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Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism



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About the author

Antonin Tisseron is an associate researcher at the Thomas More Institute. He holds a PhD in History and has worked in recent years for the United Nations and the French Development Agency on security issues in West Africa.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security
Competence Centre Sub-Saharan Africa
Point E, boulevard de l'Est, Villa n°30
P.O. Box 15416 Dakar-Fann, Senegal
Tel.: +221 33 859 20 02
Fax: +221 33 864 49 31
Email: info@fes-pscc.org
www.fes-pscc.org

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	04
List of acronyms	05
Executive Summary	06
Introduction	08
I. LONG-STANDING LOCAL SECURITY INITIATIVES	09
1.1. A dual process of expansion and militarization	09
1.2. Bottom-up security in the long term	10
1.3. A symptom of a security crisis	12
II. THE FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE OF SELF-DEFENSE MILITIAS	14
2.1. Koglweogo in the plural	14
2.2. Traditional Dozo hunters	17
2.3. Da Nan Ambassagou Militia	19
III. MILITIAS INVOLVED IN THE FIGHT AGAINST JIHADISM	21
3.1. A commitment prior to the VDP law	21
3.2. Creation of Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland	22
3.3. Gradual operationalization of the VDP law	23
3.4. A divisive measure	25
IV. A DOUBLE-EDGED TOOL	27
4.1. An operational impact in question	27
4.2. A significant risk of exacerbating violence	29
4.3. A medium-term destabilizing potential	30
V. RECOMMENDATIONS	32
Bibliography	36

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Mr. Philipp M. Goldberg

Regional Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
Peace and Security Centre of Competence
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AKDN	Koglweogo Association of the Department of Namissiguima
CDR	Committees for the Defense of the Revolution
CISC	Collective against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
CODOCI	The Dozo Brotherhood of Côte d'Ivoire
DSF	Defense and security forces
ENABEL	The Belgian development agency
FENACODOCI	National Federation of Dozo Brotherhoods of Côte d'Ivoire
GFSN	The Northern Security Forces Group
NGO	Non-governmental organization
VDP	Volunteers for the defense of the Fatherhood
PARSIB	The European Union's Projects to Support the Strengthening of Internal Security in Burkina Faso
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
RDR	Rally of the Republicans
UNOCI	United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local security initiatives in West Africa have a long history, whose roots can be traced back to colonial history. In Burkina Faso, they continue to be part of the post-independence political and security landscape, driven by the state, local governments or citizens.

The recent period has seen a very strong expansion of these local security initiatives, marked in particular by the proliferation of self-defense groups known as Koglweogo. According to sources, the first Koglweogo groups appeared in the 1990s or 2000s, before expanding after the fall of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 as a result of a rise in banditry, followed by attacks by jihadist groups on Burkinabe territory. While the Koglweogo have a national representative, they are not a unified movement. From one region to another, from one commune to another, or even within the same locality or group, the movement is diverse. This movement, which is virtually national, is present at the regional and local levels, while being inseparable from its Mossi identity. Similarly, although the Koglweogo have been the focus of media attention, they coexist with other groups such as the Dozo - with whom they have clashed - and Da Nan Ambassagou militiamen, as well as with local non-militia peace initiatives.

The relationship between the state and self-defense groups is a blend of tolerance, pragmatism, and leadership. Thus, Burkinabe authorities have adopted a legal framework intended to regulate the actions of the Koglweogo by embedding them into a community policing, which the latter have refused to do. Locally, the attitude of the Koglweogo towards the public authority and its representatives is also oscillat-

ing between collaboration, autonomy and tension, depending on the situation and the local actors. Collaboration has been notable in several regions, particularly in the East, to secure the 2014-2015 political transition process. The movement is also strongly rooted in local structures and its members are sometimes actors in political life. However, the presence of these militias creates at the same time a logic of competition with state actors responsible for maintaining public law, and the atrocities attributed to them fuel tensions while polarizing society.

On November 7, 2019, following the attack on a mining convoy by jihadists, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré called for the mobilization of civilian volunteers to support the state in fighting jihadist groups. Two and a half months later, Burkina Faso's Parliament unanimously adopted a law allowing for the recruitment of "*Volunteers for the defense of the Fatherhood*" (VDP). Its objective is twofold: to train and equip communities to enable them to fight jihadist groups, to support the armed forces or to protect communities from which the defense and security forces are absent; and to provide an institutional framework for the militia dynamics that have emerged beyond the government's control.

The operationalization of the VDP law is gradual. It is rapid in the months following the adoption of the law in January 2020 in the North of the country, before accelerating in the East and then in the West. This implementation of the VDP law – amid both political and security pressure - gives a feeling of improvisation with variations depending on military regions, very weak coordination with the police and lack of resources. In a report by the National Assembly following a series of meetings organized in June 2020 in the East, North, Sahel, Center-North and Boucle du Mouhoun, the authors stressed

the inadequacy of resources allocated to train, supervise, care for and administer VDPs, while calling for improved operational coordination between VDPs and the armed forces and greater recognition of the VDP status.

While they can help strengthen the country's security network and support the defense and security forces, militias are a double-edged sword. The main risk is the exacerbation of inter-community violence, in a context of stigmatization of certain communities, non-inclusiveness of VDPs and the increasing circulation of weapons of war. On several occasions, VDPs have been accused of abuses committed against civilians.

In the longer term, militias also have the potential to destabilize, fuel crime and weaken state authority.

Against this backdrop, the Burkinabe government must ensure a coherent increase in VDPs as part of a strategy to beef up security and involving all relevant government agencies. It must also reduce the risks associated with the use of armed militias through inclusive recruitment, enhanced training, and penalties for VDPs guilty of abuses, and place improved trust between the state and communities at the heart of its priorities.

INTRODUCTION

Self-defense groups are not new to the Burkinabe landscape. Since 2014, however, amid growing insecurity and the subsequent extension of the activity of armed jihadist groups, they have gained prominence with the emergence of local groups known as Koglweogo, i.e., “*forest guards*” in Moore, the language of the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso. Emphasizing the absence of the state and the poor quality of public services in some localities, their members display a rhetoric in which they portray themselves as responding to the absence of the defense and security forces, their ineffectiveness when they are present, and the low number of prosecutions in cases of theft or robbery.

The increase in the number of Koglweogo groups, tolerated and sometimes encouraged by the state, has led to violence against alleged delinquents and is at the core of many debates on their threats to national cohesion and their impact on the communitarization of conflicts and the development of jihadist groups. Two killings have been particularly striking. The first one, which took place in the North-Central region of Yirgou, in January 2019, follows the assassination of 6 people, including a Mossi village chief, by jihadists. In retaliation, 49 people were killed by militiamen according to official figures, and nearly 210 according to civil society organizations. The second one took place in the villages of Barga, Dinguila-Peulh and Ramdolla-Peulh, in the Northern Region, on March 8, 2020. A self-defense group opened fire on people and burned down houses. At least 43 people were reportedly killed, with several witnesses accusing the Koglweogo of being responsible for the executions.

These massacres are not specific to self-defense groups. On 29 and 30 May 2020, around 30 people were killed in an attack on a livestock market near Pama, in the east, and at least 25 in attacks on two convoys in the north, all attributed to jihadist groups. Burkina Faso's armed forces have also been accused by several civil society organizations of being responsible for extrajudicial executions specifically targeting the Fulani community. However, after the government adopted in January 2020 a law allowing for the recruitment of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland and the control of the use of armed civilians in the fight against armed jihadist groups, the dangers of the use of armed militias by the State came to the forefront.

In this context of institutionalization of self-defense groups by the state, this report examines the militia phenomenon in Burkina Faso - the militias being understood here as non-jihadist armed actors recognized or tolerated by the government - and the challenges related to the operationalization of the January 2020 law by placing it in a historical perspective, as well as the diversity of local security dynamics in the country and in West Africa. The VDP law, an ambitious but dangerous initiative, has yet to be convincing in its implementation and in its capacity to reduce insecurity and the activity of jihadist groups.

In addition to an analysis of the documentation on the issue (academic publications, grey literature, press articles, etc.), this report is based on more than twenty interviews with government actors, representatives of armed groups engaged in self-defense, civil society representatives, journalists, researchers and external partners. These interviews were conducted by telephone and in Ouagadougou in October 2020.

I. LONG-STANDING LOCAL SECURITY INITIATIVES

The militia phenomenon in Burkina Faso has gradually imposed itself in public debate and research in recent years, in a context of growing insecurity that has considerably fostered its expansion. However, this phenomenon, and more broadly local security initiatives, are not new in Burkina Faso or in West Africa. They are part of national and even regional historical trajectories of co-production of security between local and national actors.

