

## The extension of the jihadist threat to the borders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire.

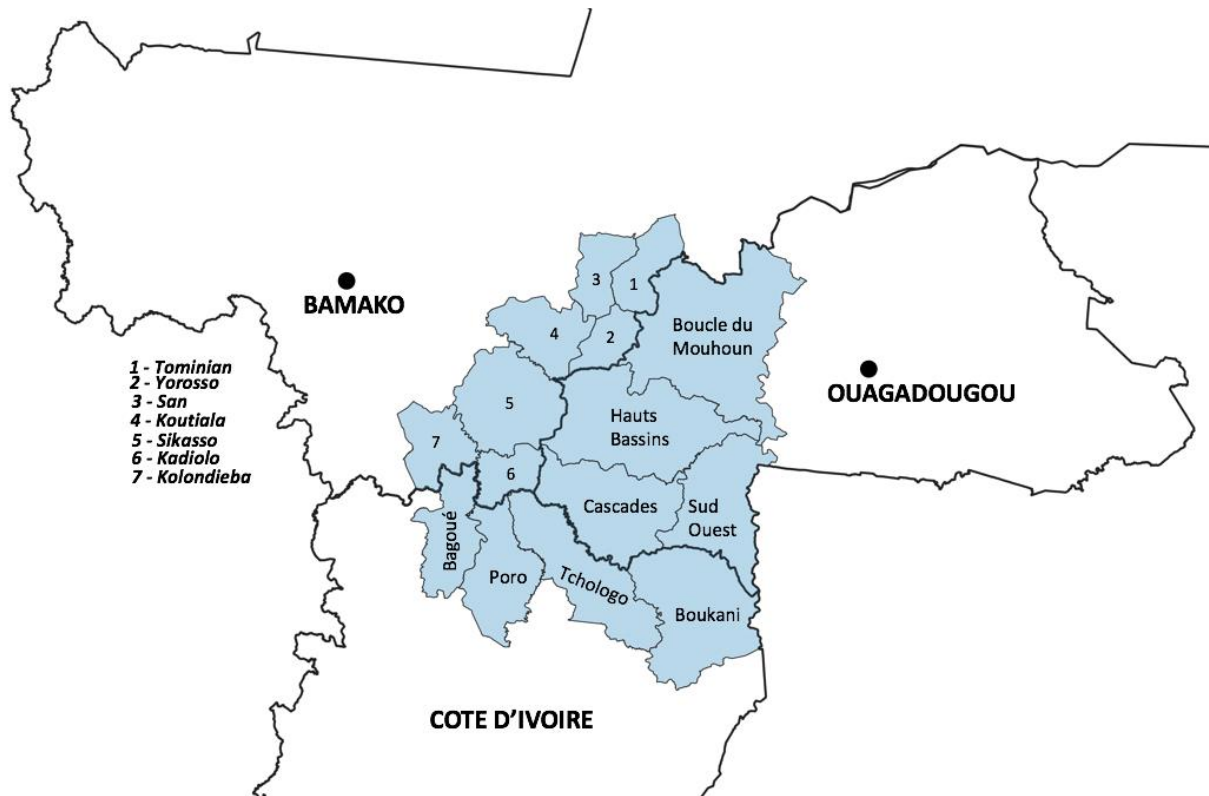
### Abstract

From 14 November to 15 December 2019, Promediation carried out a research and analysis mission in the Boucle du Mouhoun, Hauts Bassins and Cascades regions in Burkina Faso, Sikasso in Mali and the Savannah district in Côte d'Ivoire. On this occasion, the team was able to talk to many people (local elected officials, community leaders, researchers, national and local authorities, representatives of civil society, herders, farmers, traders, etc.). This note aims to present the main results of this research and to share some of the conclusions of the mission.

