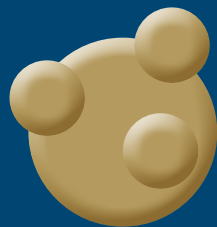


WEST AFRICA 2020

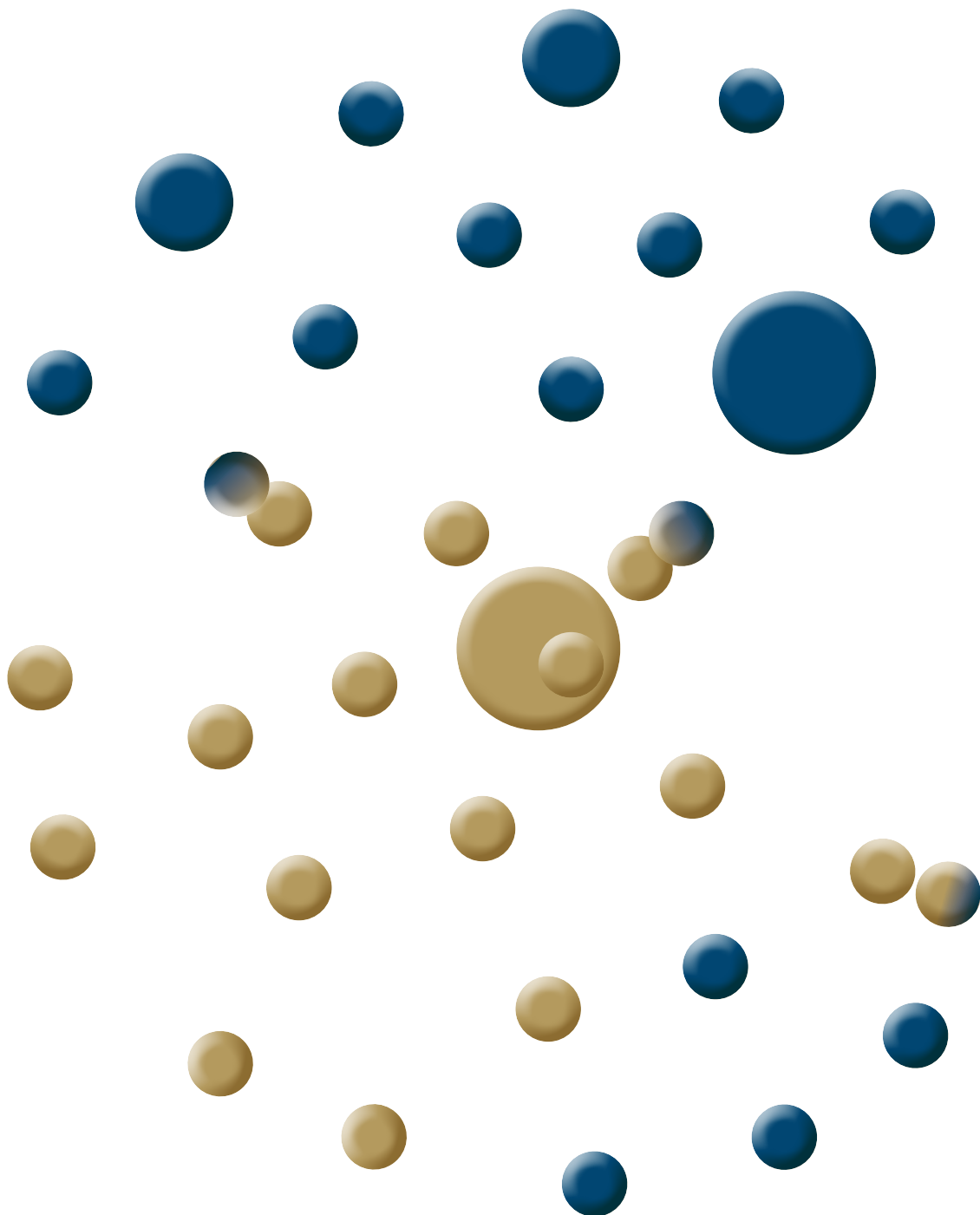
# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

## ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES



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ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES





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This series of reports use ideological or ideologically motivated extremism to refer to forms that are religiously, politically, and/or nationalistically inspired. Recognizing that typologies of extremism are fluid and lacking a global standard definition, we have elected to use this larger catch-all term to cover groups ranging from nationalist radical right actors to religiously-based fundamentalists. This includes racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE), as well as religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE).

Whenever possible, we eschew umbrella terms and refer directly to the extremist or violent extremist organization by name and, where discernible, the specific ideology advanced by the group.

We also refer to the radical right as a catch-all for hateful or violent far-right extremists and organizations when no specific organizational affiliation is noted.

Across these reports, we refer to Daesh instead of ISIS, ISIL, or IS.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The arrival of COVID-19 in West Africa in February or March 2020 meant that a region encased in complex extremist violence had to fight two deadly enemies with scarce resources. West African countries hurried to rally resources while watching the horrific toll from the pandemic in early hotspots like Wuhan, China, and Italy, witnessing how even the most affluent and prepared countries of the world became overwhelmed. Priorities were re-drawn as governments scrambled to shore up their healthcare systems and deployed precious funding from fighting violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Militaries were put on high alert for potential enforcement of lockdowns, hospital transfers, and mass burials. VEOs and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) across the region saw the pandemic as a prime opportunity and stepped up their violence, recruitment efforts, and state-building efforts as they spread misinformation about COVID-19.