1.1. A dual process of expansion and militarization

The Koglweogo appeared during the 1990s or 2000s, in a context of a flurry of informal and local security initiatives that took various forms (private security, self-defense associations, hunters' associations). The word Koglweogo, which comes from the Moore language, the language of the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso, is composed of the verb Kogl which means "to guard, to preserve" and the word weogo which designates "the bush, the forest". One of the first Koglweogo is said to have emerged from the "Namissiguima Vigilance Committee" before its transformation into the Koglweogo Association of the Department of Namissiguima (AKDN) recognized by the Burkinabe administration in 2005. The Koglweogo are said to have formed organized groups to deal mainly with environmental issues, protecting forests and nature reserves from illegal hunting and abusive logging in cooperation with State services and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

While several versions coexist on the genesis of the Koglweogo, there is however a consensus

on the factors behind their involvement in law enforcement and their expansion. On the one hand, their switch to tracking down thieves was a response to the resurgence of crime, the trivialization of violence, and the inadequacy of the state's response. On the other hand, some Koglweogo have been successful in securing certain roads and entire villages, their model is being emulated and the phenomenon experienced territorial expansion from 2015-2016. The creation of similar groups then quickly becomes anarchic with Koglweogo who do not declare themselves to the national authorities and do not enjoy official recognition. This expansion began in the rural areas of the Central Plateau, mainly Mossi, where the police and gendarmerie are not very present, before spreading out through mimicry into peri-urban areas and more ethnically mixed regions where the police and gendarmerie are sometimes present.

The increase in the number of Koglweogo investing in public security in Burkina Faso in recent years is inseparable from two dynamics.

- The first one is an amplification of banditry after the 2011 mutinies within the army and demonstrations against the ruling power. This banditry is not new. In some parts of the Eastern Region, various forms of crimes have been observed for the past 30 years, particularly near the borders with Togo and Niger. However, this criminal activity has expanded considerably and is spreading in a climate of questioning the ruling regime and the weakening by the latter of the defense and security forces considered a threat to political stability. It is fostered by a sense of impunity that is such that even the markets of large cities like Fada are targeted. Moreover, locally, the state is perceived as not satisfactorily carrying out its missions of securing people

and property. When suspects are apprehended by the population and handed over to the authorities, they are usually released without trial, leading communities to believe that the police are complicit with criminals. In addition, members of the defense and security forces (FDS) demanded payment for travel or investigation, and in some localities, they refused to work at night.

- The second factor accelerating the Koglweogo has been the increasing trend of attacks attributed to jihadist groups on Burkinabe territory from 2015, with two consequences. The first was a withdrawal of state officials from certain rural areas. The result was a call for local safety initiatives. The second was that self-defense groups have become essential partners for the state in the fight against jihadist groups. Thus, in November 2019, shortly after the attack on a convoy of mine workers that killed 38 people, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré called on all Burkinabè to support the army in its fight against jihadist groups.

The Koglweogo are not only a response to the fallout of the popular uprising of 2014, seen as the interference of the angry citizenry in the public spaces of the country's towns and villages, following the Sankarist legacy. They also constitute a bottom-up response to an unsatisfied need for security due to a combination of three different factors: rising insecurity, ineffective State responses in this area, and finally, citizen mistrust of the institutions of the Republic, which are perceived as lax and even gangrenous with corruption.

1.2. Bottom-up security in the long term

Although the Koglweogo are a response to a sense of abandonment of communities by the State, the roots of the phenomenon are older and go back a long term. Studies on the functioning of law enforcement agencies during the colonial period, in West Africa or in other parts of Africa, have indeed shown the scope and limits of the processes of bureaucratization, centralization or pacification of police services operating in the colonies. Indeed, the governing authority delegated its police, justice and prison duties to various local actors: colonial companies, private security companies, settlers, indigenous police, committees for self-defense, etc. Village self-defense committees were thus numerous in the first decades of the 20th century and, although they were not independent of the monitoring networks set up by the colonial administration, they interacted on an improvised basis, on a daily basis as well as during periods of rising crime.

After Burkina Faso's independence, this confusion between the actions of internal security forces and those of non-state actors continued, mainly due to the state's desire to engage communities in maintaining public order.

- In the 1970s and 1980s, "*vigilance committees*" were created in Bobo-Dioulasso and they worked closely with the city council. In 1983, Thomas Sankara's regime set up Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (1983-1987), which brought together citizens responsible for securing urban and rural areas and defending the ideals of the Revolution, as part of a broader nation-building project by the people. In the Western Region of Banfora and, more generally, throughout the Grand Ouest of

the country, Dozo hunters - whose origins date back to the Middle Ages - began to organize themselves in the early 1990s in order to play a role against rural delinquency. Instead of waiting for the police or gendarmerie to intervene, they take the lead by patrolling at night and, if a thief enters the village, they apprehend him and hand him over to the security forces.

- In 2005, Local Security Committees were created in several areas as part of efforts to adopt the community policing doctrine in 2003 and develop complementary approaches to the more traditional operations carried out by the defense and security forces against delinquency and banditry. According to article 8 of the 14 March 2003 law on internal security, *“community policing consists of integrating into the operational mandate of the internal security forces, the participation of communities in the management of security and crime through the concerted identification of local security issues, the quest for solutions and their participation”*. Three principles are emphasized: bringing DSFs closer to the population, strengthening conflict prevention and addressing local problems. The Local Security Committees are not endowed with police powers and their role is limited to crime prevention through the provision of information to the police and acting as a relay in the communities.

Local security initiatives in Burkina Faso are also part of a West African regional context marked by a proliferation of multifaceted militias in recent decades, whether in the form of armed groups opposed to the state during civil wars or as auxiliaries to the DSFs more or less under their supervision. During the conflicts in the Mano River region (Liberia, Sierra

Leone, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire) in the 1990s, the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2007) or more recently in Mali against jihadist groups since 2012, the militias have indeed asserted themselves as key actors, acting autonomously or taking sides with one of the belligerents, sometimes with the support of state officials but at the same time being inseparable from a power struggle with the public authority. As a case in point, Dozo's contemporary involvement in security in Côte d'Ivoire dates back to the 1990s, when their successes strengthened their influence in the country, before some joined the rebellion and President Laurent Gbagbo's opponents after the outbreak of the rebellion in 2002.

One of the narratives on the birth of one of the first Koglweogo in Burkina Faso is that it would be a duplication of an initiative conducted in Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, its founder says he was inspired by an experience observed in Côte d'Ivoire and intended to reduce insecurity to allow the sale of coffee and cocoa in the Douékoué area. Similarly, in the west of the country, the idea of creating the Dozo Benkadi Association in the 1990s is said to have come from hunters who had carried out oversight activities in Côte d'Ivoire. Whether these stories are true or not is not the most important thing. The actors position themselves and anchor their discourses in a regional space made of the movement of people and ideas, as well as the dissemination of experiences and local security practices.

1.3. A symptom of a security crisis

The state's relationship to local security initiatives has been far from linear and antagonistic. While it was estimated at the beginning of the 2000s that nearly half the population lived in areas not covered by the police and gendarmerie, the authorities have in fact regularly tried to delegate certain parts of the population, creating structures for this purpose or tolerating existing ones, sometimes at the instigation of external partners seeking to bring the populations and the State closer together. This is the case of the European Union's Projects to Support the Strengthening of Internal Security in Burkina Faso (PARSIB), implemented by the Belgian development agency ENABEL, or the UNDP's Project to Support the Strategic Council for the Governance of the Security Sector in Burkina Faso.

To this end, restricting the proliferation of self-defense groups in Burkina Faso to an erosion of the governing powers of the State is not without limits. Such an approach glosses over the older historicity of these local security practices, does not question the multiplicity of their forms and the modalities of their linkage with the State and its representatives. Indeed, as Researcher Tanguy Quidelleur observes, the field of security has *"never been the State monopoly and parts of the population have always felt legitimate to take part in it"*. A second limitation is that of confining the analysis to an irenic vision of the State as the holder of a monopoly of legitimate use of violence, structured around approaches centered on the strengthening of the State (for example, through a phenomenon of absorption or reduction of self-defense groups considered anachronistic) or, conversely, its bankruptcy (due to its inability to provide security, its lack of control over militia actors and the empow-

erment of groups rejecting the state authority), to the detriment of approaches stressing the hybrid nature of security or the existence of security oligopolies.

Historically, we rather observe a phenomenon of co-production of security, with forms varying from place to place and time to time. *"This fluidity implies thinking in terms of a historical and sociological continuum, i.e., conceiving the social practices of policing as processes in permanent reshaping, exposed to criticism and objects of negotiation between public actors, sometimes divided, and private interests"*, Gilles Favara-Garrigues and Laurent Gayer recalled in an article on vigilantism and policing. Likewise, the Koglweogo or Dozo do not position themselves in a rejection of the state, unlike the jihadist groups and their allies, but rather as alternatives and responses to a deficient and deplored presence, which does not prevent them from maintaining a balance of power with the national authorities and opposing state representatives or their decisions.

The fact remains that the dual process of expansion and involvement in policing of local security initiatives in recent years refers to a security crisis resulting from long-standing limits to State action but which, in recent years, due to the rise in banditry, has created a vacuum favoring the emergence and increased role of alternative actors in a position of permanent redeployment depending on the actors and local dynamics. As summarized by Journalist Ismaël Compaoré, co-director of the Koglweogo Land documentary (2017), for the local people who support them, *"the Koglweogo are legitimate when the State has failed to ensure the safety of the population"*.

