



Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire

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What's new? As jihadist groups in the Sahel move southward, Côte d'Ivoire has beefed up its security deployment in the north and rolled out a range of social projects to alleviate poverty and youth unemployment. Militant violence has subsided since a series of attacks in the north between 2020 and 2021.

Why does it matter? Insecurity is rampant in West Africa. Militants are encroaching upon littoral states, stepping up attacks in the northern parts of Benin and Togo. Côte d'Ivoire, which has Francophone West Africa's biggest economy, appears uniquely well placed to guard against the jihadist expansion, but it faces risks nonetheless.

What should be done? Côte d'Ivoire's twin focus on security and economic development is yielding important dividends for the population in the north. Authorities should enhance social investments and keep building trust between the military and civilians. They should pursue bilateral military cooperation with neighbouring Burkina Faso and increase support for multilateral intelligence-sharing initiatives.

I. Overview

From their bases in northern Mali and eastern Burkina Faso, jihadist groups in the Sahel have spread southward toward coastal West African countries, raising fears that they will eventually establish footholds there. Bands of militants have moved into forests along Burkina Faso's southern borders with Benin, Ghana, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. Compared to states in the Sahel, in several of which jihadists have been making steady advances, Côte d'Ivoire has responded well, pairing a focus on security with a comprehensive socio-economic approach. Authorities in Abidjan should persist with existing security efforts, including through support for regional intelligence sharing initiatives. They should also continue to seek bilateral military cooperation with Burkina Faso and possibly with littoral states such as Benin, Ghana and Togo. Finally, they should enhance work to forge trust between the security forces and residents of the north as well as ramp up their investment in programs that offer livelihood opportunities, especially to youth and women, making sure that these reach remote villages.

The security landscape in much of the region is forbidding. Jihadists are on the march throughout northern and central Mali and across Burkina Faso, where as many as one in eleven residents have been displaced. 2022 was the deadliest year on record in both countries. At the same time, coups in Bamako and Ouagadougou have fuelled

diplomatic tensions with coastal countries, hindering security cooperation as the littoral states work to prevent the jihadist menace from spreading into their territory. In late July, a coup in Niger shook up regional security arrangements even further. It could boost the fortunes of jihadist groups in the west of that country. Benin and Togo, meanwhile, have suffered a string of lethal attacks on army posts and isolated border villages in the north. The jihadists based in Burkina Faso's southern forests have grown into a threat to regional stability.

Yet even in this difficult milieu, Côte d'Ivoire, home to Francophone West Africa's strongest economy, has thus far largely managed to keep jihadists at bay. In 2011, the country emerged from nearly a decade of civil conflict that had severely weakened its already divided armed forces and left its infrastructure in disrepair. President Alassane Ouattara has concentrated on restoring political stability and social cohesion through economic growth, with impressive results, while the government has developed recovery planning and investment projects that have proven useful in the six northern regions most vulnerable to jihadist infiltration. Simultaneously, far-reaching security-sector reforms have enabled authorities to build a military able to ward off the jihadist violence scarring the Sahel.

It took the authorities some time to bear down on the challenge. In March 2016, after a brazen attack on the seaside resort of Grand-Bassam, near the commercial capital Abidjan, the government accelerated the long-planned military reforms and upgraded intelligence gathering. Still, it took four years and another attack for authorities to fully face the reality that militants in Burkina Faso were looking for opportunities to embed themselves in northern Côte d'Ivoire. In 2020, presumed jihadists killed fourteen soldiers in the border town of Kafolo, while the following year saw a series of smaller raids just south of Burkina Faso. The Kafolo attack was instrumental in leading the Ivorian government to up its game. On the security front, it built army bases and deployed counter-terrorism units along its northern borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. On the social front, it launched a comprehensive economic development program that, among other things, offers apprenticeships for vocational skills and a range of credit facilities, including to youth and women. The country has not seen a major attack since early 2022.

The dual approach Côte d'Ivoire's government has adopted in managing the jihadist threat has likely helped thwart attacks, but the country also owes its resilience to other factors that set it apart from its neighbours. These include President Ouattara's above-referenced decade-long focus on securing internal stability through economic development, as well as close ethnic and family ties that bind Abidjan's political elite to the north.

Yet Côte d'Ivoire cannot afford to be complacent. Its relative wealth and pro-Western stance will continue to make it an attractive target for those seeking to destabilise the region. Moreover, its long, porous northern border leaves the frontier highly exposed to militant violence, especially if residents grow frustrated that they are not seeing the dividends of the government's economic growth policies. A growing influx of refugees from Burkina Faso, as well as increased illegal artisanal gold mining (a potential source of financing for jihadist outfits), also contribute to long-term concerns about jihadist infiltration. Côte d'Ivoire should therefore step up its investments in the north's economy, and international partners should continue to support these programs with financial aid and technical expertise. Abidjan should enhance efforts to build trust between

security forces deployed to the north and the people who live there. The government should also continue to deepen security cooperation with adjacent states, recognising that – for all its advantages – it will need to participate in regional efforts to meet what is a regional challenge.

II. Jihadists in Burkina Faso: The Spillover Threat

Côte d'Ivoire's approach to jihadism developed in phases. The government began to focus on the danger of spillover of jihadist violence from the Sahel in 2015.¹ Following two attacks just across the Malian border that year, it passed a law that criminalised advocating or recruiting for terrorist activities and authorised wiretapping by police investigators. The country experienced its first major jihadist attack in March 2016, when three men who had travelled from Mali opened fire in restaurants and upon beachgoers in the coastal town of Grand-Bassam. The assailants killed nineteen people, including six European citizens and three members of the security forces, before security personnel shot them dead. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility the same day for the attack, which came on the heels of similar raids on upmarket hotels and cafés in Mali and Burkina Faso. Security forces hit back with mass arrests as part of a nationwide investigation.²

Though severe, the Grand-Bassam assault turned out to be an isolated incident in Côte d'Ivoire, at least so far. From 2017 onward, the tactics deployed by al-Qaeda's affiliates in Mali, which merged to form Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) the same year, changed significantly. Al-Qaeda franchises began to target military positions rather than high-profile public spaces.

But that did not mean the threat was gone. Indeed, during the same period, in Burkina Faso, militants spread to the more densely vegetated south-western regions, with groups establishing hideouts in forests near the borders with Benin and Togo.³ By 2019, with armed groups dominating much of rural territory in Burkina Faso, evidence emerged of their involvement in illicit activities in the borderlands, such as gun and motorcycle smuggling, cattle theft, poaching and unlicensed artisanal gold mining.⁴

Burkina Faso's unravelling rightly stoked concerns that jihadism could reach West Africa's coastal states.⁵ Militants were not actively proselytising there. But already,

¹ "Lutte Contre le Terrorisme : La Côte D'Ivoire Renforce Son Arsenal Juridique", Government of Côte D'Ivoire, 18 February 2015.