Even though West Africa has – at least so far – been spared the worst human losses from COVID-19, the economic and social impacts have been far-reaching and devastating. In addition to the thousands of deaths directly caused by the virus across the region, the strain it put on healthcare systems drained resources from patients with other conditions such as HIV, cancer, and sickle cell, thereby indirectly killing and affecting more people. Strict public health measures to control the pandemic led to the closure of schools, thereby disrupting education and arguably causing children to lose structured educational opportunities and, though not yet fully studied, potentially become more vulnerable to radicalization or recruitment. Closures of shops and places of worship, restrictions of travel and social gatherings, layered with ongoing food insecurity, led to severe disruptions of economic, social, and religious activities. These rifts fuelled protests and public unrest in several West African countries. In this operating environment, VEOs manipulated or capitalized on the above structural and societal challenges for their own ends.

2020 saw an upsurge of VEOs and NSAGs attacks, recruitment efforts and state-building activities by groups in territories where they wielded power across West Africa. A direct correlation between VEO attacks and COVID-19 is hard to show. However, the evidence is clear that the two pulled governments in opposite directions as VEOs worked to exploit COVID-19 ideologically, operationally, and strategically. For instance, by creating and disseminating misinformation about COVID-19, VEOs sought to undermine public health measures and control the pandemic to accomplish their own goals. NSAGs, generally less ideologically driven than VEOs, did not produce narratives similar to those of VEOs. However, COVID-19 allowed NSAGs to have more capacity to plan, train, and operate as governments focused on the pandemic and had reduced capacity to respond to their threats.

Ultimately, COVID-19 added another layer of complexity to an already dire situation in the Lake Chad Basin and central Sahel. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic

negatively impacted governments' ability to confront VEOs, since domestic funds were redirected from counter-terrorism to health care, service provision, and efforts to boost employment. Similarly, international donor priorities for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs were, understandably, constrained by COVID-19 assistance. Even with governments' efforts to provide for their people, pandemic relief demands left openings for exploitation. Where VEOs found ungoverned spaces with compromised, contested, or weak government presence, they sought to increase their own appeal and demonstrate their own competence through service provision. As such, they attempted to not only undercut governments, but attempted to win the sympathies of underserved local populations. Finally, the pandemic exacerbated poverty and unemployment, which, while far from the only variables, were among factors that facilitated recruitment to VEOs in West Africa in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme, (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Points for Recruitment*, <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>; Mercy Corps, (2016). *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth*, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/boko-haram-nigerian>; Institute for Security Studies, (2016). *Mali's young 'jihadists': Fueled by faith or circumstance?*, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/policybrief89-eng-v3.pdf>.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

**Transparent spending on public health, military capacities, and non-kinetic approaches should be a priority.** The economic downturn created by COVID-19 risks derailing West African government efforts against VEOs. These countries need to delicately balance pandemic response with combating VEOs. This will require careful prioritization and allocation of resources.

2

**Given the rapid spread of dis- and misinformation campaigns online, it is essential to focus on digital resilience by creating and implementing digital literacy training programs.** These should work with inoculation-based counter-narratives aimed to deconstruct conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns while supporting communities with practical online and offline tools.

3

**By strengthening border security, West African counties can mitigate both COVID-19 and international terrorism.** Effective border security can help reduce the cross spread of the virus and, at the same time, aid in restricting VEO cross-border activities.

4

**Governments need to credibly address and provide mechanisms to resolve grievances by minorities inside their countries.** COVID-19 has exacerbated social rifts and the concerns underlying them, which are in turn weaponized by VEOs. Credible public dialogues to address long-standing grievances should be prioritized in P/CVE programming.

5

**Governments need to provide additional security and protection for healthcare workers.** Frontline workers engaged in responding to COVID-19 and distributing vaccines around areas face tremendous risks where VEOs operate. This would help contribute to the successful containment of the pandemic in vulnerable regions.

6

**Governments and partners should continue and increase working with traditional and religious leaders to expand public-health messaging.** Their efforts to distribute factual COVID-19 information while countering religious-based misinformation from VEOs is crucial. VEOs combine COVID-19 and religious-based misinformation: both themes dangerously exacerbate each other if unaddressed.







This paper outlines how VEOs and NSAGs in West Africa took advantage of or responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. We collated and analyzed existing literature covering the period from the first recorded case of COVID-19 in West Africa and the Sahel to the end of 2020. We analyzed primary materials disseminated by VEOs on platforms such as Telegram, in magazines such as al-Naba and Dabiq, and gained access to other VEO content hosted on sites such as Jihadology, Unmasking Boko Haram, BBC Monitoring, and SITE. Such content helped us outline the broader narratives around COVID-19 and VE, including how VEOs are exploiting grievances online and offline. We further drew on two databases: The Nigerian Security Tracker and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, both of which document activities of armed groups across West Africa.

While this report covers VEOs and NSAGs in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Republic of Niger, the Republic of Chad, the Republic of Mali – and, to a lesser extent, the Republic of Burkina Faso and Islamic Republic of Mauritania – the report also analyzes them from a regional perspective, rather than only country-by-country. The groups operating in these geographies act across borders and intentionally ignore internationally recognized boundaries.

# INTRODUCTION

Like elsewhere in the world, the spread of COVID-19 has led to many deaths in West Africa and the Sahel, accompanied by economic, and sociocultural disruptions. The region is no stranger to the psychological and social knock-on effects of this health crisis. This can be observed through difficulties posed by lockdowns, social distancing, disruptive international and domestic travel restrictions, curfews, reduced public gatherings, and the increased spread of dis- and misinformation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, arguably, the most challenging hurdle in this region has been, and remains, insecurity caused by VEOs and NSAGs. The resulting mass displacement of people is only made worse by NSAG-led constraints on humanitarian access, increasing food insecurity and perpetuating the humanitarian disaster across the region.