Box 1. The Dozo in Côte d'Ivoire

In the early 1990s, the failure of the Ivorian state and its representatives to provide security accessible to all, against the backdrop of impoverishment and the expansion of crime in urban and rural areas, fostered the emergence of Dozo associations on the security market, from the north to the south of the country. This situation and the media coverage of the Dozo have popularized their action and reinforced beliefs in their magical-religious powers as an effective weapon to combat banditry.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Presidents Bédié - after having used Dozo to his advantage in the 1995 elections - and Gbagbo attempted to ban the Dozo brotherhood, suspected of links with Alassane Ouattara's RDR (Rally of the Republicans). In response to this opposition from the national authorities at the time, some Dozo associations joined the rebellion in 2002, with the support of Dozo from Mali and Burkina Faso. However, this political commitment somehow eroded the positive image Dozo enjoyed in the west and south of the country. They were also blamed on several abuses, particularly during the 2011 post-election violence, but also during land conflicts between local populations and migrants

from the North. According to the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), they were responsible for the deaths of 228 people between March 2009 and May 2013.

Three main organizations form the Ivorian Dozo movement, to which should be added laymen claiming to be Dozo hunters: Benkadi, the Dozo Brotherhood of Côte d'Ivoire (CODOCI) - the latter being the largest - and the National Federation of Dozo Brotherhoods of Côte d'Ivoire (FENACODOCI). At the national level, the State has tried to unify the movement without succeeding because of political rivalries between Dozo leaders, the financial benefits of the associations' involvement in private security and the donations they receive from politicians and even the military.

While the Dozo are a political resource, they also have a strong influence in the Ivorian security system. This influence refers to the attraction of the Dozo mystique to members of the defense and security forces and to the professional interactions between Dozo and actors in the official security apparatus, the latter facilitated by Dozo's integration into the army and the administration.

II. THE FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE OF SELF-DEFENSE MILITIAS

In recent years, the Koglweogo have played an important role in the public debate on self-defense groups in Burkina Faso because of their proliferation, their methods of action, their impact on conflict dynamics and the abuses they have been accused of. However, they do not present a unified and homogenous face and they are not the only non-jihadist militia actors. They coexist with the traditional Dozo hunters, who are heavily involved in local security in the west of the country, and to a lesser extent the Da Nan Ambassagou militia in the north and in the Boucle du Mouhoun.

2.1. Koglweogo in the plural

Koglweogo are formed from local initiatives structured by local political entrepreneurs. The countryside and peri-urban areas, where there are no police or gendarmerie stations, are the breeding grounds for these self-defense groups.

They include young breeders and farmers whose involvement in local safety initiatives is the first, as well as people who have forged a *"career"* in these initiatives. Women are present. For example, in the Koglweogo of Tenkodogo (Centre-East), created in November 2017, there were 8 women out of 180 members in February 2018. The number of Koglweogo members throughout Burkina Faso was estimated at 45,000 at the beginning of 2020, although this figure cannot be confirmed.

The Koglweogo present themselves as coming from the people, close to the people and capa-

ble of protecting people and property. While not all are armed, most use hunting weapons and knives. Once the alleged per-petrators are arrested, depending on local practices, the Koglweogo would hand them over to the authorities or prosecute and punish them. Judicial practices vary from one group to another. Some who were close to political and administrative authorities officially claimed to have stopped public flogging or particularly degrading treatment because of the debate over the practice, but they reportedly continued to collect fines. Others, in addition to the violence and the imposition of fines, add a mystical dimension to the punishment. Koglweogo justice is constructed in opposition to the bureaucratic red tape of the judicial administration and administrative acts that are considered socially discriminatory because they are stated and written in language inaccessible to rural residents who have not all attended school. For example, most of the trials organized by the Koglweogo are public and conducted in the local language.

In addition to transparency and efficiency, the construction of the local legitimacy for the Koglweogo rests on the use of a form of tradition coupled with a certain mimicry with state organizations.

- On the one hand, Koglweogo members must take an oath on the Koran and the Bible before joining the movement, and at trials the accused is not only placed under the authority of judges. Both books are invoked at trials, alongside animist references. At the end of a trial, for example, rituals related to land and water sometimes take place. The accused is thus placed under the gaze of the ancestors, who are supposed to inflict death on him in the event of a repeat offence.

- On the other hand, the Koglweogo copy the practices and organization of public administrations. Fines are also set according to the act committed. A vocabulary similar to that used in the security and justice sectors was used. The Koglweogo conducted "investigations", took "statements", staged "trials", distributed "receipts", modeled their national organization on administrative officials, and call themselves soldiers, judges, agents, counselors, etc. When an individual goes to the Koglweogo headquarters in a locality, he or she must also provide proof of identity whose photocopy is kept in the group's archives. Finally, the Koglweogo wear a uniform.

According to a survey conducted in 2017 among the populations of the Eastern, Upper Basins, Center-Western and Central regions, 90% of respondents said they fully or partially agreed with the *"community security structures"*, whether Koglweogo or Dozo. *"Because of their proximity with the communities and their knowledge of the area, the Koglweogo are quick and efficient in their interventions and do not ask for travel expenses, unlike the police"*, an inhabitant of Kaya (Center-North) observed in 2018.

If the Koglweogo have seduced part of the population, their expansion has raised eyebrows on two issues. On the one hand, their way of rendering justice and the abuses they are accused of differs sharply from the elementary principles of respect for human dignity and the rule of law and undermines the country's social cohesion. Several abuses have indeed made the news, of which the massacres in Yirgou and in the villages of Barga, Dinguila-Peulh and Ramdolla-Peulh are only the most visible part. On the other hand, in a state governed by the rule of law, the law enforcement agencies (police,

gendarmerie and army) are the exclusive holders of legitimate force. As such, they have the sole power to ensure public order and security, just as the public courts have exclusive jurisdiction to judge misdemeanors and crimes. This issue is all the more sensitive given that Koglweogo suspected of violence against civilians have neither been tried nor convicted in recent years. This is particularly the case with the Yirgou massacre: despite an investigation, depositions, and testimonies, no one had yet been prosecuted in early November 2020. Moreover, the leader of the Koglweogo of Boulsa, Boureima Nadbanka, arrested in December 2019, was released in February 2020 after strong pressure and several demonstrations by his supporters.

From a formal standpoint, the Koglweogo are under the authority of Rassamkandé Naaba, appointed by Moogho Naaba, Emperor of the Mossi tribe. Customary chief of the village of Rassamkandé, in the south-central province of Bazèga, Naaba is the national chairman of the Koglweogo. In order for a new Koglweogo group to be created, Naaba and the traditional chiefs of the locality must give their consent.

In January 2017, the self-defense group was structured around three bodies: a staff, a council of elders and a national supreme council.

In practice, however, the Koglweogo movement is not a homogenous entity. In fact, it has been marked by several dividing lines.

- There are three Koglweogo *"schools"*. The first one restricts its actions to water and forestry. Its members are still active in a residual way, for example in the North and South of the country, but most Koglweogo have chosen to invest in public security. The second, sometimes referred to as the *"Mané"* spirit, in reference to the locality

where they were born, promotes action based on apprehending bandits and handing them over to the police or gendarmerie. The third school, which is in the majority in Koglweogo born after 2015, brings together groups that do not hesitate to take the law into their own hands. They arrest, investigate, interrogate, prosecute, and punish offenders.

- There is also a division between several spaces. For example, in Central Burkina Faso, in Mossi country, Koglweogo are centralized and tend to follow the rules laid down by the movement as well as the authority of Rassamkandé Naaba. In the East, alongside the Koglweogo recognizing the authority of Rassamkandé Naaba, others, such as those of Fada N'Gourma, put forward a culture distinct from that of the Mossi. Since the end of 2016, the Gourmantché self-defense groups have in fact joined the association "*Tin Kubi u dogu*", which means in Gourmantché "*let's protect the city*". This change of name, far from being insignificant, testifies to an emancipation and a will to achieve autonomy with regard to the Koglweogo "*central power*". Their leader is a prince of the Gourmantché ethnic group called Django, who has moreover publicly denounced the behavior of the Koglweogo present in other regions of the country, which testifies to the heterogeneity of the movement and the influence of regional leaders.
- Lastly, people joining the Koglweogo do so for various reasons, contributing to drawing specific local forms from one Koglweogo to another or within the same Koglweogo. These may be a means of acquiring social status or even prestige, a

step in a local or national political career, a financial motivation linked to the income that can be obtained through the collection of taxes, donations received from the community or members of the community to fight banditry, or the marketing of security services whether for the benefit of the mayor or other individuals. For some groups, involvement in Koglweogo is more a matter of law enforcement business practices, private security activities, than citizen self-defense.

The relationship with the state and its representatives is ambiguous. The Koglweogo initially consider the regime that emerged from the popular uprising of 2014 to be hostile to them. Rapidly, however, against a backdrop of an increase in jihadist attacks, the popularity of these groups, and the municipal elections of 2016, the national authorities recognize these actors. "*We are in a democratic State that cherishes a number of values, including human dignity and life. This must be respected*", Simon Compaore, then Security Minister, told a news conference on 7 March 2016, adding "*These self-defense groups [the Koglweogo] must be legally exercised and be recognized [...] One cannot think for a moment that it is possible for the central government to set up gendarmerie brigades in every village. Our human and material resources are limited*". Thus, to put an end to the existing limbo, the authorities have developed a legal framework intended to regulate the actions of the Koglweogo by integrating them into a community-based policing of which they must be the main leaders, with limited powers to deal with crime prevention and the arrest of delinquents in cases of flagrante delicto. However, the national leadership of the Koglweogo, under pressure from its supporters, refused their integration into the community policing and the decree

remains unimplemented. Several arguments are put forward: the poor functioning of the community police and its working methods, which differ from those of the Koglweogo, the fact that not all Koglweogo will be able to join the community police and benefit from the associated remuneration, and the feeling that accepting this integration into the community police would mean the end of the Koglweogo.

