



Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. A Park under Threat	3
A. A Century-long Conservation Effort.....	3
B. Droughts, Migration and Growing Populations	5
C. Conflict on the Park’s Edges	6
III. Jihadist Takeover	8
A. Arrivals, Recruits and Allies	8
B. Local Headquarters.....	10
C. Satellite Cells and Forested By-ways	12
D. Undermining Conservation	13
IV. Safeguarding Park W	15
A. Securing Park W	15
B. Improving Conservation	17
C. Addressing Conflict over Resources	19
V. Policy Recommendations	21
A. A Three-tiered Military Strategy.....	21
B. Declassifying the Park’s Buffer Zones	22
C. A Long-term Project: Transforming Agricultural Production	23
VI. Conclusion	25
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Conflict Incidents and Protected Areas in the Sahel	26
B. About the International Crisis Group	27
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Afria since 2020.....	28
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	30

Principal Findings

What's new? Militant groups have moved into Park W, a vast protected area of forest stretching across the tri-border zone of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger. Their presence is imperilling efforts to preserve the park's biodiversity as well as the livelihoods of people living in its vicinity.

Why does it matter? If left unchecked, the insurgents could consolidate their hold on the park, using it as a base for infiltrating other West African countries. They could also exacerbate disputes over natural resources, fuelling inter-communal conflict.

What should be done? The three countries home to the park should find better ways of working together to keep the militants contained, the residents safe and competition for land and water under control.

Executive Summary

Sahelian jihadists have occupied Park W, a huge nature reserve in the borderlands of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, transforming it into a launchpad for expansion toward the West African savannah. Their presence in the park is disrupting century-old conservation efforts as well as local livelihoods, feeding struggles among sedentary farmers and nomadic herders for land and water. It also risks aggravating insecurity in coastal countries farther south. Authorities in the three countries have tried hard, with the support of foreign partners, to halt the militants' advance. But their efforts have fallen short, as have endeavours to improve conservation and ameliorate conflict over natural resources in and around the park. The three countries should agree on better protocols for coordinated military action and a common strategy for protecting the population, which should include openness to dialogue with militants when appropriate. They should also explore reforms to better manage resource competition in the park's surroundings.

Park W is part of the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex, the single biggest protected area in West Africa and home to elephants, lions and other species whose habitats are vanishing elsewhere. From its colonial-era beginnings, the conservation effort at Park W has generated contention between environmentalists, who wanted to protect a precious site of biodiversity, and residents, who viewed the park as a place to raise crops, hunt and gather fodder for their livestock. The three governments that share jurisdiction have lacked the money and manpower to preserve the park intact. Starting in the 1970s, recurrent droughts pushed people from the arid Sahel into the park's vicinity, stoking competition over grasslands and water.

Jihadists have tapped into these grievances to establish themselves. In 2018, two groups – the Katiba Ansarul Islam and the Katiba Serma – made inroads in the park, gaining control of most of it by late August of that year. Militants have used various tactics to bring in fresh recruits. At first, they attracted bandits from the forest and other troubled youth. Over time, they cultivated ties with herders, who like them dwell in bushland.

Over the last two years, Park W has become an important militant base. Jihadists fill their coffers by taxing artisanal gold mining around the park and trading herds of livestock, as well as smuggling various goods. In the park's periphery, militants try to enforce their harsh interpretation of Sharia law, particularly on women, whom they have barred from going out alone in public. They meddle in relationships between men and women and have in some cases forced underage girls to marry. Militants have also attempted to stop what they see as un-Islamic practices, including in places where animists and Christians are the majority of the population.

The jihadists in the park are causing other problems as well. From hideouts there, they have attempted to take new territory in western Niger, northern Benin and eastern Burkina Faso.

Authorities in the three countries are working alongside foreign partners to regain control of Park W and its surroundings. They emphasise three axes of intervention: securing the park through military action; improving surveillance and anti-poaching mechanisms; and addressing resource conflicts. They have stepped up conservation

efforts through legal reform, capacity building for the park's managerial staff and concerted programs designed to bring local communities on board. They are taking measures to stop the spread of farmland into the park, as well as to mark off grazing lands, transhumance corridors and resting areas for livestock.

Still, more will be required to restore security to Park W and its environs. On the military level, stronger coordination among Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger will be necessary – although for the sake of efficiency they should keep operating as separate commands rather than under a single framework. But the terrain is rough going for the three armies, and the human and environmental costs of military action will likely be high. For this reason, the three countries should be prepared to focus on containing rather than overpowering the insurgents in some regions – particularly around Niamey, Niger's capital city, which is just 150km from the park and threatened by militant outposts – and remain willing to engage in discreet negotiations with the jihadists when called for.

At the same time, the three countries will have to wrestle with the drivers of social tensions outside the park, notably the contest for resources. Here, the solutions are likely to be highly contentious. For example, the authorities may wish to consider declassifying parts of the park's buffer zones to allow pastoralists to graze and give farmers land to cultivate, despite the tension between this step and conservationist goals. Looking at the horizon, the three countries – and other states in the region – could also explore the difficult but increasingly unavoidable question of whether to encourage nomads to adopt sedentary lifestyles.

With jihadists in control of large parts of Park W, and people living nearby under economic and environmental pressures, the three governments that share responsibility for the park have their hands more than full. But coordinated military action that leaves the door open for a range of approaches, combined with donor-supported efforts to address resource scarcity through near- and long-term reforms, can help make this troubled part of West Africa safer, while preserving its natural wonders and ecosystems on which many local livelihoods rely.

Ouagadougou/Cotonou/Niamey/Brussels, 26 January 2023

Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W

I. Introduction

Parks and forests have become way stations for jihadist groups seeking to move south from the Sahel toward the West African coast. Sahelian countries and their coastal neighbours have designated millions of hectares as nature reserves to protect wildlife, prevent desertification, develop a local green economy and, more recently, contribute to global efforts at safeguarding biodiversity and ecological balance.¹ In recent years, Islamist groups have encroached on several such protected areas. Parks and forests offer hideouts far from the security forces' reach, where militants can recruit fighters from among nearby residents and plan attacks on new territories.² (See the map in Appendix A.³)

The militants in Park W, which straddles the tri-border area of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, are one group of particular concern. They are undermining longstanding conservation efforts, jeopardising livelihoods and aggravating an already dire security situation. National armies have struggled to contain them, lacking the equipment and experience for combat in forests. What is more, the Sahelian insurgents are extending their reach to new territories. Via protected forests and wooded areas, they have secured a gateway to countries on the Gulf of Guinea coast, notably Benin, Togo and Ghana. While Sahelian countries have been riddled by jihadist violence over the last six years, those along the Gulf of Guinea have only recently started to suffer from it.⁴ Militants staged an unprecedented number of attacks in these countries in 2022, showing that they are becoming entrenched.

This report recounts the history of conservation in and around Park W, describes the jihadists' encroachment into the park and its implications for both the neighbouring communities and the environment, analyses the efforts of the tri-border countries to protect the park and nearby residents, and offers recommendations for how these efforts might be improved. In so doing, it looks both at how jihadists have exploited conservation policies in Park W and adjacent areas and at how their presence has undermined efforts at protecting the environment and preserving biodiversity.

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger have designated 25 per cent, 14 per cent and 15 per cent of their territory, respectively, as protected areas. See the data at Protected Planet's "Explore Protected Areas and OECMs". As human activity increases everywhere, these protected areas are becoming the only spaces where biodiversity is preserved.

² The situation is not unique to West Africa. According to research, up to half of the world's conflicts are fought in forests. Wooded areas provide refuge, food and water, while serving as impediments to would-be attackers. See Wil de Jong, Deana Donovan and Ken-Ichi Abe, *Extreme Conflict and Tropical Forests* (New York, 2007), p. 1.

³ Other reserves that have suffered notable jihadist attacks include Arly in Burkina Faso, Pendjari in Benin and Comoé in Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴ The Gulf of Guinea countries first saw a series of jihadist attacks in 2019. Most observers view an earlier incident, the 2016 Grand Bassam attack in Côte d'Ivoire, as an isolated event. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°149, *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, 20 December 2019.

The report is based on over 70 interviews with high-level government officials and military officers, conservationists, herders, farmers, community representatives and former hostages detained by jihadists in Park W. Research involved interviews in Ouagadougou and Fada N’Gourma in Burkina Faso; Cotonou and Kandi in Benin; and Niamey, Say and Torodi in Niger. The report also draws upon a variety of additional information including satellite imagery, Armed Conflict Location Event Data and other secondary sources.

II. A Park under Threat

Park W spans nearly 10,300 sq km where the borders of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger meet.⁵ The reserve is part of the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex (WAP Complex), a conjunction of parks that together make up the single biggest protected area in West Africa. It is home to some of the region's last remaining viable populations of large mammals, such as lions, elephants and cheetahs. As the name indicates, WAP includes Burkina Faso's national park of Arly and Benin's national park of Pendjari, as well as several adjacent reserves and hunting zones.⁶ In 1996, UNESCO added the WAP Complex to its World Heritage list, citing its size, ecosystems, biodiversity and importance as a refuge for fauna that have disappeared elsewhere in West Africa.⁷

A. A Century-long Conservation Effort

Park W has been a locus of contention from its creation a century ago during the colonial era to the present day. In 1937, after designating it a protected reserve, the French colonial administration imposed strict conservation policies in the park, starting by evicting the residents for the stated purpose of shielding wildlife from human activity, including farming, herding, fishing and poaching.⁸ To this day, the forced removal of these villagers feeds local perceptions that conservation deprives indigenous people of their farmland, sacred forests and sources of income.⁹

After achieving independence in 1960, the three countries that inherited the park maintained the colonial-era conservation policies in order to preserve biodiversity and prevent desertification.¹⁰ Special paramilitary units or *agents des eaux et forêts* ("water and forestry guards", in French) patrolled the park and its surroundings to enforce these policies, which required few resources given that the area was sparsely populated at the time.

