansion southward in Mali, and increased cross-border activity in the tri-state Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger borderlands.\(^8\) In early January 2013, militants captured Konna in the central Mopti region\(^9\), and triggered a French military intervention, *Operation Serval*.\(^10\) French and Malian government forces successfully dislodged militants from the larger towns of northern Mali, shifting in response to the rural areas of Mopti, Kidal and Gao, and continuing to operate from there.

A consequence of the initial French intervention was the killing of key AQIM commanders and the decimation of AQIM brigades in Kidal Region. AQIM relied on Ansar Dine to integrate remaining brigades and commanders. Further, Ansar Dine became an Al-Qaeda front group used to infiltrate, frame, and legitimatize the jihadi takeover across Mali. Meanwhile, AQIM kept its ‘middle management’ place in Timbuktu, represented by an extraterritorial group Sahara Emirate/Katibat al-Furqan. This latter group hosted senior Algerian commanders and other regional fighters, who acted as an ‘advisory group’ for diffusion and future plans.

The restructuring of weakened AQIM factions, and their assimilation into more powerful groups amid intensive counter-terrorism operations, laid the groundwork for two important developments. The first was a new AQ-sponsored group that knit together multiple violent organizations whose nuclei are in these early mergers and acquisitions. This eventually became JNIM.\(^11\) The second is the expanded role played by Ansar Dine as the organizing node for groups...
across Mali and into neighboring states. Ansar Dine continued its southern expansion, and commenced with the formation and eventual oversight of JNIM and other Mali-specific groups.\textsuperscript{12} AQIM eventually conceded its Mali management role to Ansar Dine, formalized in the appointment of its leader, Ag Hali, as the head of JNIM in 2017. Whether this was a strategy to emphasize local ‘ownership’ of a global movement, or a sign AQIM continued to falter since their loss of key commanders, is unknown.

Ansar Dine’s program of ‘pastoralist populism’ was initially developed for the specific demographics and political geography of rural central Mali. Ansar Dine sought communities to co-opt as the basis for a larger network in Central Mali, Gao and beyond. Its plan to gain supporters and expand their reach was based on the infiltration of rural communities, targeting of alternative authority structures, and ‘ethnicization’ of militancy.\textsuperscript{13} ‘Pastoralist populism’ was very successful amongst the Fulani by emphasizing and capitalizing on tensions over land ownership; corruption; taxes;\textsuperscript{14} ‘developmental plans’;\textsuperscript{15} citizenship;\textsuperscript{16} justice concerns;\textsuperscript{17} farming and herding livelihood security and competition\textsuperscript{18} with Bambara, Dogon, and Bobo groups; state land regulation and reforms in favor of farmers; and corrupt, predatory water and forest agents.\textsuperscript{19} By 2015, jihadist groups had taken control of the Mopti region, and Katiba Macina\textsuperscript{20} specifically dominated central rural Mali through targeted development of local ties, networks and agendas.


\textsuperscript{14} Benjaminsen and Ba note: “Rent-seeking by government officials has been especially intense in relation to conflicts over pastoral land, environmental management and the fight against desertification […] These fees are so unpopular among the pastoralists that they are one of the reasons why many pastoralists have joined jihadist groups.” Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation’, \textit{The Journal of Peasant Studies}, 46, 1 (2019), pp. 1-20; Ousmane Kornio, ‘Conflit intercommunautaire et difficultés de réconciliation à la base: Conflict Bambara-Peulh dans le cercle de Ténenkou, region de Mopti’ (FES Mali Policy Paper Friedrich Eberg Stiftung, 2016).

\textsuperscript{15} These agents are widely seen as displaying predatory behavior through taxing or imprisoning, for instance, random women wood collectors or herders who are accused of causing desertification; see Tor A. Benjaminsen, ‘Conservation in the Sahel: Policies and people in Mali, 1900-1998’, in Vigdis Broche-Due and Richard A. Schroeder, (Eds), \textit{Producing nature and poverty in Africa} (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000) pp. 94-108.


\textsuperscript{17} See study on corrupt justice systems in the Delta, Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, ‘Farmer-herder conflicts, pastoral marginalisation and corruption: A case study from the inland Niger delta region of Mali’, \textit{The Geographic Journal} 175, 1 (2009), pp. 71-81.