Locally, the attitude towards the public authority and its representatives is wavering between collaboration, autonomy and tensions depending on the situations and local actors. Collaboration has been notable in several regions, particularly in the East, to secure the 2014-2015 transition. The movement is strongly rooted in local power structures. Several Koglweogo leaders are also affiliated with political parties and, for some, are openly militant. On the side of the internal security forces, members of Koglweogo have been arrested and jailed several times in recent years, not without provoking strong reactions. At the same time, however, local forms of cooperation have emerged. For example, in Tenkodogo (Center-East), the national police and gendarmerie relied on the Koglweogo to obtain information, report incidents, and hand over those arrested or even punished.

2.2. Traditional Dozo hunters

While the Koglweogo have a strong presence in the Eastern, Northern and Central regions of Burkina Faso, the West is a Dozo territory. Associated with the Mandingo country, Dozo hunting brotherhoods are notably present in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, following a tradition dating back to the hunter kings at the origin of the Mali empire. Some Dozo are traditional practitioners skilled in tra-

ditional pharmacopoeia. To become a Dozo, any applicant must be initiated and take an oath, which does not prevent people from presenting themselves as Dozo and wearing the traditional hunters' attire without having taken an oath.

Dozo hunters' movements have grown in Burkina Faso in recent years and shifted from hunting game to robbery in the 1990s due to an increase in theft and crime and, apparently, the "Christmas war" (1985-1986) between Mali and Burkina during which both states mobilized Dozo hunters. A third factor played a role in their rise in Burkina Faso: relations with the Dozo in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, who were then active in surveillance missions and the fight against banditry. These movements are structured around a hunter leader. One of the most important federations of Dozo hunting brotherhoods in Burkina Faso is the National Union of Dozo, led by Ali Konaté. It claims 17,000 members from 142 brotherhoods. Another figure in the Burkinabe Dozo movement is Yacouba Drabo. He is head of the Confrérie des Dozo sans Frontières, formerly the National Union of Dozo Traditional Health Practitioners of Burkina.

In September 2020, during the General Assembly of the Dozo of Burkina Faso, the representatives present decided to create a High Council of the Dozo of Burkina, intended to be the common interlocutor of the brotherhood within the context of the fight against terrorism. *"We cannot remain indifferent because this is our country"*, Yacouba Drabo told the Minister of Defense. *"In this struggle already, more than 65 of us have fallen. That is why we launch this appeal to all the Dozo so that we can speak the same language for the security of our country"*. However, the creation of this structure is divisive. The National Union of Dozo

does not recognize it and considers it a groundless political initiative. In addition to this division and the political rivalries it reveals among Dozo national leaders, the Dozo movement also faces tension between its national and local bodies. Dozo associations operate according to a network approach, with each association being autonomous within its territorial jurisdiction, while having to follow the rules set at the national level.

Dozo associations in Burkina Faso maintain ties with those in other countries. In 2016, Yacouba Drabo told the press that he had created a partnership between the Dozo associations of Mali and Burkina Faso *"to act whenever there was a suspicious case"* in the border region between the two countries. In February 2019, a meeting was also convened in Niobini, in the Southwest region, by the Regional Union of Dozo, bringing together Dozo from this region but also from the Cascades, the High Basins and Mali to discuss security issues. More broadly, the cultural days of the National Union of Dozo organized in recent years have been graced by the presence of delegations from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea Conakry. In this context of regional movement of people and relations among the Dozo in the sub-region, the National Union of Dozo Hunters of Burkina Faso is seeking to better control the movements of its members across countries - through a reporting system on departure and arrival - and denounces the abusive use of the Dozo identity by laypersons. Similarly, to reduce the risk of ethnicization of conflicts in the West of the country, the National Union of Dozo is said to have initiated young Fulani following a call by a Fulani chief from Bobo-Dioulasso to join the movement.

The expansion of the Koglweogo in the West has led to conflicts with the Dozo. In November

2016, Boukary Kaboré, known as *"the lion"*, was denied the creation of a Koglweogo movement in the village of Makognandougou (Upper Basins) by the local Dozo chief, who claimed that hunters already provided security in close collaboration with the defense and security forces. A few months later, tension mounted following the torture of two men by Koglweogo. Despite a decision by the governor of the Upper Basins region banning Koglweogo from settling in the region and opposition from some earth priests from the West, in December 2017, the Koglweogo imposed a 25,000 CFA fine on two people in the rural commune of Karangasso Vigué (Upper Basins) for stealing sheep. One month later, on 27 January 2018, a woman, accused of stealing a cell phone, was stripped naked and tied up in the market square of the village of Djosso. In response, the leader of the National Union of Dozo challenged the authorities and reiterated that Koglweogo were not welcome in western Burkina. *"We don't want the Koglweogo today, we don't want them tomorrow, and it's not just here in Karangasso Vigué. It's the whole West of Burkina Faso. [...] The Greater West Region of Burkina Faso does not want Koglweogo on its territory. There is a decree that has come out, the earth priests, the guardians of customs, the Dozo and the populations themselves, do not want Koglweogo, why insist? They can head to the North if they want to fight"*.

For the Dozo, the arrival of the Koglweogo challenges their authority. More broadly, however, these tensions also refer to the opposition between the traditions of the Plateau Mossi embodied by the Koglweogo and those of the Mandingo, of which the Dozo are the representatives, but also to demographic dynamics. Since the 1980s, Mossi people have been migrating to western Burkina Faso to develop lands before taking control of localities.

More broadly, in a country where the Mossi make up half the population, the Dozo's refusal to allow the Koglweogo to settle reflects a sense that the Mossi control the state and are seeking to extend their influence and take over more land. In other words, the clashes between the Dozo and Koglweogo are part of Burkinabe social and political cleavages as well as identity, cultural, ethnic and power issues at the national and local level in a context of increasing Mossi migration.

2.3. Da Nan Ambassagou Militia

Created at the end of 2016 in Mali, Da Nan Ambassagou is presented as a force for protecting the Dogon community against attacks by armed groups, at first essentially jihadist. It is a federation of defense camps set up near towns and villages where Dogon communities are concentrated. It recruits mainly Dozo, but it has also welcomed many other combatants from various backgrounds. The movement's leadership is divided into two: a military branch, whose staff

is headed by Youssouf Toloba, and a political branch, intended to serve as an interface with the outside world, headed by Mamadou Goudienkilé. These two branches are based near Bandiagara. Although officially dissolved by the Malian government because of the abuses against civilians of which its members are accused, the movement continues its activities.

This militia is mainly present in Mali, where, although officially dismantled, it still controlled checkpoints on the roads between Sévaré, Bandiagara, Bankass and Koro in mid-2020. However, it is also active in Northern Burkina Faso, where its influence is very limited. Da Nan Ambassagou's militiamen are notably present in the Boucle du Mouhoun, in the commune of Kombori, where they reportedly cooperate with local Dozo. Indeed, the Malian elements of Da Nan Ambassagou use the Burkinabe villages as rear bases. In addition, Burkinabè who fought in Mali with the Dogon militia have formed their own groups in Burkina Faso.

Box 2. Non-militia security initiatives

In 2012, a National Union of Rugga, *“representatives of the herders”*, was created in response to the challenges faced by pastoralists: nibbling of pastoral lands through agriculture and land speculation, decline in fodder and water resources, obstruction of transhumance routes or lack of enforcement of laws, etc. Their role is to organize transhumance, manage livestock mobility and protect herders from abuses and attacks by preventing conflicts and ensuring peaceful cohabitation between herders and farmers. They are supported by local and regional representatives. The Rugga are therefore not a militia or a self-defense group, even if clashes may have occurred in the East between the Koglweogo and people in charge of defending the herds who are locally called Rugga by their opponents or who call themselves Rugga. *“There are shepherds who call themselves Rugga and defend [their] interests. But the Rugga do not recognize them”*, observed a Burkinabe journalist.

On 5 October 2019, the Movement for Popular Resistance was launched in Kongoussi (Centre-North), Bam province, to support the defense and security forces. Its ambition, however, goes beyond the borders of this province. As one of its founders stated in the Burkinabè press, it is *“a national movement whose main objective is to organize local populations. In each locality of Burkina Faso, [...] we are going to set up village, provincial, regional surveillance and defense committees that will mobilize around resource persons, notably traditional chiefs, religious leaders, the Koglweogo, the*

CDR (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), the Dozo [...] so that we can strengthen intelligence and undertake any action to strengthen the operational capacity of our national army”. In February 2020, the movement claimed a presence in 30 of Burkina's 45 provinces and, eight months later, throughout the country, but these claims could not be verified.