From the late 1970s onward, however, competition over natural resources on the park's outskirts soared amid rapid population growth, triggering a slow but irre-

⁵ Park W is named after the shape the Niger River traces on the eastern edge of the park.

⁶ The WAP Complex covers some 5 million hectares in its entirety. In addition to the three national parks – W, Arly and Pendjari – it includes buffer zones where some human activities are permitted such as the Tamou Total Reserve (72,345 hectares) and the Dosso reserve (538,456 hectares) in Niger; Tapoa-Djerma (28,736 hectares) in Burkina Faso; and the Djona (118,947 hectares) hunting zone in Benin.

⁷ The WAP Complex hosts hundreds of rare plant and animal species and serves as the last West African refuge for a range of so-called charismatic megafauna such as elephants, buffaloes and lions. It also has animals whose habitats are under severe threat elsewhere in the region, including manatees, addax and oryx. See Philippe Bouché, Howard Frederic and Edward Kohl, "Inventaire aérien de l'écosystème W-Arly-Pendjari Juin 2015", December 2015.

⁸ Critics call this conservation approach "green colonialism", saying it places wildlife over humans. See Maano Ramutsindela, Frank Matose and Tafadzwa Mushonga, *The Violence of Conservation in Africa: State, Militarization and Alternatives* (Cheltenham, 2022), p. 10.

⁹ For more on local grievances, see Alexis Kaboré, "Brousse des uns, aire protégée des autres", PhD thesis, Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, Geneva, 2010.

¹⁰ W Benin is the largest portion of the park (577,235 hectares), accounting for 56 per cent of its territory. W Burkina Faso covers 23 per cent (235,543 hectares), while W Niger represents 21 per cent (221,142 hectares).

versible environmental decline (see next sub-section). None of the three governments had the staff or the money to effectively protect the park from poachers, firewood collectors, grazing cattle or farmers in search of new land to grow crops.¹¹ Furthermore, managing the vast reserve in its entirety proved impossible, given that each country had different institutional mechanisms and conservation policies.¹² Overall, until the late 1990s, less than 15 per cent of Park W was under effective government scrutiny.¹³

This lacklustre approach to conservation changed considerably in the early 2000s, when external donors became concerned with environmental issues. In particular, the European Union and Germany's development agency GIZ began to pour money into the WAP Complex, funding anti-poaching projects and strengthening the surveillance capacities of forest guards.¹⁴ Most donor projects promoted a community-centric approach to conservation.¹⁵ They did so based on growing recognition that protecting wilderness should go hand in hand with giving local people incentives to preserve the natural resources on which they rely. One such project in Park W, for instance, encouraged the formation of village associations to help manage the park.¹⁶ Previously, authorities had made little effort to involve the locals or to explain that they would reap material benefits from conservation.¹⁷

Involving local communities paid off. Villagers living close to the park tempered their scepticism of conservation when they saw their livelihoods improve.¹⁸ Tourism became an important source of employment, with locals working as rangers, eco-guards, guides or labourers for track maintenance.¹⁹ Women developed various eco-

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, former Park W forest guard, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

¹² In the mid-1980s, the three countries began to discuss aligning their conservation policies so as to treat the park as a single entity. Since then, environmental protection officials have convened many times in order to better cooperate.

¹³ See Agnès Michelot and Ouédraogo Boubacar, "Aires protégées transfrontalières : Le cadre juridique de la réserve de biosphère transfrontalière du W (Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger)", IUCN-EPLP, 2009.

¹⁴ The main projects concerned with the WAP Complex were ECOPAS (Ecosystème Protégé en Afrique Sahélienne), which lasted from 2002 to 2008; SAP/WAP (Système des Aires Protégées du W-Arly-Pendjari), which ran from 2010 to 2013; and PAPE (Projet du Programme d'Appui aux Parcs de l'Entente), which operated from 2013 to 2016. The latest project, RBT-WAP/GIP, started in 2015 and is set to continue through 2023. While all these projects aimed to improve conservation mechanisms, they did not have the same significance, approach or objectives.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former ECOPAS official and actors involved with RBT-WAP/GIP, Niamey, Ouagadougou and Cotonou, February, March and August 2022.

¹⁶ Fostered by ECOPAS, these associations were known by the French acronyms Avigrefs in Benin and Zovics in Burkina Faso. Crisis Group interviews, Avigref and Zovic members, Fada N'Gourma and Kandi, March and August 2022.

¹⁷ See "Recherche sur les perceptions communautaires sur les forestiers et paysage sécuritaire le long des aires protégées dans la zone du parc W, du fleuve Niger et la réserve de Koure", GREEF, January-April 2022.

¹⁸ The perception that conservation is a "Western" priority is reinforced by the fact that most wildlife tourists and those who come for hunting safaris are wealthy foreigners. Local tourism has been rising, however.

¹⁹ Prior to the jihadist incursion, according to Burkina Faso authorities, protected areas were attracting around 15,000 visitors per year and generating up to 4 billion CFA francs (nearly \$6.3 million) in revenue.

conomic activities linked to the park, including selling forest products such as shea butter, natural honey and fruit of the baobab tree.²⁰ As scientists and researchers began to pay attention to the park, non-governmental organisations opened offices in nearby towns, hiring local personnel and support staff. District authorities also gained from collecting taxes on activities in and around the park.

In recent years, many locals have relied on the park for their livelihoods and well-being, but it is still a source of controversy. Some, especially young people, acknowledge the benefits of conservation.²¹ At the same time, the fact that many of the park's precious natural resources have been off limits for so long has stoked resentment among locals. A main challenge of conservation has been to reconcile the views of environmentalists with the needs of farmers and herders, who tend to view the park as a source of land, bushmeat and nutritious animal fodder.

B. *Droughts, Migration and Growing Populations*

From the sky, Park W looks like a green island in a sea of degraded vegetation and advancing cropland. Satellite images taken over the years from 1995 to 2020 clearly show the transformation of the landscape, with grass- and shrublands thinning out and croplands creeping up on the park's outskirts, particularly in northern Benin and eastern Burkina Faso. In the words of a Burkinabé official, "the park today resembles a garnished dish surrounded by starving populations".²²

As mentioned above, from the late 1970s onward, a combination of social, environmental and political changes heightened competition over land and water around the park. In the 1970s and 1980s, severe, recurrent droughts pushed large numbers of farmers and herders southward from the arid Sahel.²³ Many settled in the park's surroundings, driving up demand for farmland. High birth rates then compounded the pressure to derive sustenance from limited productive land. Some districts in the park's vicinity saw their population triple in less than four decades.²⁴ Evolving agricultural practices, such as development of cash crops, mechanisation, use of herbicides and privatisation of land ownership, fuelled the scramble for land in the park's environs.

Meanwhile, nomadic herders have had to adapt to a changing environment. For generations, pastoralists, mostly ethnic Peul (also known as Fulani) from western

²⁰ In eastern Burkina Faso, hundreds of women earn a living by selling shea butter, a fat that is extracted from the nut of a tree found inside and around the park. In Niger, honey is also an important source of revenue for women. Crisis Group interviews, women's association leaders, Say and Fada N'Gourma, February and March 2022.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, villagers, Say, Fada N'Gourma and Kandi, February, March and August 2022.

²² Crisis Group interview, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

²³ The Nigerien government tried to mitigate droughts' impact by turning part of the Tamou reserve into an agricultural zone called Ayi Noma ("Let's farm", in Hausa). Burkina Faso's south-eastern Tapoa province, once the least densely populated area in the country, saw influxes of Mossi and Peul beginning in the 1980s.

²⁴ The populations of the Banikoara and Karimama districts in northern Benin grew 410 per cent and 334 per cent, respectively, between 1979 and 2013, due to high birth rates and migration from Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. See "Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement de la commune de Karimama, 2019-2034", Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Governance, 2018.

Niger, northern and eastern Burkina Faso and north-western Nigeria, roamed the Sahelian belt north of the park.²⁵ In recent years, however, soil erosion, the silting-up of the Niger River, disappearance of surface waters and vegetation degradation have reduced the area of pasture for livestock. Herders now migrate further south into savannahs and forests, and earlier than they used to – often before the harvest is over at area farms – and return later, when the sowing season has begun. Changing patterns of nomadic herding – ie, transhumance – have not only led to more frequent disputes over crop damage but also threaten Park W's ecosystems. Herders increasingly turn to the park's grasslands for pasture and water, especially when the season is driest between March and May.²⁶ They often seek to justify illegal grazing by citing the growing scarcity of fertile land and water sources elsewhere, as well as their perception that the park is sitting in disuse.

