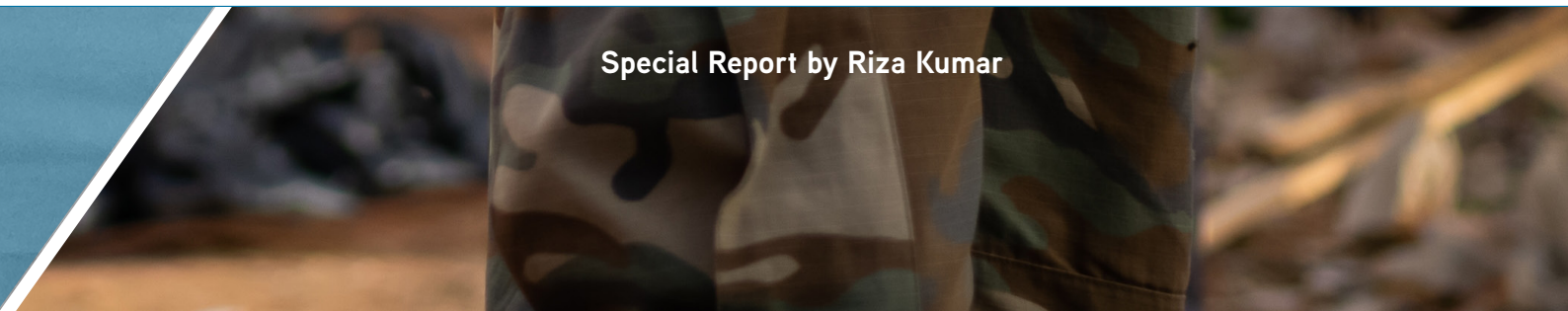# COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

# CIVILIAN MILITIAS
## IN MALI, NIGER, AND MOZAMBIQUE:
## ELIMINATING OR EXACERBATING VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Special Report by Riza Kumar

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# PREFACE

For more than a decade, the Sahel has been subject to a protracted insurgency carried out by affiliates of the global terror networks of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. As the first country affected by this insurgency, Mali has responded by drastically modifying its response to violent extremism.

The regional spillover of violent extremism has elicited similar counterterrorism responses from Bamako's neighbors, with Niger most recently adopting a counterinsurgency model shaped by Mali's and Burkina Faso's policies. Although not in the Sahel, Mozambique has faced similar struggles in containing violent extremism and, like Mali and Niger, has implemented multiple counterterrorism programs to curtail the expansion and public support of jihadist groups. Conventional responses to violent extremism — such as the deployment of national military forces and the enlistment of international counterterrorism support — have not been successful and instead have resulted in each state adopting more localized approaches to eliminating the jihadist threat.

This increasingly localized approach is often conducted through the deployment of civilian counterterrorism militias — also known as community-led self-defense groups, local militias, local forces, or simply civilian militias. Sometimes sponsored by the state, these local militias are intended to operate independently of national defense forces. However, tangential state status has not only afforded these groups funding and equipment, but it has also justified illicit behavior and discriminatory practices that have added additional threats to national counterterrorism agendas.

On paper, the fragmentation of the defense sector provides a number of benefits: Civilian militias are seemingly cost-effective, quick to assemble, and drastically increase the number of actors responsible for countering violent extremists.[1] Civilian militias also possess the unique advantage of promoting and gaining local ties as they not only have on-the-ground knowledge of communities, but are affected first-hand by the conflict.

However, although civilian defense groups have shown they are capable of repelling violent extremists, researchers have discovered these militias, without adequate supervision and management, will likely become predatory and more harmful the longer they are in operation.[2] Accordingly, civilian defense militias have been known to follow self-interested agendas in lieu of their counterterrorism responsibilities. Their defense priorities can shift from protection of civilians to financial gain or de facto positions of authority that remain unchecked due to nebulous command structures or lack of accountability mechanisms.[3]

As this research report will show, civilian militias may initially promote security, but their activities frequently degrade into violence and the further destabilization of conflict zones, allowing violent

extremists to reassert their influence among local populations and further expand their geographical operations.

Auxiliary support is not limited to local civilians, and in recent years the governments of Mali, Mozambique, and Niger have also enlisted support from foreign private military companies (PMCs), particularly, the notorious Russia-backed Wagner Group. The security fragmentation and the destabilizing activities of civilian militias and PMCs then become persuasive tools for the insurgency to legitimize their actions against the state, reinforce their credibility, and increase recruitment, strengthening their violent enterprise. The continued fragmentation of the counterterrorism sector also further increases the risk of human rights abuses, war crimes, and the promotion of a violent culture where indiscriminate attacks have no consequences.

This report will examine the unique trajectory of civilian counterterrorism militias across the

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three countries. Mali serves as an example of a state relying on the integration of civilian defense forces despite the documented negative effects of their deployment. Niger has shown great hesitancy in integrating civilian militias into their counterterrorism model but has acquiesced to their operations. Mozambique has most recently adopted civilian counterterrorism militias as an additional line of defense in its national strategy. However, it is quickly apparent that local forces, even militias that proved successful in previous decades, are also falling victim to disorder and competing goals.

Examining the specific histories of civilian militias within the three countries helps to shed light on the detrimental aspects of community-led defense forces. While this report does not recommend the outright disbanding of local militias, research on auxiliary forces — further illuminated by a prior report on civilian militias in Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso — demonstrates that they require greater monitoring and training that is aligned

with international human rights to responsibly deliver and protect a rapidly growing number of vulnerable civilians.

Currently, the risks associated with these militias are not actively evaluated or addressed, creating significant long-term challenges for the state in maintaining public support for their system of governance and restoring faith in an increasingly inadequate national military. Civilian militias are not held accountable.

Their sanctioned impunity severely compromises long-term stability and the provision of sustainable state-building programs that provide social, economic, and political benefits to all civilians. As the newest addition to standard counterterrorism protocol, progovernment militias (PGMs) — a term to encapsulate both civilian militias and PMCs — have ironically demonstrated the state's military weakness against insurgencies and contributed to greater instances of violence against civilians, further legitimizing the actions and goals of violent extremists.

# CASE STUDY: MALI

Currently in year 12 of a multipronged insurgency perpetrated by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its local affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)[4], Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel), and its earlier iteration Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)[5], Mali has yet to develop and implement an effective strategy to restore stability and protect its citizens from violence and terror.

Thousands of civilians have been killed and more than 400,000 have been displaced by the conflict.[6] Shortly after the start of the insurgency in 2012, Mali's armed forces proved inadequate, allowing insurgents to expand their operations throughout half of Mali's territory.[7] In 2013, Bamako enlisted military support from France, which briefly proved successful.