It is seen as a patriotic and political initiative intended to support the implementation of the VDP law, launched by educated urban dwellers who want to see the population more involved in the security of the country in close coordination with state officials. *“We have developed a strategy with our DSFs and training courses are underway at the village level”*, the movement's coordinator announced in February 2020. *The monitoring committees that are in the villages are credible movements. All the lists are centralized at the staff level with all the identities. We filter the registrations and we have established identities so that there are no people of questionable morality”*. The coordinator has publicly opposed the weaponization of the movement, despite demands from his supporters and most likely local practices that go against this orientation. Following the vote on the law establishing the VDP in January 2020, the leadership asked its members and supporters to enlist, while making arrangements to provide the VDPs with equipment to strengthen their operational capacities and communicating in the regions in favor of the arrangement.

III. MILITIAS INVOLVED IN THE FIGHT AGAINST JIHADISM

The involvement of self-defense militias in the struggle against jihadist armed groups precedes the 21 January 2020 law allowing for the recruitment of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland (VDP). However, this law constitutes a break on both sides. On the one hand, they are no longer simply tolerated and not legalized groups, but groups created and supervised by the state. Their operation, organization and use in the fight against jihadism are in fact governed by legislation. On the other hand, it paves the way for a growing use and a change of scale in the use of militiamen alongside the defense and security forces.

3.1. A commitment prior to the VDP law

The involvement of Burkinabe self-defense groups in the fight against jihadist groups precedes the adoption of the VDP law. Since its creation in October 2019, the Movement for Popular Resistance, born in response to the insecurity resulting from the expansion of the area of action of these groups, has publicly stated that it has begun working with the military institution to strengthen territorial security. And it is not the only movement that wants to work with the DSFs, although among the Dozo and Koglweogo, the issue has divided their members in recent years, with divisions among local groups and between national and local officials.

The main national Dozo associations have repeatedly called on the authorities to take up the fight against jihadist groups, with a pro-

gressive mobilization. Whereas previously the discourses emphasized the fight against insecurity and banditry, the year 2019 seems to mark an acceleration in the involvement of the Dozo in the fight against armed jihadist groups. Following several clashes between the Dozo and alleged jihadists, Yacouba Drabo called, in November 2019, on the Dozo to mobilize and take responsibility: *"It is time to stand up and come together. We need to realize that the authorities and the DSFs alone cannot protect Burkina. We must not think that it is the cause of such and such or that the terrorists want such and such. They want everyone. They don't sort out their victims. They attack everyone, so it is time for all of us to stand up"*. While this call underscores the reluctance within the movement about Dozo involvement in the fight against jihadist groups, the leader of the National Union of Dozo said he would have a thousand fighters ready to support the defense and security forces, for intelligence and surveillance missions, some already deployed between Banfora and Mandogara with checkpoints.

Concerning the Koglweogo, the movement's national authorities took a public stance on the issue of the struggle against jihadist groups in a communiqué dated August 25, 2019. In response to the publication of a press article whose title referred to Koglweogo's commitment to *"fight terrorism"*, Rassamkande Naaba denied any directive to this effect. Certainly, he recalled then, the Koglweogo have the mission to *"ensure the security of the population and their property"*. Because of their non-recognition by the state and their lack of supervision and equipment, the national supreme council announced that it *"declines any responsibility for any involvement of any Koglweogo chief in the so-called fight against terrorism"*. The formulation is interesting and deserves a brief look. On the one hand, at a time when the law

on volunteers for the defense of the fatherland is on many lips, it refers to a logic of bargaining with the state. On the other hand, it is not a prohibition for those who would like to combat jihadist groups, but rather a reminder of the primary purpose of the Koglweogo and the dangers for the movement to become officially involved. In the East however, due to the action of armed jihadist groups, some of the Koglweogo have laid down their arms, joined the jihadists or refocused on criminal practices.

In this regard, *“some Koglweogo have decided to move on to the fight against terrorism, others have not. The reason is purely materialistic. Each Koglweogo makes the decision according to their means and the interests of their members”*, Journalist Ismael Compaore sums up. The Koglweogo most active in the fight against armed jihadist groups have particularly proliferated in the North-Central, Sahel and Central Plateau regions. This commitment dates back to the end of 2016 with, from that date, a shift from the rhetoric of anti-banditry to that of anti-terrorism, which has sometimes been a pretext for the settlement of local community conflicts. The Koglweogo chief of Boulsa, Bouheima Nadbanka, is said to have played a crucial role in this mobilization, claiming to have sent Koglweogo for several months, at his own expense, to the village of Kerboulé (Sahel). Moreover, since the Koglweogo are not paid, this activity is combined with those relating to economic predation and public security.

3.2. Creation of Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherland

On 7 November 2019, following the attack on a mining convoy by jihadists, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, in an address to the nation, called for the mobilization and recruitment of civilian volunteers to assist the defense and security forces. Subsequent to this announcement, a commission was set up. Intended to define the status of *“Volunteers for the Defense of Faso”*, to determine their rights and obligations and to supervise their activity, it is made up of representatives from the Presidency, the Ministry of National Defense and Veterans, the National Intelligence Agency, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralization and Social Cohesion and the Ministry of Security. Following the work of the commission, on 21 January 2020, Members of the Parliament adopted Law No. 002-2020/AN on the creation of the *“Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherhood”* whose objective is to allow for the recruitment, training and equipping of citizens to support the defense and security forces in their mission of securing the national territory.

Article 2 of the law, relating to general provisions, defines the VDP as *“a national of Burkina Faso, auxiliary to the Defense and Security Forces (DSFs), voluntarily serving the security interests of his or her village or area of residence, pursuant to a contract signed between the VDP and the State”*. The law specifies that the mission of the VDP is to contribute, if necessary, by force of arms, to the defense of persons and property of his village or area of residence. Its recruitment *“is made at the village or residence on a pro bono basis, subject to the approval of the local population”*.

Volunteers receive 14 days of training from the military, at the end of which they must be

equipped with means of communication, vision and weaponry. According to the legislation, this training must focus primarily on the rules of engagement, discipline and respect for human rights. However, according to Article 4 of the implementing decree on the VDP status, dated 24 February 2020, the military authority may, *“based on need, modify [...] the duration and practical details of the training”*. The VDPs must also be *“constantly upgraded”* through on-going training, whose practicalities are not specified. VDPs are under the authority of the Army Chief of Staff through the commanders of the three military regions of the country. They do not benefit from a uniform or pension rights. The VDPs may lose their volunteer status based on resignation, termination of contract, absence for more than 30 days, and non-renewal of contract.

The January 2020 law and the February 2020 decree are supplemented by a code of conduct and an order signed in April jointly by the Ministers of National Defense and of the Economy and Finance. This decree specifies *“the financial and in-kind benefits granted to VDPs”*. If they are not paid and the issue of demobilization allowance, covered in the 24 February decree, is not addressed, *“each group of Volunteers for the Defense of the Fatherhood receives a monthly financial support of 200,000 FCFA from the State for its operation”*, mainly fuel and communications costs. The document also states that *“in the event of injury sustained in the course of carrying out their mission, volunteers receive medical care from the State in public health facilities, under the responsibility of the commander of the military region”*. In case of permanent disability, the volunteer may be entitled to a monthly allowance of 25,000 FCFA for a maximum 5-year period. Lastly, if the volunteer is killed in the line of duty, *“the State contributes up to 100,000 FCFA”* for his

burial and his heirs benefit from *“financial support from the State in the amount of one million FCFA in a single payment”*.

3.3. Gradual operationalization of the VDP law

While the goal is to eventually recruit 13,000 VDPs, only a little over 2,000 had been recruited by early June 2020, according to a report by the National Assembly. Most of the VDPs then recruited are in the North of the country, which corresponds to the 1st military region (North of the country). The implementation of the law on volunteers was indeed faster than in the rest of the country. At the end of May 2020, the commander of the Western sector of the Northern Security Forces Group (GFSN) claimed the enlistment of 916 volunteers, for a theoretical total of 2,700. In total, the 1st military region then concentrated 1,498 VDPs out of the 2,000 active in the country, most likely due to the mobilization of Koglweogo and the Movement for Popular Resistance in the months preceding the vote on the law. The training took place in Thiou, in the northern region, with modules dedicated to the handling of firearms, first aid and basic combatant acts. The VDPs are under the responsibility of a volunteer coordination and supervision committee, composed of soldiers from the 12th Commando Infantry Regiment, based in Ouahigouya. This structure is supported by focal points who identify volunteers by village in a participatory manner. Once trained, volunteers are organized into sections made up of groups whose number varies according to the size of the commune or district concerned, as well as the number of recruits. Each section has a person who serves as an interface between the VDPs and the unit to which they are attached or the coordination and supervision committee.

In the East and West of the country, VDPs have been slower to become operational, while reflecting variations in the choices made by the command. However, there seems to have been an acceleration since July 2020, starting in the East with a catch-up phenomenon in relation to the North of the country.