- **The influence of armed jihadist groups continues to spread in the Saharo-Sahelian region and beyond.** After having established insurgent foci in central Mali from January 2015 and in northern Burkina Faso from December 2016, armed jihadist groups have gained ground in the past two years and seem set to move further south. Since the beginning of 2018, they have regularly conducted operations in eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger, where certain elements linked to the Saharan branch of the organization Islamic State (Islamic State in the Great Sahara) are trying to impose themselves.
- **Located in western Burkina, the Boucle du Mouhoun, a border region with Mali that had been spared from insurgent violence until 2018, has also been the scene of attacks against security forces and civilians in recent months,** in a pattern reminiscent of those observed in other regions, particularly in eastern Burkina and in the "Tri-border region" between Burkina, Mali and Niger.
- **The Cascades and Hauts Bassins regions (Burkina Faso) and the Sikasso region (Mali), where more and more targeted attacks have been recorded recently,** also appear to be in the sights of jihadists.

**Eventually, a second "tri-border region", between Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, could therefore in turn become a theatre of confrontation between national and international armies and non-state armed groups.**

## Geographical area covered by this analysis



### 1. A new outbreak of insurgency in the Boucle du Mouhoun in Burkina Faso

**The administrative region of Boucle du Mouhoun is located in the immediate vicinity of the cliffs of Bandiagara and the town of Bankass, i.e. in central Mali, a region in which a large number of cases of armed violence are currently recorded. Militias, formed on the basis of community membership, regularly confront elements directly or indirectly linked to the Katiba Macina and Ansaroul Islam, two movements affiliated to the Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM) - or Jamā'at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn in Arabic (JNIM). The Boucle du Mouhoun is now being hit hard by the advance of armed jihadist groups.**

The first attack in the region was recorded at the Madouba border post on 30 April 2018. Then in Barani, on 17 October 2018, unidentified armed men launched an assault on the gendarmerie. One assailant and one gendarme were killed. On 21 December 2018, Sono police station was attacked and burned down. On 27 December 2018, ten Burkinabe gendarmes patrolling in the area of Loroni, a locality in the vicinity of Toéni, a few kilometres from the border with Mali, were killed in an ambush later claimed by JNIM. On the same day, a vehicle that had come to reinforce Dédougou jumped on a mine. Several soldiers were wounded.

This latest attack prompted the Government of Burkina Faso to declare a state of emergency in the provinces of Sourou and Kossi, two of the six provinces in the region, as of 1 January 2019. Since then, attacks against the security forces have increased in both provinces. On 28 March 2019, four gendarmes were killed in the attack on the Barani gendarmerie and equipment, including arms and ammunition,

was stolen. On 2 April, the Toéni gendarmerie was attacked. On 1 May, an attack was carried out against an army position in Toéni; five assailants died. On 13 August, an army convoy was attacked in the vicinity of Toéni; four soldiers were killed. On 31 August, armed individuals opened fire on the gendarmerie in Djibasso; a customs officer in the vicinity was killed. On 6 September 2019, armed individuals attacked the Eaux et Forêts post in Sono (60 km from Nouna), killing a forester. On 20 September, a military patrol was attacked in the vicinity of Toéni; five soldiers were killed. On 31 October 2019, a police commissioner was killed during the attack on the police station in Sanaba, located about 30 km from Dédougou, the regional capital. On 3 December 2019, three soldiers were killed, and two others wounded during the attack on their detachment in Toéni; 20 assailants were killed, according to the army. Attacks were also carried out across the border into Malian territory. On 6 July 2019, the Benena gendarmerie post, located on the border, a few kilometres from the Burkinabe town of Madouba, was the target of an attack. Three vehicles were destroyed, and equipment was stolen. Already in July 2017, the city had been the scene of a triple attack on the gendarmerie, customs and police posts simultaneously.

Violence was also committed against civilians. On 14 March 2019, two Dozos (hunters) were killed in the vicinity of Louta. On 21 July 2019, an educational counsellor was abducted from his home by armed men in Djibasso. According to an elected official in Toéni, several people have been abducted in recent months - some have returned, others have not. On 4 January 2020, 14 civilians, including children, were killed and 19 others injured on the Toéni-Tougan road between the villages of Donkou and Dagalé when their vehicle, a minibus, ran over an artisanal mine.