In the early stages of Operation Serval, French forces seized territory back from the jihadists in Gao and Timbuktu.[8] Despite this initial success, violent extremists continued to emerge, further destabilizing the already fragile government and leading to the "re-activation" of self-defense groups in the regions of Gao and Timbuktu.[9]

Losing further hope in their international partners, in 2021, Mali had begun the process of replacing military support from its Western allies with contracted troops belonging to the Russia-backed Wagner Group.[10] The emergence of these self-defense groups also reignited decades old interethnic disputes, with the militias using their "security" status to seek claims over historically disputed land and water resources and accuse ethnic rivals of being insurgents or terrorist sympathizers.[11]

## The Formalization of Civilian Militias

In 2016, Mali's national army supported the establishment and militarization of the ethnic Dogon and Bambara self-defense militias in the Mopti region to bolster rural areas against violent extremists. The Bambara militia and the ethnic Dogon-affiliated Dan Na Ambassagou militia were established to presumably strengthen counterterrorism efforts against the insurgencies. But local sources have claimed that Dan Na Ambassagou sought to target ethnic Fulanis and turn everyone against the group they claim seeks to impose "Fulani hegemony."[12]

Mali's Dan Na Ambassagou reportedly received state support via weapons and access to training camps in 2016, but according to militia leaders, they do not receive official training from Malian security forces.[13] Without official training and direction, these groups are unlikely to perform their duties in the organized and even-handed manner that is traditionally expected from state security forces.

Indeed, in 2019, the state withdrew official support of the militia following a series of indiscriminate and deadly attacks.[14] Dan Na Ambassagou has been accused of carrying out some of the deadliest attacks in Mali, but as of 2024, the Dogon militia remains in operation, backed by an even more controversial force, the Wagner Group.[15]

## Civilian Militias Encourage and Normalize Increased Violence

Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) make an effort to present themselves as the more capable entity in their ongoing battle with the state. As confrontations between extremists and civilian militias increase, civilians keep score of the relative strength and motivations of the two sides.

A resident interviewed in northern Mali noted that "with the increasing power of the jihadists, the militia retreated and to save their lives, villagers were forced to…cut all relations with the militia and the Malian army. In turn, the jihadists would let them … conduct their normal activities."[16]

When PGMs abandon communities, civilians are left with no choice but to submit to the authority of jihadists. As a tactic, increased insurgent violence against civilians can both signal the weakness of the state in protecting their citizens and also intimidate civilians and coerce compliance to the insurgent movement.

As detailed in the chart to the right, insurgent activity became more frequent and deadly following the deployment of under-resourced and unorganized civilian militia.

According to data compiled from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), VEO activity increased significantly following the 2016 establishment and militarization of the Bambara militia and the Dogon affiliated Dan Na Ambassagou militia. After the formalization of these militias, VEO attacks increased nearly fourfold, from 32 to 125 attacks in 2017.

Additionally, following the deployment of Wagner in 2021, the number of VEO attacks in 2022 increased to a record 912 and resulted in 2,484 casualties, the highest number of recorded casualties thus far due to VEO violence. Interestingly, VEO attacks in 2023 may have increased, but the total number of fatalities decreased by more than 600 from 2022, with 1858 fatalities versus 2484 in the year prior. These figures further confirm

> ❝ Following the deployment of Wagner in 2021, the number of VEO attacks in 2022 increased to a record 912 and resulted in 2,484 casualties, the highest number of recorded casualties thus far due to VEO violence

| Year | VEO events[17] | Civilian casualties |
|------|---------|---------|
| 2012 | 78 | 100 |
| 2013 | 30 | 111 |
| 2014 | 17 | 42 |
| 2015 | 19 | 59 |
| 2016 | 32 | 77 |
| 2017 | 125 | 228 |
| 2018 | 256 | 607 |
| 2019 | 263 | 781 |
| 2020 | 480 | 1,342 |
| 2021 | 654 | 1,142 |
| 2022 | 912 | 2,484 |
| 2023 | 1094 | 1,858 |
| 2024 | 227 | 230 |

**Table 1. Annual Violent Extremist Attacks and Civilian Fatalities in Mali**

that following the initial deployment of state adjacent forces, VEOs will also step up the number and lethality of attacks against civilians to demonstrate that they are stronger than state-sponsored counterterrorism forces, which further sways civilian opinion in the insurgents' favor.

VEOs will continue to target civilians to serve political and military objectives. By targeting civilians, insurgents force communities to either provide support for their movement, or at least withhold support from the state.[18] Interestingly, VEO activity decreased in 2024, as the period between January and June 2024 saw 227 attacks and 230 fatalities, whereas during the same period in 2023, VEOs had carried out at least 500 attacks that killed at least 900 civilians. The exact reason for declining activity is difficult to determine, however, following the 2023 coup in neighboring Niger, VEOs may have shifted their focus to expand their operations from Mali to the greater region.

Regardless of the frequency and intensity of VEO attacks, when civilian militias adopt more

aggressive operations to counter insurgents, namely indiscriminate attacks, there is a greater probability that this method will become institutionalized throughout the defense sector and lead to significant increases in casualties by all elements of the state's defense network.

The best way to analyze the consequences of the culture of violence is by reviewing annual figures of civilian casualties due to targeted attacks by civilian militias and other state forces. It can be expected that there would be an increase in violence against civilians upon the deployment of state adjacent defense units as Mali does not enforce a standard of military professionalism and conduct in PGM operations.

Furthermore, attacks can be expected to grow in lethality following particularly egregious acts that would set a new standard for acceptable levels of violence.

| Year | State/(PGM)* Events[19] | Civilian casualties |
|------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 2012 | 17 (N/A) | 38 (N/A) |
| 2013 | 43 (3) | 124 (25) |
| 2014 | 13 (4) | 31 (27) |
| 2015 | 7 (4) | 14 (16) |
| 2016 | 14(3) | 43 (1) |
| 2017 | 39 (12) | 143 (95) |
| 2018 | 104 (76) | 426 (320) |
| 2019 | 146 (122) | 575 (486) |
| 2020 | 190 (136) | 588 (298) |
| 2021 | 160 (103) | 200 (76) |
| 2022 | 267 (67) | 1357 (92) |
| 2023 | 294 (90) | 988 (208) |
| 2024 | 133 (51) | 468 (153) |

**Table 2. Annual State/PGM Attacks and Civilian Casualties in Mali**

* The figure within parentheses denotes the number of PGM specific acts of violence.

Looking at the data on Mali, it is clear that violence against civilians committed by state-sponsored units does not turn drastically lethal until 2017, the year following the state's official sponsorship of Dan Na Ambassagou. In 2016, there were three attacks against civilians, which resulted in one fatality.

However, in 2017, there were 12 attacks that resulted in 95 casualties, signaling that either the attacks were specifically targeted to ensure high casualties, or the perpetrators became more indiscriminately violent. This trend continued into 2018, when PGMs carried out six times more acts of violence against civilians than in the previous year, jumping from 12 to 76. Casualties also escalated in 2018, with 320 civilian fatalities resulting from PGM operations. Although casualties decreased by half from 486 in 2019 to 298 in 2020, the number of attacks slightly increased, from 122 to 136. Although the state withdrew sponsorship of Dan Na Ambassagou in 2019, reports claim the relationship between the two forces continued behind closed doors. However, by removing state sponsorship, it is likely Dan Na Ambassagou no longer had the weapons and training needed to inflict high numbers of casualties, which would explain why the number of casualties[20] decreased despite an increase in the number of attacks. This statistic confirms that PGM deployment is significantly fatal for civilians.