² In December 2022, an Ivorian court sentenced ten men to life imprisonment for their involvement in the attack. Of the eighteen men accused, only four were physically present in court, with the others either on the run or detained in Mali. Eight were acquitted. See "Perpétuité pour dix des accusés du procès de l'attentat de Grand-Bassam", *Jeune Afrique*, 28 December 2022.

³ These forests include Deux Balés, Boulon-Koflande, Niangoloko and Dida, among others, along the border with Côte d'Ivoire. Jihadists have also moved into Tambi Kaboré National Park, Nazinga Forest and the Sissili forest in the central regions, along the border with Ghana; and the Park W-Arly Pendjari complex along the south-eastern borders with Togo and Benin. Confidential report on file with Crisis Group. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°310, *Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W*, 26 January 2023.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Abidjan, March 2023. See also "Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma", Institute for Security Studies, 10 December 2019.

⁵ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°149, *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, 20 December 2019.

they were using northern Côte d'Ivoire as a place to obtain supplies or retreat during counter-terrorism operations and as a route for moving between hideouts. Bigger ambitions were becoming apparent. In a video made in November 2018, JNIM commanders urged the Peul people in West Africa, also known as the Fulani, to “pursue jihad”.⁶ (The Peul are widely perceived to supply most of the recruits to jihadist groups in the region.) Around the same time, Hamadoun Koufa, the head of JNIM's Katiba Macina, reportedly tasked a Burkinabé jihadist known by the nom de guerre Hamza with establishing cells in northern Côte d'Ivoire and recruiting fighters there.⁷ According to French intelligence chief Bernard Emié, who gave a rare public speech in 2021, JNIM's three main leaders filmed another video in February 2020, showing them agreeing to extend their insurgencies southward from the Sahel into Gulf of Guinea countries, notably Côte d'Ivoire and Benin.⁸

Despite all these signals, Côte d'Ivoire was not prepared when militant incursions began along its nearly 600km border with Burkina Faso. In June 2020, dozens of JNIM fighters on motorcycles killed fourteen soldiers at a mixed army-gendarmerie post in the northern village of Kafolo, less than 2km from the border. Observers perceived the raid as retaliation for Operation Comoé, an Ivorian-Burkinabé counter-terrorism sweep that had dismantled militant infrastructure in and around Comoé National Park in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire a month earlier.⁹ Operation Comoé was the first joint anti-jihadist operation in the area and came after intelligence services located a wanted jihadist commander in northern Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁰ Because of its proximity to both the Burkinabé border and the expansive Comoé Park, Kafolo is a strategic entry point and particularly exposed to attack. Security forces captured an alleged coordinator of the raid and interrogated dozens of others, including most of Kafolo's ethnic Peul men, who have since left the village.¹¹

The Kafolo attack is widely described as a “wake-up call” that spurred President Ouattara's government to take urgent steps to stave off what could become a bigger threat. Until then, Abidjan seemed to have been worried primarily about bold attacks on urban centres. At the same time, the authorities' focus on securing internal stability in the years following the 2002-2011 civil conflict meant that they were able to respond quickly. Within weeks, the government declared the north a military zone divided into two operational sub-zones (north west and north east) and sent additional forces to the area, including from existing army, police and gendarmerie counter-terrorism units. It also established a central military command in Korhogo, a northern city, to coordinate the various forces present in the area, ramped up border security and increased aerial surveillance.¹²

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Abidjan, March 2023.

⁸ “Sahel jihadists eye expansion into Côte d'Ivoire and Benin, says French spy boss”, RFI, 3 February 2021.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian security sources, Kong and Abidjan, March 2023. Crisis Group has also seen a confidential intelligence report, “Tracking Violent Extremism Spillover from the Sahel to Littoral West Africa”, dated June 2021, that contains this information.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Abidjan, March 2023.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Ivorian researcher, Kong, March 2023.

¹² The forces present are army units, paramilitary police (gendarmes), police, special forces – such as counter-terrorism troops – and forestry agents.

The attacks continued through 2021, however. As militants in Burkina Faso crept toward the south-western Cascades region, incidents along the Ivorian-Burkinabé border increased, from deadly raids on military positions in Côte d'Ivoire to abductions of civilians. In March 2021, a second attack on army positions in Kafolo killed three soldiers. Residents and security forces also found rudimentary explosive devices planted along tracks close to the border. Three months later, in what appeared to be an attempt at mass recruitment, jihadists entered a mosque in the village of Bolé seeking to persuade the congregants to adhere to JNIM's version of Islam and warn them not to collaborate with government forces. None of these actions were claimed by JNIM central command. A senior security official told Crisis Group that most raids were likely staged by small militant groups seeking to establish their credentials with core jihadist leaders farther afield.¹³ Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire also carried out joint military operations in 2021 and 2022, notably around the Dida forest in the former country.

By early 2022, the attacks in Côte d'Ivoire had stopped, suggesting that the government's efforts had been at least somewhat successful or that jihadists had changed their tactics. Or both things may have been true. But even so, militant groups have kept moving closer to the border. Burkinabé security forces and self-defence groups are increasingly struggling to contain insurgents in the Niangoloko commune, whose residents used to conduct a lively cross-border trade with northern Ivorians.¹⁴ Security sources report that at least ten villages in the commune are under some level of influence by jihadist groups (a broad description that suggests, at a minimum, that these groups are trying to entrench themselves), while militants have established hideouts in the Niangoloko forest near the Ivorian frontier.¹⁵

Moreover, in the last six months, fighters have stepped up a campaign of violence against civilians on the Burkinabé side of the border, including abductions, killings, looting and cattle theft. The Niangoloko commune saw 21 security incidents just between January and May, compared to eighteen in all of 2022. Insurgents are also believed to be selling stolen cattle from the area in northern Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁶ On 6 June, fifteen gunmen on motorcycles attacked a police checkpoint in the Burkinabé town of Yendéré, an important crossroads just 11km from the Ivorian border, killing an officer and two passengers in a bus waiting to pass through.¹⁷

III. The Northern Regions' Vulnerabilities

Instability in Burkina Faso is understandably causing anxiety in Côte d'Ivoire. Despite Abidjan's robust security response, outlined above and below, Côte d'Ivoire remains vulnerable to jihadist violence, due primarily to the length and porosity of its borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. The tri-border area is a key transit zone in West Africa. Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, import most of their fuel by road via the port of Abid-

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Abidjan, March 2023.

¹⁴ Security sources recorded eight violent incidents in 2020, ten in 2021, eighteen in 2022, and 21 between January and May 2023.

¹⁵ Confidential data from NGO based in Burkina Faso, on file with Crisis Group.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian researcher, Abidjan, March 2023.

