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FEATURE ARTICLE

Oil on the Jihadi Fire

The repercussions of a Wagner Group deployment to Burkina Faso

HÉNI NSAIBIA AND CALEB WEISS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Brigadier General Rose Keravuori

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE,
UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND

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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue focuses on Africa, the current epicenter of global jihadi terror. On January 18, 2023, the military junta in Burkina Faso demanded that France withdraw its troops from the country within a month, raising concerns the regime in Ouagadougou may be set to follow Mali in hiring the Wagner Group to help contain the worsening jihadi threat to their country. In the feature article, Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss write that “there seems to be a very significant probability that the military government in Burkina Faso will indeed hire Wagner in the near future.” They assess that a future potential Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would entrench Russian influence in the region, complicate Western policy in West Africa, and “likely result in a further upsurge in jihadi violence in Burkina Faso given the fact that jihadi attacks, perpetrated by both JNIM and the Islamic State, have increased dramatically across Mali since Wagner’s deployment there just over a year ago.”

In our interview, Brigadier General Rose Keravuori, the Deputy Director of Intelligence at the United States Africa Command, observes that “for al-Qa`ida and ISIS, the most operationally active and financially lucrative affiliates are on the African continent.” She warns that Islamic State groups are looking to grow in southern and central Africa and that in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the al-Qa`ida affiliate JNIM “has grown exponentially, so much so that the littoral countries of Ghana, Togo, and Benin view it as an existential threat.”

Stig Jarle Hansen writes that “there are reasons to be optimistic that the current Somali offensive against al-Shabaab could enduringly weaken the group. The operations have gained momentum and demonstrated that the Somali army has made large improvements over the last decade. The use of local clan militias as well as U.S. and Turkish drone support have acted as force multipliers, and the Somali government is finally making a concerted effort to go after al-Shabaab’s income generation.” He argues that “what will be key is to erode al-Shabaab’s ability to infiltrate government-controlled areas and to govern, tax, and implement ‘justice’ in these areas. In the past, this has been crucial to al-Shabaab resilience and income. Accordingly, there needs to be more focus on a ‘clear and hold’ strategy rather than just ‘search and destroy.’”

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Cover: Black smoke rises as the capital of Burkina Faso comes under multiple attacks on March 2, 2018, that targeted the French embassy, the French cultural center, and the country's military headquarters. (Ahmed Ouoba/AFP via Getty Images)

Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso

By Héli Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss

On January 18, 2023, the military regime in Burkina Faso demanded that France withdraw its troops from the country within a month, stoking fears that another African country is set to hire the Kremlin's favorite mercenaries, the Wagner Group, to help contain Burkina Faso's worsening jihadi insurgency. There seems to be a very significant probability that the military government in Burkina Faso will indeed hire Wagner in the near future. The leader of Burkina's junta, Captain Ibrahim Traore, currently faces intense pressure from both within his country and neighboring Mali to bring in Wagner mercenaries to stabilize the security situation. Though it is important to stress that Burkina Faso has already turned to private military companies, any move to hire Wagner Group would be a symptom of the malaise caused by weak and hollowed-out state institutions, corruption, and the increased militarization of Burkinabe society. Nevertheless, a future potential Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would likely result in a further upsurge in jihadi violence in Burkina Faso given the fact that jihadi attacks, perpetrated by both JNIM and the Islamic State, have increased dramatically across Mali since Wagner's deployment there just over a year ago. And a Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would further entrench Russian influence in Africa, complicate Western policy in West Africa, and create humanitarian concerns given Wagner's reprehensible human rights record.

On January 18, 2023, Burkina Faso's military regime officially announced that it was ending its military accord with France that had been in place since 2018.¹ In addition, the ruling junta in Ouagadougou, led by Captain Ibrahim Traore, requested that French troops, stationed in the country as part of France's Operation Sabre, leave Burkina Faso within a month.² The removal of French troops comes after several months of intense anti-French sentiment from the junta, who also requested the withdrawal of France's ambassador in December 2022.³ Burkina Faso has now joined its northern neighbor of Mali in officially ending military ties with France after more than a decade of French-led counterterrorism missions throughout the Sahel. With Russia's favorite private military company, the Wagner Group, already deployed in Mali for over a year, there is intense speculation that Ouagadougou may also hire the Russian mercenaries.⁴

Led by Traore, the ruling junta in Ouagadougou came to power in September 2022 in Burkina Faso's second *coup d'état* in less

than nine months by overthrowing Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the military officer who led the country's previous coup in January 2022.⁵ Much as Damiba had done to his predecessor in the earlier *coup d'état*, Traore and his allies publicly argued that Damiba had done little to stymie the continuously mounting jihadi insurgency inside the country.⁶

This so-called 'coup within a coup' in Burkina Faso comes during a period of geopolitical transition in the Sahel. France, the former colonial power and the region's longtime security behemoth since 2013, withdrew from Mali with its final troops leaving the country in August 2022.⁷ In its place, Mali has brought in Russia's aforementioned favorite plausible deniability asset, the secretive Wagner Group.⁸ With the popular protests related to Burkina Faso's most recent coup featuring some overt pro-Russia sentiments, pundits, analysts, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders within the international community have rightfully questioned if Burkina Faso will be Wagner's next destination.⁹ In early October 2022, the United States warned Burkina Faso not to ally with Russia (and by extension, Wagner). President Traore assured U.S. diplomats that he had no intention of inviting Wagner troops to fight militants in the country, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland told the media in late October. The Russian war-media Telegram channel Rybar claimed in a December 18, 2022, post that the U.S. warning had come too late, claiming that "the Wagnerites are already conducting reconnaissance, and

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negotiations are in the final stage.⁷¹⁰ ^a Concerns that Wagner may deploy to Burkina Faso have grown in recent weeks,¹¹ with reporting suggesting that Wagner has already started to deploy to Burkina Faso—though the junta itself has not confirmed any Wagner presence in the country.¹²

In light of these fears, this article serves as an exploration of a possible Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso and what the implications might be. The article also assesses Wagner's previous fortunes (or oftentimes misadventures) in Africa. Wagner remains a popular alternative to Western powers among several African states and leaders, though its operations inside Africa have often been more detrimental than beneficial. It is important to note that Burkina Faso has already relied on private military companies (PMCs) in its fight against jihadis. And that if the country hires Wagner, it would only be a symptom of the wider structural malaise plaguing Burkina Faso. As this article will outline, the country's deep-seated problems are due to corruption, the hollowing-out of state institutions, and a militarization of society caused by the mobilization of civilian militias.

Starting with a brief background of Burkina Faso's political instability during the last decade, this article then turns to providing an overview of the country's worsening jihadi insurgency and the concerning spillover of jihadi violence into littoral states. The article then examines the likelihood and repercussions of a potential Wagner Group deployment inside Burkina Faso.

Part One: A Decade of Political Instability in Burkina Faso

The September 2022 *coup d'état* in Burkina Faso is in many ways emblematic of the country's tumultuous political climate since 2014. Though the country has a long history of coups, revolts, and foreign meddling,¹³ all of which have undoubtedly contributed to Burkina's current political instability, this article will focus on its political history over the last decade, including the most recent government overthrow. What is most important to understand are the motivations of the key protagonists within Burkina Faso. The policies and personal desires of these individuals have not wholly created the current concerning state of affairs in Burkina Faso but will help determine whether and to what extent Russian mercenaries will be hired by the country.

The late September 2022 coup saw Traore, a previously unknown captain within Burkina's army who led an artillery regiment in the country's north, overthrow the previous junta leader, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba.¹⁴ Traore, himself a member of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR)—the movement led by Damiba that perpetrated the January 2022

^a On December 21, 2022, Rybar claimed that "Rybar's team managed to confirm that Wagner PMC employees are indeed on the territory of Burkina Faso, and the negotiations are close to completion." Reliable local sources could not confirm the claim and stressed that any Wagner presence in the country would not have gone unnoticed. Rybar is part of Russia's information warfare matrix. The communications and the special attention given to Burkina Faso may be an attempt to influence the information environment to create further tension between Burkina Faso and its Western partners. "Situation in the Sahel as of December 21, 2022" (translated from Russian), (Telegram), December 21, 2022; author (Nsaibia) personal communications, Burkinabe security expert, December 2022; "Who runs the Rybar military telegram channel: The Bell investigation" (title translated from Russian), Bell, November 16, 2022.

coup—appointed himself the new leader of the MPSR in a televised address shortly after deposing Damiba.¹⁵ A few days later, the MPSR formalized this appointment by announcing Traore as the new interim president of Burkina Faso.¹⁶ After mediation by local community leaders, Damiba was allowed to go into exile and fled to neighboring Togo.¹⁷ Since coming to power, Traore has attempted to assuage concerns from the international community by saying he still intends to allow planned elections by July 2024 "if the situation allows it."¹⁸ ^b

Traore's Motivations

Damiba's failure to improve the steadily deteriorating security situation has frequently been cited as the primary driver of Traore's coup. Indeed, a deadly ambush in late September 2022 by al-Qa`ida's West African branch, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), against a transport convoy escorted by soldiers and Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP)^c near the village of Gaskinde was apparently the final straw for those seeking to overthrow him. At least 27 soldiers and 10 civilians were killed, dozens were wounded, and others went missing, according to a government statement.¹⁹ Indicative of the Burkinabe military's monumental failure to secure the convoy heading to resupply the town of Djibo, the provincial capital of the northern Soum Province, is that JNIM claimed at least 90 trucks and military vehicles were burned in the attack.^d Subsequent analysis of satellite imagery by the investigative journalism group Bellingcat confirmed that 95 vehicles had been destroyed in the attack, scattered along a more than five-kilometer strip of road.²⁰ ^e

However, the worsening jihadi violence was far from the only factor that precipitated the most recent coup. Other factors played an equally important role. One was unpaid bonuses estimated at six million CFA (approximately 10,000 USD) per soldier. Another was Damiba's special treatment of the army's special forces through the allocation of land parcels that sowed further discord within the ranks of the armed forces.²¹

Popular protests occurring throughout Burkina's capital of

- ^b The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had previously reached an agreement with ousted leader Lt. Col. Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba to hold elections by July 2024. "Transition au Burkina Faso : le Président en exercice de la CEDEAO satisfait de l'évolution de la situation," Service d'Information du Gouvernement (SIG), July 24, 2022; "Coup d'État au Burkina : La CEDEAO demande le maintien du délai de juillet 2024 pour le retour à l'ordre constitutionnel," Le Faso, September 30, 2022.
- ^c *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, or VDP) are local state-backed self-defense militiamen that support Burkina Faso's regular forces in combating jihadi groups. Many VDP are recruited from preexisting self-defense groups such as the Kogliweogo and Dozo.
- ^d JNIM claimed the attack in a October 3, 2022, statement entitled "Economic blow and military coup in Burkina Faso." The group claimed credit for creating the conditions that led to the September 30, 2022, coup, saying "the decisive economic blow caused an earthquake in the ranks of the Burkinabe arm which led to a military coup in the country." Wassim Nasr, "#BurkinaFaso #JNIM revendique l'embuscade sur la route de #Djibo ...," Twitter, October 4, 2022.
- ^e The Union of Truck Drivers of Burkina (UCRB) said in the wake of the incident that as many as 70 drivers remain unaccounted for. "Attaque de Gaskindé : 'Plus de 70 chauffeurs routiers manquent à l'appel' (UCRB)," Minute.bf, October 6, 2022.