While acts committed by PGMs remained fairly consistent from 2021 to 2023 — despite the number of state attacks against civilians steadily increasing — fatalities reached a high point in 2022 with more than 1,357 civilian deaths from both PGMs and state armed forces. It is worth noting that if PGMs carry out attacks throughout the second half of 2024 with the same frequency observed between January and June 2024, they will likely reach levels of civilian fatalities not seen since 2019.

Although the period of January to June in 2024 and 2023 have similar levels of PGM violence, fatality numbers increased an estimated 50% from 2023 to 2024. By the end of June 2023, an estimated 100 civilians were killed in under 50 attacks, and by the middle of June 2024, more than 150 civilians were killed in 51 attacks. This increase in 2024 suggests that PGMs have become more aggressive and deadly in their operations. 2023 saw a slight increase in the number of state attacks against civilians, from 267 in 2022 to 294. While the number of attacks carried out by state-adjacent militias slightly increased from 67 in 2022 to 90 in 2023, the number of fatalities more than doubled from 92 in 2022 to 208 in 2023, suggesting an increase in the severity of attacks.

It should be noted, that after its deployment in December 2021 Wagner conducted joint missions with both state forces and militias[21], suggesting that the PMC's involvement amplified state violence. With a notoriously bloody record of violence against civilians — 69 percent of the PMC's engagement in Mali between 2021 and 2023 involved civilian targeting[22] — it appears that the degree of violence endorsed by Wagner's troops has had a negative impact on state actors. National defense forces have also been accused of torture, rape, and looting from not only villages, but from internally displaced people (IDP) camps, introducing additional insecurity to every level of society.[23]

Wagner's tactics were not previously observed in either state forces or civilian militias[24], further reinforcing the PMC's impact on the state's accepted culture of violence.

### VEO Exploitation of Ethnic Divisions as a Tool of Recruitment

As noted by Python, Brandsch, and Tskhay, violent extremists are more likely to target areas with high levels of ethnic conflict.[25] As PMCs and civilian militias intensify interethnic violence and governments regularly fail to respond to these acts, targeted communities are left with one option: to seek security and protection against the state from jihadists. Interviews with local Fulani leaders confirm this sentiment.

They claim community members support VEOs in order to address state corruption, settle scores, and receive protection from the army and abusive self-defense groups.[26] Ongoing interethnic strife has uniquely legitimized VEOs, as their governing style prioritizes the mediation of interethnic conflict, an issue the state has yet to ameliorate.

Although comprising only 10 percent of the overall population in Mali, the Fulani make up more than half of the casualties from attacks by the state and the PGMs.[27] Between 2015 and 2023,

more than 3,000 Fulani were killed across Mali and Burkina Faso.[28] Accordingly, this time period coincided with the deployment of civilian militias. The pastoral Fulani and the Dogon, an ethnic group of farmers, have a tense history of struggle for access to land. These hostilities have become militarized in recent years, with the Dogon-heavy civilian-led militias often accused of targeting the Fulani under the pretext of counterterrorism.[29] In a single operation in early 2019, Dan Na Ambassagou massacred more than 200 Fulani.[30]

The targeting of the Fulani has provided violent extremist organizations with a persuasive argument for gaining support from the scapegoated community. International Alert, after interviewing young Fulani in the regions of Mopti in Mali and Tillabéri in Niger, stated that interviewees held "a complete lack of trust among the communities in the defence and security forces."[31]

Additionally, the recruitment efforts of self-defense forces are often prioritized towards enlisting former state forces and the Dogon, further depriving the Fulani of economic opportunity and leading to greater ethnic resentment and division.[32] Both JNIM and IS Sahel compete for the support of the Fulani and have capitalized on their persecution.

According to AQIM's former leader, the late Abdelmalek Droukdel, the al-Qaeda affiliate was able to secure control of some parts of Mali by exploiting pre-existing rivalries between ethnic groups and by playing into the frustrations of disenfranchised communities of not only the Fulani, but the Tuareg as well. This tactic, as the United Nations reports, contributed to JNIM's long-term goal of becoming a central authority with widespread support.[33]

To further promote themselves as "saviors," al-Qaeda affiliated units developed a strategy of attempting to broker peace between the Fulani and Dogon. Since 2017, JNIM affiliates in central Mali have conducted more than a dozen peace initiatives with and between ethnic militias.[34] In 2023, the United Nations observed that JNIM elements in Mali resolved disputes between the Fulani and Dogon, further legitimizing their position as purveyors of stability and progress.[35] Although mediation often comes with "recruitment clauses" that ensure some degree of membership commitment to the VEO, the insurgents have managed to enforce ceasefires that significantly reduced interethnic violence.[36]

That strategy not only gains the group new supporters, but also makes civilians more amenable to other insurgency governing actions, such as control over communication routes and the imposition of taxes — the profits from which are used to finance global terrorist operations.[37]

## Looking ahead

Despite brutal campaigns targeting JNIM, neither the civilian militias nor the Wagner Group carry out post-operation stabilization activities, which has allowed JNIM elements to return to the villages from which they were driven. JNIM then exploits the turmoil suffered by innocent civilians. The group characterized Wagner as a "criminal force...[that] killed thousands of defenseless innocents."[38]

Accordingly, Wassim Nasr at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point noted that after the March 2022 Moura Massacre, in which more than 500 were killed, jihadist recruitment throughout central Mali increased in May and July of that year.[39]

These vicious tactics have a cultural effect on the operations of militias working alongside the private military company. The culture of violence emphasized by the Kremlin-backed group — 69 percent of Wagner's engagement in Mali from 2021 and 2023 involved civilian targeting, with around 2,000 civilians killed[40] — encourages unethical behavior of civilian-led militias. When militias have or believe they have a greater degree of autonomy from the state, they are more likely to carry out targeted attacks against civilians. Without monitoring and accountability mechanisms in place, the government's ability to exert effective control over militia violence is severely compromised.[41]

Enforcement mechanisms are necessary in promoting acceptable conduct consistent with international human rights standards. However as civilian defense militias work in remote areas not overseen by the national army, they are less likely to be held accountable for improper conduct. The lack of accountability creates deep-rooted resentment among civilians.

By exposing the weaknesses and abuses of these auxiliary groups, violent extremists are able to persuade civilians that they are the preferable force. Although the interests of the civilians are considered, insurgents ultimately follow their own agenda. By gaining enough support from the local population, insurgents can eventually delegitimize and replace the state with their own form of Islamic governance.