¹⁷ Yendéré had seen no deadly attack since 2019. See "Burkina Faso : attaque du poste de police de Yendéré à la frontière ivoirienne", RFI, 1 December 2019.

jan, while numerous Burkinabé depend on informal cross-border trade with northern Côte d'Ivoire. Cross-border ethnic and family ties are also close. Though most residents of northern towns and villages report that the deployment of troops to the frontier has bolstered security, they are nervous about venturing into the bush and hesitant to visit family in Burkina Faso.¹⁸

Additionally, the government is acutely aware that Côte d'Ivoire's strengths could also be liabilities. These include its ranking as Francophone West Africa's largest economy. The country's relative wealth, as well as Abidjan's close ties to the former colonial power, France, could make it particularly alluring for outside actors trying to stoke anti-government sentiment.¹⁹ "Côte d'Ivoire is a showcase of the West", an observer told Crisis Group, referring to the country's relationship with European and other donors. "Destabilising Côte d'Ivoire would have significant propaganda value".²⁰ Moreover, Côte d'Ivoire is preparing two high-profile events in the near future: the Africa Cup of Nations football tournament, which is scheduled to be held in stadiums throughout the country in January-February 2024; and a presidential election in October 2025.

Beyond its attractiveness as a target, three issues are of particular concern to Ivorian officials. The government's greatest immediate worry is the influx of refugees from Burkina Faso. At first, people mainly crossed the border to seek shelter with relatives or host families until violence subsided at home. Since the October 2022 coup in Ouagadougou, however, Burkinabé military leaders have stepped up counter-insurgency efforts with the mass recruitment of *volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or volunteer militias. These self-defence groups are receiving arms to use against jihadists, who as noted above are locally associated with ethnic Peul. Increasingly, for instance in the Niangoloko commune, JNIM fighters retaliate by attacking civilians or stealing food, motorcycles or cattle.

As a result, between March and July, the number of refugees arriving in northern Côte d'Ivoire more than quadrupled, standing at 32,000 at the time of writing.²¹ A majority are Peul, including families with children; many have brought cattle. Local perceptions of the Peul are less positive than of any other ethnic group in the region, raising fears that their presence could aggravate tensions.²² More generally, officials worry about jihadist infiltration amid the influx of refugees.²³

To keep a watchful eye on new arrivals from Burkina Faso and alleviate the burden on their Ivorian hosts, authorities launched a compulsory registration drive for refugees and opened two "transit sites" where people can get temporary housing and access to schools and medical services in the area.²⁴ The national security council coordinates

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Boundiali, Kafolo, Kong and Korhogo, March 2023.

¹⁹ Jihadists are not the only outsiders who might try to roil Côte d'Ivoire. Russia's Wagner Group has targeted the country with cartoon propaganda that circulated widely on social media.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ivorian security analyst, Abidjan, March 2023.

²¹ "UNHCR Côte d'Ivoire Dashboard: Situation Report on Asylum Seekers in the North", 2 August 2023.

²² Crisis Group interviews, researchers, local officials and residents, Tengréla, Kong, Korhogo, Abidjan, March 2023. Crisis Group telephone interviews, official and expert, May 2023. The Dioula (also known as Malinké), Senoufo and Lobi are the main ethnic groups in northern Côte d'Ivoire.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, senior officials, Ferkessédougou, Kong, Korhogo and Abidjan, March 2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W*, op. cit.

²⁴ The Tchologo and Bounkani regions each have a refugee site with a capacity of about one thousand households. Relocation to these sites began on 22 July 2023.

the overall response in consultation with an array of ministries, UN agencies and diplomatic missions, but local prefects are responsible for managing these measures. Abidjan's decision to decline foreign assistance in building these sites, arguing that it would take too long to collect, demonstrates that it takes the matter seriously.²⁵ It also continues to fine-tune its management of the situation: for example, the authorities determined that the thousands of cattle the refugees brought with them are a problem, given that pasture for grazing is limited in a region full of cashew orchards and cotton farms. In May, the national security council prohibited the arrival of cattle from Burkina Faso.²⁶

Another worry is artisanal gold mining, partly a legacy of Côte d'Ivoire's civil conflict, which saw the north fall outside state control for almost a decade from 2002 to 2011. Rebel leaders encouraged gold panning and took a great deal of ore from smugglers to fund their movement.²⁷ A particular headache is Tengréla, a dusty town in Côte d'Ivoire's utmost north that straddles the Malian border. Tengréla's gold deposits attract thousands of young men and women. Young men in the area are often encouraged by their mothers to take up gold mining, for lack of other opportunities, while young women view the mining sites as refuges from traditional social structures and gender roles.²⁸ Ivorian miners work alongside migrants from Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, many of whom bring gold mining expertise and equipment. Malian businessmen are believed to be providing cash. An array of people supply the miners with goods and services.²⁹ Small-scale gold mining also creates demand for weapons (and explosives), as miners and gold smugglers seek to buy guns for protection from predatory criminals.

Authorities are wary of artisanal gold mining for several reasons. Many fear that militants could pre-finance networks of gold miners and smugglers and then tax the future revenues, though a recent study found no concrete evidence that such practices are under way.³⁰ In interviews, officials also described artisanal gold mining as a dangerous and even immoral line of work that undermines traditional social hierarchies, degrades the environment, and attracts criminals and sex workers. The government is working to regulate the industry with changes to the mining code, partly to curb gold

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, foreign diplomats, May 2023.

²⁶ "Côte d'Ivoire : Afflux des réfugiés burkinabé dans le nord du Pays, pour éviter tout conflit, l'entrée de leur bétail sur le sol ivoirien, interdite", KOACI, 7 June 2023.

²⁷ In September 2002, exiled army officers opposed to then-president Laurent Gbagbo attacked several cities in a bid to oust him. They failed to take Abidjan but seized control of much of the north of the country. France intervened to halt their southward advance, while ECOWAS troops deployed to monitor a truce and establish a de facto buffer zone between the north and the south. The ECOWAS troops were later replaced by a UN peacekeeping mission. The country remained partitioned for almost a decade.

²⁸ Men and women miners sometimes enter into temporary marriages whereby they agree to work as a duo at a specific site after celebrating the "wedding". Women typically "wash" the gold, running dirt through a sieve to find bits of the precious metal. Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian researchers, businesspeople and residents, Tengréla and Boundiali, March 2023. See also "Systems Analysis of Vulnerability and Resilience Dynamics Around Violent Extremism, Indigo Côte d'Ivoire", Equal Access International, February 2022.