\textsuperscript{19} Benjaminsen and Ba, ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups?’.

\textsuperscript{20} Ansar Dine’s Katiba Macina (or Macina Liberation Front).
Early reports suggest that those who first joined the militants did so out of ‘self-defense’ both from Tuareg threats, and in response to the selective arming and support of neighboring Bambara, and later Dogon, farmers by the army. Indeed, the actions of the Malian government encouraged numerous militant supporters and informers in the Delta. Human rights violations – such as summary executions committed by the Malian army against pastoralists – led many to feel targeted. Voicing anti-government and anti-elite feelings borne of marginalization resulted in these conflicts becoming acutely ‘ethnicized’. Groups saw value in being armed and picking a side in the interests of self-preservation, without jihadi ideology (or religiosity more broadly) necessarily serving as the key motivating factor. Katiba Macina enlisted other groups including small populations of Bambara and Dogon, and expanded into areas in the neighboring regions of Segou, Koulikoro and Kayes, west, center-south and eastern Burkina Faso, and later in the guise of JNIM, through the vector of Fulani transhumance routes.

The ‘justice’ and ‘security’ rhetoric for co-option contrasts with explanations favored by external commentators about the appeal of jihadi ideology, an ‘absent’ state, or ‘ungoverned territory’. The ‘fragility’ explanation ignores the region’s political geography: Mali’s government readily cultivated relationships and co-opted local authorities, and many of these direct and indirect agents were targeted by Katiba Macina in this early period. Over 30 local authority representatives were murdered in 2015–2017, setting the scene for a change in local leadership and potential partnerships with JNIM, as of 2017. These assassinations signaled that cooperation with the state or security administration was an act against JNIM. While early Katibas claimed to be eradicating foreign militaries, their attacks mainly involved strategic assassinations of local figures, to be replaced by those more amenable to an alliance.

Other militant groups capitalized on their community networks to expand and become central nodes in this growing network: Al Mourabitoune emerged in 2013 in rural Gao and quickly became active across the tri-state border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and was rumored to be active in northern Côte d’Ivoire. It emerged from the MUJAO business network to

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22 Benjaminsen and Ba, ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups?’.
26 Benjaminsen and Ba, ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups?’.
safeguard the interests of groups from Gao, and later become a constituent group of JNIM. Al Mourabitoune’s network is representative of its home region, and included the Lemhar, Tilemsi and other Arab communities, Fulani, Tuareg and Dawsahak. The Sahara Emirate (Katibat al-Furqan) continued to represent the Timbuktu region and AQIM regional interests, although it lost several commanders. Finally, Katiba Saladeddine also emerged in rural Gao, dominated by local Arab populations. Its varied composition allowed the group to act as a bridge to forthcoming ISIS affiliation, and as a haven for various defectors, militants and wayward former rebels.

In March 2017, JNIM emerged to ‘unify all tribes’ and consolidate the various Katibas that emerged from 2012 to 2016. Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoune, Katiba Macina, and AQIM announced the establishment of this new alliance, under Ag Ghali. JNIM was to unite multiple Katibas to represent the ‘whole Sahel’ in a nodal network of alliances. In briefings, it spoke of ‘one emir and one banner that unites everyone’ and not of individual former members. The union, as well as the choice of leaders, reflects Al-Qaeda’s strategic attempt to expand by empowering local actors, creating social ties through marriages, and ‘protecting’ civilians from governmental injustice. JNIM could maintain local movements, and be present in several places.

JNIM’s profile of violence changed once the group formed: attacks rose significantly as did the number of locations in which the new group sustained activity. Reflecting the strategic value of such a formation, JNIM as an alliance has both higher levels of activity, and a wider geographic reach, than its individual constituent members had combined (Figure 3).

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27 Framed by the group as having ‘unified all the tribes’, in the merger announcement five militant leaders are present, a Fulani, a foreigner i.e. muhajir/immigrant Algerian Arab AQIM, Jamal Okacha, a Tuareg, a Malian Arab, and another immigrant Moroccan Berber. Only two remain of those five Iyad, Ag Ghaly an Amadou Kouffa. Only two of the five remain are Iyad? Please clarify.