Further complicating Mali's security landscape is the entrance of the jihadist group Wahdat al-Muslimin (Unity of Muslims).[42] Established in August 2023, Wahdat al-Muslimin calls for uniting ISGS and JNIM's efforts against the state and other opposition for the "sake of preserving the blood of [civilian] Muslims." A united jihadist front would drastically alter the attack and operational capabilities of violent extremists and would require new counterterrorism responses from the state. However, it is uncertain whether Mali's security infrastructure is capable of improving the capabilities of its counterterrorism forces. Bamako's current efforts are disorganized and often alienate the local populations that the security forces should be serving.

After the August 2023 death of former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner troops remained in Mali, but after November 2023 their forces were formally deployed under the banner of the Africa Corps. Reportedly, 1,600 Africa Corps members remained in Mali as of March 2024.[43]

This insurgency has had regional repercussions, as spillover violence has been recorded in Mauritania, home of the largest number of Malian refugees in the Sahel. In April 2024, Mauritania accused the Malian military (FAMa) and its Russian mercenary partners of chasing armed men across the border into the villages of Madallah and Fassala, ultimately killing civilians in both villages.[44] Given that Bamako has yet to contain the ongoing violence within its own borders, speedy and sustainable solutions to the overflow of violence across the region remain discouraging.

# CASE STUDY: NIGER

Niger has been significantly affected by the spill-over of violent extremist activity and political instability from Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso. Although not a primary line of defense, civilian militias became increasingly relevant in 2016, when Burkina Faso began facing significant levels of violent extremism.[45]

In 2017, JNIM proved the most threatening jihadist group in the Sahel, expanding its operations into Niger, and joining Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) and Boko Haram — the Nigerian-based jihadist group that has been in operation for around two decades and remains a resilient threat throughout Niger's southeastern Diffa region.[46]

The expansion of the three VEOs resulted in the government's enlistment of civilian counterterrorism militias to resist the growing capacity of violent extremists. However, these civilian militias were only a temporary addition to Niamey's counterterrorism program. As accusations of crime and corruption shrouded civilian militias, the government terminated its support of the civilian force, but the groups continued to operate of their own accord. Violent extremism, political instability, and anti-Western sentiment persisted in the region, culminating in successive coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and eventually Niger in July 2023. Similar to its coup-led neighbors, Niger's military junta also later demanded the withdrawal of French forces.[47] Unfortunately, the political shakeup has not resulted in a safer environment for Nigeriens. Niger saw a significant increase in VEO violence, with a recorded 231 incidents and 793 fatalities in 2023. The majority of the attacks and fatalities occurred following the coup.[48] The confluence of political instability and increasing VEO violence has since resulted in a resurgence of civilian counterterrorism militias across Niger.

## Civilian Counterterrorism Militias: Comités de Vigilance (Vigilance Committees)

Although civilian militias have been present throughout Niger since the 1990s, it was not until the mid-2010s when Nigerien communities mobilized militias for the dual purpose of restoring order where the state failed and to offset Nigeria's burgeoning Boko Haram movement.[49] Communities on the southeastern border close to Nigeria took it upon themselves to create comités de vigilance (vigilance committees) or Les groupes d'autodéfense Niger. Although not officially sponsored by the government, the village head recorded the names of troop members and shared their information with state authorities. These "vigilance committees" were often equipped with rudimentary weapons, such as bows and arrows, knives, and a few guns, according to local witnesses.[50]

In October 2016, Niger's interior minister reportedly authorized the establishment of the Korogo, a civilian self-defense militia in Torodi, near the nation's capital, Niamey, in the southwest of the country. However, it is not certain if the Korogo were deployed specifically for counterterrorism,

or if they were expected to prevent crimes in general. In the span of two years, more than 1,000 members were recruited and reportedly worked closely with Niger's national defense and security forces. Most of their successes involved the capture of highway robbers and intercepting the movement of weapons and drugs.[51] Their overall success was limited, however. Instead, it motivated criminals to relocate their operations or join jihadist groups in Mali to perpetuate their criminality.

Following the founding of JNIM in 2017, the criminal contingent that relocated to Mali returned to their strongholds in Niger under JNIM's banner. The skillset of the returnees outperformed the Korogo and resulted in the total disbanding of all "vigilance committees" by the end of 2018.[52]

Despite their stated ambitions, the committees were also tarnished by human rights violations against civilians. A majority of those who joined committees were reportedly former bandits, which was useful in tracking down like-minded criminals. However, it also gave militia members an advantage in carrying out their own crimes. The unregulated activity of the "vigilance committees" eventually motivated ethnic groups to form their own self-defense militias.[53]

Given Boko Haram's expansion into Niger and the Lake Chad region in 2017, the Fulani and Tubu ethnic groups also sought to mobilize militias to protect their communities. The state initially prevented these ethnic groups from establishing vigilance committees, partly due to existing, and considerably stronger, counterterrorism support provided by Niger's international and regional partners.

As Nigerien troops were considered better equipped, trained, better informed, and internationally recognized as legitimate and credible defense forces, Niamey did not see any reason to rely on anything other than its national forces. However, ethnic groups banded together to not only offset jihadist violence but to also provide their communities with protections overlooked by the state. In 2019, given the increased threat of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Tillabéri, the Zankai ethnic group formed a militia to offset the increase in violence. The Zankai were considered unskilled and operated outside of the government's control.[54]

Many local youth and internally displaced people (IDPs) fill the ranks of the vigilance committees, further highlighting the underserved populations



who turn to community-led operations when faced with inadequate government protection. However, Boko Haram is adept at targeting communities with vigilance committee members and carrying out retaliatory attacks. Villages close to the Komadougou River that had established "vigilance committees" were particularly vulnerable — between late 2019 and early 2020, three Boko Haram attacks there killed up to 174 people. Rather than deploy civilian militias, the Nigerien government instead announced it would double the number of troops from 25,000 to 50,000 in five years.[55]

## Government Support

While the vigilance committees are not banned by the state, they have been kept at a distance and are far from becoming a legitimate force within the defense sector. As of the early 2020s, they are tolerated rather than embraced by the state and are not actively deployed despite Boko Haram's presence in the southeast of the country. Instead, civilian militia groups have been relegated to non-defense roles, such as monitoring the movement of suspected jihadists and sharing intelligence with the state. The supplementary forces fill intelligence and surveillance gaps that could prove fatal to national troops, such as in the event of a surprise attack. Additional committee activities would include staffing security checkpoints, carrying out nightly patrols, and occasional suspect interrogation.

In the southeastern Diffa region, where Boko Haram maintains a presence, the state reportedly relies exclusively on local informant networks.[56] Through the delegation of non-military counterinsurgency missions, regional scholars Agbiboa and Aniekwe claim that the Nigerien state offsets the potential of power-hungry militia groups that could have proven more harmful than helpful.[57]

## Abuses of Power

According to the United Nations, vigilance committees comprised of Nigerian refugees in the southeastern localities of Bosso and Yebi may have contributed to the state's hesitation in formally integrating civilian militias into the national security infrastructure. Although fleeing Boko Haram, some of the refugees formed vigilante militias who reportedly interfered in the profitable cross-border trade that locals relied on.