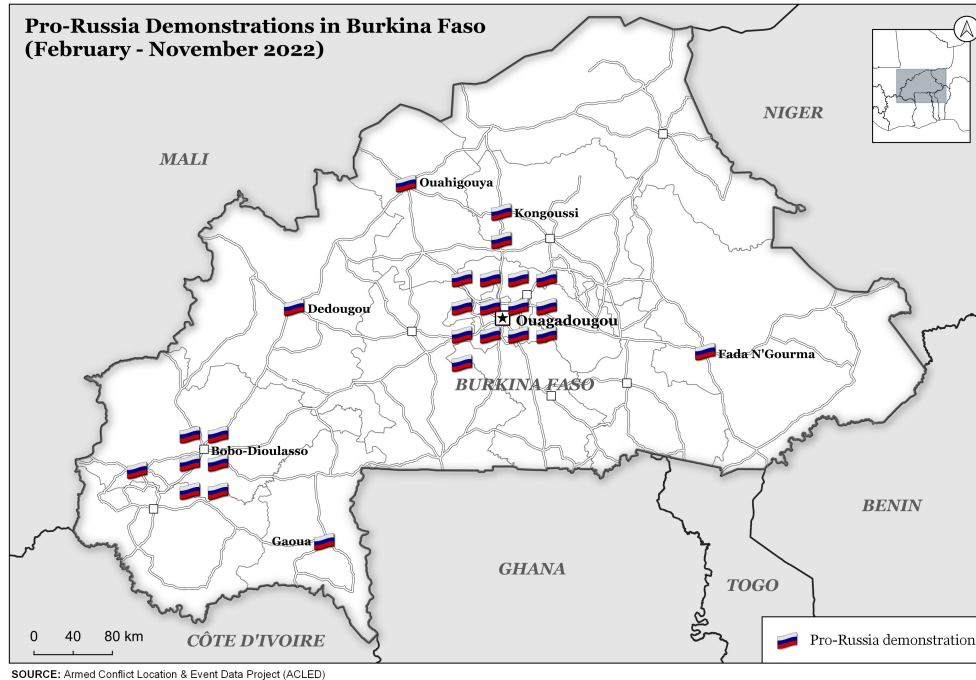


Figure 1: Pro-Russia demonstrations in Burkina Faso (February–November 2022) (Source: ACLED)

Ouagadougou related to the September 2022 coup revealed explicit pro-Russia sympathies that portended a widening battle between France and Russia for influence in the country and the region. For instance, on October 1, 2022, protestors were widely seen waving Russian flags,²² particularly at the French embassy in Ouagadougou, after rumors that Damiba was sheltering there ran rampant amid the chaos.²³ In Bobo-Dioulasso, a city in Burkina's southwest, a French cultural center was also targeted by protestors.²⁴ Pro-Russia demonstrations occurred off and on throughout 2022, with nearly 30 such demonstrations recorded in various urban centers (see Figure 1), although the vast majority were concentrated in Ouagadougou and the second largest city, Bobo-Dioulasso.^f

It is difficult to unravel to what extent Russian actors are whipping up such sentiment. In January 2023, an influence operation targeted the population of Burkina Faso through an animated video clip depicting the Wagner Group as a good friend and savior of Burkina Faso and Mali, and France as an evil enemy in the form of demons and a giant cobra snake.²⁵ The clip was infantile and unsophisticated, but it cleverly reinforced anti-France narratives.

On January 20, 2023, several hundred people gathered in Ouagadougou to again protest the French military presence in the country with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Traore featured on large adjoining banners.²⁶ As already noted, two days earlier,

the junta had withdrawn from the military accord with France and demanded that French troops leave within a month.

Notwithstanding the optics of such demonstrations, Traore himself has played coy on his sentiments regarding Russia, saying that Burkina Faso has “many partners.”²⁷ France strongly denied rumors it was interfering on the ground on the side of Damiba during the September 2022 coup.²⁸ And although the Russian state has not formally commented on the coup, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner Group and a close ally of Putin, stated he “salute[s] and support[s] Captain Ibrahim Traore” who he calls “a truly courageous son of the motherland.”²⁹ Prigozhin's statement was likely meant to publicly open the door for cooperation between Wagner and Burkina's new junta, in addition to acting as a means to further divide public sentiment between the Burkinabes and France, though any hard confirmation of further Wagner interference in Burkina apart from rhetorical support to the new junta has not come to light as of late January 2023. That said, since the beginning of 2023, there have been a number of reports from independent news outlets suggesting that a deal between Burkina's junta and Wagner is closer than ever—though the Burkinabe junta itself has not confirmed these rumors.³⁰

Damiba's Downfall

Damiba himself came to power earlier in 2022 after he was appointed interim president of Burkina Faso by the MPSR after leading the overthrow of President Roch Marc Christian Kabore in January 2022.³¹ Somewhat ironically, Damiba and his allies in the MPSR had accused Kabore of doing little to stop the jihadi insurgency throughout the country—the same public accusation Traore levied at Damiba during his coup in September.³² Damiba and the MPSR promised to improve the security situation and assured Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that there would be a return to civilian rule in the aforementioned 2024 elections.³³

However sincere Damiba and the MPSR might have been in

^f It is important to note that most of these pro-Russia demonstrations were simultaneously anti-France with demonstrators chanting anti-France slogans and calling for the withdrawal of French forces from Burkinabe territory. In October and November 2022, after the second coup, several demonstrations took place in front of the military base in Kamboinsin, where French special forces from Task Force Sabre had been stationed since 2009. According to data gathered by author (Nsaibia) for the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); “France struggles to find a way through the confusion in Burkina Faso,” Africa Intelligence, October 12, 2022.



A banner of Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen during a protest to support the president of Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Traore, and to demand the departure of France's ambassador and military forces, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on January 20, 2023. (Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images)

making these promises, his brief rule in Burkina Faso was marked by continued insecurity,³⁴ a series of massacres perpetrated by jihadis,³⁵ and a worsening spillover of jihadi violence out of Burkina Faso and into a number of littoral West African states.³⁶ Damiba apparently aimed to find a way out of the conflict by devising a more comprehensive strategy. He was convinced that Burkina Faso's problems were not only military but also political, which resulted in him incorporating or giving greater weight to political components such as amnesty, demobilization, and reconciliation, which had been largely absent until then.³⁷ By establishing local committees, he sought a platform for dialogue, negotiation, and demobilization of Burkinabe combatants who had taken up arms against the state. Some 250 combatants laid down their arms under the program, which also provided funding for development projects, vocational training centers, and reinsertion projects in the domains of breeding livestock, agriculture, and transport.³⁸

Despite Damiba actively seeking political solutions to the crisis in Burkina Faso, he by no means abandoned the military path. This was evidenced by the fact that he personally oversaw Burkina Faso's secretive drone program after the country acquired Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones that were operational by February 2022 (or perhaps even earlier).³⁹ Numerous military operations were conducted during Damiba's rule, including the staggering number of more than 200 airstrikes and repelled attacks that in total killed 1,291 militants, according to data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).⁴⁰ This closely corresponds

to an unofficial toll provided by an anonymous Burkinabe military source, who listed the results as 1,300 militants killed, more than 20 bases destroyed,⁴¹ and the approximately 250 demobilized combatants mentioned earlier.

Regardless of Damiba's efforts at the military and political level, the problems Ouagadougou faced were clearly profound and the crisis deep-rooted. Damiba was overly publicly optimistic in his statements about what he could achieve in the short term,⁴² raising public expectations while the situation continued to deteriorate during his tenure. What is clear, however, is that Burkinabe military efforts during Damiba's government were overwhelmed and outpaced by the steadily increasing operational tempo of the militant groups, as measured by the violent events they (and particularly JNIM) initiated and the resulting fatalities (Figure 2).^g

Apart from being overly optimistic that he would be able to deliver on his promises to improve the security situation and recapture lost territories, Damiba probably also felt too comfortable

^g When widespread looting and destruction of property are taken into account, the picture becomes even bleaker. JNIM militants in particular have incorporated a systematic 'economic warfare' into their strategy, which includes the destruction of security infrastructure—often through the use of explosives—government buildings, telecommunications installations, water pumping stations, power lines, schools, logistic and supply convoys (including transport trucks and fuel tankers), and other property. Authors' tracking of jihadi activity in Burkina Faso.

Militant and Military Operations and Reported Fatalities Inflicted (including own ranks) 2020 - 2022*

*as of 9 December 2022

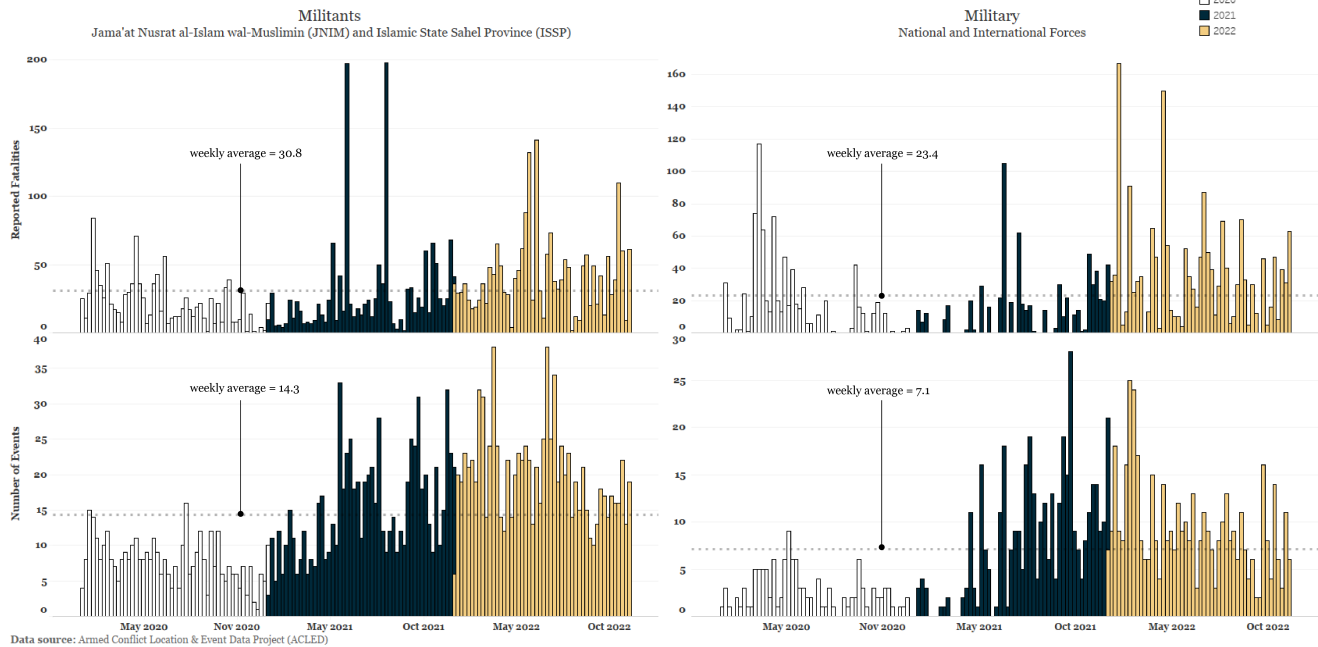


Figure 2: Militant and military operations and the reported fatalities they inflicted (2020-2022). (Source: ACLED)

in his position. This was made clear in a speech before stakeholders during a visit to Bobo-Dioulasso in May 2022, when he called on anyone who was dissatisfied with his rule to attempt a coup against him.⁴³ Moreover, Damiba was also open to continued military cooperation with France.⁴⁴ That Damiba favored maintaining and deepening military cooperation between the Burkinabe military and the French troops of Operation Barkhane,⁴⁵ played into the hands of his opponents and detractors, who took advantage of the growing anti-French sentiment in the country. Burkina Faso was one of France's favored counterterrorism partners alongside Niger, as France reshaped its regional counterterrorism mission Operation Barkhane (now officially ended) after its withdrawal from Mali.⁴⁶ Thus, it was no surprise that on the streets of Burkina Faso, pro-Russia voices became loudest and most visible. In fact, calls for military cooperation with Russia had immediately followed Damiba's own *coup d'état* in January 2022, to which he did not respond with any tangible overtures. To the contrary, he refused to contract Wagner, despite the efforts of the junta in neighboring Mali to facilitate this during a meeting he undertook with his Malian counterpart, Assimi Goita.^h

Traore's Approach

Unlike his predecessor, the current transition president, Ibrahim Traore (who is commonly referred to by his initials IB), has adopted a populist approach and chosen the path of "total war."⁴⁷ A key aspect of Traore's approach is an accelerated mobilization of the population for the VDP program following incessant calls for the arming of civilians. After Traore's transitional government called

for the recruitment of 50,000 volunteer fighters, 90,000 people reportedly responded.⁴⁸ The mass mobilization clearly shows that Traore has assigned the VDP a key role in his military strategy to take back lost territories.ⁱ His involvement with the VDP predates the coup, as he was previously the chief of Kaya's artillery regiment, responsible for training the VDP in places such as Noaka, Bouroum, and Pensa in the Centre-Nord Region where his regiment is based. The VDP around Traore were expected to play the role of force multipliers on the day of the coup in case the events would take a different turn and degenerate into clashes between Damiba loyalists and those on Traore's side.⁴⁹

Critics of the VDP program point out that the state-backed self-defense militias have been recruited predominantly from settled

i Traore has retained and strengthened the Patriotic Watch and Defense Brigade (BVDP), created under Damiba, to assemble and coordinate VDP units at the local level. Traore has also reorganized the armed forces by restructuring the chain of command of the National Theater Operations Command (COTN), creating three additional military regions, and six rapid intervention battalions (BIR). The BIR is envisaged as a mobile and responsive force that could be deployed across Burkinabe territory. Here again, the VDP are assigned a prominent role as it is envisaged that the BIR will be composed of both soldiers and VDP. It appears that Traore will also rely on the section (or platoon) sized FORSAT (Special Anti-Terrorist Force) to retake areas controlled by militants. Similar to the BIR, FORSAT is composed of soldiers and VDP. It is envisaged that FORSAT will be "better trained, equipped, and organized," including with armored vehicles and supported by helicopters and combat drones to intensify offensive operations, according to reports on local social media. "Burkina Faso : Création d'une Brigade de veille et de deux zones d'intérêt militaire dans le Sahel et l'Est," Anadolu Agency, June 21, 2022; "Burkina : recrutement de 35 000 VDP communaux en plus des 15000 VDP nationaux," Actualite.bf, October 25, 2022; "Burkina Faso: le président de la Transition, Ibrahim Traoré procède à une restructuration de l'armée," Libre Info, November 16, 2022; "Burkina: le président de la transition, le capitaine Traoré, réorganise les forces armées," November 16, 2022; "Le Président du Faso Ibrahim Traoré compte sur la FORSAT (Force spéciale anti-terroriste)," Faso Times (Facebook), October 24, 2022.

h Damiba was eager to maintain good relations with Russia, which plays a key role in supplying Burkina Faso with military equipment, while at the same time maintaining French and U.S. intelligence assistance, French air and combat support when needed, and equipment from other countries such as Turkey and the Czech Republic. Author (Nsaibia) personal communications, Burkinabe military source, October 2022.

