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Under the microscope: Inside the attacks on Porga and Keremou



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On the night of Wednesday, 1 December 2021 members of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) attacked a border security post in the town of Porga, in Atacora Department, Northern Benin.¹ During the previous day, on Tuesday morning 30 November 2021,

an army patrol near Keremou, in Alibori Department, clashed with 'suspected jihadists' killing one and allegedly injuring another. On [December 10, 2021](#) an IED was detonated near a mining site near Porga injuring four soldiers.²

1 Which led to the deaths of two soldiers and one militant, and several soldiers were injured

2 On [December 14, 2021](#) another clash may have happened in Porga. Local sources suggest a military exercise.

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These attacks are [widely mediatized](#) as further evidence of the ‘spillover’ of jihadist violence and the [deliberate expansion](#) of violent extremism into West African coastal states. If true, this is both an expected and dangerous development indicating a new stage in the Sahel crisis.

[Several recent studies](#) point to the risk of spillover into Benin due to the lingering militant threat along the country’s northernmost borders, as well as largely non-violent militant activities inside Benin. In 2021, four armed engagements between the Beninese Armed Forces and suspected militants have taken place. Since June 2021 there have been arrests of presumed militants deep inside Beninese territory (Kouande and Kouatena).

Nevertheless, we argue that it is crucial to consider recent events as separate and localized incidents that were the culmination of pent-up cross-border tensions in distinct geographic areas.³ This local reading provides an insight into how a spillover into Benin might practically take shape: First, via a growing nexus between trafficking and violent extremists and, second, as a result of (insufficient) regional coordination that risks pushing violent extremists into Benin.

Keremou: The nexus between traffickers and violent extremists

The incident on 30 November should be viewed as a culmination of pent-up local tensions. The incident occurred when two men, who attempted to evade a military position near Keremou, were intercepted by military personnel and one of the gunmen opened fire with an assault rifle.

The incident was preceded by the arrest of two foreigners at the border posts, who were allegedly carrying 17 million CFA (close to 30,000 USD).⁴ After their arrest, three weeks prior to the Keremou attack, four people allegedly from Burkina Faso showed up at the police commissariat in Soroko (just outside Banikoara) to demand the return of the money, stating that they were the bosses of the four arrested men. The police refused to return the money and the individuals made threats and left in a fit of anger. A week later, two other individuals on motorcycles were stopped at the Mekrou police post, carrying hunting rifles and gasoline heading for Burkina Faso. When stopped, they fled into the bush and left their motorcycles. Locals suspect that the attack on November 30 (three weeks after the arrest) involved two men who were actually on their way to attack the Soroko commissariat.

The Banikoara-Diapaga road to Burkina Faso is a well-known passageway for the smuggling of tobacco, fuel, firearms, and other contraband. Its remote location – between two wildlife preserves and far from any major settlements – furthermore means that it has long been an ideal place for highwaymen, whose presence predates the spread of violent insurgencies in the region. The area also has a history of poaching; in early 2020 the Keremou police station was attacked by ‘suspected’ poachers.

Hence, was it a Jihadist attack? JNIM has not claimed responsibility,⁵ and while Benin’s army chief Colonel Fructueux Gbaguidi referred to “jihadists”, subsequent official communication was silent on the identity of the assailants. Nevertheless, the details of this incident, the willingness to escalate, local witnesses and the fact that the attacker carried artisanal grenades (a hallmark of violent extremists) all point at an hybridization of violent extremism and cross-border trafficking around Banikoara.

3 Consistent with [our earlier argument](#) that the Sahel’s overall violence- across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso- should be seen as a collection of local struggles that each government and security force continues to lose.

4 Other sources suggest a few million.

5 Militant groups tend not to claim responsibility for minor incidents or when losses are apparent.

Trouble on the Nadiagou-Koualou road

The attack in Porga on 1 December 2021 occurred in the context of four other incidents along the Nadiagou-Koualou road (between Burkina Faso and Benin) in the weeks leading up to the attack. Koualou is a border town in a disputed tri-border area between Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, just a few kilometers from Porga. Nadiagou is the midpoint on the road between Pama (Burkina Faso) and Koualou – a road under the control of JNIM – and a road between a JNIM base in Kompienga to the west and a base in Madjoari to the east.

Since 16 October 2021, there have been at least four incidents involving JNIM fighters on the Nadiagou-Koualou road. In all of these incidents, the Nadiagou-Koualou road was blocked as the militants ran checkpoints and conducted identity checks on road users; motorcycles and vehicles were also seized and passers-by were robbed. Three of these incidents occurred in Burkina Faso throughout November.

According to local sources, Beninese forces were also involved in an incident on 26 October. In this ‘Beninese incident’, a dozen suspected extremists arrived on motorcycles waving black flags. They then blocked the road at night, taxed all passers-by, preached and, according to some reports, beheaded a teacher. Early next morning, the local police were prepared to intervene but the group had already left.