These activities led to the ban on civilians taking on checkpoint surveillance duties as well as carrying small arms and other weapons. It is also possible that the state considered the ban to prevent jihadist attacks on progovernment villages, given Boko Haram's predilection for retaliatory attacks. Two such high casualty events occurred in June 2015 and December 2020, when 38 villagers were killed in Lamana and Ngoumao, and 27 were killed in the Diffa region.[58]

Although the Nigerien state expressed hesitation towards the activation of civilian militias in 2022, there were reports of the Tuareg communities in the Tilia and Tahoua regions collaborating and providing intelligence to the national forces. The contradiction of public hesitation towards militias versus on-the-ground realities further intensifies existing ethnic dissension, particularly by those who consider the Tuaregs to be favored by the state.[59] The mostly-Tuareg Garde Nomade in the Tahoua region reportedly has been tasked by Nigerien forces with warning civilians when to depart an area due to imminent terror attacks.

Scores of the Garde Nomade reportedly returned from Libya in 2021 equipped with weapons from their time abroad, which they used for protecting and avenging their communities if they were targeted by violent extremists. The Garde Nomade has also perpetuated the belief that IS Sahel's ranks were filled by the ethnic Fulani, the historically disenfranchised and targeted community also present in Mali.[60]

Given the Tuareg's targeting of the Fulani, the ethnic group will be even more vulnerable to arbitrary detention and violence should Tuareg militias receive further support and freedom to operate from the state.

Despite the state's wavering support for local militias, ethnic groups continue to band together to offset increasing violence throughout Niger, which risks further ethnic discord. According to regional scholar Delina Goxho, in the Tillabéri region, the Zankai Zarma are "neither controlled nor managed and whose behavior could lead to spiraling ethnic violence."[61] The interethnic tension that is enflamed by civilian militias does not only result in a greater likelihood of intercommunal killings, but also becomes opportunities for jihadist groups to recruit in vulnerable and underrepresented communities.

Unfortunately, Niger's southeastern Diffa region remains targeted by Boko Haram, given the large number of at-risk refugees sheltering at displaced persons camps in the area. Boko Haram continues to exert a strong presence in the region as of 2023, with Diffa residents reportedly "relying on humanitarian aid or joining Boko Haram…when [residents] realize the state has given them nothing and Boko Haram is promising everything, it is very easy to see why so many [people in Diffa] made that choice."[62] The lack of state oversight creates further insecurity for civilians as they are left vulnerable to violence from not only jihadists but national and local security forces that do not

> ❝ Despite the state's wavering support for local militias, ethnic groups continue to band together to offset increasing violence throughout Niger

always direct their campaigns against violent extremists.

According to data compiled from ACLED,[63] Tuareg militias consistently perpetrated violence against civilians. The Tuareg-led Movement for Azawad Salvation (MSA) carried out some of the most fatal attacks against civilians in 2018, killing a total of 57. While comprehensive reports on the targeted demographics are not widely available, Tuareg-led militias continued to be responsible for the bulk of violence against civilians between 2018 and 2022.

However, between January and December 2023, the Zarma Zankai carried out the most attacks on civilians and caused the most casualties of any ethnic militia. The increased number of attacks and fatalities could be due to post-coup instability and the lack of regime oversight on ethnic militias' activities.

While not yet rising to the scale of violence against civilians observed in Mali, the data further solidifies the relationship between poorly controlled civilian counterterrorism militias and civilian

deaths. Interestingly, as of June 2024, Niger has yet to record civilian fatalities at the hands of an ethnic or civilian-led militia, although an "unidentified armed group" was responsible for 31 attacks and 16 fatalities in 2024. While ethnic or civilian-led militias could have been the unidentifiable group, these lower figures could also potentially be due to the junta government's

suspension of international news broadcasters shortly after August 2023.[64]

Without media sources documenting and proliferating on-the-ground events, it is less likely that attacks occurring in remote areas serviced by civilian militias will ever be recorded and publicized outside of the immediate area.

| Communal/Ethnic Militia | Year | No. of attacks | Casualties |
|---|---|---|---|
| GATIA: Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defense Group | 2018 | 3 | 20 |
| Tuareg Ethnic Militia (Mali) | 2018 | 1 | 1 |
| Arab Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2018 | 1 | 0 |
| MSA: Movement for Azawad Salvation | 2018 | 8 | 57 |
| Unidentified Communal Militia (Niger) | 2019 | 1 | 3 |
| Dawsahak Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2019 | 1 | 3 |
| MSA: Movement for Azawad Salvation | 2019 | 1 | 1 |
| Djerma/Zarma Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2020 | 3 | 9 |
| Kabi Bagara Communal Militia (Niger) | 2020 | 1 | 0 |
| Fulani Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2020 | 1 | 1 |
| Unidentified Communal Militia (Niger) | 2020 | 1 | 2 |
| Djerma/Zarma Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2021 | 3 | 18 |
| Tuareg Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2021 | 8 | 56 |
| Arab Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2021 | 1 | 3 |
| Arab Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2022 | 1 | 1 |
| Fulani Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2022 | 1 | 1 |
| Banibangou Communal Militia (Niger) | 2022 | 2 | 2 |
| Unidentified Communal Militia (Niger) | 2022 | 1 | 0 |
| Fulani Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2023 | 1 | 1 |
| Djerma/Zarma Ethnic Militia (Niger) | 2023 | 7 | 33 |
| Unidentified Communal Militia (Niger) | 2023 | 1 | 1 |
| Unidentified Armed Group | 2024 | 31 | 16 |
| Mangaize Communal Militia | 2024 | 1 | 0 |

**Table 3. Annual Ethnic Militia Attacks and Civilian Fatalities in Niger**

## Looking ahead

Niamey has yet to establish a clear line of defense with its counterterrorism protocol as Niger continues to move away from the international and regional support that previously bastioned its previous counterinsurgency program.

It is possible local militias will have greater status throughout the defense sector or will have more input in the operations of counterinsurgency protocol, which remain rife with challenges for a nascent regime unable to articulate their counterterrorism standards and prospects for the future.

Previously, Niger relied on international partners who offered train-and-equip programs to bulk up its counterterrorism efforts. Not only were these programs applied to security forces, but also the administrative structures of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS). However, since the July 2023 military coup and Niger's continued dissociation from its former Western partners, there is no guarantee that these same forces will undergo the necessary improvements required to offset the increasing violence of jihadist groups.

Furthermore, without clearly understood standards throughout every level of the security sector and an enforcement mechanism, there is no clear path forward for the national army to ensure that civilian militias can be held accountable for their actions, further compromising long-term stabilization goals.