In 2020, with governmental attention captured by the local and international pressures surrounding COVID-19, observers were concerned that devastating actions by VEOs would be inadequately responded to.<sup>3</sup> Equally, there were speculations that counter-terrorism (CT) operations would continue as usual, and VEOs would readjust to the conditions, publishing narratives and information responding to COVID-19 and the societal changes. In regions like West Africa and the Sahel, where violent extremism (VE) is an embedded issue, such groups are well-versed in adapting and exploiting critical challenges. Overcoming adversity is a way of life for VEOs.

Long before the arrival of COVID-19, West Africa has faced multiple complex and overlapping security and humanitarian challenges. From violent conflict to the stark impact of climate change to humanitarian crises and famine, the spread of COVID-19 has highlighted threats to the region's most vulnerable populations. Armed groups, some allied to al-Qaeda and the Daesh, have been wreaking havoc across swathes of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, amid an unprecedented upsurge of VEO activity.<sup>4</sup> The violence has created one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises on earth. In 2019 alone, more than 4,000 Sahelians were killed,<sup>5</sup> and some 1 million people<sup>6</sup> were forced to flee their homes. Many now live in unsanitary, cramped refugee and internally displaced person camps with limited access to basic necessities.<sup>7</sup> In many camp settings, food insecurity is rampant, education access is minimal, and medical support is negligible.

<sup>2</sup> Edu-Afful, F. (2020). *COVID-19 exacerbates the risk of violent extremism in the Sahel and West Africa*, <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/COVID-19-exacerbates-the-risk-of-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bashir, H. (2020). *Risks of the Spread of Coronavirus Epidemic for Counter-terrorism Efforts in West Africa*, <https://epc.ae/brief/risks-of-the-spread-of-coronavirus-epidemic-for-counter-terrorism-efforts-in-west-africa>.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Jazeera, (2020). *UN envoy: Devastating surge of attacks in the Sahel and West Africa*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/envoy-devastating-surge-attacks-sahel-west-africa-200109011431355.html>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations News, (2020). *'Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region*, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1054981>.

<sup>6</sup> OCHA. (2020). *Displacement and humanitarian needs rise in the Sahel*, <https://www.unocha.org/story/displacement-and-humanitarian-needs-rise-sahel>.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, W. (2020). *No Time for Complacency: The COVID-19 Pandemic in West Africa's Sahel Region*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/no-time-complacency-COVID-19-pandemic-west-africas-sahel-region>.

Following the announcement of the first infection of COVID-19 in West Africa in March 2020, the region experienced an upward trend in cases. By 28 April 2020, the virus was present across the region as the number of infections exceeded 1,000 cases in several countries.<sup>8</sup> Since then, cases have only risen. Whilst confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Sahel have been extremely low by international standards, the actual number of cases is almost certainly higher than the official data. Public health tracking capacities and access barriers across many of these countries do not allow for comprehensive reporting.

<sup>8</sup> Bashir, H. (2020). *Risks of the Spread of Coronavirus Epidemic for Counter-terrorism Efforts in West Africa*, <https://epc.ae/brief/risks-of-the-spread-of-coronavirus-epidemic-for-counter-terrorism-efforts-in-west-africa>.



# ATTACKS AND GROUP ACTIVITIES

In May 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that terrorist groups were “taking advantage” of the pandemic to “intensify their attacks and challenge state authority” in the region.<sup>9</sup> While the frequency of attacks has not dramatically increased, extremist violence, cross border movement, and strategic attacks have continued.<sup>10</sup> VEOs including Boko Haram, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the Islamic State (Daesh) in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansar ul Islam carried out a number of high-profile attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad. For instance, “March and April 2020 saw sustained attacks from Boko Haram and the Islamic State (Daesh) West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel.”<sup>11</sup> VEOs killed dozens of local soldiers in both Mali and Burkina Faso,<sup>12</sup> and in one attack in March 2020, Boko Haram overran a Chadian military base, killing about 100 soldiers.<sup>13</sup> VEOs linked to al-Qaeda killed about a dozen soldiers in the northern Republic of Cote d’Ivoire near the border with Burkina Faso in June 2020.

With COVID-19 climbing across West Africa during 2020, VEOs sought to exploit the chaos to further their cause. Ideological groups stepped up their attacks while disseminating content and misinformation to win over locals. For example, just days after Chad had recorded its first COVID-19 case, Boko Haram committed the deadliest attack on the country’s forces in the nation’s history, killing around 100 soldiers and forcing its president to abandon his country’s response to the pandemic in the capital and move to the Lake Chad area to personally coordinate a retaliation. Similarly, in Nigeria, as the military was reassigned to dealing with the rising health emergency, dozens of soldiers were killed in an ambush in March.<sup>14</sup> These competing goals of counterinsurgency and public health divided military attention. Conclusive evidence as to whether COVID-19 has enhanced the activities of VEOs in West Africa, in terms of frequency of attacks, rate of death or injury, geographic reach, or complexity of the attack, is hard to verify. But it is clear VEOs and NSAGs saw the pandemic as an opportunity, expressed willingness to exploit it – whether through actions or the publication of narratives – and, in some cases, credited it for their success.<sup>15</sup>

The following data and graphs are generated from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database. ACLED, unlike other databases, uses both field researchers and online, open-source data, triangulating findings from different sources to ensure as much accuracy as possible. It is worth noting that not all violent activity is captured by ACLED because of a lack of access to some of the most remote

<sup>9</sup> Brown, W. (2020). *No Time for Complacency: The COVID-19 Pandemic in West Africa’s Sahel Region*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/no-time-complacency-covid-19-pandemic-west-africas-sahel-region>.