In addition, the planting of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the Toéni area, some of which have resulted in civilian and military casualties, has become common practice.

None of these attacks have been claimed, except for the attack of 27 December 2018. The inhabitants of the area mostly claim that they do not know who they are. Although acts of banditry cannot be ruled out, most of them seem to have been carried out by elements affiliated with the Katiba Macina, based in Macina, Mali. Witnesses report men armed with Kalashnikovs, displaying the signs of radical Islamism (long beard, trousers rolled up over the ankles, discourse on religion). This series of attacks, the above list of which is not exhaustive, illustrates the rise in power of the jihadist elements operating in the area: the pace of attacks has indeed accelerated over the months. It suggests that these attacks are part of a strategy: they are initially aimed at striking blows at the security forces, perhaps with the aim (unsuccessfully so far) of driving them out of certain areas, as has been the case in the recent past in the Sahel and Eastern regions, or in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, while at the same time procuring war material. In each of these attacks, vehicles, telephones, weapons and ammunition were indeed taken away by the attackers and were used during some of the subsequent attacks.

Most of the time, these attacks mobilize only a few dozen elements, who move around on motorcycles. The attacks against the security forces have not yet reached the scale of those observed in recent months in the Liptako-Gourma. And the footprint of the jihadists remains for the moment essentially confined to military operations. The situation in the Loop of Mouhoun is thus for the moment not comparable to that of Soum or Macina.

However, the strategy of the jihadists in the area has now gone beyond the preliminary phase of "prospecting". They are now solidly established and seem to have relatively permanent bases, seasoned soldiers, as demonstrated by the complexity of the attacks they are carrying out (IED attacks and