C. Conflict on the Park's Edges

Surging demand for land on the park's outer edges has triggered deadly conflict in recent years. Attempts by farmers to encroach on designated pastoral areas and cattle migratory corridors often result in crop damage and sometimes lead to violent confrontation between farmers and herders.²⁷ Growing competition over land also threatens longstanding land tenure pacts between early settlers who consider themselves rightful owners and migrants with legally shakier claims. In particular, long-time residents often view Peul pastoralists who have recently arrived in the park's surroundings as outsiders with no right to the land. Northern Benin has seen recurrent clashes between herders and farmers, who have repeatedly tried to evict those they perceive as newcomers.²⁸

Meanwhile, the collapse of Burkina Faso's security apparatus in 2014, following a popular uprising that ousted long-time President Blaise Compaoré, left a security vacuum in rural areas, particularly in remote eastern forests.²⁹ Robbery, extortion at improvised roadblocks and cattle rustling increased as bandits grouped in the woodlands. By 2016, villagers on both sides of the Niger-Burkina Faso border began to form vigilante groups, known as Koglweogo ("bush vanguard", in Mooré), to keep them-

²⁵ Sahelian pastoralists move their cattle mainly during the so-called lean season, which begins in January and ends when rains resume, generally in June.

²⁶ During the lean season, an average of 20 per cent of the animals in every herd die of hunger or thirst.

²⁷ In Burkina Faso, the East region is by far the most affected by farmer-herder conflict, partly due to the intensity of pastoral activities in the region and particularly around the parks. Between 2009 and 2014, authorities recorded 1,044 such incidents in the region, 27 per cent of the cases registered during the period nationwide. Direction Générale des Espaces et Aménagements Pastoraux. See also Kelguingale Illy, "Etude sur le conflit foncier en milieu rural au Burkina Faso", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, p. 12.

²⁸ In 2004, Beninese authorities allocated an area in Park W's buffer zone to farmers, herders and traditional medical practitioners. Farmers claim all the land as theirs, however, leading to clashes with herders in Karimama, Guéné and Kandi. See Kars de Bruijn, "Law of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover", Clingendael CRU Report, June 2021.

²⁹ See Antonin Tisseron, "Une boîte de Pandore : Le Burkina Faso, les milices d'autodéfense et la loi sur les VDP dans la lutte contre le jihadisme", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, April 2021.

selves safe.³⁰ Known for meting out harsh physical punishment to suspected criminals, the Koglweogo succeeded in chasing the most notorious gangsters from the area, only for many of them to return when insurgents moved into the park. More broadly, weak rule of law around Park W spurred many locals to arm themselves – first with hunting rifles and, later, with more sophisticated weapons – making disputes more violent.³¹

³⁰ In Niger, criminals mainly used forests such as Kodjoga Beli and Cellol Bolol (on the Niger-Burkina Faso border) as hideouts. Crisis Group interviews, inhabitants of Ouro Gueladjo and Torodi, February 2022.

³¹ In northern Benin, a handgun can sell for as little as 50,000 CFA francs (\$80), while an AK-47 assault rifle can cost just 200,000 francs (\$322), depending on its condition and the ammunition that comes with it. Crisis Group interview, Kandi resident, August 2022.

III. Jihadist Takeover

Militants arrived in Park W's surrounds in early 2018.³² The Katiba Ansarul Islam, based in northern Burkina Faso, and the Katiba Serma, based on the Malian side of the Liptako Gourma, the territory edging the tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, are mainly responsible for the violent spillover.³³ The *katibas* ("battalions", in Arabic) used two routes to get to the park. The first led them from Liptako Gourma southward, during which they occupied several forests along the Niger-Burkina Faso border, including Kodjoga Beli and Tapoa-Boppo, which abut Park W. The other route went through south-eastern Burkina Faso, passing through the Kabonga forest and Arly park (see the map in Appendix A). The *katibas*' presence in the park has devastating consequences for conservation efforts and people's livelihoods. It also risks aggravating insecurity in coastal countries farther south.

A. Arrivals, Recruits and Allies

The first militants to arrive in Park W's surroundings were foreigners predominantly speaking Jelgoji – a Fulfulde dialect common in the Liptako Gourma region and northern Burkina Faso.³⁴ In western Niger, they were often accompanied by locals, mainly former students at Islamic learning centres in the Sahelian towns of Mopti, Djibo or Dori.³⁵ In one case, graduates of these schools asked militants to come to their village because – in a resident's words – they felt that "the practice of Islam needs to be revived in our community as well".³⁶

³² Armed Conflict and Event Location Data (ACLED) as well as Crisis Group information indicate that jihadists surfaced in the area in 2018. Nigerien authorities have documented the first jihadist group's arrival in Kodjoga Beli forest in Torodi on 17 January 2018. Crisis Group interview, former security officer, Niamey, July 2022. On the Burkina Faso side, the first attack on a forest guard position near Park W, in Nassoungou, also occurred that year. Crisis Group interview, forest guard, Fada N'Gourma, March 2022.

³³ It is unclear who commands the militants in Park W. Locals who have come in contact with the jihadists suggest that Katiba Macina leader Hamadoun Koufa and Ansarul Islam leader Jaafar Malam Dicko are in charge, but the stature of these two men makes it highly unlikely that either of them is physically present in the area. Security officials mentioned men going by aliases such as Muslimu, Abu Tamim and Abu Issa as the main leaders in eastern Burkina Faso; and Cheikh Albani in northern Benin. On the Nigerien side, some of the names circulating are Abu Hanifa, Belco Alhadj Kiyya (probably killed), Sadio Korcel (arrested) and Bouba Alhassane (sprung from jail). Crisis Group interviews, Ouagadougou, Cotonou and Niamey, March, August and September 2022. Crisis Group was unable to verify these claims.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, villagers living near Park W and nomadic herders who let their cattle graze inside it, Say, Fada N'Gourma and Kandi, February, March and August 2022. The Jelgoji are a Peul sub-group originally from northern Burkina Faso and south-central Mali.

³⁵ Mopti, Djibo and Dori are renowned as Fulfulde-language centres of Islamic learning. Young Peul who have completed basic Quranic training in villages across the Sahel enrol in these centres for higher education. Students are at risk of falling prey to militant discourse since jihadist groups have established themselves around these centres. Crisis Group interviews, former students in Mopti, Dori and Djibo, Niamey and Ouagadougou, February and March 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, villager, Say, February 2022.

Militants have used various tactics to lure recruits from among the people living around the park.³⁷ At first, they mainly signed up bandits operating in forests.³⁸ Young men with histories of delinquency, drug abuse or family troubles often volunteered as well.³⁹ In some instances, recruits have returned to their birth villages to assault relatives or steal property, usually cattle.⁴⁰ Piecemeal recruitment in villages often involved promises to help locals gain full control of the forests.⁴¹ Militants also capitalised on village chieftaincy and land ownership disputes.⁴² Coercive recruitment also occurs, albeit more rarely.

Mass recruitment generally comes at a later stage, often as a result of counter-terrorism operations. When news spreads that jihadists have arrived in a particular area, authorities take extra security measures in nearby villages. As the army moves in, militants begin pushing the residents not to cooperate with the authorities. Caught between the jihadists, on one hand, and security forces, on the other, villagers face a difficult choice. If they stay in their homes, security forces are likely to suspect them of collaborating with the jihadists; if they leave, they could lose their property.⁴³ This pressure has often led villagers to side with jihadists to seek protection or take revenge for abuses by security forces.

Militants have cultivated close ties with nomadic herders, who like them are often Peul, Muslim and bushland dwellers.⁴⁴ Despite mutual distrust at first – jihadists worried that pastoralists might have government informants in their ranks, while pastoralists balked at paying Islamic alms (or *zakat*) – the two groups now collaborate in ways that benefit both.⁴⁵ Jihadists give pastoralists free access to the park's abundant grasslands, while the latter's presence inside the park deters military

³⁷ People living in the park's surroundings often heard about the militants before they arrived.

³⁸ The villages of Cellol Bollol and Bontolare at the Burkina Faso-Niger border, as well as the Kodjoga Beli forest, experienced a crime surge in the 2000s. The proliferation of criminal gangs prompted Niger's government to permit self-defence groups (Koglweogo units) in villages like Makalondi, Torodi and Tamou. Crisis Group interviews, elected officials in Makalondi and Tamou, January-February 2022; traditional authorities in Torodi, September 2022.

³⁹ Such troubled youth rarely join militant groups for ideological reasons; they become politically conscious only after exposure to jihadist discourse. Crisis Group interviews, villagers in Say department in Niger, Tapoa province in Burkina Faso and Kandi department in Benin, February, March and August 2022.

⁴⁰ Villagers in eastern Burkina Faso reported several cases of sons who attacked family members or seized the family's cattle after joining a militant group. Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons from the park's surroundings, Fada N'Gourma, August 2022.

⁴¹ The jihadists are wont to say things like: "God created humans and made the forests to help them meet their needs. Therefore, forests belong to the people". Crisis Group interviews, inhabitants of Tapoa department in Burkina Faso, August 2022.