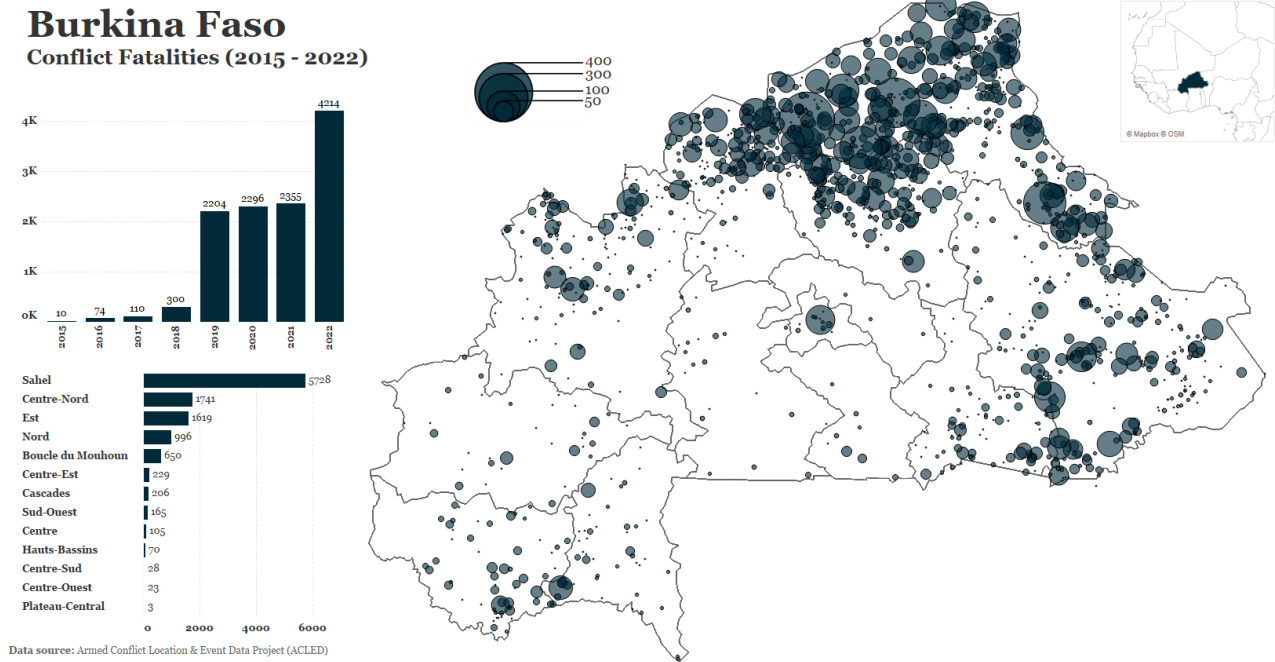


Figure 3: Burkina Faso reported conflict fatalities (2015-2022) (Source: ACLED)

communities since their official establishment in January 2020 under former President Roch Kabore.^{50j} Since their establishment, the self-defense militias have contributed to an increase in violence and an increase in recruitment from pastoralist communities by jihadi groups.⁵¹ There are fears that abuses, summary executions, and attacks could increase amid the ongoing mass mobilization, leading to even more violence and triggering a larger intercommunal crisis with ethnic dimensions.^k

Part Two: The Growing Jihadi Insurgency in Burkina Faso and the Spillover into Neighboring Littoral States

The Jihadi Insurgency in Burkina Faso

Burkina’s jihadi insurgency both started and vastly expanded during the rule of Roch Marc Christian Kabore. When he came to power in 2015 after Burkina’s first elections, which followed nearly 30 years of rule by longtime authoritarian leader Blaise Compaoré, Kabore’s rule was marked by the rise of jihadi violence in the country. After the insurgency began in earnest in late 2016, it was initially confined to a remote corner of the northern province of Soum, the birthplace of the Burkina Faso domestic jihadi group Ansaroul Islam.⁵² Since then, however, the insurgency has spread to 11 of the country’s 13

regions.^l By the end of 2022, conflict fatalities had increased by 77 percent compared to 2021, making 2022 the deadliest year since the conflict began in Burkina Faso in 2015. (See Figure 3.)

Burkina Faso has been the subject of simultaneous campaigns by JNIM and its Islamic State rival, the Greater Sahara branch of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP-GS, or more colloquially known as Islamic State Greater Sahara, or ISGS). This group was elevated to the status of its own province—the Sahel Province of the Islamic State (or ISSP)—in March 2022.⁵³ For years, the territory of Burkina Faso was the scene of growing competition between the regional branches of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, eventually escalating into a full-blown turf war largely concentrated in the far north of the country.⁵⁴ ISSP is largely confined to the northeastern provinces of Oudalan and Seno, and continues to wreak havoc there, having gained dominance in the Liptako-Gourma region, commonly known as the tri-state border area.⁵⁵ However, it is important to note that ISSP has not been able to sustain its expansion, as JNIM controls or exerts influence over large portions of Burkinabe territory and continues to spread throughout most of the country with its activities increasingly approaching the capital, Ouagadougou.⁵⁶

During Damiba’s period in power, JNIM continued to expand into new areas in several regions and increased its activities in others that had previously served as support zones rather than

j The Popular Movement for the Resistance of Bam, a precursor of the VDP, was formed in October 2019 in the town of Kongoussi. “Insécurité dans la province du Bam : Les populations préparent la résistance,” Le Faso, October 6, 2019.

k JNIM’s Burkinabe branch and Ansaroul Islam emir Jafar Dicko addressed the Burkinabe people in a video the group released in response to the mobilization within Burkina Faso for the VDP initiative. He threatened “total war” including blockades on access roads to cities and towns, and along borders with neighboring countries. in order to suffocate Burkina Faso. Larmes des pauvres, “Dans une vidéo de 5’01” le chef la branche #Burkinabé du #JNIM adresse ...,” Twitter, November 28, 2022.

l At least seven of these regions, including the country’s two largest regions (Sahel and Est), can be considered heavily affected by the jihadi violence. In the four other regions in which the insurgency is present, jihadi activity has varied. For example, both Centre-Ouest and Hauts-Bassins saw a rapid increase in jihadi activity in 2022. In Sud-Ouest, the level of jihadi activity was fairly constant at either a low or moderate level. In the Centre-Sud, on the other hand, activity could be best described as sporadic.

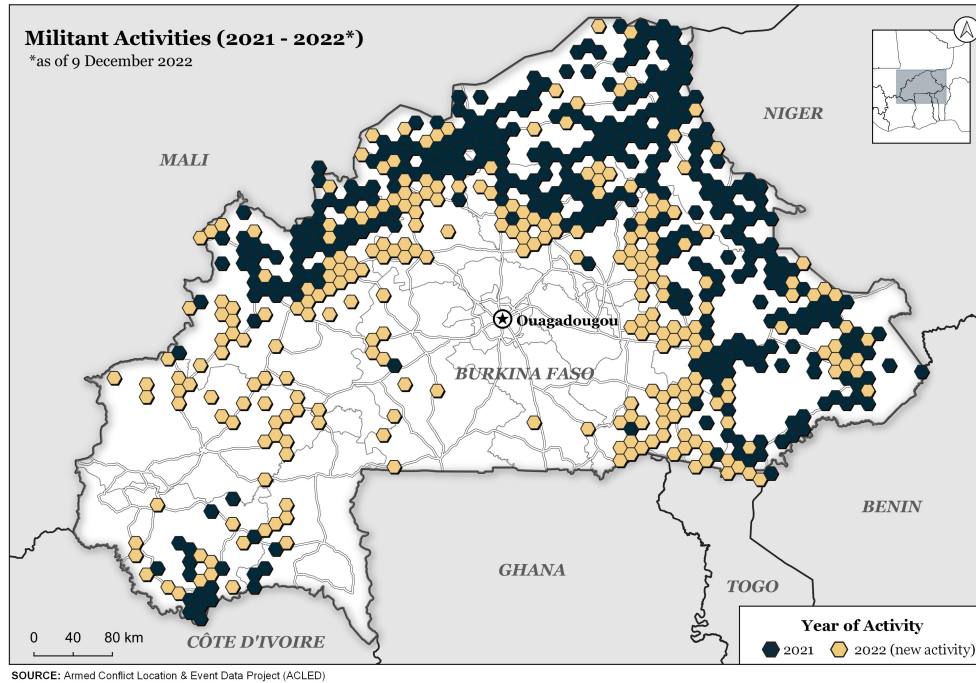


Figure 4: Militant activities (2021-2022) (Source: ACLED)

areas for military operations by its fighters.^m Taken together, this led to increased encirclement of Ouagadougou within a radius of about 90-110 kilometers in all directions around the capital (see Figure 4, with new activity recorded in 2022 displayed in yellow). This trend has continued since Traore came to power. Today, the situation remains critical in many parts of the country due to the humanitarian emergency accompanying the security crisis and the fact that many towns and villages are under suffocating militant blockades.ⁿ

Emblematic of the continued deterioration of security under Traore, JNIM overran a regiment-sized base in the northern town of Djibo in October 2022, killing at least 10 soldiers.⁵⁷ This was followed by its two-day attack in early December 2022 against an Essakane Mine logistics convoy in Burkina's Centre-Nord Region, burning at least 60 vehicles and leaving many drivers missing.⁵⁸ This attack had similarities to JNIM's aforementioned September 2022 ambush near the northern village of Gaskinde that killed 27 soldiers and 10 civilians and helped trigger the September coup against Damiba.⁵⁹

The Jihadi Spillover into the Littoral States

With JNIM making a concerted effort to consolidate its power and

influence inside Burkina Faso, its violence has not been confined within its borders. JNIM has used its positions, particularly inside the southeastern Burkinabe province of Kompienga (which it effectively controls),⁶⁰ to strike inside both Benin and Togo on numerous occasions, with these cross-border attacks picking up pace in 2022.⁶¹ This is not dissimilar to the situation in Burkina's southwestern provinces of Comoe and Poni, from where JNIM had earlier managed to infiltrate northeastern Côte d'Ivoire.⁶² The violence that encapsulates much of Burkina Faso is being exported to its southern neighbors.

Though al-Qa`ida had previously struck inside littoral West Africa prior to the deterioration of Burkina Faso's security, particularly with the March 2016 attack in Grand-Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire,⁶³ it was not until June 2020 that operations by the group into the littoral states from bases and staging points inside Burkina Faso began in earnest. That month, 14 Ivorian troops were killed by militants from JNIM's Katibat Macina in northeastern Côte d'Ivoire.⁶⁴ And though attacks in Côte d'Ivoire have since declined, jihadis, primarily JNIM, have since regularly attacked other littoral states from their bases in Burkina Faso at a rapidly increasing tempo.⁶⁵

Although Benin witnessed a handful of jihadi incidents between May 2019 and March 2021, it was not until late 2021 that violence seeping out of Burkina—largely from JNIM—constituted a more constant threat. Since December 2021, Benin has recorded at least 17 incidents related to jihadi violence.⁶⁶ Though JNIM is believed to have perpetrated or have been involved in the vast majority of incidents, the Islamic State's regional franchise has also publicly

m This expansion of activities during Damiba's rule was particularly pronounced in Nayala and Banwa provinces in Boucle du Mouhoun region, Koulpelogo and Boulgou provinces in Centre-Est region, Boala department in Namentenga province and Kaya department in Sanmatenga province in Centre-Nord region, Sanguie and Sissili provinces in Centre-Ouest region, and Houet, Kenedougou, and Tuy provinces in Hauts-Bassins region.

n This has forced the Burkinabe military to supply towns and villages from the air, including Djibo, Sebba, Solhan, and Tin-Akoff in the Sahel region, where the risk of famine is imminent. "Sebba (région du Sahel) : Confrontées à la famine, les femmes marchent pour exprimer leur ras-le-bol," *Le Faso*, September 18, 2022; "Il Etati Temps !" *Pays*, October 6, 2022; "Burkina : la population de Solhan a faim et crie au secours," *minute.bf*, December 13, 2022.

o Since that raid, Côte d'Ivoire has been targeted at least 15 additional times by JNIM, including the use of four improvised explosive devices (IEDs), with an additional three IEDs that either failed to detonate or were defused. However, reported jihadi attacks in the country have slowed dramatically since March 2022. According to data compiled by author (Weiss) for FDD's Long War Journal.

claimed at least two operations inside northern Benin.⁶⁷ Togo was largely spared jihadi violence until its military repelled a suspected JNIM incursion into its territory in November 2021. Since then, the small West African state has been targeted at least an additional 11 times.⁶⁸

Taken into context, it is clear that the jihadi violence expanding across Burkina Faso does not just affect that country. It also threatens the stability of Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and to a lesser extent Ghana. All four countries have had to reinforce their northern borders, enact new security policies or operations, and in the case of Benin, reach out to Rwanda for better security guarantees.⁶⁹ There is great pressure, therefore, on Burkina Faso—and international actors—to finally contain the insurgency within its borders. For some time, there has been concern that Burkina Faso may respond by turning to the Russian Wagner Group.