<sup>10</sup> Raleigh, C. (2020). *The pandemic has shifted patterns of conflict in Africa*, <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-06-22-the-pandemic-has-shifted-patterns-of-conflict-in-africa/?amp%20twitter%20impression=true>.

<sup>11</sup> Edu-Afful, F. (2020). *COVID-19 exacerbates the risk of violent extremism in the Sahel and West Africa* <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/COVID-19-exacerbates-the-risk-of-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa/>.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, W. (2020). *Mali left shaken as dozens of soldiers killed in jihadist ambush*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/16/mali-left-shaken-dozens-soldiers-killed-jihadist-ambush/>.

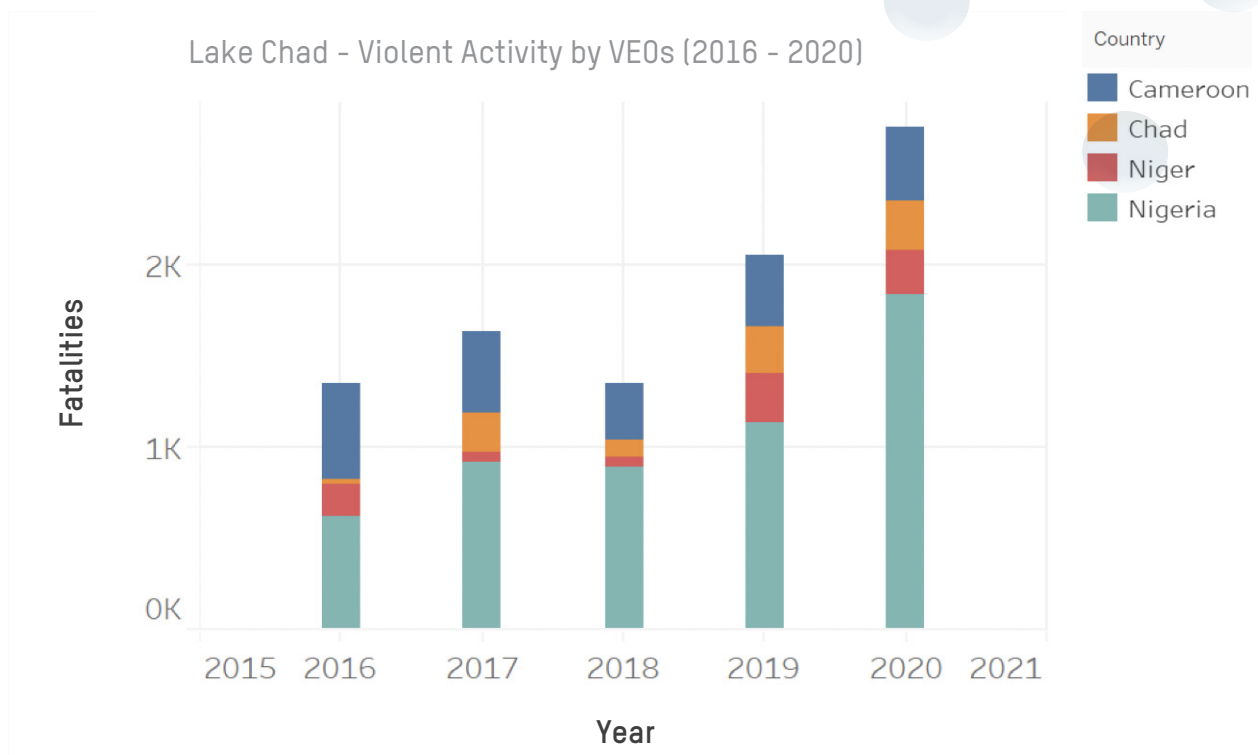
<sup>13</sup> Brown, W. (2020). *As the World Is Distracted, Boko Haram Terrorists Strike a Key Western Ally*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/01/boko-haram-islamist-terrorists-strike-chad-while-world-distracted-by-coronavirus/>.

<sup>14</sup> BBC News, (2020). *Dozens killed in attack in Northern Nigeria*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-52988437>.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Lami, M. (2020). *Analysis: Key jihadist responses to COVID-19*, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201qi8p>.