⁴² Chieftaincy disputes have become more frequent in eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger, partly due to changes in election procedures. In the Nigerien village of Kodjeri, supporters of a man vying for the chieftaincy joined Islamist insurgents when their candidate lost the election, apparently to take revenge. Crisis Group interview, former security officer, Torodi, July 2022.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, villagers from around Park W, Fada N'Gourma, August 2022.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, villagers from around Park W, Say and Fada N'Gourma, February and March 2022.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, herders who have spent time with jihadists in Park W, Say, February and August 2022.

action, given the high risk of civilian casualties.⁴⁶ Pastoralists often run errands in rural markets to get insurgents their daily supplies.⁴⁷ Militants regularly preach their version of Islam in herders' camps, seeking recruits.⁴⁸

Still, most people living on the park's outskirts feel apprehensive about the militants. News that a relative has joined the insurgency is typically met with great sorrow, as well as fear of retaliation by security forces. Whereas communities in northern and central Mali have at times welcomed insurgents for their purported ability to provide security, justice and effective governance, the militants in Park W – although they serve some of these functions (see below) – are not seen in this light. Wary of the militants' influence, many Peul parents now avoid sending their children to centres of Islamic learning in Burkina Faso or Mali, enrolling them instead in schools in Niamey or northern Nigeria.⁴⁹

B. *Local Headquarters*

Park W serves as both a refuge and a launchpad for the militants there. Militants have sabotaged key infrastructure in the park, including watchtowers, boreholes, solar panels, water points and mobile network antennas. Most jihadist camps are nestled under a thick canopy of trees, hidden from the view of drones and other military aircraft.⁵⁰ Camps are usually near water points, though scarcity forces insurgents to move regularly between them.⁵¹ Insurgents also run a court to adjudicate perceived violations of Islamic law and to punish collaboration with state authorities. They imprison those they find guilty inside the park.⁵² The court also settles disputes among villagers. Until recently, only male combatants lived in the camps. After Burkina Faso labelled its side of the park a special military zone, however, women and children moved into the park from neighbouring villages, reportedly to seek the jihadists' protection from the army.⁵³

Park W is an important source of revenue for militants. First, jihadists use the park's dense network of unpaved roads and rivers to smuggle food, fuel, weapons and

⁴⁶ A military officer in eastern Burkina Faso said, "The problem we face in the park is that we cannot distinguish between a herder and a terrorist. ... You may kill someone you think is a terrorist but turns out to be a herder. And you may spare someone you believe is a herder who then shoots at you". Crisis Group interview, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, herders, Say, February 2022.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, herders, Niamey, August 2022.

⁴⁹ Some parents among herders have prohibited their sons from going near Park W. Crisis Group interviews, herders, Say and Niamey, February 2022.

⁵⁰ They often use rugs as protection from the sun as well as aerial surveillance. Crisis Group telephone interview, person who was detained by jihadists inside Park W, February 2022.

⁵¹ The ECOPAS project drilled several wells inside the park. Officers say water scarcity impedes military operations. Crisis Group interview, officer formerly deployed in Park W, Niamey, September 2022.

⁵² Prisoners are blindfolded during the day and held out of earshot of the jihadist camps. Crisis Group interview, person who was detained by jihadists in Park W, Say, February 2022.

⁵³ Authorities gave residents an ultimatum to evacuate the special military zone. Jihadists, however, impressed upon the villagers that they should stay or risk never being allowed back. Crisis Group interviews, nomadic herders, Say, January 2022; former detainees, Niamey, February 2022.

motorcycles across the three borders.⁵⁴ Secondly, they avail themselves of its ample space to stock cattle that they have stolen or accumulated through *zakat*, sometimes selling cows in nearby markets.⁵⁵ Thirdly, they levy taxes on artisans mining gold in the area and trade gold through intermediaries, some of whom are suspected to be based in Niamey.⁵⁶

The jihadists' presence has harmed the local economy, depriving many of a stable income.⁵⁷ It has wrecked tourism. Though Benin's side of the park is still open to visitors, attacks on security forces and kidnappings have become more frequent there.⁵⁸ In villages in Niger and Burkina Faso, militants are policing society, trying to bring people's behaviour into line with their stringent interpretation of Sharia law.⁵⁹ They have prohibited alcohol sales and consumption, tobacco farming and pig rearing.

Women have borne the brunt of the jihadists' meddling. Militants have barred women from shopping in rural markets and washing dishes in rivers or at wells. They also interfere in marriages. Locals have reported cases of child and forced marriage, with militants pushing parents to marry off their underage daughters on the pretext of preventing adultery.⁶⁰ Militants sometimes use the threat of physical force if par-

⁵⁴ Militants are transporting fuel to Park W via the Mekrou River. Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien forest guards, September 2022.

⁵⁵ Herder leaders who also trade in livestock – known as *Rugga* – are reportedly buying stolen cattle from jihadists at low prices. Burkinabé security forces have arrested some of them. Crisis Group interview, *Rugga* from Diapaga who was later arrested on charges of reselling jihadist livestock, Fada N'Gourma, March 2022.

⁵⁶ There are several artisanal gold mines near Burkina Faso's side of the park. Villages with such mines include Tchiapagri (in Tansarga); Bayantori in Tambaga; Mardaga, Bounou, Kankandi, Bamouanti and Boujouani (in the district of Partiaga); and Koriombo and Douptchari (in Diapaga). Niger's artisanal gold mines are located in the districts of Tamou, Torodi and Makalondi. Rumour has it that militants are digging for gold inside the park. Crisis Group interviews, villagers in jihadist-occupied zones in eastern Burkina Faso and Western Niger, Fada N'Gourma and Say, March and February 2022.

⁵⁷ Some former park employees remain unemployed, while others have moved to cities in search of work. Still others have joined local self-defence groups, including the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, which the government recruited to help in the counter-terrorism fight, and Koglweogo. The luckiest among them are employed as rangers by the park's new managers, including African Parks Network and Wild Africa Conservation. Several NGOs have also left the area. Crisis Group interviews, villagers, Say and Fada N'Gourma, February and March 2022.

⁵⁸ Several people have been kidnapped around the park, including an Italian priest in Torodi in September 2018 (released in October 2020) and two French tourists in the Pendjari park in northern Benin in 2019. When security forces freed the tourists, they discovered two other hostages – a U.S. citizen and a South Korean – who may have been snatched in the same area. Thiam Ndiaga and Richard Lough, "Hostages rescued from Burkina Faso 'hell' praise fallen French commandos", Reuters, 11 May 2019.

⁵⁹ Jihadists in northern Benin have remained discreet in comparison to those in Niger and Burkina Faso. Militants rarely come out of the park to nearby villages. So far, they have attacked only military targets, though in October 2022, militants came to Mamassi-Peul just outside the park and arrested the village chief. Crisis Group telephone interview, villager, October 2022.

⁶⁰ These cases involved girls as young as fourteen. These practices are reversing recent gains in reducing child marriage in rural areas, undercutting campaigns that have sought to raise awareness of the legally accepted age of marriage, which is eighteen. Crisis Group interview, Diapaga resident, Fada N'Gourma, March 2022.

ents do not comply or take it upon themselves to arrange a marriage regardless of whether the girl or her parents consent to it.⁶¹

The park's surroundings have a large population of animists and Christians, particularly in Burkina Faso and Benin.⁶² While jihadists have seldom physically attacked these non-Muslims, they have often preached against local religious practices, and in some instances, attempted to halt church services, saying men and women should not gather in the same space.⁶³

Jihadists have also disrupted education. They have closed and, in some cases, burnt francophone schools. They have also prohibited a traditional practice at Quranic schools, whereby the pupils beg in order to feed themselves and support the *marabout* (teacher) to whom their parents have entrusted them. Many marabouts from the Burkina Faso-Niger border area have fled with their students to settle in cities, including Niamey.⁶⁴

C. *Satellite Cells and Forested By-ways*

From bases inside the park, the jihadists are launching attacks in several new directions. To the north, they have built a string of satellite bases that connect Park W to their other strongholds, notably in the Kodjoga Beli forest along the Niger-Burkina Faso border, and from there up to northern Burkina Faso and the Liptako Gourma. In Niger's Rive Droite – the territory between the Niger River and the Burkina Faso frontier – militants have established satellite bases in the districts of Ouro Gueladjo, Torodi and Say.⁶⁵ Most combatants in the satellite bases are local recruits who rotate regularly back to the park.

This expansion is particularly worrying in Niger. Militants connected to the groups in Park W are believed to be living in several Niamey suburbs. In fact, since early 2022, jihadists have been creeping up on the capital, as illustrated by an attack that occurred only 15km away.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, villagers living near Park W, Say and Fada N'Gourma, February and March 2022.

⁶² In the Tapoa province of Burkina Faso, 57 per cent of the population identifies as animist, 21 per cent as Christian and 19 per cent as Muslim. See "Rapport Général de la Population et de l'Habitat, 2006", Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2008.

⁶³ According to a Nigerien priest, militants initially sought to reassure local Christians, telling them (correctly) that Islam regards Jesus as a prophet, but they later changed their tune, insisting that Mohammed is the only prophet. Crisis Group interview, Say, February 2022.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, marabout from Ouro Gueladjo who took refuge in Niamey, March 2022.