Part Three: The Likelihood of a Wagner Deployment and its Repercussions

Internal and External Pressure to Hire Wagner

Traore currently faces both internal and external pressure to work with Wagner. The Burkinabe 'street,' from which he received support during and after the coup, has been demonstrating repeatedly for nearly a year, demanding military cooperation with Russia and French withdrawal.^p Another factor is that several officers within the new MPSR (or MPSR 2, which the junta under Traore is referred to as) are calling for a partnership with Wagner, or another private military company, citing military fatigue.⁷⁰ Several mining and construction companies have also called for PMCs to be brought in to protect them, although these requests have so far been rejected.⁷¹ Adding to their sense of insecurity, on four occasions between June and October 2022, JNIM fighters attacked security positions and employees at the Karma mine in Namissiguima in the Nord region.⁷² JNIM fighters also attacked a logistics convoy of the Essakane mine twice on the Kaya-Dori road between December 8 and 9, 2022, with the devastating result of nearly 30 fuel tankers and trucks burned.⁷³ However, if the security situation does not improve, it is likely that businesses and economic operators will increase pressure on the government to hire PMCs to protect their interests and ensure the security of their activities. It is possible that some may issue an ultimatum by threatening to move their operations out of the country if their security needs are not met.

Hardening Anti-French Sentiment

In early December 2022, Burkinabe authorities suspended the broadcasting of Radio France Internationale (RFI) in the country for reporting on a video message released by Ansaroul Islam.⁷⁴ RFI was not the only media outlet to report on the issue, however. The video message was widely circulated, and local mainstream media also reported on the matter without any apparent reprisals. This may suggest that the decision was merely a pretext for a more hostile attitude toward international and particularly French media

operating on Burkinabe territory, which strongly resembles the approach adopted by neighboring Mali, albeit in a softer manner than by the Bamako junta.^{75q}

The suspension is indicative of an increasingly hostile environment toward France in Burkina Faso. There have been repeated demonstrations and vandalism against French facilities, including the French embassy, the French Institute, and the military base in Kamboinsin where French forces have been based.⁷⁶ Military relations between the two countries also soured after Burkinabe authorities in early October 2022 suspended French military flights in the country "until further notice."⁷⁷ Though the suspension was brief and lasted a few weeks, the government in Ouagadougou made the resumption of flights contingent on the mandatory presence of Burkinabe commandos on certain flights. Creating further tensions, on the night of December 17-18, 2022, the Defense and Security Forces (FDS) arrested and expelled two French nationals accused of espionage because of their interest in military activities, according to the state-owned Agence d'Information du Burkina (AIB), citing security sources.⁷⁸ Again, the event was reminiscent of the arrest and brief detention of two French soldiers in mid-September 2022 in Bamako, Mali.⁷⁹

On December 23, 2022, authorities in Ouagadougou declared the resident humanitarian coordinator of the United Nations, Barbara Manzi, *persona non grata* and ordered her to leave the country on the same day.⁸⁰ That same month, the junta in Ouagadougou also requested the French ambassador, Luc Hallade, to leave Burkina Faso, though France stood by its diplomat, refusing to withdraw him,⁸¹ but ultimately recalled the ambassador "for consultations" on January 26, 2023.⁸² This increasingly hostile attitude toward the French and the international community comes in the wake of a rapprochement between Ouagadougou and Bamako, as the heads of the junta of the two countries met in the latter's capital in November.⁸³ In the wake of Ouagadougou ending military cooperation with Paris on January 18, 2023, it is all too easy to imagine that talks on defense and security issues between the countries included discussions (as previously between Damiba and Goita) of Burkina Faso allying itself with Bamako's new preferred military partner, the Wagner Group.

Strengthening Ties with Russia

On September 25, 2022, just a week before Damiba's ouster, the then-Burkinabe leader met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, ostensibly to strengthen bilateral relations between Burkina Faso and Russia.⁸⁴ Following the abrupt end of Damiba's rule, relations between the two countries have only strengthened. Immediately after the coup, Russian Ilyushin Il-76 transport aircraft delivered weapons and helicopters previously ordered by Damiba to Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. As reported by Africa Report, "these orders for arms and helicopters were placed by the old authorities, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, and validated by the new ones, Captain Ibrahim Traore and his men,

p Though the current junta in Ouagadougou kicked out several French officials and institutions, in addition to harboring a more generalized anti-French attitude, France still housed at least 400 special forces soldiers in the country as of mid-January 2023. As noted higher, on January 18, 2023, the Burkina junta demanded French troops leave within a month. See "French minister says France still committed to Burkina Faso despite tension," Reuters, January 11, 2023.

q After RFI reported on abuses committed by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), the Malian transition government spokesperson compared RFI to Rwanda's Radio Mille Collines, which played a significant role in inciting the Rwandan genocide. "Malian junta orders French broadcasters RFI, France 24 off air," RFI, March 17, 2022.

once the coup had taken place.⁸⁵ Shortly thereafter, in late October, the newly appointed Burkinabe prime minister, Appolinaire Kyelem de Tembela, publicly stated that Burkina Faso would reconsider its relationship with Russia.⁸⁶ In early December, Kyelem carried out a discreet blitz visit to Moscow facilitated by Mali, which sent a plane to pick up the Burkinabe prime minister in Ouagadougou, from where he traveled to Russia via Bamako and Istanbul.⁸⁷ *Jeune Afrique*, which broke the story of the prime minister's Moscow trip, quoted an unnamed regional source as saying that Kyelem sought to acquire military equipment and that French officials believed the visit could facilitate the meeting with Wagner Group executives.⁸⁸

The History of PMCs in Burkina Faso

When considering the possibility of the Wagner Group deploying to Burkina Faso, it is helpful to consider the historical context of PMCs and private security companies (PSCs) operating in the country. Burkina Faso has already relied on PMCs to help in its fight against the jihadi insurgency ravaging its border areas. As such, if Wagner is hired by the junta, it would only be symptomatic of a growing hollowing and weakening of the country's political, security, and military institutions.

The hiring of PSCs to protect businesses and sensitive assets and facilities, particularly in the mining sector, has not been uncommon in Burkina Faso.⁸⁹ Their presence in the country was highlighted when militants from al-Murabitoon^r abducted Romanian security guard Iulian Ghergut from the Tambao manganese mine in Burkina Faso's northern Oudalan province in April 2015.⁹⁰ Ghergut is the longest-held Western hostage in the Sahel and remains in captivity to this day. Compared to PSC activities, less is known about PMC activities in Burkina Faso, although the Ukrainian PMC Omega Consulting openly featured its operations in Burkina Faso on its Facebook page in 2018⁹¹ and ran a training facility there.⁹²

Ukrainian and Bulgarian mercenary pilots (referred to as "contractors") were deployed to Burkina Faso in December 2018,⁹³ coinciding with the delivery of helicopters from Russia and Bulgaria in late 2018 and early 2019.⁹⁴ While it is normal for mechanics and trainers to be part of the package in the transfer of military hardware such as aircraft and helicopters, in this case, the Ukrainian and Bulgarian pilots conducted combat missions, including an airstrike January 30, 2019, on the 'wrong' village.^s The pilots attacked the village of Zourma, some 130 kilometers from the intended target in Kompianbiga,⁹⁵ where JNIM fighters earlier the same day had overrun an army camp.⁹⁶

The pilots were reported to have either been contracted by the company Aranko Security or an unnamed Ukrainian PMC.⁹⁷ Considering the timing of the aforementioned activities by Omega Consulting, it is possible that it is the unnamed PMC in question. Regardless, the helicopter sale and the contracted mercenary pilots were all reportedly interconnected through a scheme of front companies linked to murky arms deals overseen by then-President

Roch Kabore.⁹⁸ The Aranko Security and Ralph companies, run by a French-Lebanese businessman of Armenian origin, Rafi Dermardirossian, reportedly had close contacts with Kabore and brokered the transfer of a refurbished Mi-24 attack helicopter from the Bulgarian defense firm Metalika to the Burkinabe state, in addition to a series of arms deals since 2016.⁹⁹

Wagner's Track Record in Africa

Wagner's activity on the African continent is well-documented. Wagner's first major deployment to Africa was to Sudan in 2017, helping the then-government of Omar al-Bashir put down protests in exchange for Russian access to Sudanese gold mines.¹⁰⁰ Then in 2018, Wagner deployed to the Central African Republic (CAR) following a similar deal signed by CAR's government to receive Russian military support in its civil war in exchange for Russian access to CAR's lucrative mining sector.¹⁰¹ Though not initially involved in combat operations, by late 2020 as the security situation in CAR deteriorated, Wagner became one of the most significant armed actors in the conflict according to ACLED data.¹⁰² The majority of Wagner's military activity in CAR was directed against civilians.¹⁰³

In 2019, Wagner expanded its operations in Africa with high-profile deployments to both Libya and Mozambique. In Libya, the Russian private military company assisted General Khalifa Haftar retake vast swaths of territory across the country's north and mount an assault on Tripoli, the seat of Libya's internationally recognized government.¹⁰⁴ During its deployment to Mozambique, Wagner assisted the central government in Maputo in its fight against the Islamic State's insurgency in the country's northern province of Cabo Delgado.¹⁰⁵ Though Wagner is still believed to be active inside Libya, it quietly withdrew its men from Mozambique just three months after its initial deployment following the loss of 10 men in combat operations.¹⁰⁶

Most recently, Wagner expanded its presence in Africa by deploying to Mali.¹⁰⁷ Following Mali's own series of recent coups, the Wagner Group was invited to deploy by the country's new strongman, Assimi Goita, after France fell out of favor with the ruling junta.¹⁰⁸ As France was withdrawing its troops, Wagner entered Mali in late 2021. Since the beginning of 2022, the addition of Wagner has only compounded violence toward civilians, with the militia itself behind several massacres, such as a mass killing in central Mali in March 2022 that left at least 300 civilians dead.¹⁰⁹ To further highlight the impact of Wagner, civilian deaths were higher in the first quarter of 2022 than all of 2021 combined.¹¹⁰ In all, Wagner's deployment in Mali has served to further worsen the jihadi threat in not only Mali but the wider Sahel region.¹¹¹ Jihadi attacks, perpetrated by both JNIM and the Islamic State, have dramatically surged across Mali since Wagner's deployment.¹¹²

The Potential Repercussions of a Wagner Deployment

Judging by its impact in Mali, a future potential Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would likely exacerbate the climate of fear, and their presence would be detrimental to civilian security in areas where the PMC would operate alongside local government forces. Wagner mercenaries could also alter the fragile power equilibriums between armed groups that are largely mobilized along ethnic lines, negatively impacting conflict dynamics and leading to settlements of accounts and retaliatory attacks with a high risk of mass atrocities. In addition, the information environment will

r A founding member of JNIM, al-Murabitoon was itself the result of a merger of two other al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups in the Sahel: the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and Katibat al-Mulathameen.

s The error was apparently geographical. Kompianbiga and Zourma share the same coordinate numbers, albeit in eastern and western direction, respectively, on the longitudinal axis. Kompianbiga is located in Kompianbiga Province of Est Region and Zourma in Boulgou Province of Centre-Est Region.