Phase 2: Alliances, alternatives, defections and dangerous attempts to stand out – The creation of ISGS

The emergence of Ansaroul Islam and ISGS marks the second phase of militant expansion post-Serval when, in late 2016, another front formed in northern Burkina Faso and western Niger. In 2016, new fronts, armed groups, and a series of high-profile cross-border attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger from Mali, represented a dangerous shift in the political environment.

In December 2016, Ansaroul Islam sought to create a Katiba on the borderlands between Mali and Burkina Faso, and comprised mainly of Burkinabe militants, recruited from the Fulani and Rimaibé communities in Soum. The group used the rhetoric of equality to gain popularity and
followers, especially among the Rimaibé.\textsuperscript{30} Meanwhile, since 2015, Al Mourabitoune members increasingly sought to protect Nigerian Fulani and Arab communities from armed attacks by the Mali government in the Mali-Niger border areas, Menaka and northern Tillaberi. This led them to pledge allegiance to IS central (in Iraq), and in turn name the growing group of militants, ISGS. Coordinating with AQIM, Ansar Dine and Katiba Macina, ISGS engaged in several high-profile government attacks in Burkina Faso, claiming early operations in September and October of 2016 in Markoye, an assault against an army base in Intangom, and two attacks in Oudalan Province. In Niger, their attempted prison break at the Koutoukalé Prison north of Niamey, failed. ISGS was reportedly very small (50 members in 2015-2016) and quickly sought to establish a connection with Ansaroul Islam, also operating in Soum with growing pro-IS sub-units. Both ISGS and JNIM grew from co-opting Ansarol Islam militants.\textsuperscript{31}

At this early period, support and contacts to and from IS central were limited, and based on pledges but little material assistance. Those tenuous connections between IS central and ISGS became strained between 2016-2017 when an IS central emissary was arrested and not replaced. The local ISGS affiliate sought to continue operations in the shadow of the larger and better-organized JNIM. The result was often shared activity and cooperation in areas of overlap (see Figure 3).

Three features highlight how ISGS and JNIM contended with each other across shared space: first, while their short-term objectives are similar, the groups’ longer-term goals diverge. ISGS, as a subsidiary branch of IS central, is seeking to establish a ‘global caliphate’,\textsuperscript{32} for which radicalizing violence against non-supporters and non-believers is justified, if not called for. To the extent that ISGS has forged local alliances (and these remain more limited than JNIM) it has done so by integrating local groups into a hierarchical command structure.

By contrast, JNIM is seeking to challenge a sitting government and foreign assistance domestically. While JNIM is an AQ associate, proselytizing is a less prominent feature of its activity, so much so that a recent intervention took place to ‘remind’ JNIM of its Islamist principles.\textsuperscript{33} JNIM has sought to organize a broad-based coalition of diverse local socio-political groups of the Sahel into a diffusive, nodal alliance, similar to Al-Qaeda infiltration techniques in

other states, including Afghanistan and Yemen. JNIM uses social networks, authority contests and local geopolitical fault lines to militarize domestic and regional fighters. By integrating local soldiers, JNIM creates branches that can claim local motivations and take advantage of local vulnerabilities and competitions.

The difference in these profiles is reflected in the number of active associated actors and allies recorded alongside JNIM and ISGS: the former have been involved in violent events with 12 discrete associated actors; while the latter, have been active in violence alongside just four. ISGS’ more limited local links corresponds to an alternative, and extremely violent, means through which to diffuse and establish dominance. JNIM diffuses through activating local grievances that are present among both civilians communities and armed groups, and transforming local militants into allied groups; the spread of ISGS, by contrast, is facilitated through more hardline, radicalizing violence that relies to a greater extent on fear and coercion.

Second, both groups engage very differently with civilians. JNIM is often unwilling to claim sole responsibility for violence against civilians in areas where it is both active and dominant, as it would directly and negatively influence their ‘populist’ message. This pattern of activity has been seen in other contexts, where dominant groups seeking to appeal to local sympathies are less willing to be clearly associated with high rates of civilian targeting. By contrast, ISGS’ violence profile is characterized by high civilian fatalities: there are 3.5 civilian fatalities for each ISGS attack, compared with 2 per JNIM attack.