²⁹ Mining sites also attract women hawkers and sex workers. Ivorian *dozos* (traditional hunters) are often on hand to make sure that nobody steals gold, while others act as middlemen between miners and buyers. Besides their cultural role in the north, *dozos* also provide intelligence to authorities.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian researcher, Tengréla, March 2023. See "Manœuvres djihadistes à la frontière ivoirienne : traqué à Sama, Ansar Dine se redéploie à Manakoro", L'Infodrome, 28 July 2015.

smuggling to Mali, while the gendarmerie has established a brigade to uproot illegal gold miners from nature preserves or high-risk areas. Foreign partners are meanwhile funding a project that aims to bring artisanal miners together into formal cooperatives, whose members would then sell gold to the state rather than smuggle it across the border. Some artisanal miners will also be trained to operate heavy machinery so that they can find jobs in industrial mines.³¹

The third major concern that preoccupies government officials is that young people in Côte d'Ivoire's north have fewer livelihood opportunities than peers in other regions of the country. Cocoa, the country's biggest cash crop, does not grow in the north. Most northerners earn an income growing cashews, cotton or seasonal vegetables. Cross-border commerce continues but at a slower clip, both because residents are being dissuaded by local authorities, who are concerned for their safety, from selling goods in Burkina Faso and because travellers from neighbouring countries are avoiding the borderlands due to insecurity.³²

The picture is not as bleak as it might otherwise be, in part because of steps Abidjan has already taken. Largely cut off from the south during the rebel movement's decade-long rule, the north has benefited from massive public investment in economic infrastructure and service provision over the past eleven years. Roads, cell phone towers and even airports have made most rural areas accessible, bolstering local economies. Still, poverty and illiteracy are major problems in the north; for example in the Tchologo region bordering Burkina Faso, the rates are among the highest in the country, and salaried jobs are scarce.³³ Many residents are increasingly frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities, more so given the ostentatious wealth on display in Abidjan.³⁴ Concerned that northerners could be recruited into militancy with offers of cash, officials set up a special program for the north, outlined below, that trains low-skilled youth and facilitates access to credit for village associations and a range of men and women seeking to sustain small businesses.³⁵

IV. Sources of Resilience

Given Côte d'Ivoire's position as Francophone West Africa's commercial hub, observers understandably fret about a destabilising surge in jihadist violence in the country's north. Jihadist rebellions have caused humanitarian crises in both Mali and Burkina Faso. Attacks kill thousands each year and show no sign of abating. Swathes of the Sahel have become inaccessible, with militants wiping out farmers' livelihoods and severing regional trade routes. Besides the deadly conflict and political instability in the Sahel, many countries in West Africa are facing high food and fertiliser prices due to the war in Ukraine. Still, while Côte d'Ivoire's six northern regions display some of the risk factors that have contributed to the emergence of jihadist violence elsewhere

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian researcher, EU official, Abidjan, March 2023.

³² Crisis Group interviews, officials and residents, Kafolo, Tengréla, Kong, Ferkessédougou, March 2023.

³³ The poverty rate in Tchologo was 62.9 per cent in 2018, well above the national rate of 39.4 per cent. See "Analysis of Extreme Poverty and Its Determinants, Inequality and Vulnerability in Côte d'Ivoire", Economic Analysis Institute, National Institute of Statistics, March 2022.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, residents, northern Côte d'Ivoire and by telephone, March and July 2023.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior government officials, Abidjan, March 2023.

– notably, poverty, underdevelopment and pervasive illicit activity – Côte d'Ivoire has seen few attacks, and it appears better positioned than other countries to face the security threat going forward. Five factors have contributed to the relative effectiveness of the authorities' response to date.

A. Côte d'Ivoire's Focus on Economic Development

The 2002-2011 civil unrest in Côte d'Ivoire, which saw regular outbreaks of deadly violence, still informs much of government policy today. With the rebellion fresh in its memory, Côte d'Ivoire began taking steps to tackle threats to its security as early as 2011. A former deputy managing director at the International Monetary Fund, President Ouattara placed structural economic reforms at the heart of his recovery strategy, in the belief that economic growth (and its trickle-down effects) would restore the legitimacy of the state and foster political stability.³⁶

It was partly the neoliberal policies of the country's first president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, that inspired Ouattara to put a premium on growth, but he also looks to countries with "big government" models such as Rwanda and China.³⁷ With the good-will of both foreign governments and multilateral organisations that stepped in with billions of dollars in financing, Abidjan quickly obtained the money it required to beef up the security forces, build modern economic infrastructure throughout the country and restore the state's authority in areas where it had slipped away during former President Laurent Gbagbo's tenure from 2002 to 2011. Ouattara also appointed technocrats to senior positions to oversee his new policies.³⁸ A decade of public investment, much of it provided by external partners, has improved access to electricity, drinking water, education and health care nationwide. In making this investment, the government has significantly lowered the national poverty rate, even if perceptions that the country's wealth is distributed unequally are widespread, particularly among urban youth.³⁹

B. Power Base of Authorities

The Muslim-dominated north is Ouattara's political base and most reliable electoral constituency.⁴⁰ Shortly after taking power in 2011, Ouattara increased the country's number of regions from ten to 31 in order to strengthen the state at the local and regional levels, which in turn made it easier to carry out his economic development agenda.

³⁶ Francis Akindès, "You Can't Eat Bridges or Tar! Côte d'Ivoire's Meandering Path to Crisis Recovery", *Politique Africaine*, vol. 148, no. 4 (October 2017).

³⁷ In 2018, Rwanda and Côte d'Ivoire signed several cooperation agreements, leading to regular political talks between the two countries. Senior Ivorian officials are also sent to Rwanda to learn about that country's administration. Crisis Group interviews, senior government official, Abidjan, March 2023.

³⁸ For example, Vice President Tiémoko Meyliet Koné formerly headed the Central Bank of West African States, while Prime Minister Patrick Achi studied engineering and previously served as minister of economic infrastructure. Ouattara's chief of staff, Fidèle Sarassoro, is an economist who held the post of UN deputy special representative for the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Overall, the administration has hired numerous Ivorians who went abroad to work for international or multilateral organisations as the 2002-2011 crisis worsened.) Ouattara's national security council is also staffed by loyal, experienced technocrats.

³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, March-July 2023.

⁴⁰ Ouattara is a descendant of the Kong dynasty, which ruled what is now north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and much of present-day Burkina Faso throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

These changes particularly augmented the number of government representatives (and political appointees) from the north. Moreover, key cabinet and military figures as well as some of the country's wealthiest businesspeople hail from the north, with those who can afford it bestowing their largesse on northern towns and villages.⁴¹ Abidjan thus pays close attention to how the north is governed. Though grievances against the government do exist, mainly among unemployed youth, loyalty to Ouattara and his inner circle runs deep. In addition, memories of the lawlessness that reigned in the north during the 2002-2011 conflict mean that there is little or no apparent appetite for fresh upheaval, at least not at present.⁴²

C. Religious Tolerance and Heavy Government Scrutiny

Most Ivorians see jihadist violence as an external threat. Ouattara, himself a Muslim married to a Catholic woman, has made religious tolerance a government priority, partly to reverse the stigmatisation of Muslims under his predecessor Gbagbo.⁴³ Ivorian officials and researchers insist that jihadists are unlikely to gain a foothold in northern Côte d'Ivoire through ideological persuasion, primarily because ties between authorities in Abidjan and the north are strong, as described above.⁴⁴ They also point out that Côte d'Ivoire has a long tradition of peaceful, mainly Maliki Islam, with diverse Muslim communities whose members live side by side or intermarry with people of other religious denominations. Though Salafi groups have grown in influence among Muslims since the 1990s, they have been careful to distance themselves from jihadist narratives.⁴⁵ The country's religious diversity has fostered a culture of dialogue, and religious conversions are common.