Further crowding Niger's defense network, in April 2024, media sources confirmed the Africa Corps — a division of the Expeditionary Corps, which in itself is the official unit for the Wagner Group's operations in Africa — deployment to Niger in April 2024. According to the Expeditionary Corps Telegram channel, on April 24, dozens of Russian military instructors arrived in Niger to help train the country's army.

While details of the training have been limited, media sources noted that Russian servicemen also intend to install a state-of-the-art air defense system that is to be used by Niger's military.[65] As Russian troops ingratiate themselves throughout Niger's counterterrorism program, it is still too early to claim whether the Wagner Group will take Niger down the same path of Mali. News of Wagner abuses have yet to be recorded in Niger, but if Africa Corps's deployment is anything similar to Wagner's operations in Mali, Niger's junta government should be prepared to address increasing levels of indiscriminate violence, jihadist activity, and interethnic division.

Naparama unit. Pic: Telegram

# CASE STUDY: MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique was slow to respond to the emerging jihadist threat in 2017 when elements from Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) — colloquially referred to as al-Sunna wal-Jamma (ASWJ) and al-Shabaab (not affiliated with al-Qaeda's Somali-based branch) — began carrying out lethal attacks within the country's borders.[66]

Violence reached a zenith in 2020 when regional IS affiliates in Somalia provided tactical training, support and payments to ISM, which resulted in the seizure of Mocimboa da Praia, a northern coastal area noted for its lucrative gas reserves. As Mozambique approaches year seven of the insurgency, close to 5,000 deaths have been reported and more than a million people have been displaced.

The insurgency has overwhelmed all facets of Mozambique's counterterrorism program, leading Maputo to employ defense methods that are both old and new. Accordingly, Mozambique has witnessed a revival of local Naparama units and in 2023, Maputo authorized the deployment of civilian-led counterterrorism militias. The Naparama are non-state sponsored local militias that had promising results against rebel groups in the Mozambican civil war from the late 1970s until the early 1990s, whereas the state-sponsored counterterrorism militias are official affiliates of the Mozambican military.

At the start of the insurgency in 2017, the Mozambican armed forces were under-resourced and unable to sustainably contain the emerging threat from violent extremism. Rather than revising their operations or strategies, federal defense troops became more aggressive against the activities of violent jihadists.

However, this violence was not only directed towards jihadists, but also civilians, who according to the Africa Center, were susceptible to "torture, extrajudicial killings of civilians suspected of supporting jihadists, and the mutilation of bodies of presumed ASWJ fighters." The state's aggressively violent response rendered national counterterrorism operations ineffective. Security forces exposed civilians to increased violence from ASWJ units seeking retaliation against villages reportedly providing intelligence to the state, which increased public resentment toward national forces. These factors gave ASWJ a powerful recruitment tool, further mobilizing support for their insurgency.[67]

Maputo sought to minimize growth of the insurgency by enlisting the Kremlin-based Wagner Group and the South African Dyck Advisory Group in 2019. The PMCs were unsuccessful, given their unfamiliarity with the terrain and inconsistent operational procedures. They were accused of unlawful practices and human rights abuses that involved the indiscriminate killing of civilians and harassment of journalists and aid workers. Although the Wagner Group proved to be a resilient force in Mali, the group was quick to depart Mozambique following the deaths of about a dozen Wagner personnel following altercations with insurgent groups.[68] By 2021, the two private

military contractors had reportedly evacuated Mozambique.[69]

It was not until the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Rwanda deployed troops in 2021 did Maputo see a cessation in violence.[70] SAMIM, the SADC Mission in Mozambique, first launched its counterterrorism operations in July 2015. However, the military-heavy mission did not prevail in its goals of neutralizing militants, restoring law and order, and providing human-itarian relief.[71] As of June 2024, ISM continues to ravage the region, carrying out a particularly catastrophic attack in May 2024 in Cabo Delga-do that displaced more than 700. Government reinforcements failed to respond and showed up two days after militants left the scene. Further weakening the containment of VEOs, SAMIM an-nounced in June 2024 that it would withdraw its 2,000 forces by July 15, 2024.[72]

Mozambicans have expressed hesitation towards the purpose of state counterterrorism forces. In-terviews compiled by the NGO Amnesty Interna-tional have revealed that local people are "caught between the Mozambican security forces, the private militia fighting alongside the government and the armed opposition group locally known as 'al-Shabab' – none of which respect their right to life, or the rules of war…All three have committed war crimes, causing the deaths of hundreds of civilians."[73] With the addition of unregulated ci-vilian-led militias, it is even more likely that these fears will be magnified and it will be even more difficult to ensure accountability after crimes are committed against civilians.

## Community-Based Defense Groups

Civilian-led militias emerged in Mozambique in the 1980s,[74] with the Naparama, a prominent local militia, entering the scene in 1991. The Naparama provided auxiliary support for government mil-itary forces unable to adequately secure camps for internally displaced people.[75] Although not giv-en the unconditional support of the government, the civilian-led troops were able to mobilize and counter an ongoing rebellion led by Renamo com-batants — a political party and militant group that has battled with the state for decades — and its collaborators.[76]

However, following the end of the civil war in 1993, the Naparama proved somewhat difficult to demobilize as they sought to receive the same demobilization benefits given to their state-reg-ulated counterparts. Despite their demands, the Naparama were a disorganized movement with-



out a notable leader, leading the group to disband before securing state subsidies.[77]

Naparama units reactivated in the northern Mo-zambique regions of Namuno and Montepuez in late 2022, securing early victories against insur-gents in Namuno. Similar to their predecessors, the Naparama relied on unorthodox approaches to counterinsurgency, relying less on traditional weapons and ammunition and more on deploying large numbers to overwhelm novice fighters.[78] The current insurgency has also seen the forma-tion of local forces in containing VEOs. It was not until November 2022 and well into the Islamist insurgency that the government's Ministry of De-fense conceded its counterterrorism response was failing.

Maputo first legalized the deployment of Local Forces — forças locais and hereafter LF — sole-ly for counterterrorism purposes in April 2023.[79] Prior to their official recognition by the state, self-defense militias were operating throughout Mozambique and reportedly assisted the Mo-zambican armed forces and Rwandan forces that were deployed to Cabo Delgado in 2021.[80] Some reports indicated that these forces offered their services in the northern provinces as early as 2018.[81] Unlike the Naparama, LF are an official unit of the Mozambican Armed Defense Forces (FADM), meaning they are provided state support and they are also liable to the discretion of the Ministry of Defense.[82]

According to Cabinet spokesman Filimao Suazi,

the deputized local militia force will be better structured and organized than its predecessor, which did not have a formal leader or hierarchy. The self-defense forces will assist the state with not only counterinsurgency operations but will protect communities as well as public and private infrastructure. Accordingly, the decree further elaborates on "defining the concept of the local force, its activation and deactivation, composition, forms of acquisition, and rights and duties." The militias are not necessarily untrained troops, as many have informally and formally supported the state's counterterrorism operations since 2020.[83] LF are deployed to assist the FADM as well as military contingents from neighboring Rwanda, and the SADC.[84]

Figures regarding the number of LF remain limited as the most recent estimate of deployed troops was around 4,000 when recorded in February 2022.[85] The organizational structure of the Naparama, as well as their total troop numbers, has not been reported although they are documented across multiple localities.