“A future potential Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would likely exacerbate the climate of fear, and their presence would be detrimental to civilian security in areas where the PMC would operate alongside local government forces. Wagner mercenaries could also alter the fragile power equilibriums between armed groups that are largely mobilized along ethnic lines, negatively impacting conflict dynamics and leading to settlements of accounts and retaliatory attacks with a high risk of mass atrocities.”

undoubtedly be heavily influenced by disinformation, and lethal tactics not previously employed by local government forces and their allies could potentially be introduced, as has already been seen in other countries where Wagner mercenaries are deployed, including CAR, Libya, and Mali.¹¹³ Combined, this will likely result in an upsurge in the jihadi threat in Burkina Faso just like in Mali. As Wassim Nasr recently noted in this publication:

*The arrival of Russian mercenaries [in Mali] hastened the departure of French and European forces. However, the Russian private military company did not deploy capable, disciplined, and well-equipped troops to fill the gap, and its brutal and indiscriminate counterinsurgency efforts are serving as a recruiting tool for the jihadis. A year after the arrival of the Russian mercenaries to Mali, the security situation has worsened. Despite ongoing fighting between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State's branches in the Sahel, the two terrorist groups are consolidating their sanctuaries and gaining an unprecedented range of action.*¹¹⁴

A Wagner deployment would undoubtedly also lead to increased tensions between Burkina Faso and the West, especially France, leading to a decrease or a full cessation of Western assistance. The possibility of a Wagner deployment also threatens regional initiatives to counter the jihadi violence. For instance, in December 2022, Ghana's president, Nana Akufo-Addo, during a trip to Washington D.C., publicly accused Burkina Faso of already hosting Wagner mercenaries and paying for them with mining concessions.¹¹⁵ This caused a diplomatic row between the two countries, with Burkina Faso summoning the Ghanaian ambassador in Ouagadougou in response.¹¹⁶ The fallout from the rift threatens to weaken two key pillar states of the Accra Initiative, a cooperative security mechanism comprising seven West African states.¹¹⁷ The initiative voted in late November 2022 to establish a joint task force to help combat the jihadi insurgency flowing across Burkina Faso's borders. But with two of its key member states currently in a diplomatic tiff, it is unclear what progress has been made in forming such a task

force. Ghana did eventually backtrack on the allegations and sent a high-level delegation to mitigate the diplomatic fallout of President Nana Akufo-Addo's statements.¹¹⁸

If Wagner does deploy to Burkina Faso it would be a symptom of the country's increased reliance on private military companies writ large. By using such companies, the unelected military junta in Burkina Faso ensures little to no accountability or transparency on the operations carried out by these companies. The junta in Ouagadougou has little incentive—or need—to provide updates to its populace on what any mercenary group or faction is doing inside Burkina Faso. This in turn helps foster public distrust of the regime. For instance, in Mali, the presence of Wagner has caused what ACLED describes as a “climate of fear,” wherein civilian journalists are afraid to report on the group or criticize its presence in the country out of a fear of potential reprisals.¹¹⁹ And as is clear from their performance elsewhere in Africa, private military companies can oftentimes leave countries worse off than when they arrived as they have historically prioritized the protection of resources, companies, and key personnel involved in resource extraction, as well as their own profit over the well-being of civilians or civilian infrastructure.¹²⁰

Moreover, if a hypothetical future Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso is paid for with mining concessions, this would not only lead to the draining of state resources, but could also lead to the further militarization of Burkinabe society. In other West African conflicts, such as in Liberia and Sierra Leone, resources concessions to private military companies only perpetuated the cycle of violence as the industries in which concessions were granted themselves became more militarized.¹²¹ This dynamic is playing out now inside the Central African Republic, where Wagner has utilized increased violence, including assassinations of others involved in artisanal mining.¹²² In CAR, it has also used armed personnel to protect one of its shell companies involved in the mining and smuggling of diamonds out of the country.¹²³ Worryingly, Burkina Faso is already well on the way to militarizing its society, having already mobilized and armed civilians as part of its VDP program.

Conclusions

The authors assess that given the current dynamics, a Wagner Group deployment to Burkina Faso is likely in the near-future. Burkina's military ruler Ibrahim Traore—much like his predecessor, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba—faces high internal pressure, particularly from certain segments within the Burkinabe military and among influential economic actors with interests in the mining and construction sectors, and external pressure, such as from Mali and Russia itself, to ally his country with the notorious private military company. Given the current ill-feeling of the junta in Ouagadougou against France, and indeed much of the West, it seems likely that any attempt at increased diplomatic pressure against Traore to move away to Russia and Wagner will fall on deaf ears. Unlike Damiba, who rebuffed such pressure, Traore is, in the authors' assessment, much more likely to cave. The authors believe it is only a matter of time before Burkina Faso hires Wagner.

A Wagner deployment to Burkina Faso would further entrench Russian influence in Africa, complicate Western policy in West Africa, imperil regional counterterrorism cooperation, and bring about additional humanitarian concerns given Wagner's reprehensible record, further aggravating Burkina Faso's human rights situation, which is already dire.

This does not mean that any hiring of the Wagner Group would be the government's main solution to securing and stabilizing the country. Traore's main line of effort has been to mobilize the masses via the VDP. That said, upscaling the VDP program is no guarantee for success, and if the security situation in Burkina continues to deteriorate, Wagner may be one of the few options left for Traore to protect his own position and preserve the interests of economic or other political actors and related sectors. This is not dissimilar to what has historically occurred in other West African states utilizing PMCs such as Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Ouagadougou's apparent consideration of hiring the Wagner Group is just a symptom of the broader hollowing of Burkinabe

institutions that billions of dollars and tens of thousands of foreign troops deployed across the Sahel for almost a decade have failed to arrest. Burkina Faso's dependence on citizen militias, PMCs, and PSCs is already highly damaging to the fabric of the country, by militarizing society, reducing accountability, and draining state resources. It is this environment that jihadi groups have found so fertile in Burkina Faso. Given that Wagner's poor counterterrorism capabilities and heavy-handed tactics have made the jihadi problem worse in neighboring Mali, there is every likelihood that a deployment by the Russian private military company to Burkina Faso would also pour oil on the jihadi fire there. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Rose Keravuori, Deputy Director of Intelligence, United States Africa Command

By Brian Dodwell

Brigadier General Rose Keravuori currently serves as the Deputy Director of Intelligence (J2) at U.S. Africa Command. Keravuori has spent over 20 years in the U.S. Army as an Active Duty and Reserve Officer. She led troops at the tactical and operational levels in Afghanistan and Iraq and deployed on several peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. She commanded the 259th Expeditionary Military Intelligence Brigade (Reserve). Before commanding a Brigade, she was a strategic war planner at CENTCOM and on the CENTCOM Commander's Action Group, advising the CENTCOM Commander. Between 2011 and 2021, she also served as chief executive officer of Rise Out in Support of Empowering Women (ROSE Women), LLC, a consulting firm whose mission includes empowering and enabling women in business and government internationally.

CTC: With the shift away from the traditional battlegrounds in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's been a popular refrain to label Africa as the new epicenter for global jihadi terrorism. Would you agree with that characterization? More broadly, how would you frame the current jihadi threat in Africa?

Keravuori: I would absolutely agree. For al-Qa`ida and ISIS, the most operationally active and financially lucrative affiliates are on the African continent. There are probably many reasons for this. Certainly the economic issues in some of these countries lend themselves to individuals being radicalized more easily, but also there are social as well as ethnic differences in [certain] countries that radicalize a sub-ethnic group, which allows, again, for their easier radicalization.

What we're seeing on the African continent are IS and AQ affiliates metastasizing. In the west, ISIS-West Africa is a viable entity that has grown in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. In Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, JNIM—an al-Qa`ida affiliate—is alive and well and has grown exponentially, so much so that the littoral countries of Ghana, Togo, and Benin view it as an existential threat. In the east, al-Shabaab continues to vie for space and competes with the Federal Government of Somalia to provide governance and be a viable alternative. Lastly, I would say ISIS-DRC and the ISIS cells that we see throughout several countries in central and southern Africa are looking to grow. These groups are alive and well.

CTC: Speaking of ISIS, as we've seen the number of affiliates expand over the last couple of years and spread geographically, a lot of these are based on historical, local groups with local objectives and grievances. How have you seen their transition to ISIS affiliates/provinces? Is there still a focus on that localized nature, or do they take on more of the regional or globalized outlook of ISIS writ large?

Keravuori: That's an interesting question. I think the ISIS regional nodes and core have done a lot of marketing to build their franchise. And so what we've seen—whether it's ISIS-Mozambique, ISIS-DRC, ISIS-Somalia—are locations that had their own problems and lent themselves, as I mentioned earlier, to radicalization of personnel that joined the group. But then the instruction, the money, the direction that they're getting from the regional nodes means that they are moving towards the desires of ISIS Core. So we're definitely seeing the hand of what I would call C2—command and control—of what these nodes are doing and really exploiting regional grievances by offering help. Unfortunately, they are having a lot of success with franchising.

CTC: There's been some discussion and debate about the level of ISIS Core engagement with these localized franchises. It sounds like you're characterizing it as a growing level of engagement. Would that be accurate? And do you think, from a command and control perspective, that ISIS will expand its level of control?

Keravuori: What I would say is, not necessarily ISIS Core but organizations that have engaged with ISIS Core since 2015, notably ISIS-West Africa and ISIS-Somalia, have taken on that role of really representing what ISIS Core needs and applying that to other networks in their respective regions. And then ensuring that each node has leadership, is well financed, has the direction of the Core. I think there was, at one point, a question in ISIS Core [about] the role of African leaders in the franchise, and what I think they've seen is the value of the African groups and then of the money that they're able to raise. Whether through kidnap-for-ransom networks, or taxation and other means, they're able to be financially stable, and we assume some of that money is getting back to Core. So they cannot be ignored. Though I would say ISIS Core probably originally wanted [them] to be more Arab-led, what you're seeing in Africa are key nodes leading the expansion throughout Africa and then being that conduit for the C2 of what Core would like to do with the expansion in Africa.

CTC: How would you characterize the relationship between al-Qa`ida and ISIS on the continent today. Obviously, we've seen conflict between the two organizations globally. How is that playing out on the African continent? Is there more conflict in some places versus others? Do we see cooperation in certain locales?

Keravuori: It's interesting, there is definitely conflict between the two. In the west right now [fall 2022], ISIS-Sahel and JNIM—the al-Qa`ida affiliate that is operating out of Mali and Burkina Faso and bits of Niger—are actively fighting. They [JNIM] have ongoing operations to limit ISIS-Sahel and the territory that it controls.

And of course it goes back to where their financial base is. They are actively doing operations against each other in Mali. Of course, we're happy about this, but it doesn't necessarily mean it will stem JNIM's expansion.

In the east, ISIS-Somalia and al-Shabaab have clashed at certain points as al-Shabaab has tried to take on territorial control of more of Somalia going from the south to the central region. They both look to expand in the areas that they own, but the conflict isn't as active as in West Africa because ISIS-Somalia and al-Shabaab generally do not operate in overlapping areas.

CTC: To dive deeper into some specific countries and regions, we saw [in late November 2022] al-Shabaab carry out yet another attack in Mogadishu, specifically a hotel.¹ What has been the source of al-Shabaab's resilience, and why have the Somali government, A.U. forces, and the U.S. not managed to significantly diminish that threat there?

Keravuori: First, let me make a comment about why you're going to see more attacks and why you *have* seen more attacks recently. It's because al-Shabaab feels backed into a corner. There is an offensive by the Federal Government of Somalia—with SNA troops and ATMIS [African Union Transition Mission in Somalia] troops in support—that is really pressuring al-Shabaab right now. Typically, you've seen the international support for offensives in the Lower Juba River Valley. What you're seeing now is an offensive in the central region of Somalia, particularly the Hiraan region. And more importantly, a clan uprising that is organic to the area and which is actually trying to get rid of the al-Shabaab yoke in the Hiraan region. We haven't seen something like this in the last decade in Somalia, and so because of these operations, you're seeing al-Shabaab react and lash out.

When it comes to the success of al-Shabaab, the Federal Government of Somalia has not been able to successfully unite the federal states to provide essential services and governance, but al-Shabaab does. So it goes back to the basic needs of the people. And [al-Shabaab] has been able to sell that to certain regions; they've been able to talk to clan leaders; and they've been able to buy their way, or if not, kill their way, into what they want as a de facto government in Somalia. Al-Shabaab is now killing clan leaders that they had previous agreements with, because those clan leaders are part of the uprising. So what they can't achieve by saying 'we're going to provide governance and a justice system,' they're going to do by singular attacks in order to force different areas to submit to their governance.

CTC: The United States has been engaged in Somalia for quite some time. We've had various ups and downs in terms of our level of engagement and the types of activities we've conducted. We've seen airstrikes and, recently, the redeployment of forces into Somalia under the current U.S. administration. How effective has this approach been? Are targeted strikes effective? Relatedly, how important is the on-the-ground presence of U.S. forces in Somalia in terms of maintaining pressure on the group?

Keravuori: [Regarding] airstrikes and ground presence, the effectiveness of those two [is] based on what else is happening. At this particular time, ground presence *is* effective because of



Brigadier General Rose Keravuori

the context: one, we have a confirmed ambassador who is helping direct U.S. policy. Two, the new president of Somalia happens to be someone who wasn't in the diaspora but living in Somalia and he has the respect of the Somali people right now. Third, the president of Somalia has opened ties with the presidents of the Federal Member States. These elements all combine to make it an effective time for a persistent ground presence. But again, we have to remind everyone, we are not doing offensive actions. We're there to advise and assist, whether it's the Somali National Army or Special Forces troops that we have trained.