At the same time, Abidjan exerts increasingly tight control of the public sphere. Tolerance for protests that disrupt public order or behaviour the government deems immoral is declining.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, official messaging places great emphasis on civil behaviour and increasingly cautions against jihadist influence. Muslim associations, in particular, are expected to toe the government line, given their proximity to the country's political elites. In 2018, for example, Côte d'Ivoire's most influential Muslim federation, known by its French acronym COSIM, issued a statement of support when the prosecutor-general charged a young Muslim preacher in Abidjan with advocating terrorism.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Criticism that the country is "run by northerners" is rampant. Previous presidents were from the east and centre.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, government officials, military officers and residents, Kong, Ferkessédougou, Boundiali and Tengréla, March 2023.

⁴³ Gbagbo's Young Patriots youth group often conflated Muslims and northerners, labelling both groups as non-indigenous people or "outsiders" with no legal claim to Ivorian citizenship. During the 2010-2011 conflict, Gbagbo loyalists torched mosques and burned Muslims alive.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, March-July 2023.

⁴⁵ Frédéric Madore, "The New Vitality of Salafism in Côte d'Ivoire: Toward a Radicalization of Ivorian Islam?", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 46 (December 2016); "En Côte d'Ivoire, l'islam 'du juste milieu', fragilisé par une percée du salafisme", *Le Monde Afrique*, 7 July 2020.

⁴⁶ "Côte d'Ivoire/Justice : 26 militants de Laurent Gbagbo condamnés à 24 mois de prison ferme", *Abidjan.net*, 10 March 2023.

⁴⁷ "En Côte d'Ivoire, les imams se prononcent sur l'affaire Aguib Touré", *La Croix Africa*, 19 July 2018.

Close collaboration with Muslim groups is also an essential part of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. A religious official told Crisis Group that the government actively encourages local Muslim leaders to relay intelligence on "strangers" – for example, unknown individuals who come to the area to preach, proselytise or otherwise immerse themselves in the Muslim community.⁴⁸ Côte d'Ivoire has long subjected preachers of all denominations to scrutiny, with many northern communities requiring that traveling imams submit their proposed sermons to village authorities for approval.⁴⁹ The violence in Burkina Faso has only heightened public suspicion vis-à-vis foreigners, particularly preachers and young men who are not known in the community.

D. *An Army Overhauled*

Côte d'Ivoire's security and defence forces have made considerable strides in recent years. Ouattara was sworn in as president after intense fighting between rebels who had occupied the northern half of the country for almost a decade and security forces loyal to Gbagbo, who refused to step down after losing December 2010 elections to Ouattara. The post-electoral conflict – the country's deadliest since it won independence from France in 1960 – played havoc with the politically divided army. In contrast, most rebels were staunch supporters of Ouattara, who like them hailed from the north.

The rebels' military victory, aided by French and UN airpower, was a mixed blessing for Ouattara. On one hand, it allowed him to emerge unscathed from the conflict and assume the presidency. On the other, it made him politically indebted to a rebel movement that he never publicly supported as an opposition leader. It also meant his government had responsibility for seeing through a 2007 peace accord that prescribed the integration of thousands of former rebels into the armed forces. Few of these rebels had had professional training. Though some 6,000 former rebels entered a demobilisation program, a handful of powerful rebel commanders who had run their own militias in the north (known as *comzones* in French) were absorbed into the army's top ranks with their patronage networks largely intact. As a result, though crucial to restoring stability, the reconstituted army was riven with internal tensions.⁵⁰

Moreover, the outsized influence of the ex-rebel commanders fed perceptions that Ouattara relied on them for his political survival. Certainly, his government's actions bolstered that impression. For instance, when former rebels complained that they did not receive the financial support to which they were entitled, the military pushed through mass promotions that inflated the middle ranks with a disproportionate number of non-commissioned, low-grade officers.

Following the March 2016 attack on Grand-Bassam, the government placed security-sector reform at the top of the agenda once again. President Ouattara saw the terrorist attack as a deliberate attempt to derail his post-crisis recovery program.⁵¹ The follow-

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Abidjan, March 2023.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, France-based researcher, June 2023. Some imams no longer offer shelter in mosques to male travellers who are unknown to the community, fearing that they might be linked to jihadist groups. See "2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Côte d'Ivoire", U.S. Department of State, 2 June 2022.

⁵⁰ Maxime Ricard, "Sous pression : les défis du secteur de la sécurité en Côte d'Ivoire", IRSEM, July 2021.

⁵¹ "Al Qaeda attack will not derail Ivory Coast revival: president", Reuters, 16 March 2016.

ing month, the government allocated over \$130 million to bolstering the security forces' mobility and intelligence-gathering capabilities, while also pledging to improve border security.⁵² Later that year, parliament adopted far-reaching plans to make the security apparatus more professional, announcing payroll cuts to allow for higher spending on equipment.⁵³ But these plans set off a series of violent soldiers' protests in 2017 and 2018 that paralysed major cities and reportedly even prompted Ouattara to briefly consider resigning. Instead, he replaced the army chief of staff and defence minister and quelled the unrest with cash, paying bonuses the military demanded, with some financial support from Côte d'Ivoire's foreign partners.⁵⁴ The bottom line was that the mutinies motivated the government to push through military reforms and curb the dominance of the former *comzones* in the process.

Today, the army's ethnic and regional composition is considerably more balanced than it was a decade ago. Voluntary retirement packages have flushed out a sizeable number of mid-ranking personnel, while thousands of fresh recruits – men and women – are bolstering the proportion of rank-and-file soldiers. With assistance from partners as diverse as France, China and Morocco, the government has also invested in equipment, training and better housing facilities for security personnel. For example, a modern gendarmerie base is close to completion in Tengréla, while a Moroccan company is building three military hospitals in key towns, including in Korhogo. Security sources plausibly suggest that Ouattara's government has built the most professional army Côte d'Ivoire has had to date, which will soon also be the largest.⁵⁵

By the end of 2023, the army is slated to be a force of 24,000, while the police and gendarmerie are estimated to account for an additional 40,000 security personnel.⁵⁶ Some question, however, whether training soldiers to a higher professional standard and purchasing new military equipment is sufficient to effectively respond to the unconventional strategies adopted by jihadist rebels.⁵⁷

The defence ministry, headed by Ouattara's brother Téné Birahima, is understandably secretive about its security strategy in the *zone opérationnelle nord*. The army has built bases along the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso and deployed between 2,000 and 2,500 troops in the area. For example, Kafolo now has a large military camp with north-facing guard towers, while soldiers with machine guns protect key infrastructure elsewhere in the village, including a newly built mobile antenna. Troops are rotated

⁵² "Lutte Contre le Terrorisme : Le Gouvernement Débloque 80 Milliards FCFA Pour Le Renforcement Des Capacités Opérationnelles Des Forces De Défense Et De Sécurité", Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 20 April 2016.