Notably, when both groups collaborate, 50 percent of their recorded shared activity is against civilians. These events have a civilian fatality rate closer to JNIM’s, at 1.7 civilian deaths per event. Although neither group overtly claim shared responsibility for these acts, deflecting sole responsibility ‘benefits’ JNIM, who prefer to deal with local detractors without overt public repression, if possible. By contrast, ISGS has distinguished itself by making its violence brutal and ‘radical’, believing that high violence drives local recruitment out of desperation, while attacking schools, hospitals and potential supporters of alternative groups will underscore their dominance and lead to submission.

Third, the overall activity from these groups is also distinct: JNIM is clearly more dominant and three times more active than ISGS, although recently that ratio has been shifting. Their military engagements also differ: up to 40 percent of JNIM activity is against domestic militaries, and approximately 20 percent is against foreign forces. JNIM, in effect, is attempting to fight an insurgency on at least three fronts: foreign, domestic and local. This is clearly distinct from ISGS, who engage domestic military forces at 25 percent and foreign forces at 13 percent. ISGS’ fatality rates per event are far higher (at 10 per domestic military event and 7 for foreign military events), but this is partly due to ISGS deaths. As with its civilian strategy, ISGS is diffusive through brutality. Yet, as noted, a change is evident since IS re-recognized ISGS in March 2019 and ISGS
activity levels are beginning to rival those of JNIM. The new stated aims are to conduct a campaign targeting governments, local self-defense units and Christians.34

Phase 3: Competition, consolidation and disintegration of pro-government groups and foreign forces

The third phase witnessed the expansion and consolidation of Islamist reach across the region, with renewed and particularly intense violence against international forces in Mali. This phase was set in motion in late 2017 with the implantation of militants in the Est Region of Burkina Faso and nearby areas in Niger. Elements of all groups converge in these regions, reflecting JNIM’s endeavor to forge alliances and unify diverse factions. The expansion southward sought to overstretch French counter-terrorism forces and complicate the operationalization of the G5 Sahel Force. This spread is particularly relevant to Burkina Faso where new fronts are opening up before authorities and security forces are able to adequately address previous ones (Figure 2). This stage has witnessed the greatest rise in violence as both non-state actors and governments continue to militarize local groups to combat the insurgency. Please see Table 1 for a summary of the main armed, active groups in the region.

The 2018 and 2019 expansions suggest a contradiction at the heart of the Sahel insurgency. In 2018, JNIM suffered multiple tactical defeats including the elimination of several commanders at the hands of the French Operation Barkhane forces. France indicated that 2018 was the operation’s most successful year in terms of militants killed or captured since 2014.35 However, during this period, JNIM also significantly expanded its operations in the region. Overall, JNIM was active in 120 more locations in 2019 than in 2018 (Figure 2). This expansion was especially evident in Burkina Faso, where it opened up new fronts in the East, South-West and Centre-North regions.

If 2018 was the year of expansion, 2019 was the year of consolidation in the networks of AQ and IS (see Figure 4). While the Centre-North region had previously only experienced sporadic militant activity, it soon became the epicentre of the insurgency and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Militants began 2019 with a suicide bombing campaign, including the first

34 ISGS is also learning from regional agents: since the reconnection with IS central, ISWAP in Nigeria has had two roles. The first is managing the regional IS affiliates and guiding the activity of ISGS; the second is the establishment of a junction between the two. An example of their influence occurred after the acknowledgement of ISGS by IS-central. A coordination meeting was held in the border between Mali and Algeria. This region is quite far from the borderlands area when ISGS operates, and indicates the pull of regional powerhouses in designing IS activity in the region. See for example, Aaron Y. Zelin, ‘New issue of The Islamic State’s newsletter: “al-Nabā’” #220’ Jihadology, 6 February 2020 <https://jihadology.net/2020/02/06/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-220/> (19 June 2020).