In terms of airstrikes, it depends. Certainly collective self-defense is what we are doing now. We need to differentiate that [from] offensive airstrikes. When the forces we support are being attacked, we will conduct airstrikes for collective self-defense. That is clearly there to support them, to show them we are here to support their operations. And that is absolutely necessary. The jury is out, I would say, on how effective offensive airstrikes would be. I think our main concern remains CIVCAS [civilian casualties]. You can't just indiscriminately conduct offensive airstrikes. We need to make sure that the Somali population is protected, and that's one of our highest concerns. In some of these locations, it's just something you can't necessarily achieve.

CTC: What is your assessment of the terrorism threat landscape in Mali? With the French having pulled out, what are the risks that the actors in Mali would be emboldened, gather in increasing formations, and grow as a threat?

Keravuori: Terrorist actors being emboldened is a huge concern.

Despite Wagner CT operations with the FAMA [Malian Armed Forces] in Mali, we don't necessarily see that it's had a positive impact on limiting JNIM. We see JNIM's expansion in Burkina Faso, and Burkina Faso [has been] struggling, unfortunately, to stem the growth over the [past] several years. We clearly see JNIM's expansion into the littorals of Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin, with increased attacks in Benin and Togo in particular. So we are very concerned about how much it has grown. [There has been a] lack of effectiveness in the localized African partner response and international response. Whether it's MINUSMA^a or ECOWAS,^b I think we could come together and do more in terms of working with our African partners, through intel-sharing or helping drive effective operations that will allow them to strike JNIM. But again, this goes hand-in-hand with, why are people being radicalized? People are being radicalized because there is either a real or perceived lack of governance and a lack of essential services. Typically, who's in the government isn't necessarily the same ethnic background [as] those who are being radicalized. So the interests of those individuals who have been radicalized aren't really represented in the government. It's easy to see why individuals are being radicalized in the west of Africa. I think this is where we, the U.S. and the West, need to focus a bit more. Certainly Europe is concerned. The diaspora of these countries have ties back to West Africa. So I think what we're seeing is France and Europe more concerned about the growing extremist threat in the west of Africa.

CTC: We also have an expansion of ISIS' presence in the southerly direction: activity in DRC, in Mozambique, even down in South Africa. Can you offer some comments on that region and the growing threat that we see there?

Keravuori: ISIS-Mozambique has been interesting because it was so localized through the Cabo Delgado region, and we saw the Rwanda Defense Forces actually have effective CT operations against the group. Now we've got SAMIM [SADC Mission in Mozambique] in there and SADC [Southern African Development Community] forces supplying the holding forces, but unfortunately, holding and clearing are very different. Though the Rwandans have effectively cleared the militants from the Cabo Delgado region, it is difficult without essential services and governance and everything we just talked about to *hold* a region. What we've seen is ISIS go to other regions where SAMIM isn't necessarily located and then come back. So the threat there is not completely gone.

ISIS-DRC is one to watch. I think it has also grown. They're taking advantage of the situation that is now coming to a head between [rebel group] M23, Rwanda, and the DRC. So they are certainly taking advantage of the eyes being [on] the North Kivu region rather than the Ituri region where they're operating. Again, it goes back to being able to raise money, and then operating the facilitation lines that we are seeing them help traffic money [and] people all the way down to South Africa. I think what ISIS is doing in this region is really focused on facilitation and growing nodes. Thankfully, for now, I would say they're small. But it is definitely one to watch.

a Editor's Note: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

b Editor's Note: Economic Community of West African States

“Our national security interests should be tied to what our African partners need right now ... a lot of it comes to the security concerns and ensuring that their countries, their people are secure from extremist threats.”

CTC: Pulling back a bit, one of the challenges that the U.S. has always had when it's looked at the global jihadi threat is where to engage and where U.S. national security interests really, truly are at risk. Looking at the African continent, what are those U.S. strategic interests that require engagement and how is that decision made from an AFRICOM perspective of where to engage? And secondly, regarding the threat to the homeland, what do we see coming out of Africa?

Keravuori: Let me start with the second question first. We are not seeing a threat to the homeland *yet*. The al-Qa`ida and ISIS affiliates are focused on their regions, but it does not take long—as you can see from JNIM's expansion in just several years—[to get to the point] where the African capitals may be at risk, maybe European capitals next, and where any group would like to do a sensational attack in the U.S. It is possible. Not likely, but again, they may get there. For now, we're operating on no threat to the homeland.

[On U.S. strategic interests], what I would say is with the NSC's [National Security Council's] current focus on Africa and with the sub-Saharan and the Sahel strategies that have recently come out, the focus is really [on] developing better relationships with African partners. And that's where we need to focus. When we talk about integrated deterrence and competition, meeting the African partner where they need to be met, which is their security concerns, means that we are being the best partner for them. I think the rhetoric on Western nations exploiting Africa—[given the] history of that—I think we need to be very careful because that's not what we're doing now nor what we want to do. Our national security interests should be tied to what our African partners need right now. And again, a lot of it comes to the security concerns and ensuring that their countries, their people are secure from extremist threats.

CTC: How does that tie into the renewed U.S. focus on strategic competition? Some of our competitors—Russia, China—are actively engaged in the continent. You talked about how we want to focus on our partners in the region, but to what extent is this part of our broader refocus on strategic competition?

Keravuori: I think strategic competition is alive and well in Africa. But here's the thing, our African partners want options. And they are owed options. They, as sovereign nations, would like to partner with whoever provides them [with] what they need, whether it's a port, a railroad, a hospital, funding, and if they're not getting it from the IMF or World Bank, they will get it from somewhere else. Let's take each on its own here: If we're looking at Russia, really it's Russia's strategy of limited actions, which is primarily Kremlin-backed PMCs [private military companies]. And it's the use of Wagner for Russian policy really without the check and balance that

a government provides. What we're seeing Wagner do is exploit, for profit of a company—gold, diamonds, and other minerals—for payment for questionable CT operations. But again, we very much know CT operations aren't just about clearing, which is what Wagner does. It's also about holding, and then it's about providing the services which will stem the radicalization of individuals in that region: again, the special services, governance, justice. And that's not what Wagner enables. Wagner has had success because they provide clearing forces, but also because they drive huge IO [information operations] campaigns that allow them to build support and profit from that.

In terms of China, 53 African countries are One Belt, One Road² signatories. So, they view China as a viable partner who provides economic resources, commerce, ports, and things that they need. So when we talk competition, we need to be very aware that China is a strong partner to many African nations. If we want to compete, we need to help African countries where they're looking to be helped. There's a youth bulge, there are climate issues, there are security issues as we've mentioned. There are visions for more African nations to be spacefaring nations. Those are the topics that I think we need to engage Africa on in order to be able to compete with China, because that's where China has already taken it over the last 20 years and developed those relationships.

I want to reiterate that African partners want to be seen as sovereign nations with their own choice and that they could choose *all* partners. We have to respect that.

CTC: So as we are building and reinforcing those relationships, getting back to the CT context, obviously security force assistance is one of the key tools. How do you see the future of that playing out? Is that our 'best' tool to help empower African countries to combat these threats? Where does it fit in?

Keravuori: The Western footprint should be limited. I think it needs to be focused on building partner capacity, whether it's equipment that African nations need, whether it's training ... and as an intel professional, there is something to be said about an MI [military intelligence] core that takes intel, knows how to PED [Processing, Exploitation, and Dissemination] it, knows how to operationalize that intel for military operations, and I think that's where we need to be focused. How can we help train and build their own capacity? Because if I look at West Africa in particular, the West African nations want their own solutions to the JNIM expansion, not a Western solution. And that's what it should be. I think that's what the French were having issues with. I think they weren't necessarily listening to African partners or putting African partners first and foremost, and that's what we need to do. I think AFRICOM's approach is very much not 'boots on the ground,' but how do we enable African partners, specifically the littorals and Burkina Faso at this point, to clear and to then hold terrain. Not only are we trying to do better intel-sharing and develop our partners' capabilities, but USAID has gone in with, specific to the Gulf of Guinea countries, more development aid money [to] really give them what they need so those radicalized populations feel governed, feel like they're getting the services they need. That's really what's going to stop the deteriorating security issue in the west of Africa.

CTC: I'm glad you mentioned USAID because I was going to ask about that—more broadly, USAID, State Department, and

the broader diplomatic efforts. In other places, sometimes we've seen challenges where we had disjointed efforts. From an AFRICOM perspective, when you look at your strategy in the region, how coordinated is it with State, with USAID, etc.? Because, as you said, the role of development is critical in terms of challenging some of these radicalization drivers. So how do we make these things work together?

Keravuori: One thing I was surprised about when I first got to AFRICOM about a year and a half ago was the 3D [diplomacy, development, and defense] approach, more so than I've seen at other combatant commands. We do have a USAID senior rep that sits at AFRICOM headquarters, plus other USAID reps integrated within the staff. And the same with diplomatic reps. We have an ambassador who is the Deputy to the Commander for Civil-Military Engagement at AFRICOM, one of two deputy commanders. He really lends [his] State Department [experience] and policy guidance as we look at strategies, plans, and our Africa campaign plan. I haven't seen this approach in other combatant commands. I think it's an essential approach.

As we're looking at West Africa, we have stood up a combined joint interagency coordinating group, which is exactly that: How do we use our convening power to really synchronize the 3Ds? Because that is what's going to win and really fix the security issue in the west of Africa. So it's not just about the military operations, but it's about how do we time it and sequence it with the aid development and of course our diplomatic efforts and our allies and partners in the region so that we can actually achieve an effect. So, I would say AFRICOM approaches regional problems through the 3D lens, and that's the first step.

CTC: You mentioned climate and environmental issues earlier. How do you think climate change might impact extremism in Africa? Obviously, it's a very large continent with different challenges in different places. But are there certain theaters where you think climate change could be a greater concern than others, and what can the U.S. military and its partners do to counter those effects in the near and medium term?

Keravuori: First, I absolutely see climate change exacerbating the problems with VEOs. And AFRICOM needs to lead discussions, whether it's at CHOD [Chiefs of Defense] conferences or with our partners, to continue to put climate challenges upfront, because it's going to take the problems we see now and exacerbate the underlying issues of why these problems are happening and why certain individuals are becoming radicalized. If you take the Lake Chad Basin as an example, where you have ISIS-West Africa and Boko Haram operating, Lake Chad is decreasing in size, while flooding of the rivers is happening in Chad. When villages are inundated, villagers want government essential services that will help cover their livelihood. It's an issue when the government can't even go into the region because ISIS-West Africa holds this terrain.

When you look at the Sahel, the farmer-herder conflict has been around for decades. As climate change affects the amount of arable land, you see farmers trying to increase the areas where they can farm, and it abuts against the Fulani herdsman grazing territory. So what you're seeing, again, are localized conflicts being aggravated by climate. Those are just two examples throughout a continent of many examples of either deforestation, bad practices in mineral

extraction, flooding, or desertification that exacerbate the problems that the governments don't necessarily have the capacity to deal with.

CTC: One final threat question: We do a lot of work here looking at innovation in terrorist networks and their use of technology. How concerned are you about the transnational reach and evolving technological capabilities of terrorist actors and networks based in Africa? Are there specific areas or specific networks where your concern is the greatest in terms of their adoption and adaptation of technology?

Keravuori: When you look at the money streams that come from some of these groups, they're able to buy new technologies. They're able to buy even the manpower that knows how [to use this technology]—scientists, for example—or train those in order to be future innovators and developers. So they are absolutely innovating and developing. I think UAS [unmanned aircraft systems] are a huge concern simply because we have seen their ubiquitous use. We are also concerned about the potential to arm UAS. I think what would be interesting is to see how they're innovating their messaging. So not just hardware, which we talked about, which we know is coming, [but] how they innovate in other spheres like social media, their messaging campaigns to be able to recruit better, how they innovate in what we call the DOTMLPF.^c How do they innovate their training, their funding lines, their recruiting lines, their messaging? They have really slick media campaigns, so it really comes down to that. How are they evolving that [aspect] to meet the youth bulge that many African countries are having? They're innovating at a quicker pace than some of the governments in order to recruit from the youth bulge, youth looking simply to have jobs. So they're meeting that demand and meeting that need. I think it's something that we need to be on the lookout for.

CTC: The messaging and recruitment piece is really interesting. How well do you think we—both our partners in the region and the U.S.—are doing in terms of counter-messaging? What do we need to be doing better in the information operations domain to combat these efforts?

Keravuori: We could be more effective. When I look at Wagner, they have a pretty successful IO campaign. [And] it ties in to the VEO security issue because they have been able to get Western nations essentially disliked by local populations. Again, these are Western countries that have deployed soldiers to MINUSMA in Mali, for example, to U.N. missions for the greater good of the country, but now the country thinks that they are arming the jihadists, which is unfathomable to think but that's how successful these IO campaigns have been. We need to better counter those messages.

c Editor's Note: Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, and Facilities.