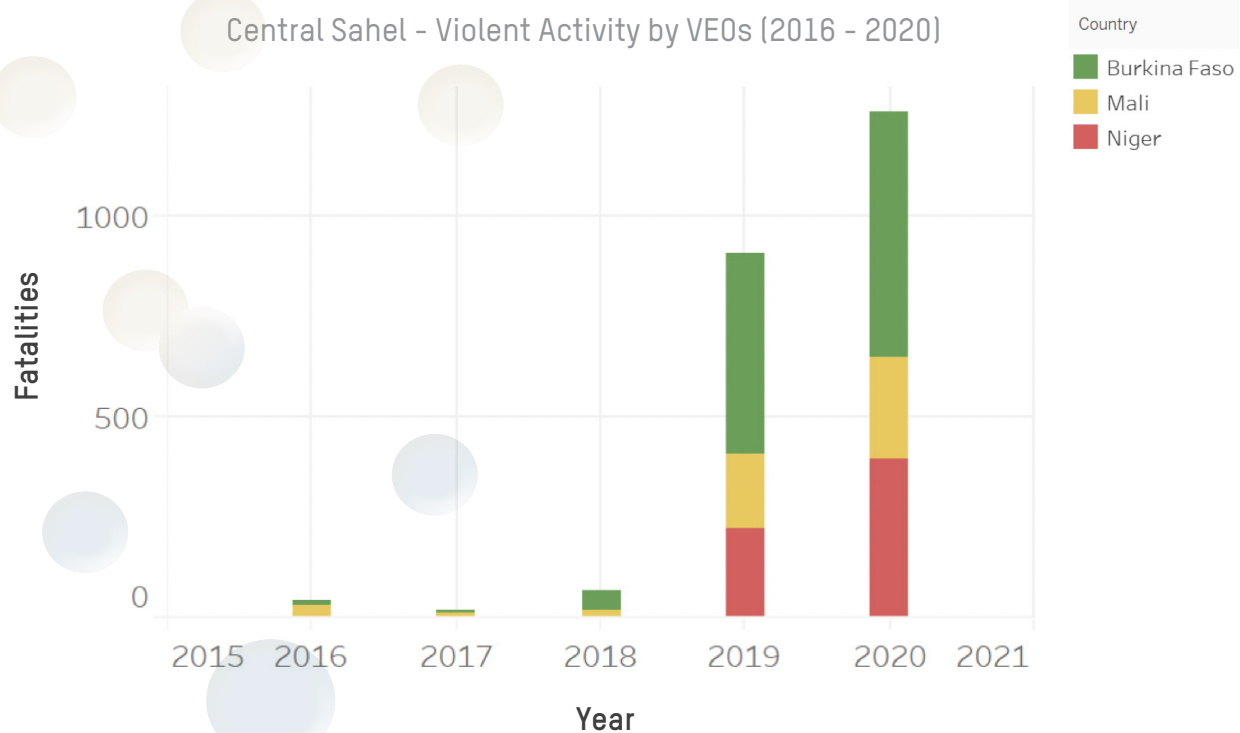
areas where VEOs are active. However, ACLED captures incidents that are indicative of the purpose of this report.

2020 saw an upsurge in violent events and fatalities in both the Lake Chad Basin area and the central Sahel. While the trend has been on the rise for years, 2020 was unique in that the increase recorded was more significant than in previous years. In the central Sahel, every country recorded a spike in fatalities in 2020, with an overall increase of 39% in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger - from 907 fatalities in 2019 to 1,257 in 2020. While fatalities in the Republic of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger remained stable, Nigeria saw an over 60% jump in casualties from 1,133 fatalities the previous year to 1,834 fatalities in 2020. In Cameroon, fatalities remained stable, but violent incidences jumped by over 90% from 2019 to over 400 incidents, a significant portion of which were kidnapping for recruitment and ransom, as well as the looting of villages and displaced person camps.<sup>16</sup>



**FIGURE 1** *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for 1 January to 31 December 2020*  
<https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>

<sup>16</sup> Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, (2020). *Boko Haram Violence against Civilians Spiking in Northern Cameroon*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/boko-haram-violence-against-civilians-spiking-in-northern-cameroon/>.



**FIGURE 2** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for 1 January to 31 December 2020  
<https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>

In addition to ideologically motivated extremist groups operating across the sub-region, West Africa is also reeling from the violent activities of non-religiously motivated NSAGs. These include multiple separatist groups in Cameroon and Chad, organized criminal gangs in northwest Nigeria and separatists in the southern part of the country, and ethnic and separatist militias in Mali. These groups do not claim to be fighting for a moral cause, and, generally, they did not spread COVID-19 disinformation or attempt to use it to recruit members. It is noteworthy that these two pieces of information are not mutually exclusive but stand in contrast to VEO activities. NSAGs did, however, exploit the gaps created by COVID-19 to step up their activities and press for their demands. For example, as the Nigerian government focused its attention on containing the pandemic, criminal gangs locally called “bandits” increased their attacks in the northwestern part of the country.<sup>17</sup> This led to a tripling in the number of people displaced by violence within four months from when the first COVID-19 case was reported.<sup>18</sup> It has been observed by several researchers – somewhat rightly – that bandits took advantage of restriction of vehicular movement to turn northwestern Nigeria into a virtually “separate region,” where they used speed motorcycles in violation of movement restrictions to operate “unquestioned and unchecked.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Idowu H. A., (2020) *Reappraising Conflict Trends in Nigeria amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Accord, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/reappraising-conflict-trends-in-nigeria-amidst-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>18</sup> Hamrouni, S. M. (2020). *More than 30,000 refugees flee violence in northwestern Nigeria in last two months alone*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2020/6/5ef5e99e4/30000-refugees-flee-violence-northwestern-nigeria-months-alone.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Sambo, S., et al. (2020). *COVID 19 and Increased Security Challenges in Northern Nigeria: Interrogating Armed Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria*, <https://www.siasatjournal.com/index.php/siasat/article/view/87>.



While separatist and criminal gangs in West Africa sought to take advantage of every opportunity provided by the COVID-19 pandemic, one group in Cameroon responded rather interestingly. Following a call by the UN Secretary-General for a ceasefire to allow for pandemic response, the Southern Cameroon Defence Forces (SOCADEF) – one of 15 separatist groups fighting for the establishment of an independent Ambazonian Republic in parts northwestern and southwestern Cameroon that will use English as its official language – announced a two-week ceasefire to allow humanitarian access for COVID-19 containment measures.<sup>20</sup> SOCADEF sought to use it to gain political leverage by portraying itself as a good actor and trying to chorale international recognition and favour.<sup>21</sup> This is an example of a non-ideological group seeking to exploit COVID-19 strategically. In brief, while evidence from 2020 demonstrates that certain countries in the region experienced a rise in overall attacks, violent incidents or fatalities, due to the undeniable existence of multiple variables that could account for an explanation of this upward trend, it is difficult to specifically establish direct causality between this occurrence and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the nature of the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 situation online and offline have undoubtedly provided fertile soil for violent actors who used it to advance their aims.