⁵³ Disproportionate spending on salaries, often for personnel not trained to a high professional standard, limited the defence ministry's ability to purchase vehicles, weaponry and other equipment. See also Loi de programmation de sécurité intérieure, 13 January 2016.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Abidjan-based diplomat, July 2023.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, security sources and analysts, Abidjan, March 2023. In February 2023, French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu heaped praise on the Ivorian military, saying the army was "unrecognisable from ten years ago". See "L'armée de Côte d'Ivoire n'a rien à voir aujourd'hui avec celle d'il y a dix ans, estime Sébastien Lecornu", *Le Monde*, 21 February 2023.

⁵⁶ Like elsewhere in West Africa, spending on the military and security services is increasingly eating into the budget, growing from \$583 million in 2021 to as much as \$687 million in 2023, according to Ivorian data.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Abidjan, March 2023.

every two to three months to prevent predatory practices by security forces.⁵⁸ Overall, there are few checkpoints and little visible evidence of the presence of security personnel on the north's main roads. It is important progress since the 2002-2011 civil conflict, when police roadblocks were rampant and security forces feared for their intimidating and extortionate practices.

Residents and local officials report that relations with the security forces are generally good. A recent survey found that 74 per cent of the population in the north felt positive about the security services, saying they worried more about unemployment and high food prices than their personal safety.⁵⁹ The government addresses security issues and potential problems through security committees as well as so-called civilian-military committees. The security committees meet at least once a month to keep channels of communication open between the military and prefects, municipal authorities, youth leaders and community representatives (including women). The civilian-military committees are specifically meant to build trust and help resolve disputes between locals and the security services; there is roughly one civilian-military committee per region.

These efforts are not seamless. While on the whole they have helped defuse potential grievances and boosted intelligence gathering, as discussed below, some observers say the civilian-military committees have been hamstrung by problems of mandate and money, making them ineffective in building long-term trust with civilians.⁶⁰ In particular, though these committees are seen as important in theory, military personnel are often unable to convene gatherings due to official work duties that are seen as more urgent, and members have struggled to find money to organise trust-building events such as sports tournaments.⁶¹ Furthermore, there are indications that police racketeering is rife in border areas where illicit trade flourishes.⁶² Such activity could damage the relationship between civilians and the security services and, in turn, limit the ability of the authorities to gather intelligence, efforts that are currently spearheaded by the gendarmerie.

In addition to putting boots on the ground in the north, Abidjan is bolstering its security architecture with a counter-terrorism training facility that aims to become a regional hub for security and senior government personnel involved in reversing jihadism. In June 2021, Ivorian and French authorities opened the International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism (Académie Internationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme, or AILCT) in the seaside town of Jacquenville, near Abidjan, which combines operational training, capacity building and strategic research. The academy also has training modules for judicial officials and prison administrators. Beyond its educational goals, the academy serves as a space where military officers and other relevant personnel can build relationships with their counterparts from across the region and

⁵⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ivorian security official, July 2023.

⁵⁹ "Security and Resilience: Perceptions and Experiences", NORC, Equal Access International, February 2022.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian analysts, Abidjan, March 2023; and by telephone, June-July 2023.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, military officer.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, researchers, Abidjan and by telephone, March-July 2023. See also "Political Economy Analysis (PEA) Local Governance", Cellule d'Analyse de Politiques Économiques du Cires, Equal Access International, February 2022.

the wider continent. By 2023, officials and officers from 26 African countries have completed courses there.⁶³

Although the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) both have representatives on the academy's board, the bulk of funding comes from Western partners, including France, the European Union, Australia and Canada.⁶⁴ Separately, the Ivorian armed forces run a War School in the centre of the country for French-speaking senior military officers from the region.

E. *Social Projects in the North*

Aware of the vulnerabilities of the six northern regions, Abidjan has been careful not to build its response to the jihadist threat solely on military redeployments. As noted, structural economic reforms and social planning have been the mainstay of the government's stabilisation strategy, generating considerable public investment in basic infrastructure, including paved roads, power lines, schools and clinics. Following the jihadist raids near the Burkinabé border in 2020 and 2021, authorities are trying to address the concerns of young men and women in the north who might fall into jihadism as a result of socio-economic woes. While donors are giving considerable financial and technical assistance, ministers with social portfolios directly accountable to the president have taken the lead in coordinating and implementing a variety of social projects.

In January 2022, Prime Minister Patrick Achi launched the second phase of a nationwide social program designed to reduce regional economic disparities, commonly known as PSGouv2.⁶⁵ The first pillar of the program focuses on the six northern regions, offering, among other things, six- to nine-month training courses in vocations such as carpentry, tailoring and hairdressing to 22,000 mainly young men and women with little or no formal education. Spearheaded by the youth ministry along with the national agency for professional training, these paid apprenticeships also enable graduates to apply for low-interest loans in order to embark on their own business ventures upon completing the training. Alternatively, youth can opt for lessons in order to obtain a driver's licence. Local radio stations are particularly effective in drawing in applicants when opportunities open. Trainees told Crisis Group that they value the program, although awareness of its overarching purpose – to prevent vulnerable people from being lured into jihadism – was low in some instances.⁶⁶ In one village, a young man said he had been a “good-for-nothing” until the program took him off the streets.⁶⁷

Simultaneously, government-sponsored projects offer residents the opportunity to save money and take advantage of low- to zero-interest loans. For example, a public

⁶³ “Spain participates in the first Governing Board of the International Counter-Terrorism Academy”, Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, 11 May 2023.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, March-July 2023.