targeting the EU training mission, EUTM-Mali, in Koulikoro, just 50km northeast of Bamako. The campaign also included the deadliest attack ever against the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, in Kidal, which reportedly killed at least 11 Chadian peacekeepers and wounded 25.36

2019 also drew attention to the roiling intercommunal violence that has been responsible for some of the gravest acts of violence against civilians. The year saw mass atrocities against Fulani communities perpetrated by Dozos in Koulogon, Mali, and by Koglweogo in Yirgou, Burkina Faso, seen as punishment for JNIM and ISGS broad recruitment amongst the Fulani. In response to armed attacks by government-armed communal militias, JNIM and ISGS conducted a series of joint offensives in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. This offensive forced all three national armies into tactical withdrawals from military outposts in the tri-state border area. Several of the attacks carried out as part of this campaign are among the deadliest ever recorded in these countries. The result has been a remarkable rise in intra-community violence.

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Overall, the heavy-handed approach of state forces, which includes severe abuses and extrajudicial killings, has exacerbated the crisis. The involvement of militias and self-defense groups, combined with the partiality of government forces, has triggered deadly episodes of intercommunal violence that have left civilians particularly vulnerable. In the last two years, civilian targeting has come to dominate the crisis (Figure 5). Whereas in 2012, violence against civilians constituted just over one-tenth of all violent events recorded in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, in 2019, it made up just under half (47.9 percent). This intensity is a product of a deadly downward spiral, through which security provision has become localized and ethnicized as a result of state failure to protect civilians; security forces’ brutality has further fueled militarization; and lastly, large numbers of government-armed communities – intended to serve as proxy front guards against jihadists – predictably turned on other ethno-regional communities with whom they are in contest.

**Figure 5: Violent Events by Type, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2012-2020.**
The next stages

The Sahel crisis has significantly escalated and geographically expanded since 2012. Dynamics since 2017 reveal important aspects of how both jihadi militants and local, communal militias evolve in new environments. The crisis has escalated through both regional AQ and IS affiliates leveraging local contests, militarizing identities, localizing global narratives, and forming a series of complex alliances. While violence in the region has often been cast as an African example of the global jihadi threat, the most recent surge in violence underscores how local, domestic, often ethnicized tensions generate the most lasting instability. Where recent research has shown how local dynamics are often central to the emergence of militant groups in the Sahel, our briefing goes further to highlight how the precise strategies of localization and alliance formation – either through hierarchical integration, or more nodal, horizontal allegiances – can differ across groups and in turn, account for differences in the level, modalities and geographies of their violence.
While the Sahel crisis has evolved into a larger threat matrix for the region, its dynamics are hyper-localized but responses from governments are not consistently directed at regional or local threats. Several government-affiliated local leaders have acceded or been killed across the Sahel. As a result, jihadist groups have been able to move from hit-and-run attacks, to full rural (and intermittently urban) insurgencies. In short, the link between political disorder and the escalating crisis across the Sahel today lies in the ability of these groups to leverage the branding and coordination offered by Jihad; and find opportunities in the chaos at the political centre while taking advantage of persistently poor, local-centre governance relationships.

The COVID-19 crisis is a key example of this strategic opportunism. While there has been much speculation about the potential for the pandemic to either quell violence and lead to a widely adopted global ceasefire, or to intensify violence in an unprecedented way, so far, levels of violence in the Sahel have remained relatively stable. Although it is too early to appreciate the full impact of the crisis across the region, the context created by the global pandemic appears to have accelerated – rather than transformed – conflict dynamics and alliance patterns. The nascent conflict between ISGS and JNIM is continuing to develop, largely in line with pre-pandemic patterns of contestation, with continuing defections from JNIM. These are driven by both a global process (institutional pressure from IS central for ISGS to consolidate its dominance in the region) and a local one (disputes over land access, particularly in Central Mali, that has exacerbated divisions within JNIM). Beyond these operational considerations, we have also witnessed the leveraging of the pandemic for strategic communications, with ISGS taking the opportunity to criticize JNIM publicly.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 crisis appears to have accelerated developments which were already well underway. In this way, the crisis reflects the interaction between local and global dynamics, as perhaps the greatest impact of the global health crisis will be the strategic opportunism of groups in the Sahel to continue in this downward spiral of conflict, while the world’s attention is largely focused elsewhere.