<sup>20</sup> Southern Cameroons Defence Forces, (2020). *Statement from the SOCADEF*, <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Cameroon-SOCADEF-Ceasefire-Text.pdf>.

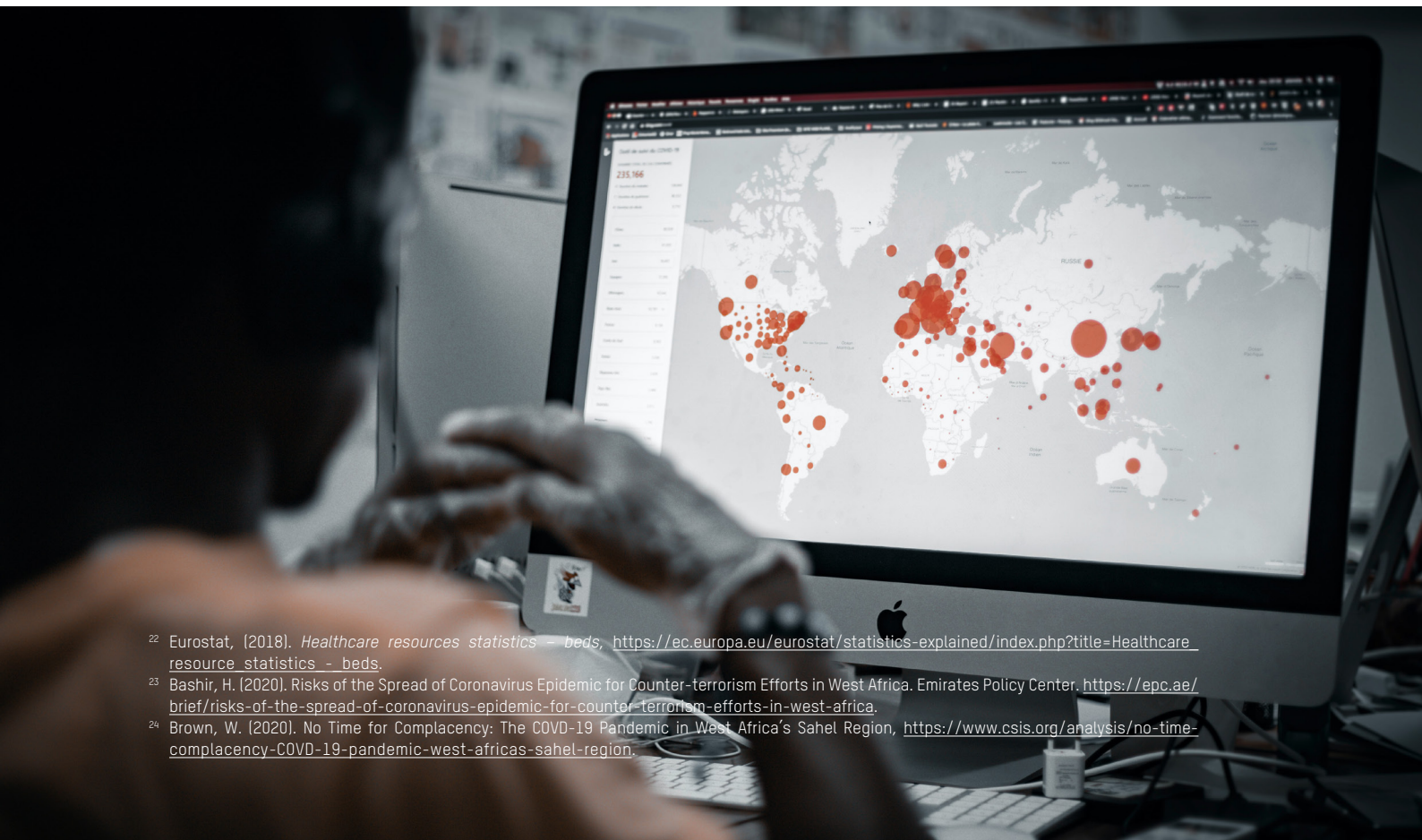
<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



# THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION

There is a tangible fragility of the health structures in West Africa and the Sahel. Most countries in the region have less than five hospital beds and two medical doctors per 10,000 people. In comparison, the European Union has just over 39 hospital beds per 10,000.<sup>22</sup> In West Africa, per capita expenditure on health is lower than \$50 USD, compared to \$2,840 and \$2,506 USD in the Italian Republic and the Kingdom of Spain.<sup>23</sup> This gap in the market of service provision and governance allows for exploitation by VEOs and NSAGs, especially during vulnerable times. Experts say this figure could double or even triple as the COVID-19 virus continues to spread and lockdown measures hit the most vulnerable.<sup>24</sup>

With the immense challenge of the pandemic, governments have been stretched with ongoing decisions and regulations to put in place to try and curtail the spread. In some instances, implemented restrictions have caused a public outcry; in others, the lack of action has triggered frustration. Additionally, VEOs and NSAGs have capitalized on the response to promote provisions from the group itself. Where government



<sup>22</sup> Eurostat, (2018). *Healthcare resources statistics – beds*, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Healthcare\\_resource\\_statistics\\_-\\_beds](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Healthcare_resource_statistics_-_beds).