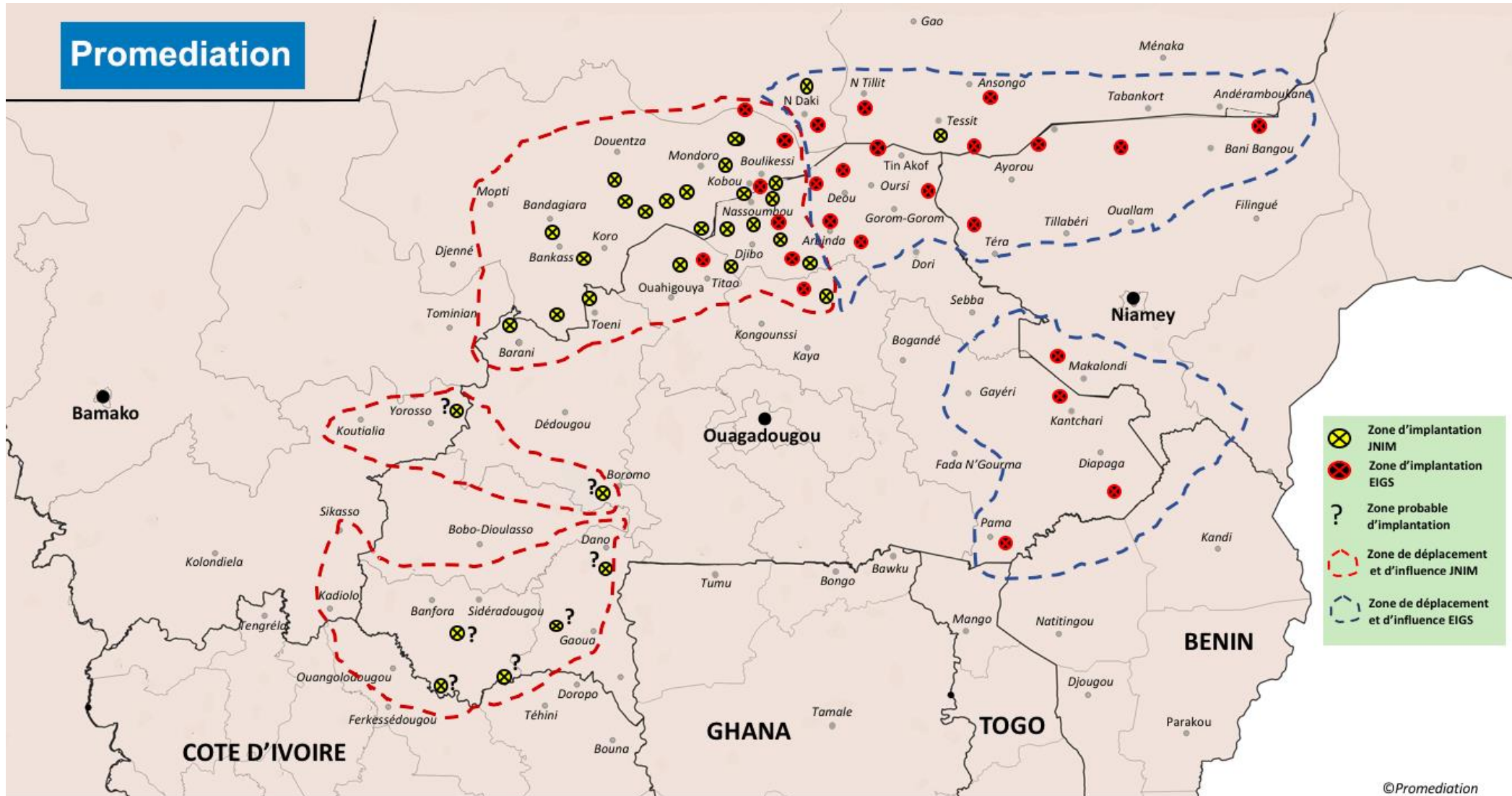
ambushes) and the particularly deadly record of their operations, and reliable intelligence. In particular, they are particularly active in two border sectors with Mali, in which they seem to have established themselves: the pastoral zone of Barani, which constitutes an ideal hideout, and a triangle linking Baï (Mali), Lroni, Sono and Toéni (Burkina), further north. The various cells they have at their disposal also seem to have squared the terrain in such a way that they are in direct contact with the elements of the Katiba Macina, which operate in central Mali, and those of Ansaroul Islam, whose influence now extends into the Sahel and northern regions of Burkina Faso. This operational 'continuum' is vital for these groups: it should enable them to avoid the failure suffered by the katiba Khaled Ibn Walid in 2015 in southern Mali. It is now a matter of them settling in permanently and imposing themselves on the local populations. They have already organized sermons in some villages, notably in Lroni and Sémé, near Toéni. "They said they were there to defend religion," said a local elected official. The process is comparable to that observed in eastern and northern Burkina Faso, or in central Mali: At nightfall, during evening prayer, armed men on motorcycles arrive in a village, force the men to gather at the mosque, and explain to them that they are there for Islam, that they are not fighting against them, but against the military, that they will not do anything bad to them as long as they do not collaborate with the army, and that they must respect a certain number of strict rules. According to several testimonies, most of the time they express themselves in ffulde.

In addition, schools in the region have closed, sometimes as a result of direct threats, sometimes just as a precaution. Teachers have been threatened in Sourou province, for example. As of August 2019, 81 schools in the region were closed<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Out of a total of 2024 schools closed throughout the country, including: 746 in the Sahel region, 391 in the Centre-North, 352 in the Centre-East, 290 in the East and 164 in the North. Source : Unicef. Situation of closed and occupied schools. 29 August 2019.

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Zone of implantation, displacement and influence of the armed terrorist groups JNIM and EIGS in the cross-border areas of Burkina Faso, Niger and the countries of the Gulf of Guinea in December 2019.

## 2. A growing footprint in the south of the Burkina Faso/Mali border

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**Jihadist elements, most likely linked to the Katiba Macina, are not confined to the border area of the Mouhoun Loop. Even if their footprint is less sensitive there for the moment, they are also present almost everywhere in south-west Burkina:** in the interior of the country, on the borders of the Boucle du Mouhoun and Hauts-Bassins regions; but also along the border between Mali and Burkina as it descends southwards, in the Hauts-Bassins and Cascades regions on the Burkinabe side, and in Sikasso on the Malian side. In particular, they carried out attacks in the vicinity of Boromo and Houndé, along the country's busiest road, the Nationale 1, which links Ouagadougou to Bobo-Dioulasso, and continues to the border with Côte d'Ivoire. This area is full of forests in which it is possible to hide: the Deux Balés forest, the Pâ forest, the Dibon forest, the Tui forest, the Soroboali forest, the Kalio forest, the Tissé forest, etc.