⁶⁵ Militants have often arrested those whom they accuse of contravening these rules, detaining some people for months. Many people taken hostage by jihadists in neighbouring districts, including Tamou, Ouro Gueladjo and Torodi, are jailed in Park W or Kodjoga Beli, and sometimes moved between the two forests. During their detention, prisoners are forced to listen to lessons in the militants' version of Islam. Crisis Group interviews, villagers from Makalondi and Torodi districts, Niamey, January 2022.

⁶⁶ Residents of Niamey's outskirts report seeing more suspicious motorcycle traffic in the Bougoun hills, which border both the city's western edges and Park W. Crisis Group interviews, January 2022. Jihadists are known to use motorcycles frequently, and Niger has repeatedly issued bans on motorcycle traffic as a security measure in certain districts. Jihadist recruits are also believed to live in villages in the Bitinkodji district and suburbs such as Sagia.

Insurgents have also extended their reach to Togo and Ghana via a series of inter-connecting forests. Park W abuts Benin's Pendjari reserve and its Atacora hunting zone, as well as Burkina Faso's Arly reserve, which both sit on the border with Togo and Burkina Faso.⁶⁷ The jihadists roam all over this vast area of protected forests and reserves, rendering it more difficult for those fighting them to find them.⁶⁸ Jihadist movements across these three borders up to northern Ghana are well documented.⁶⁹

Finally, to the south, militants have attempted to reach forests in Benin. The northern Benin region has many parks that are close to one another. Benin's side of Park W is connected to other protected areas that include the Djona hunting zone and the Sota, Goungoun and Trois Rivières classified forests.⁷⁰ Evidence of jihadist incursions in these preserves is mounting, along with concern that militants are trying to establish ties with criminal gangs in Kainji national park, just across the border in southwestern Nigeria.⁷¹

D. *Undermining Conservation*

Beyond the security issues it presents, the jihadist presence in Park W is undermining long-running conservation efforts. The three countries have withdrawn most of their forest guards from posts in the park.⁷² On Burkina Faso's side of the reserve, guards have abandoned the three main forestry bases, while those in Niger and Benin primarily patrol the peripheries.⁷³

The militants' open-door recruitment policy has lured herders, poachers, farmers and artisanal miners to the area. A 2021 aerial survey counted around 63,000 head of cattle inside Park W.⁷⁴ It also found that the elephant population had dropped to 4,056 from 8,938 in 2015, the date of the previous survey, pointing to a surge in

⁶⁷ See "Catégorisation des Aires Protégées de la République du Bénin", PAPE and CENAGREF, December 2013, p. 18.

⁶⁸ See Leif Brottem, "Jihad Takes Root in Northern Benin", ACLED, 23 September 2022.

⁶⁹ For more on the spread of jihadist violence in northern Togo and Ghana, see "The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and Prospects for Containing the Expansion", Promediation and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 2022.

⁷⁰ See "Catégorisation des Aires Protégées de la République du Bénin", op. cit.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Beninese officials, Cotonou, August 2022; former resident of Segbana, a village near the Nigerian border in north-western Benin, Dakar, October 2022.

⁷² Forestry bases in Niger include Tapoa, Perelegou and Kary Kopto, while Benin's main bases are Alfa Koara, Karimama, Kompa-Monsey and Founougo. The three countries' forest guards often gathered at Point Triple, at the juncture of the three borders.

⁷³ African Parks has about 600 personnel for both Pendjari and Park W, including former government guards and rangers. An African Parks official told Crisis Group that Pendjari is "easier to manage" because there are fewer people living around it. Other African Parks staff members said their area of intervention has shrunk in recent months. Crisis Group interviews, Kandi, August 2022; Johannesburg, September 2022.

⁷⁴ The 2021 survey was conducted by African Parks in collaboration with the three countries' agencies in charge of protected areas. A similar survey in 2003 counted 36,363 head of cattle. It is important to note that cattle counts have seesawed over the years, however. For example, another survey in 2015 put the number of cattle grazing inside the park at 152,486. See "Inventaire aérien de la grande faune et du bétail W-Arly-Pendjari: Benin-Burkina Faso-Niger 2021", African Parks, 2021.

poaching.⁷⁵ Declining prices for bushmeat and other wildlife products in rural markets are another such indicator.⁷⁶ In the park's peripheries, farmers are cultivating new fields, while artisanal gold mining (which makes liberal use of hazardous chemicals) has mushroomed.⁷⁷ All these activities are accelerating the environmental decline of West Africa's biggest natural reserve. On the plus side, the jihadists have prohibited logging.⁷⁸

As mentioned above, the primary beneficiaries of this open-door policy are herders, whose animals now seemingly graze unrestricted inside the park. Paradoxically, however, herders told Crisis Group that they worry about the park's survival.⁷⁹ They fear that cattle will eat the grasslands bare, gradually destroying one of West Africa's few remaining areas of fresh pasture and available water. Further, contact with wildlife transmits pathogens to livestock, heightening the risk of contagion. Several herders who regularly let their cattle graze inside the park said they have lost a significant number of animals to disease.⁸⁰

Park W thus risks suffering a fate similar to that of the Sambisa forest, a once-thriving game reserve in north-eastern Nigeria where the Islamist insurgency Boko Haram set up its base in the mid-2010s. Over the years, Sambisa became a smuggling hub for militants and an impregnable fortress to security forces, which tried to dislodge the group with aerial bombardments. Today, the forest is completely degraded, and its rare fauna and flora have vanished.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Poaching is likely not the only cause of the decline. Others could be migration out of the park due to encroaching cattle and infectious disease borne by the livestock.

⁷⁶ For instance, a lion's hide, valued locally for its supposed mystical properties, has been fetching 200,000 CFA francs (\$185) since jihadists allowed poachers into the park, down from 500,000 CFA francs (\$750) previously. Crisis Group interviews, herder who often lets his cattle graze in the park and its surroundings, Say and Niamey, February and September 2022.

⁷⁷ In Kaabougou, a village in eastern Burkina Faso's Tansarga district, jihadists have tolerated farmers' appropriation of new land in the park's buffer zone. Similar land appropriation occurred in the Tamou total reserve in Niger. Crisis Group interviews, inhabitants of Kaabougou and Tamou, Fada N'Gourma and Say, February and March 2022.

⁷⁸ In January, jihadists stopped a vehicle transporting timber near Tiela Fulbé in the Tamou district in Niger. They burnt the vehicle and flogged the driver. Crisis Group interview, former elected official from a district near the park, Niamey, September 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, herders and Rugga from Niger and Burkina Faso, Say, Fada N'Gourma, February and March 2022.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Say and Niamey, February and September 2022.

⁸¹ For more on Boko Haram's occupation of the Sambisa forest, see Azeez Olaniyan, "Once Upon a Game Reserve: Sambisa and the Tragedy of a Forested Landscape", *Arcadia*, 2018. For additional background, see Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016; N°180, *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East*, 29 March 2022; and N°184, *Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria's North East*, 16 January 2023; as well as Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019.

IV. Safeguarding Park W

Along with foreign partners, authorities in Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger are working to regain control of Park W and its surroundings. They have three priorities: first, securing the park through stepped-up military action; secondly, improving conservation efforts; and, finally, addressing conflict over resources.

A. *Securing Park W*

The three countries' armies tried to prevent the jihadists from encroaching on Park W and, later, to uproot them, but all to no avail. In 2016, Burkina Faso's defence and security forces swept through the park as rumours of the jihadists' presence began to spread. Two years later, Niger declared a state of emergency in three districts near the Burkinabé border, including its part of Park W, handing the army additional powers to prosecute those suspected of involvement in militancy.⁸² In 2020, Nigerien authorities tasked a special military unit with securing the Tapoa base camp inside the park.⁸³ The unit retreated, however, after suspected militants killed two forestry guards in an attack in December that year.⁸⁴

Similarly, although starting late, the Beninese government has made efforts to stop the spillover of jihadist violence from its Sahelian neighbours. The government has laid out a strategy that includes dividing its northern region into two areas of operation: Sector West, covering the Atacora region along the border with Burkina Faso and Togo, and Sector East, which encompasses Park W. It is also trying to procure military aircraft such as drones. Along with military action to boot jihadists out of the park, Benin has enhanced its community-based intelligence gathering, which could help explain why, thus far, jihadists have been slower to infiltrate Beninese than Burkinabé or Nigerien villages.

The three states' military action has yielded short-term gains. In 2019, the Burkinabé army launched Operation Otapuanu, which temporarily disrupted jihadist activities and reduced the frequency of major attacks in eastern Burkina Faso.⁸⁵ Similarly, between 2019 and 2020, Niger armed forces conducted Operation Saki, which chased militants out of most of the Rive Droite.⁸⁶ Benin authorities have established a number of police stations in towns near Park W that, until recently, had improved public safety.⁸⁷

⁸² Among other things, the state of emergency prohibits the use of motorcycles. "Terrorisme : Niamey décrète l'état d'urgence dans trois départements proches du Burkina Faso", *Le Monde/AFP*, 1 December 2018.

⁸³ In 2018, Niger launched Operation Saki 1. It followed this operation with Saki 2, and then Taanli 1, 2 and 3, as well as Niya. These operations have focused on combating jihadists in the forests along the Burkina Faso border and in Park W.

⁸⁴ Moussa Aksar, "Niger : 2 morts et 2 portés disparus suite à une attaque terroriste à la Tapoa", *L'Évènement Niger*, 4 December 2020.