The four preceding events shed a different light on the attack on Porga than the narrative of a deliberate attack on Benin to extend the reach of violent extremists: first, the attacks on Porga could foremost be a spillover effect of military developments in Burkina Faso; second, the attacks on Porga may expose a complicated strategic trade-off for Benin.

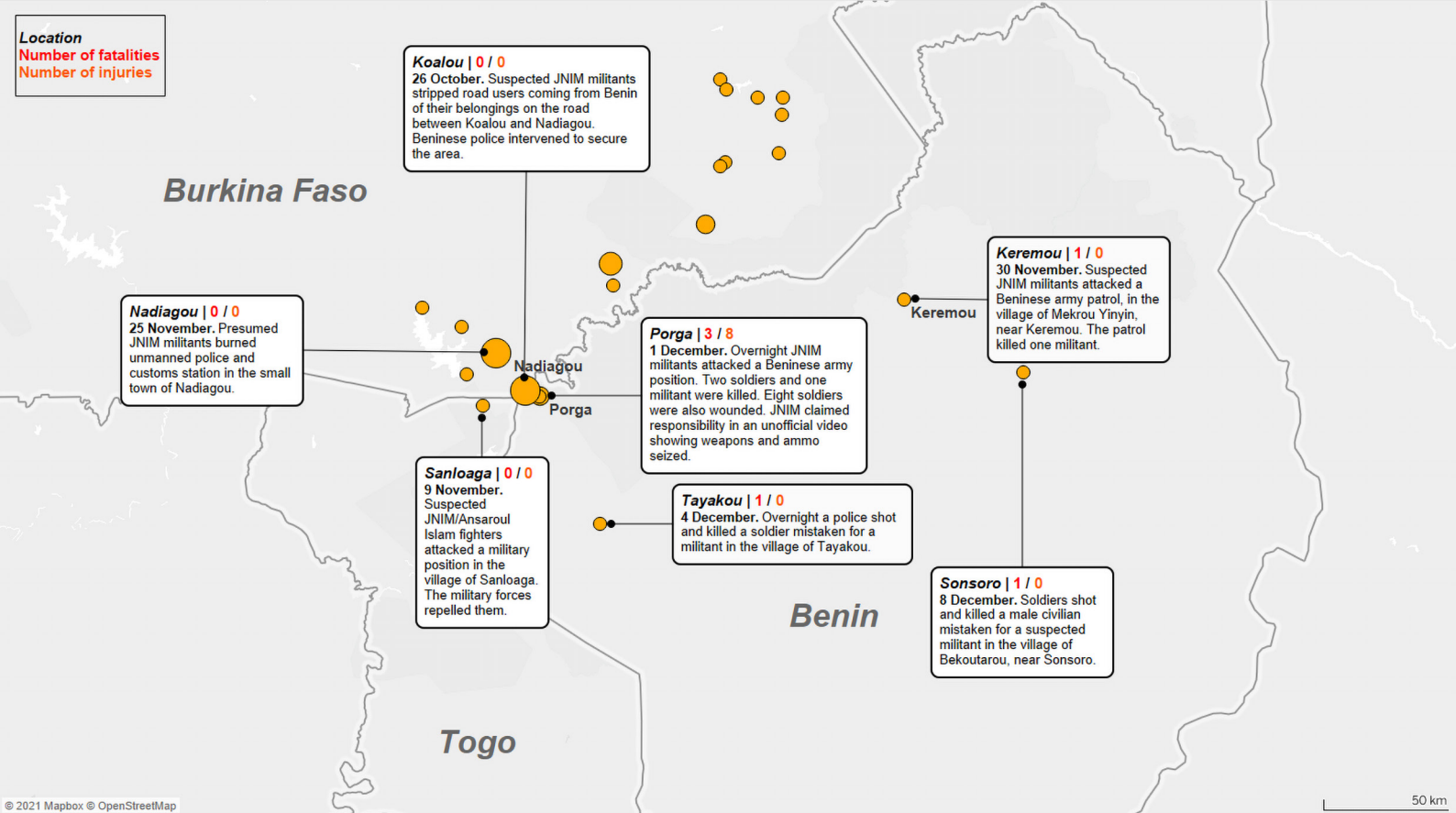
A side effect of Burkina Faso

The six incidents (cutting the route four times and the two attacks on Porga) are most likely due to a JNIM cell around Kompienga. For several months, this cell has been trying to take over Nadiagou, an objective that has ultimately been achieved. The town is strategically important for JNIM as it connects Kompienga by road to Madjoari, the Pama Reserve, and other areas harbouring JNIM bases.