The presence of armed men in some of these wooded areas is proven. Herders claim to have encountered them, particularly in the Deux Balés and Pâ forests, located between Boromo and Houndé. Water and Forestry agents hardly ever go there anymore, because of the danger. One of them apparently escaped death a few months ago: intercepted by armed men while he was travelling on a motorbike, they asked him if he was a gendarme or a Water and Forests agent; he answered that he was a health agent, and was thus able to continue on his way.

Several attacks were carried out in this area. On 4 June 2019, in the middle of the night, the gendarmerie post of Bapouro, located on the N1, was machine-gunned by half a dozen assailants. The next day, it was the police station of Fonzan, a locality located on the N12, about ten kilometres from the N1, that was stormed. A few weeks later, on 18 July, the police station in Béréba, a town 25 km from Houndé, was also attacked. These attacks did not cause any deaths. But they allowed the attackers to steal material: military uniforms, weapons, ammunition, motorcycles...

Information gathered by the security forces following the arrest of five suspects, one of whom confessed and admitted involvement in two of the three attacks mentioned above, suggests that a cell was being set up. "According to the evidence available to us, it seems that these men had few means at their disposal and were attacking posts to arm themselves," said a gendarme.

The head of the cell that is being set up is said to be a man named Cissé, a Burkinabé of Malian origin who grew up in Koussarou, a village 80 km from Houndé, near Bana. This man is said to have become radicalized in Mali, where he would have spent several years before returning to his village in 2019. He is said to have links with Hamadoun Koufa, the head of the katiba Macina. On his return, his behaviour would have changed: he wore a beard, short trousers, his wife stayed cloistered at home, and he made radical speeches. He is said to have opposed certain traditional ceremonies, refused to shake hands with non-Muslim friends, and to have said that Islam should be imposed and take up arms for it.

Cissé was apparently trying to recruit in the area, particularly from the Peul community. He disappeared after the arrest of the five suspects. Before that, he had about twenty elements divided into several groups and several caches in the Deux Balés forest, where they buried, among other things, the booty brought back after the attacks; and he was planning to carry out new operations against the gendarmerie posts of Bondoukui and Ouarkoy, two localities located on the Nationale 10, which links Dédougou to Bobo-Dioulasso.

The man who confessed to the crime is a cattle breeder. He says he was approached directly by Cissé, and that he received training in a forest further south, in the vicinity of Diebougou, a town in the Southwest administrative region. For three weeks in February and March 2019, he reportedly learned to handle weapons, and underwent sports training as well as religious training. He claims to have received 30,000 CFA francs (about 45 euros) at the end of his training. But on his return, his livestock vanished into thin air.

The story of this man and the disappearance of the gang leader after his arrest demonstrate the willingness of jihadist groups to set up cells in this area, but also illustrate their fragility during this stage. It also seems, according to the testimonies gathered by the security forces, that Cissé had difficulty convincing men to follow him and met resistance in his own village.

Cells such as this one seem to exist in this area relatively far from the border with Mali, known for its cotton production. On 24 November 2018, at nightfall, armed men attacked the gendarmerie brigade in Satiri, a locality located on National Highway 10, some 40 kilometres from Bobo-Dioulasso. Although no one was injured, the building was destroyed by fire. The identity of the attackers is unclear. It could be bandits – ‘coupeurs de route’ were very active in the recent past - or an act of reprisal in the context of a recent dispute between the village dozors and Mossis who tried to create a koglweogo unit - an attempt that was stopped by the authorities. But according to a local elected official, it is just as plausible that these were jihadist elements. Suspicious movements have been observed in the nearby Maro forest, which has long been frequented by poachers, as well as in the area of the Mare aux Hippopotames, a famous tourist site now deserted, where the forces of the state are trying to create a koglweogo unit - an attempt that has been stopped by the authorities. But according to a local elected official, it is just as plausible that these are jihadist elements. Suspicious movements have been observed in the nearby forest of Maro, which has long been frequented by poachers, as well as in the area of the Mare aux Hippopotames, a famous tourist site now deserted, where the security forces conducted a sweep operation in late 2019.