⁸⁵ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°287, *Burkina Faso: Sortir de la spirale des violences*, 24 February 2020.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Niamey, September 2022.

⁸⁷ These police stations have become a main militant target in northern Benin. At least four police stations (in Keremou, Monsey, Dassari and Birni Lafia) have suffered attack.

Yet neither Burkina Faso, Niger nor Benin has been able to flush out the militants or establish permanent military positions inside the park. Generally speaking, troops lack the training and equipment to work well in dense forests full of wildlife.⁸⁸ On top of that, the three countries' armies have severe staffing problems. In Burkina Faso, the defence and security forces are stretched across several fronts fighting insurgents, the top priorities of which are those in the populous north and centre.⁸⁹ In Niger, officers likewise lamented having to send men to other fronts, saying unit rotations make battlefield victories ephemeral.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Benin's army is small, poorly equipped and inexperienced in counter-terrorism operations.⁹¹

The three countries have also attempted to boost military cooperation among themselves, as well as with West African neighbours and foreign allies. In 2017, Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Burkina Faso launched the Accra Initiative to curb spillover from the Sahel, pledging, among other things, to better share intelligence. This pact led to several joint military operations, including incursions in Park W.⁹² In October 2018, top brass from Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo met in Cotonou to discuss ways to coordinate the anti-jihadist fight in the WAP Complex. These consultations were under way at the time of writing.

One reason that regional collaboration has produced few results is that so many different military and law enforcement units – including gendarmes, foresters and the national guard – are involved in securing the park and its surroundings. Coordination is a struggle at the national level and even more complicated when countries are working together across borders.⁹³

The three countries are exploring options for outside military help. Niger and Burkina Faso have collaborated with France, other European allies and the U.S. in fighting terrorism. In Benin, the government has asked France, Rwanda and private U.S. security firms to help with military training, while the European Union plans to increase its support, including lethal equipment for the military. The U.S., via its Africa Command (AFRICOM) has also pledged to help the Beninese government curb the jihadist threat, notably with intelligence sharing. AFRICOM has been using

⁸⁸ Nigerien and Beninese military officials recounted that the roar of lions terrifies soldiers. They also said the park was extremely difficult to navigate with military vehicles. Crisis Group interviews, Cotonou and Niamey, August and September 2022.

⁸⁹ A Burkinabé official said the park is not a priority because “humans come first and then wildlife”. Crisis Group interview, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, military officers, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

⁹¹ Benin is believed to have about 5,000 police officers and its army is thought to have 7,000 active-duty troops. See “Benin”, CIA World Factbook, undated. The soldiers have little combat experience, except for those who have participated in UN peacekeeping missions. Crisis Group interview, military officer, Cotonou, August 2022.

⁹² Under the Accra Initiative, the countries conducted a series of military operations called Koudanlou I, II, III and IV between May 2018 and December 2021. The Initiative's members are preparing another operation scheduled to occur in 2023. Benin and Burkina Faso are member states, while Niger is an observer. For details on the Accra Initiative, see “Mapping African Regional Cooperation”, European Council for Foreign Relations, undated.

⁹³ Authorities in capital cities can take more than two months to respond to a neighbour's request for information. By contrast, military officers or soldiers on the ground share information by telephone or WhatsApp. Crisis Group interview, senior intelligence officer, Cotonou, August 2022.

drones to gather information on jihadist activity in Park W, which the three countries may find useful in their counter-terrorism efforts.

Military commanders of the three countries are meanwhile debating how to better secure the borders. While Niger and Burkina Faso have yet to dedicate troops to the mission, Niger plans to train a special battalion for the anti-jihadist fight in Park W and other forests. But it could take time before the battalion is able to deploy. In June 2022, Burkinabé authorities designated Park W and its surroundings as zones of military interest, signalling intent to launch an important operation.⁹⁴ But shortly thereafter, divisions in the army triggered the country's second coup in eight months, shifting the military's attention back to the centre of power in Ouagadougou.

B. *Improving Conservation*

The jihadists encroached on the park at a time when the three countries, with the help of foreign partners, were stepping up conservation efforts. They were trying to address the lack of coherence in their respective legal and institutional frameworks, the weak capacity of the park's managerial staff, and the low rates of local participation in conservation.

The three countries have at various intervals tried to align their conservation policies, with little success. A slew of tripartite agreements signed over the last 40 years – notably in 1984, 2003, 2008 and 2019 – aimed to harmonise management practices with respect to parks in the tri-border region, but none of these deals fundamentally changed the three countries' tendency to manage the parks unilaterally.⁹⁵ The push for harmonisation has little local buy-in, as it comes largely from foreign partners.⁹⁶

In 2019, the countries' foreign ministers agreed to create four institutional mechanisms to better align conservation and other policies, including a ministerial council, a technical and evaluation committee, a scientific council and an executive secretary to oversee policy in the WAP Complex.⁹⁷ Three years on, none of these mechanisms is operational. The countries are squabbling over whom to appoint as executive secretary.

As concerns capacity building, the countries with donor support are working to get better at park administration. Over the last twenty years, donors have funded numerous projects aiming to improve management of the WAP complex.⁹⁸ But the projects have not met expectations, and the donor support has been inconsistent. Even the limited gains the projects achieve are rarely sustained after the funding ends. None-

⁹⁴ Burkina Faso's high command identified two zones of military interest in the country; one in northern Soum province, and the other in the east near the WAP protected areas. Authorities asked residents to vacate these areas to avoid being caught in the crossfire. See "Burkina Faso: 14 days to evacuate before vast military operation", Reuters, 14 June 2022.

⁹⁵ The idea of concerted management of Park W has been around for a long time. In 1984, the three countries decided to pool their efforts at combating poaching. Numerous ministerial meetings took place to discuss more effective conservation. In 2008, the three countries again signed a management cooperation agreement. These accords produced little.

⁹⁶ The above-mentioned ECOPAS and RBT-WAP/GIP, both funded by foreign donors, particularly the European Union and the GIZ, have pushed state officials in the three countries toward harmonising conservation policies. Crisis Group interviews, officials and project implementers, Niamey, July 2022; Cotonou, August 2022.

⁹⁷ Copy on file with Crisis Group.

⁹⁸ See footnote 14.

theless, the countries and their partners have been working to secure long-term, regular funding for conservation. In August, the West African Savannah Foundation – a trust fund for the environment created in Benin in 2012 – signed an agreement with Burkina Faso and Niger authorities that may mobilise nearly 20 billion CFA francs (\$30 million) to fund conservation efforts. Officials say it is a big step toward ensuring sustainable funding for the protection of the WAP Complex.⁹⁹

Finally, the three governments and foreign partners have been trying to promote community-based conservation. Several projects funded by donors try to improve dialogue between conservationists and park area residents, in order to build trust and promote better ways of resolving land and communal conflicts.¹⁰⁰ Yet while more locals are participating in park management, contestation over resources has increased as well.

The three countries and their foreign partners are also taking major steps toward delegating the park's management to non-governmental actors. Losing confidence in state management, they are shifting toward partnerships with private organisations that have more experience and more money.¹⁰¹ In 2020, Benin asked the South African non-profit African Parks Network (APN) to take over management of its side of Park W.¹⁰² African Parks has been managing Pendjari National Park since 2017. African Parks says it now has about 600 staff, mostly locals, including rangers and guards who have worked in the reserves before.¹⁰³ APN's achievements in Pendjari, described below, are widely applauded among government officials and foreign donors, though its strict management style has at times angered residents.¹⁰⁴ So far, APN has struggled to replicate its success in Park W, which is twice the size of Pendjari and located in a much more densely populated area, and thus subject to fiercer resource competition along its boundaries.

Benin's partnership with African Parks could significantly improve management in its part of Park W. With considerable resources and significant experience with restoring degraded natural reserves, African Parks has already demonstrated its capacity to enhance surveillance and curb poaching.¹⁰⁵ It has also drawn important lessons from its management of Pendjari, setting up a "peripheral zones commission" to have a direct channel of communication with residents. African Parks has recruited staff who engage directly with locals to discuss mutual concerns and explain

⁹⁹ See "Pour un financement harmonieux de la conservation de la biosphère du WAP", *Le Leader du Jour*, 19 August 2022.

¹⁰⁰ The U.S. Agency for International Development and GIZ fund projects to that effect in all three countries.

¹⁰¹ Delegating the park's management to a private entity means that the entity agrees to administer the park for a fixed time period. All management prerogatives belong to the private entity, in consultation with an advisory board composed of government officials, private-sector representatives and area residents.

¹⁰² Benin has delegated operations at Pendjari to the non-profit organisation, but the state remains responsible for the park and its officials participate in committee meetings.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Beninese conservation officials and African Parks employees, Cotonou and Kandi, August 2022; Johannesburg, September 2022.