<sup>23</sup> Bashir, H. (2020). Risks of the Spread of Coronavirus Epidemic for Counter-terrorism Efforts in West Africa. Emirates Policy Center. <https://epc.ae/brief/risks-of-the-spread-of-coronavirus-epidemic-for-counter-terrorism-efforts-in-west-africa>.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, W. (2020). No Time for Complacency: The COVID-19 Pandemic in West Africa's Sahel Region, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/no-time-complacency-covid-19-pandemic-west-africas-sahel-region>.

is compromised or contested, VEOs tried to increase their appeal by filling the governance void through service provision. As such, they have attempted to not only undercut the government but to win the sympathies of vulnerable populations.<sup>25</sup>

In Mali, for instance, a public health curfew was challenged by the population. Regardless of the pandemic, the country was, and remains, in a protracted crisis resulting in government decisions generally being questioned by an aggrieved population. The pandemic was layered onto a complex base of already-tense social relations that encouraged the VEOs to take advantage of this context. For example, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an ideologically-motivated VEO in the country exploited mass protests against French military presence by weaponizing grievances against COVID-19 curfews. By fusing two streams of grievance, JNIM claimed that its effort to dismantle France's influence and supplant secular systems with Islamic laws and norms was now a popular demand.<sup>26</sup>

VEOs and NSAGs in Mali and Burkina Faso have intervened to address and capitalize on some of the gaps associated with the lack of government infrastructure and responses, particularly in water infrastructure and hygiene. For example, in the Lake Chad area, Islamic State (Daesh) West Africa Province (ISWAP) was reported to have delivered letters to communities hit by public health measures "offering people large sums of money to join them."<sup>27</sup> Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, ISWAP engaged in a 'hearts and minds' strategy towards local populations by providing governance services such as security, infrastructure and healthcare and by providing water, easing access to food and giving micro-loans to communities frustrated by government failures and abuses by security agencies.<sup>28</sup> Such service provision furthers the opportunity to legitimize the group's pro-type state as a better alternative to secular ones.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that ISWAP will exploit the long-term impact of COVID-19 to consolidate to position in the coming years. Such ideological, social, and medical support may prove more dangerous in the medium- and long run than an increase in immediate battlefield fatalities.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Basit, A. (2020). *COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?* Taylor and Francis Online. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603>.

<sup>26</sup> Bukarti, A. B. (2020). *The West in African Violent Extremists' Discourse*, Hudson Institute, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16467-the-west-in-african-violent-extremists-discourse>.

<sup>27</sup> Nagarajan, C. (2020), *The Impact of Covid-19 on Conflict, Gender and Social Exclusion in North East Nigeria*, [https://www.justice-security.ng/sites/default/files/mcn\\_research\\_report\\_covid19\\_impact\\_ne\\_web.pdf](https://www.justice-security.ng/sites/default/files/mcn_research_report_covid19_impact_ne_web.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid; International Crisis Group (2019), *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

<sup>29</sup> Bukarti, A. B. (2018). *The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Lake Chad Basin*, Tony Blair institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/battle-hearts-and-minds-lake-chad-basin>; Bukarti A. B. (2020). *How Boko Haram is Responding to COVID-19*, <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>.

<sup>30</sup> Bukarti, A. B. (2018). *The Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Lake Chad Basin*, Tony Blair institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/battle-hearts-and-minds-lake-chad-basin>.





## NARRATIVES AND MIS-INFORMATION



VEOs in the Sahel and West Africa, as elsewhere, used strategic communications to frame the COVID-19 pandemic alongside the perceived decline of the West and the righteous aims of the groups for ideological substantiation. West African VEO narratives and misinformation on COVID-19 varies from group to group but broadly can be classified into three categories each described below:

1. framing COVID-19 as divine punishment for sin;
2. portraying it as a “soldier of God” and,
3. opposing public health measures and peddling ideological cures.



Image A: Poster of first Boko Haram's audio on COVID-19 released on 15 April 2020<sup>31</sup>

## “COVID-19 AS DIVINE PUNISHMENT FOR SIN”

Boko Haram factions in the Lake Chad area, touching Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, broke their silence on the pandemic as confirmed cases rose between February and April 2020. On 15 April 2020, the independent faction Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, abbreviated as JAS), released a 68-minute audio message detailing its position on COVID-19. It was accompanied by the visuals in Image A, packaged as video and produced by its media outfit Wadih al-Bayan. Abubakr Shekau, the former leader of Boko Haram, speaking in Hausa, Arabic, English, and Kanuri, described the virus as divine punishment for the world for widespread fornication, sodomy, usury, and non-payment of mandatory charity (zakat). In his speech, he referred to people's sins globally as having caused the outbreak: “Transgression has covered every part of the world. We should repent to Allah and use his laws. That is the only way out.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Unmasking Boko Haram, (2020). *Boko Haram – Abubakar Shekau Audio Message on Coronavirus – April 15, 2020* [online video], Presenter Abubakar Shekau, Lake Chad Area, 2020, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/04/19/boko-haram-abubakar-shekau-audio-message-on-coronavirus-april-15-2020/> (accessed 12 October 2021). Translation from Hausa to English by authors.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.