In light of this, and looking to longer-term implications of our analysis, our assessment suggests that other neighbors are at great risk due to similar “opportunities”. Côte d’Ivoire is preparing for what is anticipated to be a difficult and polarized election even prior to the COVID-19 crisis. The incumbent party’s main opposition candidate (Guillaume Soro) is the subject of an active warrant for plotting a coup, endangering state security, embezzling public funds and money.

laundering. Further, there is general discontent throughout the state at inequality, a lack of development, and elite impunity. Recent assessments suggest that Côte d’Ivoire has the potential for significant violence. The north, once the seat of FN power, is close to the now heavily destabilized borders of Mali and Burkina Faso, and instability could spill over. In other regional states, including Guinea and Togo, changes to the constitution, flawed elections and ongoing marginalization of northern communities in Ghana, are particularly polarizing and dangerous. Meanwhile in Benin, a recent plot to overthrow the President resulted in the arrests of several military officers, and inter-communal tensions between Fulani and other groups are rising, attesting to the potential for violent escalation there.

These opportunities may seem initially unrelated or only indirectly heightening the risk of diffusion but the initial vectors for violence in both Mali and Burkina Faso emerged from similar poor governance problems. In neither case did jihad simply ‘arrive’, it grew from existing tensions and localized conflict systems. The critical lesson of this briefing is that a tsunami of conflict does not have to initially manifest as overtly Islamist or even ideologically coherent, but grows from opportunism. Populist rhetoric, displays of weakened state authority, a brutal – or absent – security sector, the militarization of neighbors, livelihoods and communities each constitute viable ways that the Sahel violence can metastasize through the wider region.

A second lesson of this briefing is that while external and domestic military forces have exerted little influence on how the conflicts are evolving, JNIM and ISGS have demonstrated they are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to take advantage of new opportunities. While both groups share some local goals and appetite for limited cooperation, our analysis has shown that their strategies of localization diverge significantly, and in turn, shape their strategies of violence.

Complicating these dynamics further, is the fact that amid tensions between JNIM and ISGS – and within JNIM – many JNIM fighters have recently defected to ISGS, a process that has accelerated in recent months. Until recently, JNIM and ISGS have at times cooperated, with

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43 As reported in La Nouvelle Tribune, in Bénin, on 2 March 2020, residents of Dogbo (Dogbo, Mono) attacked a Fulani settlement in the area. The Fulani were accused of being responsible for the death of a boy found in the community. Prince Amassiko, ‘Bénin: Suite à un décès, les Peulhs de Dogbo contraints de se réfugier à Lokossa’, La Nouvelle Tribune, March 2020, <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2020/03/benin-suite-a-un-deces-les-peulhs-de-dogbo-contraints-de-se-refugier-a-lokossa/> (19 June 2020).
44 As a result, many events in the Sahel cannot be definitively attributed to JNIM and/or ISGS. Such events are hence coded by ACLED as ‘JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)’. Events involving either or both of these actors were reported in 145 more locations in 2019 relative to 2018. This point makes the expansion of events attributed to solely JNIM, earning JNIM a spot on the list above, even more stark.
JNIM as the dominant partner. But since ISGS has been recognized and managed by ‘IS Central’, it is seeking to usurp that position. The expanded role of ISGS represents a change in how IS Central is coordinating with the group, and goes some way in explaining the brutality of recent violence.Through its targeting of civilians, ISGS is deliberately focusing on weak targets and mass casualties for maximum effect.

These distinct profiles of violence and discrete trajectories are significant in part, because they complicate a monolithic view of a single, global jihadist threat, and instead, highlight important nuances in the way groups laying claim to similar global narratives, navigate and leverage local conflict environments in very different ways. These differences are also important because they point to the growing risks posed by an increasingly active and expansionist ISGS, the most likely outcome of which will be greater civilian suffering and further destabilized states.

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45 Jacob Zenn, ‘The Islamic State’s provinces of the peripheries: Juxtaposing the pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute group in the Philippines’, Perspectives of Terrorism 13, 1 (2019), pp. 87-104.