- In the 3rd military region (Central and Eastern), the military authorities focused their efforts during the first months on the Eastern and Central-Eastern regions, which were considered a priority given the security conditions. However, they were confronted with reluctance on the part of some mayors, resulting in a slowdown in the implementation of the process. If the choice to draw up the lists in consultation with the village authorities – as opposed to the choice made by the command of the first military region - may have had an impact on this low attractiveness, other factors can be mentioned: the specificities of the Koglweogo movement in the East, and in particular the reluctance of the Gourmantchés - some Gourmantchés have since joined the VDPs, following a strong advocacy by the army - the targeting of the Koglweogo by jihadist groups and the resulting defections, as well as a lack of mobilization comparable to that observed in the 1st military region in the months preceding the vote on the VDP law. According to military authorities in the 3rd military region, VDPs sign a contract with the commander of the region before receiving their weapon. On this occasion, their rights and duties are also specified. Each group is under the direct responsibility of the detachment commander or, failing that, the commander of the local gendarmerie brigade.
- In the 2nd military region (West), VDPs have been slower to establish themselves, with

fewer incidents of jihadist groups in the region than in the other two. However, VDPs were recruited in recent months, particularly in the Boucle du Mouhoun and Comoé Park areas. Dozo hunters also joined the VDPs. While the National Union of Dozo does not encourage the recruitment of VDPs among its members, it does not condemn it either.

In theory, all VDP is subject to investigation prior to incorporation. This investigation takes place at two levels: at the level of the military region and at the central level. The primary purpose of these investigations is to avoid infiltration, a major concern of the military hierarchy. As a corollary to this security concern, linked in a context of confusion between Fulani and jihadists in the country, there is a refusal in certain localities to recruit Fulani. In several regions, the Fulani are in fact excluded from VDPs. In Thiou (North), for example, the mayor's insistence would have allowed the integration of some Fulani, who are, however, viewed with suspicion. However, many of them are reluctant to join a system perceived as a threat because of the stigma they are subjected by the law enforcement agencies and the Koglweogo, preferring to continue to call for the creation of Fulani militias amidst militia mobilization and the ethnicization of social relations.

In terms of mission, VDPs meet two logics. The first is that of support to the defense and security forces, for example, for reconnaissance, intelligence, zone surveillance, convoy escorting, sweeping, etc. The second is to mesh the territory in order to, in the words of President Roch Marc Kaboré in an interview with France 24 and RFI on October 15, 2020, *“establish a form of known village security that makes it possible to anticipate terrorist attacks in villages and the army [...] to be able to defend the population”*. For good reason, the President contin-

ued, the armed forces cannot be deployed in each of the country's 8,000 to 9,000 villages at the same time. Worse, a significant fraction of the territory is beyond the reach of the law enforcement officers and the administration. Thus, the Constitutional Council estimated before the presidential and legislative elections of 22 November 2020, that a little less than 20% of the national territory would not be covered for the elections, i.e., approximately 1,500 villages in 32 communes. It should be noted that while VDPs are expected to intervene close to their place of residence, this is not always the case. Similarly, military units continue to hire people who have not trained as VDPs and do not have official VDP status as auxiliaries.

Finally, not all VDPs carry weapons. While this may be due to the unavailability of small arms, authorities insist that not all VDPs are intended to be equipped with weapons of war. *"The number of weapons is defined according to the security risk of the area where the VDP is based"*, a senior gendarmerie officer noted in mid-2020, *"to prevent areas where the risk is lower from no longer having weapons to the detriment of communes severely impacted by terrorist attacks"*. Sometimes the weapon is recovered by the army once the VDP mission is over, as in Arbinda for escorting convoys, but this is not the case in the province of Oudalan for the VDPs responsible for the protection of their village. Some of the recruits are from previous self-defense groups, while others are made up of individuals who did not belong to such groups.

3.4. A divisive measure

Many Koglweogo welcomed the VDP law and Rassamkandé Naaba, breaking with the position adopted in the 25 August 2019 communiqué, even called for joining the VDPs while the state was struggling to recruit. In addition to the likely demands of state officials for support from Rassamkandé Naaba, the VDPs are responding to demands for state recognition of the Koglweogo's role as security actors - or at least part of it, since justice is excluded from the VDP's security apparatus - and for the establishment of mechanisms to strengthen their capacity and provide compensation for injuries and deaths. *"The Koglweogo and VDPs are doing the same job for the same cause"*, said a member of the national Koglweogo authorities. The January 2020 law also allows local authorities supporting the Koglweogo to *"legalize"* them for the purpose of protecting a locality. However, in the North-Central region in particular, Koglweogo who had joined the VDPs for profit have left them. It is also possible that the authorities' demand that Koglweogo who joined VDPs must end their Koglweogo activity may also have led to departures. As with the fight against jihadism, the choices are a matter of intertwined national, local and individual dynamics.

Within the army and the internal security forces, the perception of VDPs differs from one body to another. Like the integration of the Koglweogo and Dozo into the VDPs, more work needs to be done on this issue. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the military institution and the police, with the gendarmerie falling somewhere between these two poles. The army takes a positive view of the creation of the VDPs, with several senior officers having publicly stressed the importance for the military to work with the population, especially

given the army's inability to be present in every locality in the country. It also provides a framework for existing cooperative practices while placing the VDPs under military command. Conversely, within the police, frustrations are significant, especially a year after the National Police Union's press conference during which the police union called for better armament and better security coverage in the country. *"It was necessary to recruit more police officers with one year's training"*, said one police officer. *"We don't see any supervision of the VDPs. They make noise, they make a lot of noise, but it's unclear. There is a problem of control and whom they act for. VDPs do whatever they want, and everything is done under the guise of fighting terrorism"*. Besides this feeling, the collaboration between the police and the VDPs is very poor. On the ground, the police do not necessarily know the VDPs focal points and cannot coordinate with them or even consider the latter to be jihadists. The gendarmes seem to be divided between these two positions. In the cities, they are mostly opposed to the VDPs, but for those deployed in the bush, VDPs are an asset and a necessity to maintain safety.

Finally, many representatives from civil society and the research community have expressed concerns over human rights and the risks inherent in the creation of VDPs. *"Privatizing security to individuals will increase stigma*

and entrench crime. We risk seeing the acceleration of a community confrontation mechanism, we are heading straight for a Malian-style scenario", Senegalese Researcher Bakary Sambe stated. There has been unprecedented competition for access to land and natural resources in Burkina Faso due to a combination of several factors: population growth and the resulting internal migration, impoverishment of certain soils due to climate change, or land development projects that are fueling covetousness and land speculation. In the Sahel, West, North-Central and to a lesser extent, Eastern regions, pressure on land is exacerbated by agricultural migration driven mainly by Mossi populations (the main ethnic group in Burkina Faso) which, for example in the West, is a backdrop to clashes between Koglweogo and Dozo and a factor aggravating inter-community conflicts at the local level between indigenous people and newcomers.

In other words, the adoption and implementation of the VDP law opens a Pandora's box by legalizing illegal practices that are harmful to the country's future, especially when they operate in isolated localities without effective control by the defense and security forces and they are part of local conflict dynamics at the service of local authorities relying on them to promote their objectives.

IV. A DOUBLE-EDGED TOOL

As comparable experiences in West Africa and abuses attributed to VDPs by human rights organizations have shown, resorting to militias is a double-edged sword. Admittedly, their operational impact can be positive, even under certain conditions. However, the militization of security poses the risk of increased violence against civilians, a weakening of the rule of law, and raises the question of the future of these non-state, non-Jihadist armed groups.

4.1. An operational impact in question

It is generally accepted that the operational benefits of militia mobilization are twofold for defense and security forces. First, they improve access to intelligence. Knowledge of local languages and regions both geographically and socially, enables the military to better target their operations. In addition, local civilians have a better perception of what is normal and what is not, and they are more motivated than the defense and security forces to defend their community. Second, by being hired as substitutes for resource-intensive missions, volunteers enable the armed forces to use scarce resources in priority areas or for other missions.

The examples of state-sponsored militias in other countries of the continent, however, testify to the limits of the use of militias in the fight against jihadist groups. In Cameroon, for example, the mission of civilian volunteers against Boko Haram consisted of carrying out checks at checkpoints at the entrance to villages and patrols. This may have helped to thwart some attacks, but the result was rather marginal. In the

case of Nigeria, where in 2013 the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was set up in Borno State, the volunteers were involved in various missions: intelligence, surveillance, site protection, patrols, escorts, etc. They also made arrests and handed over suspects to the police. In 2018, an investigation conducted in Borno highlighted the role of the CJTF in the fight against jihadist groups to identify terrorists and individuals likely to help them. But, as in Cameroon, their strategic impact has been only relative and has depended heavily on their coordination with defense and security forces and their ability to carry out their missions.

Coordination between defense and security forces and VDPs is indeed critical. The latter are part of a territorial system and must be able to be rapidly supported by law enforcement or military units. While VDPs regularly claim to be successful in repelling attacks, many have complained about their working conditions, and dozens of them have been killed since January 2020 in operations or executed in their localities. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), at least 40 attacks were directed against VDPs between January and September 2020, not without generating discontent. Thus, following the death of three VDPs in Nagraé (East) in September 2020, demonstrators brought the bodies to the governorate of Fada N'Gourma to express their anger. Moreover, due to threats against villages setting up VDPs and the execution of VDPs by jihadist groups, some have ended their involvement, echoing the trajectory in recent years of Koglweogo in the East under jihadist pressure.