After Burkinabe security forces abandoned their posts in the wake of the 18 November attack due to persisting and imminent threats, JNIM fighters in Kompienga finally managed to capture Nadiagou. On 25 November, militants wearing police and customs fatigues openly roamed the streets of Nadiagou. The four incidents in which the Nadiagou-Koualou route was regularly disrupted for nearly three months prior to the Porga attack are best understood as military guerrilla tactics to isolate Nadiagou.

In the weeks leading up to the Nadiagou takeover, Benin and Burkina Faso each appear to have attempted to secure their part of the road. The key piece of information is that Porga’s military units were responsible for securing the road on the Benin side. The attacks might, therefore, be best interpreted as punishment for involvement in Burkina Faso. This is even more likely considering the December 10 incident in which a Beninese military vehicle was hit by an IED. This incident occurred after the Beninese army crossed into Burkina Faso on 3 December and arrested several Burkinabe residents for allegedly “harbouring terrorists” whereas on December 8 various arrests were made in Dassari, Materi, Tanguita and Porga.⁶

⁶ Arrests on December 8, according to some sources, involved predominantly Fulani and sometimes on unclear grounds. The use of IEDs might also indicate a warning that is consistent with the message in June 2020 that JNIM should not become involved.



Violent Extremist Activity in Benin-Burkina Faso-Togo Border Region (September - December 2021)

Benin's 'catch 22': to coordinate or not to coordinate

The Porga attacks, however, reveal another strategic problem that Benin faces: the difficult choice of coordinating with its neighbours.

The attack on Porga and the JNIM Nadiagou operation took place in the midst of successive military operations in JNIM core areas in eastern Burkina Faso and along its borders. In early November, the Burkinabe Armed Forces started a military operation targeting militant positions dubbed "Ougapo 2" in Est and Centre-Est. On 25 November, the joint Nigerien-Burkinabe operation "Taanli 2" began along these countries' common border. Meanwhile, from 21 to 27 November, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo conducted the large-scale operation "Koundalgou 4" in the border areas of all four countries, an operation involving more than 5,000 personnel. Military pressure was thus exerted to the north, west and east of Komienga, leaving only one way open into Benin to the south (even though the army had taken a defensive stance after

an attack on Sanloaga Togo in November). This probably helped to push extremist fighters into Benin.

Strikingly, Benin did not participate in these military operations.

There appear to be several reasons for Benin's reluctance. One reason is that Benin prefers bilateral engagements (specifically with Niger) according to sources close to the Accra Initiative and in Cotonou. Another reason are tensions between Burkina Faso and Benin. Beninese decision-makers reportedly have little confidence in the Burkinabe military, whereas Burkina criticizes Benin over the ease of movement on the border where extremists operate. This mistrust – and the obvious problem of extremists operating in a disputed strip of land claimed by both countries – seems to prevent effective coordination between Benin and Burkina Faso.

Nonetheless, there is more to this than just bad blood between neighbours. The attacks on Porga expose a complicated strategic problem for Benin: participating in regional coalitions against violent extremists could help mitigate the threat if successful, but

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risks making Benin a target (including activating radical elements that are already present in Benin).

Hence, there is presently a catch-22 situation. A purely defensive stance could (albeit temporary) contain spillover into Benin. However, an offensive approach through regional coordination will pitch Benin withdirectly against a strong JNIM presence and carry a massive risk of escalation.

The way out for Benin

[As our recent research has shown](#), a major question is whether violent extremists will be able to tap into and transform local communal conflicts like farmer-herder violence and resource management. As of June 2021, there was no clear evidence that this had happened on a large scale. These new incidents, paradoxically, underscore this point: these incidents were not based on exploiting communal conflicts, but rather appear to have arisen for very local and pragmatic reasons.

What can Benin do?

First of all, the country needs to reduce its vulnerability as soon as possible. In doing so, it should focus on the root causes of communal conflicts in the North. If these transmission patterns are not addressed, there will be ample room for importation.

Early indications are that promising steps are being taken in some areas, particularly the management of Parc W, but also that violence between farmers and herders, for example, remains a massive problem.



The second task is challenging both for Benin as well as for its neighbours. Joint military operations must be decisive, well-coordinated, and followed by a clear plan as to how the border areas will be subsequently jointly managed (rather than a week-long roundup of suspects by a regional coalition – cf. ‘Koundalgou 4’). As long as these conditions are not met, Benin has no real incentive to join the international efforts. Indeed, it is not in its interest to do so now, as it risks pitching itself against extremists in Burkina Faso. It can make better use of the time available to further reduce its vulnerabilities.

A final task is to seek moderation. In the aftermath of the attacks on Porga and Keremou, the Beninese military has made several rounds of arrests, some of which are claimed to have been indiscriminate. Moreover, there is tension in the army as attested by two incidents of ‘friendly fire’ where in one case a civilian and in another a soldier were shot (both of whom were mistakenly identified as ‘terrorists’). If we have learned anything from Cote d’Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso, it is that an overreacting military will make matters much worse.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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