**More certain is the presence of a unit of jihadist elements in the border area north-west of Bobo-Dioulasso, east of Koutiala, in the vicinity of Mahou and Boura, in Malian territory.** This group, which is also reportedly linked to Katiba Macina or even directly to the JNIM command, conducted several operations in 2019. On 19 May, a dozen armed men attacked the Kouri gendarmerie post, located a few kilometres from the border with Burkina Faso, killing seven people, including two gendarmes. On the same day, the sub-prefecture and the residence of the sub-prefect were attacked in Boura by men on motorcycles.

Quoted by RFI, the sub-prefect said at the time that gendarmes and members of the communal council had been notified of the attack a few days earlier via SMS text messages. Several vehicles of the Malian armed forces had then been deployed in the region. The attack took place only a few hours after their departure, prompting the sub-prefect to say that "the attackers were very well informed....»2.

On 27 October, the Kouri gendarmerie post was attacked again. After this new offensive, a unit of the Special Anti-Terrorist Force (Forsat) was deployed there. According to local officials, the Mahou police station, located 6 km from the border, was also fired upon during the same period.

Several sources claim that the assailants came from the commune of Boura. One group is said to be hiding in a hilly and wooded area of this commune, which is deserted by farmers because it is unsuitable for cultivation, contains caves and straddles the Mali/Burkina border. "An ideal hideout," according to a mayor of the area. According to a colonel posted in the region, this area used to be a refuge for jihadist elements who came here from central Mali to rest. It would become a "living zone" from 2017. From then on, elements described as "suspects" were seen in the villages of the commune before the first attack. They had allegedly bought products in the markets, without alerting the authorities to their presence. Armed men on motorcycles were also seen on the Burkinabe side of the border town of Faramana. They were heading in the direction of Nouna, in the Boucle du Mouhoun.

However, their footprint remains light so far. No preaching has been imposed on the inhabitants, and no schools have been closed. Civilians have not been targeted. However, a nun, Gloria Cecilia Narvaez, a Franciscan nun of Colombian nationality, was kidnapped on 7 February 2017 in the parish of Karangasso, about 30 kilometres from Koutiala. Her abduction was claimed by the JNIM in July 2017.

A military source claims that this group is seeking to recruit from among the Fulani. The fact that the suspected elements encountered in the markets spoke the language of the Fulani and that a few weeks earlier Fulani herders who had fled the violence in central Mali had taken refuge in the vicinity fuelled suspicions against this community. **According to reports from central Mali, an important leader of the JNIM may be hiding there. From there, he would attempt to reach the entire border area from the Boucle du Mouhoun to the Ivorian border and beyond, in the entire Sikasso region.**

This presence is all the more worrying for the authorities as this area has long been targeted by jihadists. It was in Samorogouan, a locality located a few dozen kilometres from Boura, in an area with important historical and economic links, that the first jihadist attack was carried out on Burkinabe soil in 2015.

On 9 October that year, a group of about 50 armed men attacked the gendarmerie brigade in Samorogouan, a town in the province of Kéné Dougou, west of Bobo-Dioulasso, near the border with Mali. Two gendarmes had been killed in the exchange of fire, and then another during the retreat of the assailants.

The day before, they'd gone after buildings. That day, the men had been discovered by shepherds in a forest a few kilometres south of Samorogouan. They had set up a camp there, with weapons and a generator. The former would have demanded that the latter pray with them. One of them refused and his throat was cut. The other managed to flee after the prayer and alert the authorities. One of their landlords, a Mossi, a member of the "Sunni" brotherhood<sup>3</sup>, was then arrested in the town of Tenasso and taken to the gendarmerie. It was during the following night that the gendarmerie was attacked.