¹⁰⁴ See de Bruijn, "Law of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover", *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ African Parks rehabilitates and operates about twenty national parks throughout Africa at the request of national authorities.

regulations pertaining to conservation. The commission now serves as an effective conflict resolution mechanism.¹⁰⁶

These results seem to have persuaded donors to encourage authorities in Burkina Faso and Niger to explore similar partnerships. In January 2022, prior to the first of the country's two coups that year, Burkinabé authorities showed interest in collaborating with African Parks, asking the organisation to carry out a feasibility study for its side of the Park W. There is no indication that a concrete partnership will come about, however. In Niger, a non-governmental organisation called African Wildlife Conservation (WAC), a local African Parks partner, is carrying out a similar study that could lead to a proposal for a new management model for the Nigerien part of Park W.¹⁰⁷

The partnership model for managing protected areas comes with challenges. Conservationist organisations such as African Parks or WAC have neither the mandate nor the capacity to fight insurgents. The two NGOs and the defence and security forces have pledged to share information and work together in the park.¹⁰⁸ But these joint interventions have been difficult to get off the ground, due to the military's reticence to work with foreign conservationists and an inability to iron out command issues between military officers and the states' forest guards, as well as the African Parks and WAC rangers. Many forest guards in the three countries oppose delegating management functions to non-state organisations. Some view it as an unwarranted negative judgment of their park management skills, saying that any shortcomings in their performance are due to lack of resources. Others castigate the government for privatising a public good and worry that the countries will lose sovereignty over the park.¹⁰⁹

C. *Addressing Conflict over Resources*

Since the early 2000s, authorities and their partners have struggled to reconcile conservation efforts with the needs of locals. As farmers encroached on the park's peripheries and herders let their cattle graze inside it, park managers and their foreign partners worked to restore farm and grasslands outside the reserve.

To stop the advance of farmland around the park, authorities and their partners have promoted mechanisms for land restoration such as fertilising degraded soil and

¹⁰⁶ Many pastoralists praised the way African Parks addresses land-use issues in the park's periphery, particularly in the eastern buffer zones. Crisis Group interviews, Kandi, August 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Niger is unlikely to return to the previous public management system. The pilot project for delegated management occurred in 2018 with the Termit and Tin-Toumma reserve, which was taken over by Noé, an NGO that was created to capture donor funds. The European Union has explicitly demanded that a public-private partnership manage at least part of its funding for protecting biodiversity. This demand comes from experience with conservation projects, in particular ECOPAS and PAPE. Crisis Group interviews, environment ministry officials, Niamey, January 2022.

¹⁰⁸ In Niger, officials from the defence and environmental protection ministries are working on a memorandum of understanding that should pave the way for collaboration among soldiers, security personnel, foresters and WAC agents in securing the park and enhancing conservation. Ratification of the memorandum is lagging, however, partly due to the military's reluctance to cooperate with WAC's perceived foreign leadership. Crisis Group interviews, officials involved in environmental protection, Niamey, January 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, forest guards, Niamey, February 2022; Ouagadougou, March 2022; Cotonou, August 2022.

introducing seeds that produce higher yields. Similarly, authorities worked to delimit pastures, transhumance corridors and resting areas for livestock.¹¹⁰ They also built water points and vaccination sites. Many other community initiatives promoted peaceful conflict resolution and raised awareness, not only of conservation objectives among pastoralists but also of the herders' needs among foresters. Some of these initiatives have borne fruit.

Regulation of transhumance has proven particularly complicated. At present, herders move around looking for pasture and water as the weather dictates. They can hardly stop all their roaming cattle from damaging protected grasslands and crops. West African countries have signed numerous agreements that set out conditions for herders to cross borders, such as carrying a cattle vaccination certificate and informing authorities of their itinerary and herds' size prior to departure. The idea was that countries could then prepare for the pastoralists' arrival. Yet thus far no country has been able to enforce the rules, mainly because herders rarely seek permission from authorities when they leave a jurisdiction. Nor do they follow a predetermined route. Indeed, herders are usually guided by information about the availability of resources, particularly salt (a vital mineral for cattle), that they receive along the way.

Benin and Togo have regularly shut their borders to herders from Niger because of the latter's failure to abide by regulations, but also due to heightened tensions between herders and farmers. Beninese authorities have justified border closures by citing pastoral reforms and the need to assess how many cattle its grasslands can feed.

Generally, Benin has outperformed its neighbours in this area. Authorities have launched various initiatives to mitigate the risk of land-use conflict in northern districts. Through the Agence Béninoise de Gestion Intégrée des Espaces Frontaliers, for instance, the government funds numerous projects aimed at improving local livelihoods. It is also trying to reform the livestock sector by, among other things, encouraging herders to settle as well as requiring district authorities to designate pastoral zones and manage the nomads' itineraries.

¹¹⁰ There are many pastoral areas in the park's surroundings, including Say in Niger and Tapoa-Boppo and Kabonga in eastern Burkina Faso. But these areas have no clear boundaries and lack sufficient water points and pastures. Additionally, some corridors to grazing land are obstructed by farmland.

V. Policy Recommendations

Protecting nature reserves like Park W is a security, environmental and development imperative. Dislodging the insurgents who have based themselves there will be difficult, requiring a multi-pronged strategy. As authorities in Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger are preparing to better address the jihadist problem militarily, they will simultaneously need to consider near- and long-term reforms that can help address the economic and ecological challenges facing the region's people.

A. A Three-tiered Military Strategy

Counter-terrorism efforts have struggled to achieve their objectives in the open expanses of the Sahel, and in dense forests like those in Park W they will face even greater challenges.¹¹¹ Success will likely require the three countries to toggle between a range of strategies – including military pressure, containment and even negotiation.

As a threshold matter, for counter-terrorism efforts in Park W to have a chance of succeeding, all three countries will need to cooperate militarily, develop better intelligence gathering and devise a common long-term strategy. Benin may be well positioned to take the lead. It can impress upon Burkina Faso and Niger the need for trilateral military mechanisms, in part because so far it has suffered the least from jihadist militancy. Rather than setting up a cumbersome mission like the G5 Sahel force, which Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger created in 2014, the militaries will likely find it more efficient to work within national commands while relying on constant communication among field commanders on each of the borders for coordination.¹¹²

In addition to planning for cross-border military cooperation, the three states should work together to mitigate harmful consequences of direct military action. For one thing, having more soldiers on the ground will heighten the risk of abuses against civilians. Heavy-handed behaviour feeds resentment of central authorities and undermine the military's credibility. In previous counter-terrorism operations in the area, the army has carried out mass arrests of locals, singling out Peul men for maltreatment and slaughtering their livestock.¹¹³

¹¹¹ For more on counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel, see Crisis Group Report, *Burkina Faso: Sortir de la spirale des violences*, op. cit.; as well as Crisis Group Africa Reports N°289, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020; and N°299, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, 1 February 2021.

¹¹² A senior Nigerien officer with pertinent experience says this simple mechanism is best. Crisis Group interview, Niamey, September 2022. Crisis Group has previously discussed the problems with the G5 Sahel force. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Force*, 12 December 2017. The Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad basin has had some success in fighting Boko Haram, but difficulties with coordination have hindered its effectiveness as well. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°291, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?*, 7 July 2020.

¹¹³ In July 2022, Beninese forces shot dead dozens of cattle grazing on the park's outskirts. The incident sparked an outcry from pastoralists as African Parks had authorised grazing in the area. Authorities have promised to compensate the owners.

There is also a high risk of harm to the environment. Deploying a large number of troops inside the park could damage flora and fauna, which would defeat the purpose of conservation efforts.

For these and other reasons, the three countries should consider whether they could achieve some of their immediate objectives – at least temporarily – by trying to contain the jihadists' expansion rather than overwhelm them with force. The three countries could establish bases around the park or step up patrols in the area in order to restrain militant movements. Doing so would give the residents respite and afford the three countries time to work out a long-term strategy. This strategy should be of particular interest to Niger, given how close the park is to Niamey. Now that Burkinabé soldiers have left the border, Nigerien troops there are more exposed to attack. A containment strategy would involve urgent deployment of troops to strategic spots in the region. For example, soldiers could go to the commune of Ouro Gueladjo, near the outskirts of Niamey. No garrison is there now.

The strategy's third element could be for state officials to be open to talks with the jihadists occupying Park W – as some already are – so that they can explore whether they may be able to deal with a few issues through discreet negotiations. Both Nigerien and Burkinabé authorities have spoken at times with local militants. In Niger, such talks in the Rive Droite near Park W have produced results, including the release of a U.S. hostage and a temporary ceasefire. Beninese authorities have said nothing about engaging in dialogue with jihadists, but according to a top official, they do not categorically oppose it.¹¹⁴

B. *Declassifying the Park's Buffer Zones*

As they work to address the threat posed by jihadists in the park, the authorities of the three jurisdictional countries should also consider mechanisms that could be used to alleviate resource competition in the surrounding areas. That competition has both created social frictions and driven some people – mostly herders but also some farmers – through the door the jihadists have opened to the park's grasslands.

One stopgap measure that the authorities might consider would be to lift the protected designation from parts of the buffer zones around the park and open these areas up to increased human activity. To go a step further, they could authorise herders to let their cattle graze in particular grasslands inside the park at agreed-upon times of the day during the lean season between January and May, when pasture and water are scarce elsewhere.