### Government Support and Local Endorsement

Reports have claimed that LF began collaborating with the government from as early as 2018 when demobilized soldiers volunteered to counter the insurgency.[86] Frelimo, the ruling government party, has reportedly provided material support[87] to local forces since 2020.

However, the government stopped short of providing monetary support. The Frelimo government formally began providing the LF[88] with weapons, a monthly allowance, and retirement benefits following the April 2023 decree that legalized the activities of the LF. The decree also stated that the LF are only legally deployed when there is the "existence of a threat to sovereignty and territorial integrity."[89] The parameters of what is considered a threat is left to the discretion of the LF, who are responsible for reporting the threat elements in their communities that would authorize neutralization attempts.[90]

The LF are established on an ad-hoc basis following approval from the government and local parties. However, there remain insufficient regulations and mandates determining how long LF will operate and which actions are considered acceptable as counterterrorism initiatives. Although LF are not exclusively autonomous, clear guidelines dictating how the FADM and LF coordinate their efforts are not yet established. There is also

> 66 **The government's informal support of local forces in 2020 stopped short of enforcing regulations of the troops. As the state did not provide a salary for the local forces, reports of extortion at checkpoints and the seizure of goods from civilians were attributed to militia members**

no guarantee the two forces will willingly cooperate with one another, as the FADM has accused the LF of inexperience, and LF has chastised the FADM in their failure of containing the insurgency.[91] This perceived skill and power imbalance can result in significant infighting that prevents focused counterterrorism operations to successfully eliminate ongoing threats.

Although technically local forces, the Naparama are not afforded the same state benefits provided to the LF. In times of combat, the Naparama are known to use traditional weapons and claim to use potions that reportedly render them immune to bullets.[92] However, after the Naparama's early success in November 2022, the first secretary of Frelimo in Cabo Delgado invited the group to operate their own checkpoints and roadblocks.[93]

The Naparama were also quick to gain community support, as villages across northern Mozambique reportedly raised funds to help enlist members to the movement.[94] Despite the Naparama's grassroot origins, the Naparama have not shied away from operating as if they were appointed by the Ministry of Defense to enforce their agendas on localities where they are present.

### Abuses of Power and Violence Against Civilians

The government's informal support of local forces in 2020 stopped short of enforcing regulations of the troops. Additionally, as the state did not provide a salary for the local forces, reports of extortion at checkpoints and the seizure of goods from civilians were attributed to militia members as recently as December 2022.[95] Accordingly, Voice of America reported that unregulated standards of protocol resulted in instances of torture and murder against civilians suspected of terrorism.[96] This violence continued to be observed after the 2023 legalization of LF. Several incidents included the decapitation and rape of civilians across villages reportedly suspected of collaborating

with violent extremists. Regional scholars expressed grave concerns about the troops: "irregular forces, without any training in this field…have a tendency to apply the principles of retaliation, that is, an eye for an eye."[97]

Following decades of economic and political neglect, the Mwani and Makua ethnic groups joined ASWJ en masse beginning in 2015. While not all Mwani and Makua have enlisted in the VEO, ASWJ has directed attacks towards the dominant Maconde ethnic group. The Maconde, of which President Filipe Nyusi is a member of, dominate the sectors of business and politics, placing the

ethnic group in an influential position to determine the organization and operations of LF. Accordingly, many LF troops are affiliated with local pro-Frelimo organizations, raising speculation among regional scholars that LF could one day become an armed wing of the Frelimo party.[98] This potential transition is rife with risks. As ASWJ conducts attacks against the prominent Maconde, the Mwani and Makua are at greater risk of targeted violence by LF. LF could claim they are not singling out minority groups but are instead targeting ASWJ fighters — a distinction that in many instances will be difficult to disprove.[99]

| Communal Militias in Mozambique | Year | No. of events | Fatalities |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nangade Communal Militia | 2018 | 1 | 5 |
| Unidentified Communal Militia | 2019 | 1 | 4 |
| Unidentified Clan Militia | 2019 | 3 | 0 |
| Maconde Ethnic Militia | 2020 | 2 | 3 |
| Magaia Communal Militia | 2020 | 2 | 1 |
| Macomia Communal Militia | 2021 | 2 | 6 |
| Muidumbe Communal Militia | 2021 | 2 | 7 |
| Nangade Communal Militia | 2021 | 4 | 8 |
| Chai Communal Militia | 2021 | 3 | 4 |
| Palma Communal Militia | 2021 | 1 | 10 |
| Mueda Communal Militia | 2021 | 1 | 3 |
| Mueda Communal Militia | 2022 | 1 | 4 |
| Naparama Communal Militia | 2022 | 3 | 14 |
| Nangade Communal Militia | 2022 | 5 | 31 |
| Macomia Communal Militia | 2022 | 3 | 3 |
| Mbau Communal Militia | 2022 | 1 | 0 |
| Meluco Communal Militia | 2023 | 1 | 0 |
| Muidumbe Communal Militia | 2023 | 2 | 5 |
| Naparama | 2024 | 2 | 3 |

**Table 4. Annual Communal Militia Attacks and Civilian Fatalities in Mozambique**

Looking at data collected from the Armed Conflict and Location Event Project database (ACLED), violence against civilians committed by communal militias from the beginning of the insurgency in 2017 until December 2023 have remained relatively consistent, differing from the trend found in Mali and Niger in periods where civilian militias are deployed.[100] Although the data is not exhaustive as incidents may have gone unreported due to fear of reprisal attacks or improper reporting mechanisms, there are some patterns worth noting.

Following the unofficial state sponsorship of communal militias in 2020, violent incidents became more lethal, jumping from four fatalities in 2020 to 38 in 2021 and 52 civilian fatalities in 2022. Interestingly, fatality levels drastically subsided in 2023 and June 2024, with overall civilian fatalities listed at five and three, accordingly. As the communal militias are now formally working alongside federal troops, it is possible that they were reported by on-the-ground sources as part of the military forces of Mozambique, which would reduce the number of violent operations attributed to LF.

However, given that the Naparama operate outside the nexus of state-sponsored counterterrorism initiatives, it is interesting to note that they were responsible for the three civilian fatalities recorded so far in 2024. Although the Naparama are not included under the umbrella of LF, it is possible the Naparama are emboldened by the state's sponsorship of civilian-led militias to fulfill self-interested agendas.[101] Unfortunately, the Naparama have advanced topics outside of counterterrorism throughout their communities.