According to a local elected official, "there was everything among them: Mossis, Fulani, Malians, Burkinabe, etc.". "One of them had spent several years in a farming hamlet before leaving for Mali and staying there for several years. Quoted in a study on the security challenge in Burkina, a Fulani village chief in the commune reports this anecdote: "XX, one of the terrorists, had left Pedon to ask for my help. He wanted to learn to speak Arabic. He wanted to study in our medersa. I suggested he go and find a relative as a witness. So, he left again. When he came back, he came with his father and a friend of his father's. He came to live with me. He did a year, and on non-working days, he'd go visit his family. The

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<sup>3</sup> In both Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, Wahhabi Muslims have for several years presented themselves as "Sunnis". This denomination is used by most Muslims in these two countries, as well as in numerous research studies.



following year, his father came to me to look for a place where he could house his wife and child. I gave him a place to build. The third year, he moved to the Mossi neighbourhood and did two years there. After that, he went to Mali and did nine years there. He came to visit me often. Then he married a second woman in Tenasso and he brought her to Mali. In the end, he didn't come to see me anymore. It was when he made the attack in Samorogouan that his father told the gendarmes that it was me who put XX on that road. »<sup>4</sup>

In all likelihood, these men were trying to set up a cell in the area on behalf of the katiba Khaled Ibn Walid, who had tried to establish himself in the Sikasso region at the same time. According to various sources, the man in charge of setting up the cell was Boubacar Sawadogo, a Burkinabé. Arrested in July 2016 in the Sikasso region, he was close to the Malian Yacouba Touré, the number 2 of the katiba Khaled Ibn Walid.

### 3. The extension of the threat to Côte d'Ivoire

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**Another region of Burkina seems to be particularly targeted by jihadists. This is the Cascades region, bordering Côte d'Ivoire.** This area is characterized by the presence of large classified forests that can serve as sanctuaries and which, according to information gathered in central Mali, are of interest to the men of Hamadoun Koufa. Attacks there are still rare, and for the time being they are only targeting gendarmerie or police stations, but the presence of armed men is proven.

One of the first attacks took place on 17 October 2018. The gendarmerie of Sideradougou, a town located on National Highway 11, which links Banfora to Gaoua, was stormed. Equipment was stolen, including weapons. On 5 August 2019, the gendarmerie of Ouo, located halfway between Sideradougou and Gaoua, was attacked. On 23 August, the gendarmerie in Sideradougou was attacked a second time. One gendarme was killed. On 13 December, a police station at a mining site in Kouéré, on the Ouo-Sideradougou axis, was stormed. Finally, on 5 January, armed men again attacked the gendarmerie in Ouo and destroyed equipment.

In this area, two densely vegetated forests separated by the national highway have apparently been inhabited by armed men for more than a year: the Gouandougou forest and the Kongouko forest. Dozos in the area have on several occasions arrested foreigners riding motorbikes, armed and carrying money, and handed them over to the authorities. Some seemed lost. They were looking for a specific village.

It was here that four Huawei workers were abducted on 22 November 2019 by armed men and released the next days.

The pressure exerted by the authorities and by the dozos, who sent more than 150 men to the scene and surrounded the area, seems to have decided the kidnappers to abandon their hostages. The account of one of them, reported by a local elected official, validates the theory that it was jihadists who abducted

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<sup>4</sup> Sécurité par le bas Perceptions et perspectives citoyennes des défis de sécurité au Burkina Faso. Sten Hagberg, Ludovic O. Kibora, Sidi Barry, Yacouba Cissao, Siaka Gnessi, Amado Kaboré, Bintou Koné et Mariatou Zongo. Forum for African studies. Uppsala Universitet 2019

<sup>5</sup> According to RFI, a few months before the abduction, "the defence and security forces had been conducting operations in this part of the country. "The area was infested and suspicious movements had been reported," a radio source said. But the security forces had "treated" the area, in their own words, and ensured that the way was clear for further "work".». <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20191126-burkina-faso-liberation-travailleurs-huawei-defense-securite-fuite>

them: they had a beard and wore short trousers, and told them, in ffulde, that they wanted to close down the maquis and schools in the communes of Sideradougou and Mangodara.