Authorities have declassified protected areas in the region before. In 2004, Benin removed the designation from a 5km-wide strip on the edge of Park W, which was then made available to farmers, herders and traditional medical practitioners. Similarly, in eastern Niger, forestry services partially opened the Gadabédji Total Reserve to herders during the lean season, which rapidly improved their relations with forest

¹¹⁴ For more on dialogue with militants in the Sahel, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°276, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, 28 May 2019; and N°306, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*, 10 December 2021.

guards and eventually motivated residents to help patrol the reserve.¹¹⁵ African Parks is testing this approach in northern Benin. In 2022, the organisation labelled areas on the park's edge "moderate restrictions zones", allowing pastoralists to bring in livestock during the day. Herders say the program has eased their hardships.¹¹⁶

Still, there are significant downsides to weigh. Conservationists may consider such measures too high of a price to pay – a calculation that might depend on whether making more fertile land available could secure immediate community buy-in for overarching conservation efforts. The authorities should also review previous declassification exercises in Niger and Benin, some of which created lasting communal tensions, to see what lessons might be drawn. Finally, declassification is only a temporary remedy for land-use frictions. It is no substitute for long-term solutions to the security crisis in the park or the resource management challenges in its surroundings.

C. *A Long-term Project: Transforming Agricultural Production*

The militant presence in Park W is not the only threat to the area's security and stability. Trends in population growth, migration and land use have also driven up tensions. If the last decade has been the deadliest yet, the next is likely to be bloodier still.¹¹⁷ Thus, the three governments and their outside partners need to consider what would be required to put the region's agricultural economy on a sounder footing. One idea that some regional actors have begun exploring is to encourage nomads to settle, while helping semi-nomadic herders and farmers adopt new practices that increase crop yields.

This undertaking would be enormous. Sahelian authorities have tried to settle nomads for decades, with little success. Nomadic pastoralism is a deeply rooted culture sustaining millions of people in the region – a lifestyle that some have pursued for centuries. Settling herders would require huge investment over a long period. It would additionally be impossible absent sustained political engagement from officials, which might be difficult, particularly in Niger and Burkina Faso, from which most nomadic herders originate. Powerful pastoralist associations in these countries would stridently object to any such measure. For these and other reasons, the idea of settling nomadic herders was barely discussed in the Sahel, until recently.

But the notion is now gaining traction in state and society. In 2020, Benin launched an ambitious program to settle nomadic herders and change pastoralist practices, restricting, among other things, cattle movement between regions.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, many herders are becoming aware that nomadic pastoralism will come to an end, sooner or later.¹¹⁹ In Burkina Faso, the influential pastoralist organisation Union Nationale

¹¹⁵ See Mahamane Iro, "Rôle de la réserve totale de faune de Gadabédji dans le développement local au Niger", MA thesis, Université d'Abomey Calavi, Benin, July 2014.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, pastoralist spokespersons, Kandi, August 2022.

¹¹⁷ All three countries have witnessed a significant increase in violence over the last decade, due to jihadist activity, resource conflict, banditry or a combination of these phenomena. See ACLED data.

¹¹⁸ For example, cattle is not allowed to move between the Attacora and Alibori regions. Crisis Group interview, president of sedentarisation commission, Cotonou, August 2022.

¹¹⁹ Leaders of the Rugga as well as herders themselves agree that transhumance cannot continue in its current form. A nomad from Niger says he will likely keep going for years to come, but he does not expect his children to pursue his lifestyle. Crisis Group interview, Say, February 2022.

des Rugga du Burkina Faso supports sedentarisation, saying traditional cross-border transhumance is unsustainable.¹²⁰

As they weigh prospects for sedentarisation, authorities and their partners will need to consider the equally difficult question of how to reform farming methods so that farmers can produce more with greater efficiency. They will need to invest in new technology that can boost productivity in limited space. There are ways, for example, of getting more milk and meat from livestock without expanding herds or farms.

Agriculture is the mainstay of rural economies in Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin, and each country is well aware of the pressing need to transform farm production, including livestock management, in part to reduce food insecurity. Benin and Niger in particular have articulated wide-ranging strategies for improving crop yields. For their part, donors and institutions such as the African Development Bank are increasingly interested in funding such initiatives as they move their sights in Africa from infrastructure to sustainable agriculture – a shift motivated by, among other things, global supply chain problems and climatic changes that are worsening food shortages on the continent.

Authorities in the three countries should continue to test policy ideas for better regulating transhumant pastoralism and encouraging nomads to settle in conflict-prone areas, ideally with the input of professional herder and farmer associations as well as local civil society organisations. Donors should be prepared to help, but numerous relevant projects already exist in all of these countries.

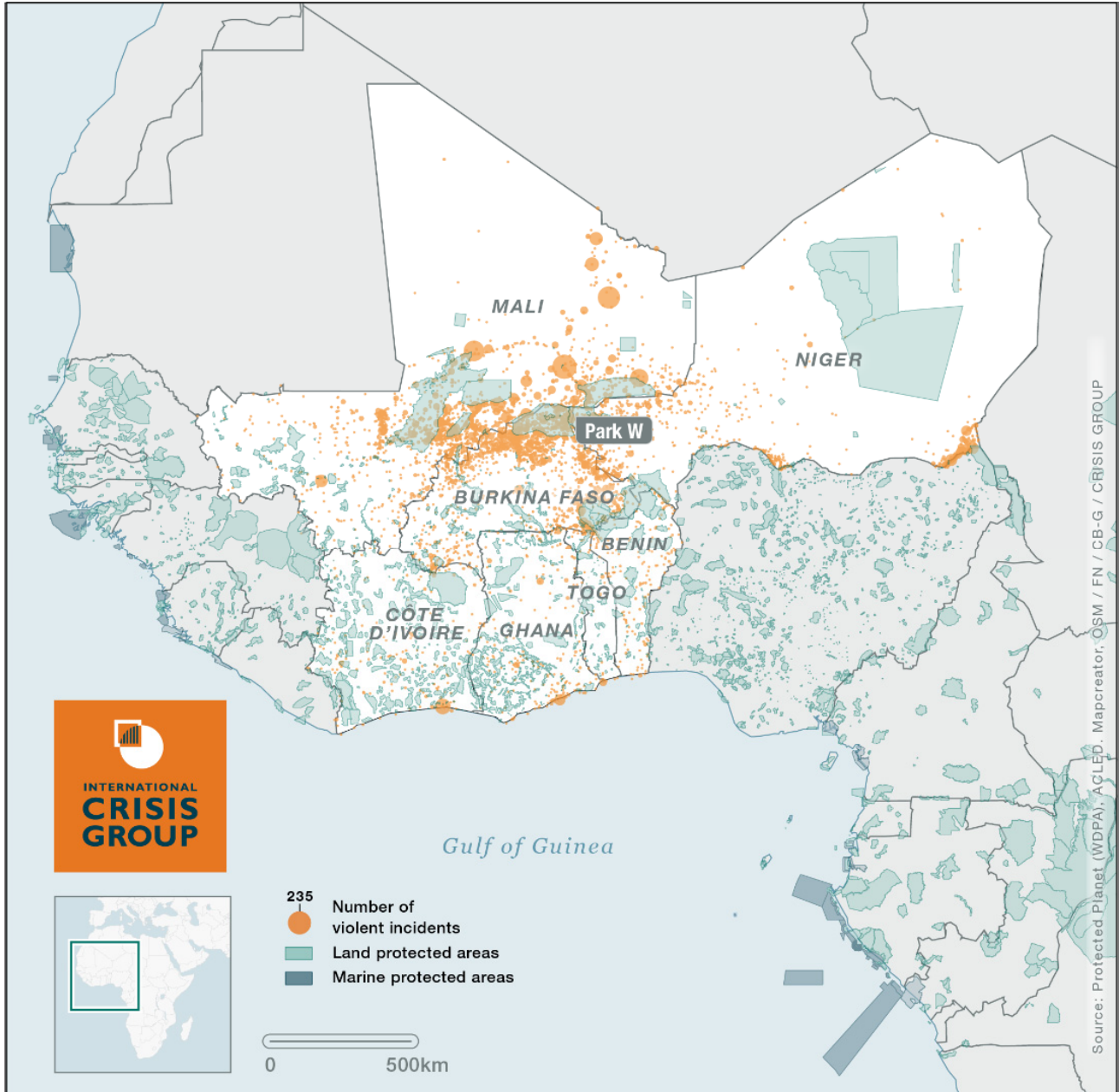
¹²⁰ The organisation notes that herders face mounting difficulties with authorities and farmers, due to farmland's encroachment on pasture and cattle corridors, as well as growing threats to evict semi-nomadic herders. Clashes with farmers, other herders and security forces have increased in recent years. The spread of jihadist violence in the Sahel has exacerbated these problems, leaving herders caught between insurgents, on one hand, and the state, on the other. The association believes that these conflicts will worsen unless pastoralists give up their way of life. Crisis Group interviews, Union leaders, Ouagadougou, March 2022.

VI. Conclusion

Park W's troubles are many-sided and will require a multifaceted solution. The three governments sharing responsibility for the park will need to coordinate efforts to restore security – ideally through a flexible approach that mixes military action with openness to quiet dialogue. But they will also have to work with donors to develop near- and long-term solutions to the resource challenges that have created rancour in the communities surrounding the park. This combination of efforts is the best hope for bringing human security, economic viability and environmental sustainability to this troubled region.

Ouagadougou/Cotonou/Niamey/Brussels, 26 January 2023

Appendix A: Map of Conflict Incidents and Protected Areas in the Sahel



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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