⁶⁵ PSGouv2 runs over three years at a total cost of 3,200 billion CFA francs (4.8 billion euros). PSGouv1, the first phase of the program, began in 2020 and focused on rural electrification, construction of roads and water pumps, and teacher training. The World Bank is a major donor, having invested almost \$5.5 billion distributed over 33 projects and programs in Côte d'Ivoire. See “3 200 Milliards de FCFA pour l'Atteinte d'Objectifs 'Clairs, Forts, Concrets', Indique le Premier Ministre Patrick Achi”, Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 25 January 2022; and World Bank Strategy in Côte d'Ivoire.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, trainees, skilled workers and women's association members, Tengréla, Boundiali and Kafolo, March 2023.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Kafolo, March 2023.

works program in Korhogo gives street sweepers a monthly salary as well as a set amount for deposit in a savings account after six months of labour.⁶⁸ Women in this program told Crisis Group that the prospect of saving their earnings had motivated them to apply for the project – money they hoped to reinvest in their small businesses, mainly trade. Credit facilities target village associations that need financing for cash crops or loans to purchase agricultural machinery, as well as small business owners such as tailors, grocers or poultry farmers. Additionally, a sizeable group of “extremely vulnerable households” receive quarterly cash transfers from the government via mobile money.⁶⁹ All these projects strive to include women and girls, reflecting the view that greater financial autonomy for women and girls improves the well-being of households overall.⁷⁰

Broadly speaking, the government gives collectives of six people or more priority when it approves applications for credit, both to mitigate the risk that money may not be reimbursed and to promote social cohesion. A requirement that applicants submit identity documents and register for mobile money payments is also helping the government enhance its surveillance in the region. In July, the northern city of Ferkessédougou hosted the official launch of the program's second stage targeting some additional 30,000 Ivoirians.⁷¹

V. The Way Forward

For the reasons explored, Côte d'Ivoire is better positioned than many other Western African states to resist and confront jihadist militancy. It enjoys the good-will of many international partners that have been ready to assist its economic development policies with infrastructure investment, loans, technical expertise, and considerable military training and equipment. The country's armed forces and intelligence services are much better funded and equipped than in the past. They seem quite capable of defending the country from jihadist encroachment. Local and national authorities are also mindful of the frustrations that a lack of livelihood opportunities for youth in the northern regions can generate. They have spent heavily on programs to address those grievances.

Abidjan's dual response to the jihadist violence on its northern borders seems to have borne fruit in the sense that northerners are embracing the enhanced state presence, both in military terms and in economic development initiatives. Though criticism of Ouattara's comprehensive state response does exist, local officials are clear and unified in supporting Abidjan's counter-terrorism strategy, including the new bases the government has built and troops it has deployed to the north. The above-referenced security and civilian-military committees appear thus far to have helped

⁶⁸ This particular group was composed of more than twenty women and one man; nationwide, the public works program draws both men and women.

⁶⁹ 30,418 northern households are receiving welfare payments. Government note on first pillar of PsGouv2 program, 25 July 2023.

⁷⁰ While donors have played an important role in pushing for gender inclusivity, surveys show that a large majority of northern Ivoirians support women's participation in public life and financial decision-making.

⁷¹ “Lutte contre la fragilité dans les zones frontalières du Nord : l'édition 2023 du Programme sera lancée à Ferkessédougou le 07 juillet 2023”, Abidjan.net, 3 July 2023.

mitigate any grievance related to the arrests of ethnic Peul who are perceived as collaborating with militants; many officials stress the importance of social cohesion and of recourse for residents when security personnel are reported to have engaged in misconduct.

There have been other operational benefits to the community ties that officials have worked to foster. Abidjan's emphasis on building good working relations between national officials and inhabitants of the six northern regions has improved its capacity to acquire useful intelligence. At present, local appointed and elected officials are taking the lead in consulting with military personnel, community representatives (including, in some cases, Peul leaders), religious leaders and youth and women's groups to stay abreast of developments.

Yet the strong military presence could eventually undermine the authority of local leaders. Anticipating this problem and the friction it could cause, the defence ministry should develop strategies that can help address it. Given that regular troop rotations make it difficult to build long-term trust between military officers and civilians, investments in other strategies could be important. It would be useful, for example, to find ways to address critiques of the effectiveness of the civilian-military committees the government has put in place. Cost-effective initiatives such as football matches or other sports events bringing together military personnel and locals are easy to organise and could serve as important trust-building steps. Additionally, while the military presence often boosts local trade, the government needs to make sure that civilians who are not profiting in that way still feel that their needs are being met in equal measure.

Overall, while Abidjan's two-pronged approach of addressing both the economic and security dimensions of the north's vulnerability has clearly yielded benefits, there is certainly room for improvement. Critics of the socio-economic development program say it is overly focused on "short-term fixes" for long-term structural development issues.⁷² These concerns are understandable because many young men and women who have received vocational training are unlikely to secure long-term employment or succeed in mounting a viable business after completing the program. The government therefore needs to think through how it can make the short-term gains from these social programs more durable, including by speeding up its efforts to develop local industries⁷³. It should also make it easier for donors to get access to those government departments that are responsible for carrying out security and social programming. Donors could help identify areas for long-term investment that could make these programs' gains more durable.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Ivorian researchers and analysts, Abidjan and by telephone, March-July 2023. A 2021 study of the public works program showed that it did not improve chances of employment. The researchers noted higher rates of savings and a lasting improvement in psychological well-being, however, suggesting that these positive effects could reduce crime and illegal activities. See "Do Workfare Programs Live Up to Their Promises? Experimental Evidence from Côte d'Ivoire", World Bank Group, March 2021.

⁷³ Efforts under way include Indian private investment in cashew processing facilities in the north and a 37.5MW solar power plant in Boundiali that was built with a concessional loan from the German development bank KfW.

Another persistent criticism is that the government has thus far overly focused on building infrastructure without a fully considered plan for putting it to good use.⁷⁴ While its efforts to build schools and clinics – both in the north and elsewhere in the country – are laudable, for example, it is essential that the government carefully devise next steps to maintain these buildings and staff schools and clinics with sufficiently qualified personnel. For example, a newly built clinic in Kafolo administers vaccines and other basic medical services, but it lacked running water when Crisis Group visited in March. In addition, while the government distributes bench tables and books to primary schools in the north, some are still short of teachers (although Abidjan appears to be conscious of this need throughout the country, having recruited 10,300 teachers nationwide in 2022).⁷⁵

Furthermore, a critical shortcoming that researchers cite is the emphasis thus far on population centres, with many stressing the urgent need for the state to extend its presence into the country's most remote rural zones, particularly along the border. In many cases, these zones have benefited from infrastructure such as boreholes, water pumps, electrical lines and school furniture, and are getting basic services as a result, but are still in dire need of paved roads as well as livelihood opportunities – especially for youth and women. While the government is aware of the need to roll out social projects in isolated villages, efforts to do so need to be accelerated.⁷⁶

There is also work to be done on the security front. While West African and Sahelian states share a growing sense of urgency, the number of organisations that these countries can rely on for developing an operational platform to enhance military cooperation and intelligence sharing appears to be decreasing. In theory, littoral states should be able to rely on the ECOWAS security architecture, but the organisation has been hamstrung by coups in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and now Niger. The leaders of the first three countries have been strengthening mutual ties at the expense of engagement with the regional bloc. Meanwhile, the G5 Sahel is defunct. That France-initiated military cooperation mission, which was designed to patrol borders in the Sahel, largely failed to prevent the jihadist rebellions from spreading southward. It disintegrated after Mali and France severed ties over the Malian leadership's decision to hire the Russian paramilitary group Wagner.