In January 2024, the militia launched disinformation campaigns accusing health workers and authorities of spreading cholera and water-borne diseases. These accusations culminated in a series of riots across Chiure, Montepuez, Namuno, Balama, and Ancuabe districts. The Naparama led 14 riots, some of which led to significant property damage throughout Cabo Delgado and the death of at least three community leaders.[102]

It is uncertain if the Naparama were responsible for the deaths, or if other rioters were culpable. The Naparama continued this trend of misguided operations further weakening their relationship with the state and the public. In June 2024, they were responsible for the death of three election workers they claimed were ISM fighters.[103]

Although some state authorities have asked the Naparama to staff vehicle checkpoints, there has been evidence of the Naparama abusing this responsibility and exploiting their position to harass female travelers. Despite the lack of state sponsorship, the Naparama have become a fixture within Mozambique's counterterrorism ecosystem. However, they are not reassuring additions to the space and instead expose the systemic vulnerabilities of Mozambique's counterterrorism infrastructure.

## Looking ahead

Following the January 2024 cholera riots, authorities in Cabo Delgado met with civilians who stated, "the naparamas were welcome…but now we see that they are a serious problem." The aggressive tactics employed by the Naparama have not only led to grave medical disinformation but have also resulted in the destruction of health centers, further depriving vulnerable communities from necessary medical treatments.[105]

As terrorists expand their operations, it will become increasingly difficult to determine who exactly is part of the insurgency or who is an innocent bystander. Insurgencies expose the faults of state forces and civilian-led militias must offset these defense weaknesses by maintaining public support to preserve the state's legitimacy in providing its population with safety and security.

Exercising restraint is critical, especially as local forces are more likely to be ingratiated into the communities where they are stationed and thus more familiar with the difference between residents and those warranting suspicion.

Although insecurity has not always looked the same in Mozambique, concerns for achieving feasible and sustainable peace remain the same. In 1994, scholars Joao Paulo Borges Coehlo and Alex Vines noted that if Mozambique faced increasing instability and the government enlisted "third forces," these auxiliary units could "progressively develop more autonomy, transforming the conflict into an even more difficult situation in which to mediate."[106]

As the number of armed actors grows on both sides of the insurgency, the heightened risk of violence will be compounded by unclear strategies for protection and stabilization. The vague rhetoric of the April 2023 decree authorizing the deployment of LF underestimates the lawless liberties taken by local militias across the continent. According to political analyst Wilker Dias, operations must be directly approved by federal forces before being implemented by the militias to reduce the potential for crimes against humanity.[107]

The inherent risks that emerge following the distribution of weapons and proxy military status to civilians has significant potential to further disrupt peace and long-term stabilization efforts throughout the country. Without these regulations in place, local troops will not only present ongoing challenges now, but also following the insurgency.

Indeed, following Mozambique's civil war, the Naparama took advantage of ineffective demobilization processes and reportedly continued operations to attain recognition and veterans' pensions, albeit without much success.[108]

LF, and increasingly the Naparama, require ongoing monitoring to ensure they do not deviate from their sanctioned responsibilities and must also be made aware of post-insurgency expectations to ensure the peaceful demobilization of their forces. Regulating LF activity is critical to preventing further division of ethnic communities as weaking social cohesion significantly destabilizes areas already in crisis.

Although not yet reaching the fatal levels observed in Mali and Niger, if LF activity degrades into interethnic conflict, marginalized groups may turn further away from the state and closer to the side of the rebels, the opposite of counterterror programming goals.

# CONCLUSION

As multiyear insurgencies rage across the Sahel and in Mozambique, it is more necessary than ever to confront and improve the conditions that have allowed violence committed by both extremists and security forces to persist. These case studies demonstrate the limited capacity of civilian counterterrorism militias to significantly contain extremism. Rather, they have demonstrated that progovernment militias are an unqualified line of defense for providing security in an environment mired by targeted violence, fatally aggressive operations, and rampant injustice. Civilian counterterrorism militias have amplified the drivers of violent extremism and states have failed to address the conditions that radicalize the public.

To offset the risks associated with civilian militias, states will have to improve monitoring mechanisms and enhance accountability throughout the security sector. As a preliminary step, the three states profiled should prevent the further establishment of civilian forces, and instead focus on improving operations of the security forces they currently have.

The three states should also be more mindful of integrating objective interethnic mediation services into their national security and stabilization strategies. These mediation processes are critical in gaining the trust of civilians, as the International Crisis Group noted in interviews with Fulani across Burkina Faso. Fulani believed "state institutions (justice, administration, security forces) discriminate in favor of other communities whenever there is a dispute."[109] By framing counterterrorism forces as the problem rather than the solution, violent extremists do not have to singularly rely on violence to secure their area of control; they can cater to public safety by negotiating peace agreements and ceasefires between ethnic rivals. According to regional scholars Benjaminsen and Ba, many Fulani "have joined the armed insurgency due to a general feeling of marginalization and because they are attracted by a jihadist anti-corruption [and] anti-elite discourse."[110] Applying a hearts-and-minds strategy creates an environment in which civilians believe the state, and not violent extremists, can remedy economic and political injustice for those impacted by violence and a history of second-class status.

Although intended to fill security gaps in an increasingly expanding regional conflict, these auxiliary groups have demonstrated that in the long run they create rather than counteract disorder and instability. If governments believe that these counterinsurgency units are necessary to their security structure, then there must be conditions in place to mitigate the high risks associated with these groups. States must establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to hold troops accountable for their actions. If possible, employing "monitor" militias could offset abuses. Several monitoring agents within the local forces, albeit not guaranteed to be immune from corruption, could prevent further transgressions if the local forces know they are actively monitored within their cadre and are subsequently reported to the state.

These subsidiary campaigns should at a minimum prioritize basic human rights and compliance with the rule of law. Studies have shown that progovernment militias are more often successful in delivering short-term security goals, demonstrating there is some value in their deployment, albeit temporarily.[111] Campaigns should remain brief to limit exploitative behavior and once a unit is accused of deviating from standards, its mandate should be terminated to prevent further suffering.

These short-term mandates should also prioritize full-scale disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs to ensure sustainable security and development objectives. Although considered a pillar of post-conflict peace consolidation, DDR programs do not exclusively occur post-conflict, and in many cases can occur while insurgencies remain ongoing. DDR ideally helps to resolve or deescalate conflicts. Clearly delineating DDR timelines and expectations will further reinforce that PGM operations and their troops are temporary programs and agents subject to the central regime's discretion. National security sector reform is not easily implemented, however: as PGMs remain integrated throughout counterterrorism structures, governments must rely on solutions that not only counter violent extremism, but also ensure that implemented programs are thoroughly executed and eventually disbanded so as not to increase instability and violence.

Civilian defense militias are driven by questionable agendas punctuated by indiscriminate violence, qualities that are normally expected from violent extremist movements, not state forces. Across the Sahel and Mozambique, violent extremist movements have transformed the delivery of legitimate state-sponsored security, convincing civilians that sustainable social, political, and economic development is more pipedream than reality.

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