“Our approach needs to be localized, and it needs to be nuanced, and it needs to come in ... with the 3D approach of defense, diplomacy, and development simultaneously. Otherwise, we're never going to really win in improving the security situation here.”

CTC: What is the most common misconception about counterterrorism in Africa? What should the general public know about the importance of CT efforts on the continent?

Keravuori: I think we need to look at terrorism through each country's lens and the historical reasons for why, whether it's ISIS or al-Qa`ida affiliates, [these VEOs] have gotten a hold in some countries. I think we need to take a different tack than what we did in Syria or Iraq and just say, 'OK, how do we now help this knowing that we should not be taking the lead?' It's hard. You're looking at a problem that you want to quickly 'solutionize,' which is what we do in the military, and say, 'OK, it is much more nuanced than we know, and it's a solution that will take years for the government to build, but it needs to start at some point.' I think that's what we need to think about: How do we help that government start the solution now? And where do we need to best invest and what are we seeing? How do we help them see something differently? So it's that nuanced approach. In the west, Mali and Burkina Faso are going to have very different approaches. Same with the littorals. Same with the east: Kenya and Somalia will approach the issues with al-Shabaab differently. So our approach needs to be localized, and it needs to be nuanced, and it needs to come in, as I mentioned, with the 3D approach of defense, diplomacy, and development simultaneously. Otherwise, we're never going to really win in improving the security situation here.

CTC: What does success look like? In other geographic regions, we've struggled with this. We're not going to fix every problem in Africa, just like we couldn't in other regions where we've combated these threats. So what does success from a CT perspective look like?

Keravuori: I would say, success would be where governments are able to go into territories they are not able to even walk in now and are able to provide governance and essential services. So if we could help limit the threats—I wouldn't say even eliminate—but if we could limit the threat so much so that the people have a choice and don't necessarily have to go with the governance imposed upon them by some of the VEOs, then that is a step in the right direction and that could be considered success. **CTC**

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Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab?

By Stig Jarle Hansen

There are reasons to be optimistic that the current Somali offensive against al-Shabaab could enduringly weaken the group. The operations have gained momentum and demonstrated that the Somali army has made large improvements over the last decade. The use of local clan militias as well as U.S. and Turkish drone support have acted as force multipliers, and the Somali government is finally making a concerted effort to go after al-Shabaab's income generation. However, several factors should temper this optimism. Al-Shabaab has been defeated on the battlefield in the past and has reemerged as a strong actor. What will be key is to erode al-Shabaab's ability to infiltrate government-controlled areas and to govern, tax, and implement 'justice' in these areas. In the past, this has been crucial to al-Shabaab resilience and income. Accordingly, there needs to be more focus on a 'clear and hold' strategy rather than just 'search and destroy.' In the long-run, there are several additional factors that will determine whether al-Shabaab can be definitively defeated. One factor will be the degree to which counterinsurgency operations can be extended from central Somalia into al-Shabaab's southern strongholds. An additional factor will be the degree to which the Somali police can protect ordinary Somalis and businesses from being extorted by al-Shabaab. Another factor will be finding a way to continue to mobilize clan militias against the terrorists without creating the sort of clan rivalries and fragmentation and militarization of society that allowed al-Shabaab to emerge in the first place.

The Harakat al-Shabaab has defied all predictions of its doom and demise over the last 17 years. Today, al-Shabaab is the numerically strongest affiliate in al-Qa`ida's network, still controls large amounts of territory, and is probably Africa's strongest jihadi organization overall as well. The U.S. Department of Defense has assessed the organization to be the "largest, wealthiest and most lethal al-Qaeda affiliate in the world," and some experts have mentioned al-Shabaab's leader, Ahmed Diriye, as a potential replacement for al-Qa`ida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was killed in a drone strike in Afghanistan on July 31, 2022.¹ The Somali terrorist group continues to carry out terrorist attacks throughout Somalia, including a deadly bombing of the compound housing Mogadishu's mayor's office on January 22, 2023.²

Yet, the organization now faces new challenges. A new offensive by the Somali government has been launched across central Somalia. Somalia's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, has even

predicted an end to al-Shabaab's insurgency by the end of 2023.³ Indeed, the offensive has seen many successes. So far, al-Shabaab is on the retreat, losing village after village, and the offensive remains popular in Somalia, with many Somalis having lost patience with the organization and especially its use of intimidation to get the local population to pay what al-Shabaab refers to as taxes, but what in many ways function as protection money.

It is important to note that al-Shabaab has faced challenges before and proved surprisingly resilient.⁴ The group was severely beaten by the Ethiopian forces intervening in Somalia from December 2006 to the start of 2009; it nevertheless reemerged stronger than ever. Al-Shabaab was largely driven out of Mogadishu in 2011, but still manages to both widely tax the city today and continue to launch heavy terror attacks in the capital. The militant group lost large territories in the period of 2012-2017, but it managed to survive and increase its income-generating activities.

Still, there are several new factors at play in the present offensive as compared with previous offensives. Al-Shabaab is facing a more comprehensive and Somali-led offensive, stronger local ownership over the operations, and a stronger focus on curtailing the organization's income.⁵ Al-Shabaab can nevertheless still take advantage of the factors that ensured its resilience in the past: disunity among its enemies, its ability to infiltrate and even govern territories beyond its military control, and to 'tax' much more efficiently in these areas than the government.⁶ This article is an attempt to explore the factors that make this offensive different from past offensives and the factors that both enhance and inhibit the government efforts in order to highlight what will determine the future of al-Shabaab. This article proceeds in three parts. It first briefly outlines the evolution of the current offensive. It then examines reasons for tempered optimism about the current offensive and how it differs from past campaigns. The next section looks at the sources of al-Shabaab's resilience and how this may blunt or limit what can be achieved in this campaign. Finally, the article offers some conclusions.

The Current Offensive

The current offensive started in August 2022 in response to a realization that previous strategies against al-Shabaab had failed

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to bring about any meaningful weakening of the group, and perhaps a recognition that even a negotiated settlement with al-Shabaab demanded that the government negotiate from a position of strength. In fact, President Mohamud directly expressed that his government would, “in the right time,” negotiate with al-Shabaab.⁷ The offensive was launched in two regional states, Hirshabelle and Galmudug, the weakest regional states in Somalia. In these areas, the offensive has been impressive, leading to the fall in mid-January 2023 of Harardhere, a former pirate hub and a strategic city in Galmudug.⁸ Around the same time, Somali forces also captured the nearby town of Galcad, some 200 miles north of Mogadishu. In both Harardhere and Galcad, the al-Shabaab militants fled without putting up a fight, though in Galcad some of the militants returned to attack a Somali government military base before 30 of their fighters were killed in a U.S. drone strike near the town on January 20, 2023.⁹ Since the offensive began in August 2022, the government has reported killing hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters and liberating dozens of towns and villages across central Somalia.¹⁰

Reasons for Optimism: The Ways This Campaign is Different

A stronger Somali army is finally taking the lead.

In many ways, the new offensive is different than previous ones in Somalia. First, the Somali National Army and its Somali partners are leading the operations. In the past, offensives have tended to be foreign led.¹¹ The development follows the strategic goal of the African Union and its partners over the last 10 years, in which Somali forces would be handed increasing responsibility for fighting al-Shabaab and intervening powers from the African Union would slowly withdraw from combat operations.

The Somali army has indeed steadily assumed a larger role since 2017.¹² The role the Somali army plays today illustrates how far the country’s armed forces have come over the last decade, lowering the sky-high desertion rates it had in its early phase and lowering corruption in its ranks as well as removing ‘ghost units’—units that existed only on paper while commanders embezzled funds that were to be used for paying soldiers. The Somali army today is far from a strong army, but it is stronger than it has been since before the civil war.

Moreover, the Somali army is not fighting alone in the current campaign; it has extensive support from the United States, which uses drones and provides air power to aid the current offensive, as demonstrated by the January 20, 2023, U.S. airstrike near Galcad. In another example, Danab forces, special forces trained by the United States, attacked al-Shabaab near El Ba’ad, in the El Dhere district of the Galgaduud region in north-central Somalia, on December 23, 2022, drawing upon U.S. air support in the form of drones.¹³ There has also been extensive Turkish support, with Turkey deploying the now-infamous Bayraktar drone systems in October 2022.¹⁴ Both countries, together with Eritrea, are also training Somali forces. The forces of the African Union in Somalia, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS),^a have also provided air support as well as a military presence that has forced al-Shabaab to hold some reserves in order to keep a check



Somalia (Brandon Mohr)

on them. However, ATMIS has also become unpopular in Somalia during this offensive because of its perceived passivity. Some Somali observers have viewed the ATMIS response as sluggish and slow.¹⁵

Clan militias are acting as a force-multiplier.

The most important allies that the government forces have are the local clan militias, dubbed “Ma’awisley,” that operate alongside the Somali army, and these are being used more intensively than they have been over the last two decades.^b The extensive clan mobilization against al-Shabaab in central Somalia goes far beyond their contribution to past government offensives. In many ways, the current offensive in Somalia’s has parallels to the U.S. offensive against al-Qa`ida in Iraq in western Iraq during the Anbar Awakening in the mid-2000s, in that it is enlisting the support of local clan-based militias and clan leaders are breaking their bonds with the terrorists. The clan-based militias enjoy several comparative advantages vis-à-vis the Somali national army: They are cheaper and more numerous than the army, and they enjoy local support as well as extensive local knowledge, including of terrain. Moreover, the clan-based militias give the Somali government access to knowledge and understanding of local politics at the sub-clan level. The clan militias are, however, dependent on coordination with government forces and are extremely hard to coordinate as well as concentrate for larger attacks. Clan militias

a In April 2022, the African Union replaced AMISOM with a new mission named ATMIS—the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia—consisting of military, police, and civilian dimensions.

b Clan militias were, however, particularly important in the Somali civil war of the 1990s.

have also sometimes been hard to motivate in the past to fight far from their home areas. Moreover, they are hard to mobilize if clan leaders are not protected by the government and are open to al-Shabaab intimidation. Their training is also poor. This means that clan militias function best in coordination with and supported by the army, particularly when assigned to specific tasks—for example, securing liberated areas. Many of these militias are motivated by anger at al-Shabaab's extensive taxation of clan members, and several of the clans in central Somalia are now clearly distancing themselves from al-Shabaab. For example, clan leaders are now often not willing to intercede to release al-Shabaab members from their clan from captivity in Somali national army prison camps.¹⁶

Clan mobilization can, to a certain extent, remedy some of the weaknesses of previous offensives against al-Shabaab, namely the lack of local forces ready and willing to deploy to pacify liberated areas and prevent al-Shabaab from reestablishing a presence in such areas. In the past, al-Shabaab was allowed to reestablish shadow governance and taxation structures in supposedly 'liberated' areas and even gather funds from relatively high-security areas such as Mogadishu and Mogadishu port.¹⁷ A 'clear and hold' strategy where insurgents would have been prevented from entering a territory after it was liberated was neglected and a more kinetic approach focusing on destroying larger al-Shabaab units was prioritized—a 'search and destroy' focus. The local population in newly liberated areas was left to fend for itself, and al-Shabaab easily reinfilitrated such areas.¹⁸ The local anchorage of clan militias as well as their numbers and limited cost for the Somali government are factors that make them suited to prevent such infiltration; they know the local communities and can be present in a larger number than the Somali army.

U.S. and Turkish drone strikes are curtailing al-Shabaab's command and control and freedom of maneuver.

A third reason for optimism is that al-Shabaab's own coordination and control system also presents the Somali government with several advantages in the current offensive. U.S. drone strikes (or the threat of them) have complicated the operation of al-Shabaab's *tanfid* (equivalent of a cabinet) and *shura* (equivalent of a parliament).¹⁹ While U.S. drone strikes have caused these effects for years, the current Somali government offensive has inflicted higher costs on al-Shabaab because the militant group needs command and control to face the government onslaught. In addition, Turkish drones have increased pressure on al-Shabaab.²⁰

Al-Shabaab has lost momentum in neighboring Ethiopia.

A fourth reason for optimism is that al-Shabaab had lost its momentum in neighboring Ethiopia before the start of the offensive against it. The allegations of al-Shabaab infiltration in the Bale mountains, and of connections between al-Shabaab and youth violence in Oromia, remain unproven so far. Harakat al-Shabaab also failed miserably in Ethiopia in its July 2022 offensives against Afder and Ferfer, despite the fact that the Ethiopian army was engaged in a civil war in the northernmost region of Tigray. Notably, al-Shabaab had alienated local and strong clans in Ethiopia and has faced strong opposition from the local forces of the Somali

federal state of Ethiopia.^c Al-Shabaab, as an Islamist organization, in theory had a large advantage in the violence plaguing the Oromia countryside there, where conflicts have been interpreted in a religious way, with local Muslim Oromos accusing Christian Oromos of being manipulated and controlled by the Ethiopian central authorities and where violence has been initiated by Oromo groups naming themselves 'Shabaab.'²¹ However, so-called 'Shabaab' groups in Oromia have so far not publicly revealed connections with the Harakat al-Shabaab, and the group has, perhaps due to the skepticism of any Ethiopian allies, so far (and despite rumors otherwise) failed to take advantage of Ethiopia's problems.