Côte d'Ivoire and its coastal neighbours are left with fewer options than they might have enjoyed several years ago. They do have a mechanism, known as the Accra Initiative, to focus their efforts on regional security cooperation and intelligence sharing. Created in 2017 at Ghana's behest, the Accra Initiative aims to prevent spillover of jihadist attacks from the Sahel and address organised crime and militancy in member countries' border areas. Members subsequently carried out three joint military operations in zones abutting the Sahel and are striving to improve security and intelligence sharing by bringing relevant personnel together in person. In November 2022, coastal heads of state agreed to assemble a multinational joint task force to patrol the

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews with researchers; Ivorian residents, March-July 2023. See also "Political Economy Analysis (PEA) Local Governance", Cellule d'Analyse de Politiques Économiques du Cires, Equal Access International, February 2022.

⁷⁵ See "Communication en conseil des ministres sur l'état d'exécution du programme social du gouvernement (PSGOUV)", October 2022.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, analysts and residents, Abidjan, Boundiali, Korhogo and Tengréla, March 2023.

border zones of its member countries. At the time of writing, this force has yet to come into being.

But Accra is not on the firmest ground. The initiative is self-financed by participants, though partners like the European Union (EU) can give an Accra member state money upon request. Yet, overall, the costly but largely ineffective G5 Sahel experiment has made EU member states lean toward financing national initiatives instead.⁷⁷ Donors are also unsure whether the organisation will be able to scale up its activities, saying member states have been slow to identify needs and given the shifting political dynamics in much of the region. Moreover, past experiences have shown that there is no silver bullet for the jihadist threat and that overly complex regional structures are probably best avoided. Still, the Accra Initiative could serve as a useful avenue for enhancing multilateral intelligence cooperation by convening intelligence and law enforcement officials as well as financial investigators from member states on a regular basis. Such gatherings, whether formal or informal, would build trust and boost information flows. Donors could assist with financial and technical support.

Given the paucity of viable multilateral anti-jihadist mechanisms, bilateral cooperation remains key to shoring up defence capabilities. Côte d'Ivoire has not had direct military-to-military relations with Mali since 2022, when Bamako apprehended 46 Ivorian soldiers who had gone to Mali to work for the UN and sentenced them to twenty years in prison on charges of attempting to undermine state security.⁷⁸ Fortunately, officials report that there are no jihadist activities in southern Mali that would require joint operations.⁷⁹ By contrast, high-level conversations and intelligence sharing with Burkina Faso continue, with messages often passing through businesspeople with connections in both countries.⁸⁰ The Ivorian government is also pushing for joint military operations with Burkina Faso, but the latter's military leadership is hesitant because it is occupied with the anti-jihadist fight in its north.⁸¹ As part of cooperation, however, Côte d'Ivoire recently donated a shipment of small arms, ammunition and vehicles for Burkinabé troops stationed in the south near the Ivorian border.⁸² Meanwhile, Ivorian officials in the north report that they still speak regularly with their counterparts across the border.

Meanwhile, efforts to beef up security forces are on the rise among West Africa's littoral states. Benin and Togo are now putting in place a more robust military response to the threat at their northern borders, speaking with an array of potential partners

⁷⁷ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo are members of the Accra Initiative. Nigeria and Niger have observer status. Côte d'Ivoire used the diplomatic channels the Initiative created when negotiating in 2002 for the release of Ivorian soldiers detained for over six months in Mali on accusations of conspiring against Mali's security.

⁷⁸ Three women soldiers were released but sentenced to death in absentia. The 46 men were pardoned in January and allowed to go home after negotiations involving various regional leaders. "Mali leader pardons Ivorian soldiers, suspends 46 prison sentences", Reuters, 7 January 2023.

⁷⁹ The last joint operation with Mali dates to 2021; this operation, Tourbillon Vert, also involved Burkina Faso and focused on forests in the tri-border area. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Malian and Ivorian officials, July 2023.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, analyst, June 2023; diplomat, July 2023.

⁸¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Burkinabé analyst, July 2023.

⁸² "La Côte d'Ivoire livre du matériel militaire au Burkina Faso pour lutter contre l'insécurité", RFI, 18 March 2023.

farther afield when trying to procure equipment and training.⁸³ Benin, for instance, has asked Rwanda to help train a contingent of troops that are to be deployed in the north. It also received a donation of four drones from China as it tries to build up its aerial capabilities. Simultaneously, however, it is working on social programs for the north. External partners such as the EU, the UK and the U.S., meanwhile, are discussing how to support the coastal countries' security efforts. For example, the EU is considering helping Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo with civilian missions to share expertise with police, rule of law and civil administrators. It also has bilateral funds for capacity building in intelligence services.⁸⁴

One initiative that a broad range of donors should continue to support is the International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism in Jacqueville, which gives regional military personnel an opportunity to reflect on and better coordinate their security responses. France, which helped found the academy and provides around half its staff as well as the bulk of its funding, has wisely taken a low profile on security cooperation in Côte d'Ivoire, having persuaded other partners to provide money, too. Yet greater involvement of a more varied group of partners could usefully contribute to the "internationalisation" of the academy.⁸⁵ More investment would also help the academy build up much-needed infrastructure and on-site training facilities for the region. In this regard, Saudi Arabia's decision to also provide funds for the academy is a critical step. While no school can stop jihadism from spreading all by itself, the academy at Jacqueville presents partners with a concrete and effective way to support counter-terrorism capacity in Côte d'Ivoire and beyond, while also fostering the kinds of multilateral relationships across the region that will be necessary to ease this crisis.

VI. Conclusion

While Côte d'Ivoire appears better positioned than many in its neighbourhood to face the threat of jihadist insurgency, most Ivorian officials understand that there is no room for complacency. They acknowledge that the hundreds of unpatrolled bush tracks that connect the country to its many neighbours create openings for militant violence in the border zones. Many describe fresh jihadist attacks, possibly even in urban areas, as a matter of when rather than if, despite all the new military deployments in the six northern regions in the last few years.

Broadly speaking, Côte d'Ivoire is on the right path and should continue to pursue the strategies the government has put in place to reinforce security along its northern borders as well as the programs to alleviate poverty and unemployment in the area. Further investment – in local economies, community-military relations, cross-border military cooperation and military capabilities – will be needed to help Côte d'Ivoire continue fending off the jihadist groups that have cast a shadow of hardship and instability over its neighbourhood.

Abidjan/Brussels, 11 August 2023

⁸³ "Rwanda promises military assistance to Benin to combat Sahel jihadist threat", RFI, 17 April 2023; "Benin gets Chinese drones", Military Africa, 29 March 2023.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, August 2023.

⁸⁵ EU partners are hoping that more non-Western countries will step in with funding. Egypt has thus far declined to do so. Crisis Group interviews, foreign diplomats, Abidjan, March 2023; Kigali, June 2023.



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