In the Burkinabe context, there have also been specific reservations about the effectiveness of VDPs due to initial training being too short, with only 14 days or less in some cases under Article 9 of the decree implementing the

21 January 2020 law. Similarly, if ongoing training is provided, this decree does not mention any frequency or minimum duration. Another area of concern relates to the equipment of VDPs. In October 2020, those in Kongoussi (Centre-North) were still complaining that they had not received weapons and did not have sufficient resources to carry out their mission, with some choosing to acquire weapons on their own. This issue of armament is particu-

larly sensitive, given that control and storage measures are unclear and that the spread of weapons is a vehicle for exacerbating violence. However, from an operational standpoint, both this reduced training and the limited access to equipment call into question the need for the authorities to allocate the necessary resources to the VDPs to ensure their operationalization, but also to reduce the risks inherent in the use of militias.

Box 3. Challenges in implementing the VDP law

In a National Assembly report following a series of meetings in the East, North, Sahel, Center-North and Boucle du Mouhoun in June 2020, the rapporteurs highlighted several challenges in implementing the VDP law.

First, the army does not have sufficient resources to train, supervise, care for and administer VDPs. This results in bottlenecks and concerns over the ability to provide both initial VDP and sufficient ongoing training, as well as effective monitoring and supervision of volunteers. In other words, the system needs to be adequately resourced to operate effectively.

Second, coordination between the VDPs and the armed forces is hampered by the poor communication networks in some municipalities and the lack of night-time capabilities within the defense and security forces. In addition to these two factors mentioned in the report, the non-intervention of the armed forces in the event of an attack may point to other factors. On several occasions even before the expansion of the jihadist threat on Burkina territory, the defense and security forces were accused of failing to intervene with the requisite speed against banditry. Moreover, in some eastern provinces, for example, the army rarely leaves its bases, and the hierarchy sometimes even

has to negotiate exits with combat units. However, the ability of the armed forces to intervene in support of the VDPs when they are under attack is crucial to the credibility of the VDP law and the state more broadly, even though security is a major concern for the population and the Koglweogo have shown a very limited ability to autonomously counter jihadist armed groups.

Finally, the government's communication and promotion of VDPs action and status must be strengthened. This is particularly important given that some VDPs have expressed dissatisfaction with being considered "*cannon fodder*" while others have ended their involvement for fear of reprisals. VDPs are particularly targeted by jihadist groups who perceive them as a threat. For example, on October 7, the UN reported that 25 men had been executed by an armed group whose members had allegedly identified themselves as jihadists in the North-Central province of Sanmatenga as a reprisal for the presence of VDPs in the village.

4.2. A significant risk of exacerbating violence

In addition to an operational impact under debate, the use or tacit support of armed militias exacerbates violence. In central Mali, the militization of security - sometimes with the support of state officials who see it as a way to counter the influence of jihadist groups - has been coupled with a sharp increase in violence against civilians, contributing to the transformation of the conflict into inter-community violence, as in the northern regions in the 1990s against the backdrop of a Tuareg rebellion, and accentuating the rejection of the state by part of the population.

If Mali is a paradigmatic case, it is not isolated. In recent years, in Burkina Faso, *"the Koglweogo [...] have disrupted the balance between local communities in the Centre-North,"* noted the International Crisis Group in a report published in February 2020. By exercising police and security prerogatives, they have voluntarily or involuntarily become accomplices in settling scores, often over land issues and to the detriment of the Fulani community, but also the Gourmantchés in the East and the Mandingos in the West. It was against this background of mutual mistrust and strong stigma of the Fulani community that the massacres of Yirgou (Center-North) and Arbinda (Sahel) occurred in January and March 2019, respectively, and of Barga, Dingoula-Peulh and Ramdolla-Peulh (North) a year later. These massacres have resulted in vengeful reactions and in members of the targeted communities being drawn closer to the armed jihadist groups.

To what extent has the creation of VDPs amplified violence against civilians in the country? The mechanism is still young, its implementation differs from one locality to another, and

the risk is not the same depending on the employment and autonomy of the volunteers. Similarly, the issue of abuses is not limited to VDPs. During the year 2020, Koglweogo and Dozo hunters in the Boucle du Mouhoun, were repeatedly accused of perpetuating violence against civilians in the country. Military units have also been accused of abuses against civilians. However, the risk of exacerbating violence was high due to the behavior of some state and local officials who tended to condone or even incite the violence, the limited control over VDPs in areas where the police forces were absent, VDP's lack of weapons, the very low representativeness of the Fulani ethnic group and its stigmatization in recruitments, the profile and even the liability of certain VDPs, the dynamics of revenge of VDPs attacked by jihadist groups, and the tendency of uncontrolled militias to settle scores locally.

While VDPs are viewed with concern by many observers because of their impact on community violence, several non-governmental organizations have denounced violence committed by VDPs against civilians in recent months. In a statement issued in May 2020, the Collective against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities (CISC) accused VDPs in Tanwalbou-gou (East) of involvement in targeted violence and killings. On June 11, the Balai citoyen (Civic Broom) called on the authorities about *"numerous blunders in the Sahel, North Central and Eastern regions"*. Four months later, the CISC reiterated its concern: *"For several days now, the CISC has been strongly challenged by several Burkinabe citizens about cases of serious violations of the principle of free movement of people and goods on the national territory. [...] In the regions of the North, Center-North, East and the Boucle du Mouhoun, on most of the main roads, Fulani communities are systematically disembarked from vehicles, face-checked,*

humiliated, tortured and sometimes killed by the VDPs and members of the Da Nan Ambassagou militia" for their ethnicity. In total, ACLED recorded 17 cases of violence against civilians involving VDPs between 26 April and 17 October 2020, in the Center-North, the Sahel, the Northern and the Eastern regions, already affected by this phenomenon before the creation of the volunteers but also those where the mechanism is most advanced. And the actual figure is most likely much higher, with several anecdotes reporting intimidation and threats specifically targeting a Fulani community considered to be collaborating with the jihadists.

Another consequence of VDPs recruitment is a nationwide blurring of the distinction between civilians and the military, already severely affected by the militia dynamics of recent years and the stigma of communities. In Nigeria, for example, the establishment of the CJTF has exacerbated violence against civilians. On the one hand, jihadists have considered the villages where CJTF cells were established as their enemies. On the other hand, for law enforcement agencies, any refusal to establish a CJTF unit was seen as a sign of support for the jihadists on the part of the community. While in recent years numerous assassinations have targeted those suspected of being informants for the authorities, the establishment of the VDP has reinforced this trend even though the Rubicon has already been crossed by the Koglweogo.

4.3. A medium-term destabilizing potential

Self-defense groups in Burkina Faso have become increasingly important since 2014, not hesitating, like some Koglweogo, to openly challenge the state and its officials. These self-defense groups and their members have their own agendas, which do not necessarily match those of the national authorities. This distortion refers directly to the way these groups will evolve over time and to the power relations they have and will have with the administrations, which will depend on the way volunteers are recruited, employed, controlled, supervised, punished and even brought to trial.

Indeed, how far can we trust them? Some volunteers, in their quest for income-generating activities, may be used for political purposes or fall into banditry, as has been observed respectively with the Koglweogo in Burkina Faso and with members of the CJTF in Nigeria. The latter in particular indulged in drug trafficking and the resale of stolen livestock. Others may join jihadist armed groups to seek protection that state officials fail to provide after recruiting and arming them. After all, the Koglweogo have, in the past, already negotiated non-aggression agreements with jihadists, and some interlocutors encountered in Ouagadougou mentioned a similar phenomenon with VDPs.

How will these militiamen position themselves when the state no longer needs them? As a Malian diplomat summed up about the militias in the center of his country in an article published in August 2019, *"the monster we created has escaped us. Today, the militias operate in complete autonomy"*. Echoing this fear, a Burkinabè policeman wondered about the future of the relationship with the VDPs in the following terms: *"Will they agree to disarm?"*

The army will not want them; the gendarmerie will not want them. What are we going to do?" Today, this is not a topical issue for the army, which considers it to be a political issue. But the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes are difficult and complex, subject to haggling and negotiations that the Burkinabe state and its partners should anticipate. For the time being, a "demobilization allowance" is provided for volunteers upon termination of their contract, although this provision was not included in the joint decree of April 2020 on the financial and in-kind benefits of VDPs.

In this respect, the use of militias should not overshadow the necessary strengthening of state institutions to ensure that the co-construction of security is in their favor. Experi-

ences in other West African countries, such as those in Burkina Faso with the integration of the Koglweogo into a community policing system and their failure, but also the Koglweogo opposing the arrest of some of their members and the clout of local authorities in the militia phenomenon, show that the relationship with the militias is both one of cooperation - more or less imposed - and a balance of power. While militia proliferation is symptomatic of state failure, it also leads to empowerment of local security groups and their "bosses" with respect to the national authorities. In this respect, the medium-term objective must be the State's capacity to ensure the safety of populations, to provide justice and to impose itself on actors in conflict with the public authority.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The VDP law demonstrates a desire to provide an institutional framework for the use of self-defense groups, which have mushroomed since the fall of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014. Its purpose is to guarantee volunteers a future - at least temporary - in the state while offering the possibility of supervising their operation and coordinating them alongside the defense and security forces in the fight against armed jihadist groups. It must, however, be carefully monitored in a context marked by operationalization whose modalities of control and use remain unclear and by allegations of abuses by VDPs against civilians, but also as a result of the consequences of the involvement of militias in the fight against armed jihadist groups in other countries in the region.