The government is finally seriously going after the money.

A fifth reason for optimism is that unlike previous offensives, there are concurrent efforts against al-Shabaab's taxation and governance in areas beyond its military control. Al-Shabaab has been extraordinarily successful in collecting funds and implementing sharia law in the government-controlled areas of southern Somalia in the past. Al-Shabaab's sharia courts were functioning deep into government territories, proving that one does not need to control an area militarily to create structures of governance.²² In a crackdown on the group's finances, authorities have closed down hundreds of bank and mobile money accounts allegedly linked to the group.²³ Furthermore, the government is warning the Somali private sector against paying taxes/protection money to al-Shabaab, with stark warnings and ultimatums to the private sector that continue to support them.²⁴ According to a Mogadishu-based observer, al-Shabaab sharia courts with responsibilities for government-controlled areas (often located outside these areas) were attacked in airstrikes, even before the offensive began, weakening the will of ordinary Somalis to bring civil cases to these courts.²⁵

Reasons to be Realistic: The Resilience of al-Shabaab and the Limitations of the Current Campaign

Despite the above factors working against it, al-Shabaab can draw upon advantages that have explained its resilience against similar offensives in the past. Indeed, in some areas, al-Shabaab today is actually stronger than it was in the past. Furthermore, there are limits to what can be achieved by using clan militias, and over-relying on them carries big risks. Moreover, the government has not yet significantly taken the fight into al-Shabaab's southern strongholds.

Al-Shabaab still has lots of money, territory, and capacity to induce fear.

Al-Shabaab remains a wealthy organization with a sizable financial surplus. It has the finances to weather a storm. The wealth generated by al-Shabaab will provide a financial cushion that can be used to bribe clan elders, government officials, and security personnel and to 'buy' freelance operatives, such as unemployed

c Al-Shabaab's rivalry with the Ogadeen clan over control of Kismayo port in 2009 and 2010 led to hostilities between the clan and al-Shabaab that cause tensions to this day. Ogadeen clan members in Ethiopia are still quite resistant, if not hostile, to al-Shabaab attempts to infiltrate the Somali region of Ethiopia. Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

youths in Mogadishu, for tasks that could even include targeted assassinations. As explored previously, al-Shabaab has until now been a much more successful ‘taxer’ than the Somali government in the south and also in areas under government control.²⁶ The success of al-Shabaab taxation draws upon the credibility of its threats of violence: Al-Shabaab will tax businesses, construction companies, individuals, nomads, and the transport sector in particular while threatening to punish them if they fail to provide funds.

The protection of civilians against such threats has been neglected in Somali security planning in the past. The Somali police has a history of being donor-driven rather than seeking to provide security for all Somalis equally; protection for the civilian population, including protection against al-Shabaab harassment, has been neglected.^d The Somali government has previously focused on searching for and destroying al-Shabaab units, and it has been Mogadishu’s past unwillingness and inability to do the much harder work of clearing and holding territory and protecting civilians in supposedly government-controlled territories that has allowed al-Shabaab to raise so much revenue through taxation and to carry out governance in areas even outside of its military control. Al-Shabaab’s continued ability to tax and govern is in turn a major factor contributing to its resilience in the face of the new military onslaught it faces.

The al-Shabaab strategy in the past has not been to confront enemy offensives directly, but rather to withdraw, hide, and then again infiltrate newly liberated areas. In this sense, one has to be careful not to equate the number of cities taken over by the government as proof of military success. Al-Shabaab might lose open battles, but it frequently returns after these battles, nevertheless. The current government has started a campaign against al-Shabaab’s taxation and seemingly takes al-Shabaab’s ability to generate income in areas under theoretical government control seriously.²⁷ As already noted, there have been bans on the payment of taxes to al-Shabaab and public campaigns against such payment, and although there have been such warnings before, this is a crucial new element in relation to an ongoing offensive. However, weak protection of the Somali business community will inevitably allow al-Shabaab to tax again, and the current weakness of the police forces will make it likely that al-Shabaab can still generate income in the larger cities.

While the number of cities that have been liberated by the government and its allies in the Hirshabelle and Galmudug regional states is large, it is the ability of the government to secure these areas fully against al-Shabaab infiltration after their liberation and prevent al-Shabaab from gathering taxes in areas supposedly under government control that will be most important. Preventing al-Shabaab from punishing and pressuring ordinary Somalis, including in areas outside of al-Shabaab’s military control, will be the most valuable tool in winning loyalty among the population. The statements coming from Villa Somalia indicate there is serious contemplation over how to avoid past mistakes, and clan militias can provide the necessary numbers to create such effects in the

“The al-Shabaab strategy in the past has not been to confront enemy offensives directly, but rather to withdraw, hide, and then again infiltrate newly liberated areas. In this sense, one has to be careful not to equate the number of cities taken over by the government as proof of military success. Al-Shabaab might lose open battles, but it frequently returns after these battles, nevertheless.”

countryside, but the results are not yet certain.

There are limits to what can be achieved by clan militias and over-relying on them carries big risks.

The use of clan militias carries its own risks as it can result in clan conflicts that interfere in the current offensive, or in other words ‘clanify’ the offensive. As happened in the early 1990s when Somali insurgent fractions deployed rural clan militias, these militias are hard to control, and arming local militias could create armed groups that fall into conflict even after a possible al-Shabaab defeat. A key factor in ensuring success in the current campaign against al-Shabaab will be finding a way to continue to mobilize clan militias against the terrorists without creating the sort of clan rivalries and fragmentation and militarization of society that allowed al-Shabaab to emerge in the first place.^e The use of Ma’awisley could lead to a fragmentation of the Somali security situation, and members of some clans not involved in the current offensive have already shown some suspicions and hesitancy, for example in the southwest.²⁸ Al-Shabaab has also been quite successful in the past in intimidating clan elders, kidnapping clan members to apply pressure, and isolating clan militias to defeat them one by one because of these militias’ coordination problems, all strategies that are open to al-Shabaab during the current offensive.²⁹ There are indications that some of these strategies are already in use.

Yet, the clans are to a certain extent already armed, and the limited geographical focus of the current offensive and the small number of clans involved, makes control and coordination with

d Many of the evaluations of the Somali police force, as well as many of the research articles, are based on top-down approaches, which at times have led to a drastic overestimation of their capacities. However, local civil society organizations and journalists provide more realistic assessments. Waheid Siraach, “Somali Police Force in Need of Forward-Thinking Leadership,” Hiiraan Online, September 24, 2022.

e Samira Gaid recently noted in this publication that “the ‘clannization’ of Somalia’s conflict was evident in 1988, two years before the onset of the civil war, when adversaries encouraged social mobilization along clan lines and ultimately led to the overthrow of the military regime. ... The aftermath of state collapse witnessed the reemergence of clannism as the dominant political currency, with political value placed on the greater numerical strength and the superior fighting prowess of clans compared to other Somali actors. In this new political reality, minorities and the marginalized were automatically disadvantaged given the premium placed on military capabilities that in turn were dependent on a particular group’s access to funds and weapons. It is against this backdrop that the al-Shabaab insurgency exists and thrives.” Samira Gaid, “The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:11 (2022).

“The key to the government’s success will not only be whether it can clear al-Shabaab out of supposedly liberated areas but also whether it can prevent them from reentering.”

clan militias easier. Notably, al-Shabaab has attempted to clarify the conflict by mobilizing its own clan elders; so far, however, these attempts have been peripheral in the clan hierarchy and have largely failed.³⁰

Southern Somalia remains a safe haven for al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab still has relatively safe areas in which to retreat. The current offensive mostly targets the periphery of the group’s territorial holdings, namely al-Shabaab-controlled areas in Galmudug and Hirshabelle. While al-Shabaab’s presence in those areas was notable and strong, they were not al-Shabaab’s main bastions. The areas that have been most consistently and tightly controlled by the group—in Middle and Lower Juba, as well as parts of lower Shabelle—is today the ‘Shabaab land’ of Somalia, where al-Shabaab taxes, trains, indoctrinates, and governs in the open. At the time of publication, there have only been limited offensives against al-Shabaab in these areas, including an operation in late January 2023 in South West State³¹ and an offensive against Jana Cabdalle, 60 kilometers west of Kismayo in Jubaland regional state, in the second half of January 2023.³²

Political rivalries are part of the explanation. The current president of the South West State of Somalia, Abdiiaz Hassan Mohamed (Laftagareen), was in many ways a creation of the previous Somali president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmaajo’ (2017-2022), who interfered in South West State’s presidential election in 2018, sidelining President Mohamud’s current minister of religious affairs and former al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Robow in the process. Moreover, Laftagareen was allied with Mohamud’s political enemies during the 2022 selection process for the Somali presidency.³³ The distrust between South West State President Laftagareen and Federal President Mohamud runs deep, and President Mohamud’s local allies have been moving to remove Laftagareen after his extension of his state presidency to the end of 2023, even leading to clashes in Baidoa on December 23, 2022; the conflict also follows clan cleavages.³⁴ The coordination between the South West State, President Mohamud, and the Somali national forces are thus severely hindered by distrust and enmity, and clan mobilization against al-Shabaab is hindered by the clan-based cleavages created by the conflict in the southwestern state. This provides al-Shabaab forces in Hirshabelle with a potentially safe sanctuary when suffering setbacks there, as it is possible for them to flee into the South West State.

It is Jubaland that will hold the key to defeating al-Shabaab as it is the regional state where al-Shabaab has the most stable territorial holdings. Jubaland’s president, a veteran and pragmatist Aden Madobe, has quietly been watching the government offensives in Galmudug and Hirshabelle from the sidelines and is apparently only just starting to move in support of government efforts. Madobe is in many ways more of a pragmatist than an enemy of President

Mohamud, but he might well play a waiting game, waiting for the success or failure of the government offensive elsewhere to decide whether to join in the offensive against al-Shabaab, although by late January 2023 there were signs he might be starting to genuinely engage in the fight. The problem of the Somali government is that it cannot defeat al-Shabaab without defeating it in its core areas in Jubaland.

Conclusion

The momentum of the current offensive should not be estimated based on the number of cities that al-Shabaab loses in central Somalia nor rough estimates of al-Shabaab losses. Al-Shabaab has in the past faced offensives that slowly pushed it out of Somalia’s larger cities. Yet, the core of al-Shabaab’s resilience and endurance in past years was not due to its ability to withstand such offensives but the offensives’ focus on ‘search and destroy’ rather than ‘clear and hold.’ Al-Shabaab has a unique capacity for rebel governance, including wealth generation, in areas militarily controlled by its enemies; this ability has given it the possibility to generate the fear and respect that is needed to generate income from taxation.

The key to the government’s success will not only be whether it can clear al-Shabaab out of supposedly liberated areas but also whether it can prevent them from reentering. In Hirshabelle and Galmudug, the newly mobilized clan militias might give the government the numbers to do just this, but such clan forces are hard to coordinate and need to be supported by the army. While such militias led to clan conflicts in the early 1990s, they will, because of the army’s limited numerical capacity to clear and hold, be an essential component of a future Somali security solution.

A paradoxical problem is that one of the keys to al-Shabaab’s survival is not in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, where the current offensive is ongoing, but in the areas that the government has controlled over time, such as Mogadishu, where al-Shabaab has developed the capacity to extensively tax and to a certain degree even govern with shadow sharia courts.³⁵ As long as such semi-territorial control exists, taxation is possible, and al-Shabaab will generate wealth that will enable it to survive. The further conundrum is that the entity most important to thwarting such al-Shabaab activities, the Somali police, as well as the regional state police need to be up to the task to provide services to protect ordinary Somalis from al-Shabaab extortion. Developing the capacity and capabilities of the Somali police clearly seems to be a necessary piece to help the Somali government consolidate/maintain its gains, and build on them. Unfortunately, capacity building in the police in the past has tended to focus more on ‘tick the box’ exercises involving theoretical matters and organizational charts rather than capacity to provide services and protection to the average Somali. Al-Shabaab also has, for now, the ability to continue its operations in South West State and Jubaland, notwithstanding the launching of some operations in these regions against it.

All this means that it is likely that al-Shabaab will survive this offensive, but it might lose territory. The problem is that this has happened in the past and resulted in al-Shabaab rebounding, partly because the government failed to protect the population in government-controlled areas from al-Shabaab intimidation. The key to enduring success against al-Shabaab is to protect ordinary Somalis, and it remains to be seen if the government and its allies are ready to effectively oversee this task. **CTC**

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