The other forests in the region also seem to be inhabited by infiltrators: the Dida forest on the border with Côte d'Ivoire, the Boulon-Koflande forest on the Banfora-Mangodara axis, and above all the Comoe-Leraba forest<sup>6</sup>, a vast wooded area on the western border of Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. A suspicious presence in an area that is difficult to access, full of forest galleries, has also been reported south of Sirakoro, near the Ivorian town of Bolé.

Several residents claim that all these areas are home to jihadist camps. Pastoralists who have allegedly crossed paths with them claim to have been threatened if they spoke out. "There is no doubt that they will attack us. The question is: when?" a local politician worries. The jihadists' footprint is currently limited to these rumours.

Further west, on the road linking Banfora to Côte d'Ivoire, this presence is already palpable. Two attacks have taken place on this strategic axis for the economy of Burkina Faso. On 29 March 2019, an assault was launched against the gendarmerie brigade of Yendere, a locality bordering the Niangoloko forest where the last border police station before Côte d'Ivoire is located. Three civilians (passengers on a transport bus) and two assailants died. On 30 November, this post was again attacked with heavy weapons. Two passengers were injured.

In response to the attack, Burkinabé security forces organized several patrols in the area. An operation was carried out in late 2019. But according to a local elected official, "finding men in these dense forests is very difficult".

**The Ivorian security forces have also increased their presence. Several patrols have been conducted at the border for several months.** It is true that, to date, no attacks have been carried out on Ivorian soil. But "it will not be long before that happens", according to a colonel posted in the region. "There is no reason why they shouldn't come to us," insists an administrative official in Ouangolodougou, the Ivorian town closest to the border with Burkina Faso.

Ouangolodougou is bordered by three forests, Leraba, Koba and Nougbo, which are themselves contiguous to the "Burkinabe" forest of Comoe-Leraba. The border between the two countries, within this wooded area, is marked by the Leraba River, which can be crossed on foot during the dry season. This border is impossible to control," admits an Ivorian soldier. Every year, thousands of people cross it without passing through official checkpoints. »

A suspicious presence was reported a few months ago in these forests. One villager said he met several armed individuals dressed in fatigues - Ivorians, he said, who spoke Dioula. One of them who is from the area recognized him and they let him go, explaining that they were opposed to certain traditional festivals. After this man's warning, excavations were organized in the area, to no avail.

Further west, on the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, the threat remains equally discreet. But the Malian and Ivorian authorities admit that infiltration is likely, especially on gold panning sites. Everyone has in mind the attempt to establish a katiba linked to Ansar Dine in 2015 in the border region.

After the dismantling of this group, no attacks had been recorded in the area for four years. However, on 20 November 2019, armed men on motorcycles launched an assault on the Manankoro military camp in the Bougouni region of Mali. Manankoro is the last Malian town before the border. One of the assailants was killed. One soldier was wounded. According to initial evidence gathered after the battle, it appears that these individuals, five in number, were hosted by a villager.

After the attack, the Malian authorities detected suspicious movements in a wooded area north of Manankoro, between the towns of Doussoudiana, Yorobougoula and Garalo. According to a military source, some elements were sent by the Katiba Macina, via Yorosso, to try to form a cell in this area. They are said to be seeking to recruit local young people, including Fulani.

Suspicious movements are also reported from time to time in the vicinity of Misseni (Mali) and Tengrela (Côte d'Ivoire), where the Katiba Khaled Ibn Walid had tried to establish itself.

For the Ivorian authorities, the question is not whether Côte d'Ivoire will be affected by jihadist attacks, but when. So far, the country appears to be used more as a safe haven for fighters operating in Burkina than as an area of operation. But in Côte d'Ivoire, as in Mali and Burkina, the ground is fertile for Islamist groups advocating armed insurrection.