While the challenges are multiple, they mainly relate to three inseparable dimensions: ensuring that VDPs gain strength in a coherent manner while being part of a strategy to beef up security involving all relevant state actors; putting in place measures to reduce the risks associated with the use of armed militias and punish VDPs guilty of abuses; and fostering confidence between the state and communities and links between communities.

Issue 1. Ensure a coherent security system

Recommendation 1. Strengthening VDPs supervision and monitoring

In view of the risks associated with the deployment of militias and the abuses of which VDPs are accused, having efficient control and management structures, with selected and trained

personnel, should be a priority for the state and its representatives. In particular, the army could capitalize on the feedback from the first year of implementation of the January 2020 law to improve the mechanisms created, generalize the good practices identified and put an end to those that encourage abuses and violence. A particularly dangerous case in point seems to be volunteers working in communities where the defense and security forces are not deployed. Deciding on such a deployment should be taken following an analysis of local conflicts and consultation with other State services and the various communities in an inclusive manner. In areas where inter- or intra-community violence has occurred in recent years, and commensurate with the level of the jihadist threat, consideration could also be given to deploying defense and security forces to conduct operations with VDPs, mentoring them and ensuring that they are not used as a private community or political militia by local authorities, or as one community against another.

Recommendation 2. Allocating adequate resources

The material and financial resources allocated for initial and ongoing VDPs training must be sufficient. They must also be provided with materials (lethal or not), and be better administered, controlled and supervised by the State. The number of VDPs must be commensurate with the resources made available by the Burkina Faso army through coordination and supervision committees. The implementation of the April 2020 decree providing for the allocation of resources to VDPs is a particular challenge. This requires a sufficient budget, but also transparency and control over spending to avoid misappropriation of funds or the perception among VDPs that embezzlement is taking place. Similarly, defense and security forces should no longer use people who have

not been trained as VDPs and do not have VDP status as armed auxiliaries.

Recommendation 3. Be able to support VDPs

When VDPs are deployed to protect a locality, the military must be able to respond to an attack. If this happens, volunteers will feel unnecessarily sacrificed, fueling state rejection and exacerbating abuses against supporters - real or perceived - of jihadist groups. In this regard, defense and security forces must be able to support the VDPs through a rapid response capability, while ensuring that the response chain is operational and allows for rapid reporting of attacks or incidents. Indeed, VDPs are part of a territorial security system and form a link alongside the defense and security forces.

Recommendation 4. Involving the police more closely

The police are sidelined in the use of VDPs. In order to strengthen their control, coordination with state officials, and operational impact, the state would gain from greater involvement of the police. Such involvement can be done at the level of the military regions, through meetings or the presence of a police officer acting as a liaison officer in the coordination structures set up by the army for areas where the police are present.

Issue 2. Reduce risks associated with the use of VDPs

Recommendation 5. Prosecuting and punishing perpetrators of abuses

While the Yirgou massacre has not yet been tried and VDPs are accused of abuses, the judiciary must investigate the incidents of abuses, and prosecute and punish the militiamen found guilty. The military must also enforce the code

of conduct for VDPs and apply legal sanctions in case of violations. VDPs were under investigation by the civil justice system, and some of them had already been disbarred. However, these responses to violence committed by VDPs should not be isolated cases, just as abuses committed by other armed militias should not go unpunished. The army could also communicate more about the risks of non-compliance with the law, and the pressure of justice should be more perceptible to avoid a sense of impunity. Because of its limited resources, the judiciary should work primarily on militiamen accused of repeated abuses and around the most serious crimes. External partners have an important role to play in this area, whether in denouncing abuses, supporting NGOs investigating abuses, or supporting judicial processes, as is the case with terrorism-related cases.

Recommendation 6. Assessing the implementation of the VDP law

Given the risks associated with self-defense groups, a national assessment could be conducted in early 2021 under the aegis of members of the National Assembly or the government. It would give a voice to volunteers, military personnel intervening alongside them or mentoring them, gendarmes, police officers, community members, civil society organizations, etc. The assessment would be conducted by the National Assembly or the government. Such an evaluation would be an opportunity to share among the actors concerned the modalities for implementing the law from one military region to another, to identify and share good practices, to investigate and strengthen risk mitigation measures related to the use of volunteers, to better involve the Ministry of Security and to learn lessons about the use of VDPs, their added value, their limitations and their impacts. It would also make it possible to liberate speech, to foster the dialogue dynam-

ics among actors and clarify the future of other self-defense groups in the country and their involvement in security. Just as in the area of strengthening VDPs control, external partners and civil society have an important role to play in supporting this exercise and encouraging questions that go beyond mere operational effectiveness in the fight against jihadist groups.

Recommendation 7. Anticipating Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

Finally, the political authorities and their partners should anticipate the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of VDPs. Disarmament will necessarily involve a mix of constraints and incentives, with probably more reluctance on the part of former Koglweogo. Some will probably ask to join the defense and security forces, but not all will be able to do so, and feedback from the region raises concerns about the risks associated with such choices. Alternative options are possible, such as integration into bodies such as the water and forestry not without echoing the anti-poaching role of the former Koglweogo, or a community policing force. This reflection on demobilization should also take into account members of self-defense groups that have not joined VDPs.

Issue 3. Strengthen linkages between communities and with the state

Recommendation 8. Recruiting inclusively VDP recruitment should be inclusive and reflective of Burkinabè society. Individuals who are unfavorably known for having been involved in criminal activities or abuses should also not be recruited as VDP. This inclusiveness is critical to avoid ethnicization of VDPs and to ensure that they are truly a national institution represent-

ing the people of Burkina Faso. At the risk of producing the same problems as the Koglweogo and fueling parallel militia phenomena as several voices continue to call for the creation of a Fulani militia. As one NGO member summarized, *"VDPs are not yet fixed in a community identity. They can become a true national force"*. This requires the state to fight against the stigma of communities, which is counterproductive and destructive of social ties, but also to promote this inclusiveness.

Recommendation 9. Improving the sovereign tools for security and justice

VDPs and other self-defense groups are both part of a dynamic of coexistence with the state and a logic of questioning the latter. The state must not lose sight of the importance of strengthening the sovereign tools for security and justice. The operational shortfalls of the law enforcement agencies and the malfunctioning of the justice system have in fact fueled the expansion of jihadist groups and the Koglweogo. This includes a state effort to improve the living conditions of field units and a more efficient justice system, one of the indirect consequences of which would be to reduce abuses by members of the defense and security forces. Likewise, in the area of intelligence, dependence on information provided by the militias has resulted in the reinforcement of stigmatization dynamics, with the military having little ability to distinguish between civilians and insurgents. Burkina Faso's partners have a central role to play in this area, by continuing to implement programs that combine capacity building and strengthening relations between state officials and local populations, and by placing the security of people and property at the core of their approaches. The number of donors present in the region nevertheless presupposes effective coordination of their respective actions to avoid duplication.

Recommendation 10. Addressing crises in the rural world

The violence of local conflicts and underlying inter-community tensions point to the limits of security responses and counter-terrorism. At the same time, the authorities should also reduce the structural factors that cause violence in rural areas, starting with conflicts over land. The proliferation of Koglweogo and clashes with the Dozo are in fact a reminder that part of this violence is related to migration and competition among communities for the control of land resources. The state should therefore invest more, in concert with local authorities, to peacefully resolve deteriorated intercommunity relations and strengthen its ties with all Burkinabè.

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About this publication

The recent period has seen a very strong expansion of local security initiatives, marked in particular by the proliferation of self-defense groups in the wake of the fall of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 due to an increase in banditry, followed by attacks by jihadist groups on Burkinabe territory. The relationship between the Burkinabe state and these self-defense groups is a blend of tolerance, pragmatism, and attempts to regulate them. Thus, the Burkinabè authorities have adopted a legal framework to regulate the actions of the Koglweogo by integrating them into a community-based policing system. Collaboration has been notable in several regions, particularly in the East, to secure the 2014-2015 political transition process. On November 7, 2019, following the attack on a mining convoy by jihadists, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré called for the mobilization of civilian volunteers to support the State in countering jihadist groups. In January 2020, members of the National Assembly unanimously adopted a law allowing the recruitment

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of “volunteers for the defense of the homeland” to assist in the fight against jihadi groups, support the armed forces, or protect communities where defense and security forces are absent. Militias, however, are double-edged tools. The main risk is that of exacerbating inter-community violence, in a context of stigma of certain communities, non-inclusiveness of VDPs and increasing circulation of weapons of war. On several occasions, VDPs have been accused of being responsible for abuses against civilians. In the longer term, militias also have the potential to destabilize, to fuel criminality and to weaken state authority.

The study will examine the militia phenomenon in Burkina Faso - militias being understood here as non-jihadist armed actors recognized or tolerated by the state - and the challenges related to the operationalization of the January 2020 law on volunteers for the defense of the homeland, as well as the diversity of local security dynamics in the country and in West Africa.