Image C: Cover of Issue 230 of ISIS' al-Naba Magazines<sup>34</sup>

times – we ask Allah to intensify its effects on them – due to the economic crisis that has begun to appear.<sup>35</sup>

The article hoped that the economic downturn of COVID-19 would force countries in the region to cut their security, noting that: "This imposes on them to pay greater attention during the coming period to reduce expenditure and collect the revenues necessary to protect their economies from collapse and the function of their governments and armies. All of this will reduce the resources allocated to fighting the mujahid in West Africa."<sup>36</sup> JNIM viewed this as an opening to step up efforts and expand activities.

<sup>34</sup> ISIS, [2020] *Al-Naba Magazine Editorial Issue 230*. On file with the authors.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## “OPPOSING PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES AND PEDDLING IDEOLOGICAL CURES”

VEOs operating in West Africa did not obey the public measures imposed by governments. In a bid to undermine public health messaging, they shared videos and photos of their congressional prayers and public preaching session where hundreds of villagers were addressed in violation of social distancing measures.<sup>37</sup> For example, in a 15 April 2020 message, Shekau denounced public health measures like social distancing as a ploy by non-Muslims and hypocrites (Muslims who do not subscribe to the group’s exclusivist worldview) to use the outbreak as a pretence to stop Muslims from practising their faith: “Just look at it, they stopped you from Umrah and Hajj, even the fasting they are telling you that corona season needs a lot of drinking water.”<sup>38</sup> Shekau noted that the solutions were the opposite of public health measures – prayers should continue: “We are fine, fine, fine. We have the anti-virus. You have the virus. We have anti-coronavirus, which is Allah.”<sup>39</sup> ISWAP, active across the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel (through the Islamic State (Daesh) in the Greater Sahara), released similar photos and pictures of its preachers giving sermons to crowds of villagers in violation of public health measures.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Unmaking Boko Haram, (2020). *ISWAP – Photostreams – 2015 onwards*, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/iswapmay262020eidalfitrphotos.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Unmasking Boko Haram, (2020). *Boko Haram – Abubakar Shekau Audio Message on Coronavirus – April 15, 2020* [online video], Presenter Abubakar Shekau, Lake Chad Area, 2020, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/04/19/boko-haram-abubakar-shekau-audio-message-on-coronavirus-april-15-2020/> (accessed 12 October 2021). Translation from Hausa to English by authors.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Lami, M. (2020). *Analysis: Key jihadist responses to Covid-19*, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201qi8p>.

<sup>40</sup> Unmaking Boko Haram, (2020). *ISWAP – Photostreams – 2015 onwards*, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/iswapmay262020eidalfitrphotos.pdf>.

# COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS AND PLATFORMS

With the transition from face-to-face to online activities witnessed globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VEOs and NSAGs have also readjusted. Travel has reduced, large meetings have ceased, and people have been increasingly present online. During COVID-19, internet data usage across Africa surged with reported higher data traffic during the months when “stay at home” measures were implemented.<sup>41</sup> As well as defying public health restrictions to spread their messages, VEOs sought to exploit this digitalization and increasing use of virtual solutions for daily activities to communicate their messages and content.<sup>42</sup>

VEOs in West Africa thus upgraded their communication presence online. Facing more content moderation on public social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, groups opted to spread narratives and dis- and misinformation via encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. For instance, JNIM – operating in the central Sahel – used its Telegram-based media arm, al-Zallaga, to disseminate messages on COVID-19. Similarly, Abubakar Shekau’s 15 April 2020 audio message on COVID-19 and subsequent communications were distributed by Wadih al-Bayan Telegram via Boko Haram’s official online media distributor, al-Tibyan.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, ISWAP – also operating in the Lake Chad region – used Telegram and WhatsApp groups to distribute its bi-weekly newspaper, launched at the end of March 2020, in which it details its activities as well as those of the Islamic State (Daesh) in the Greater Sahara operating in the Sahel.<sup>44</sup> While these channels have been used previously, 2020 marked a record increase in the shift to these new fora.



<sup>41</sup> World Bank Group, (2020). *The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdown Measures on Internet Speed*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35148/The-Effect-of-COVID-19-Lockdown-Measures-on-Internet-Speed-An-Empirical-Analysis-of-Eighteen-Countries-in-Africa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>42</sup> Edu-Afful, F. (2020). *COVID-19 exacerbates the risk of violent extremism in the Sahel and West Africa*, <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/COVID-19-exacerbates-the-risk-of-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa/>.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Lami, M. (2020). *Analysis: Key jihadist responses to Covid-19*, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201q18p>.

<sup>44</sup> Salkida, A. (2020). *ISWAP Launches Bi-weekly Hausa Newspaper*, <https://humanglemedia.com/iswap-launches-bi-weekly-hausa-newspaper/>.





Image D: Photos of ISWAP Preaching Released May 2020<sup>45</sup>

But VEOs in West Africa used offline dissemination methods as well. They used traditional outreach, including mosques, with preaching visits and Friday congregations to disseminate narratives and misinformation on COVID-19 alongside ideological messages.<sup>46</sup> For example, Shekau's 15 April message was delivered before a large cheering audience and subsequently distributed via messaging apps. In the same vein, from May 2020, ISWAP released photos, such as *Image D* above, of its preaching campaigns in villages in which dozens are shown listening to the group's preachers. This showcasing of its activities was also a display of its defiance against social distancing measures. Furthermore, during the 2020 Islamic Eid festivals, which were both observed during lockdowns, groups across West Africa released videos and photos of congregational observance. In some of these videos, they mocked and denigrated other Muslims who observed public health measures during the festivities.

<sup>45</sup> Unmaking Boko Haram, (2020). ISWAP – Photostreams – 2015 onwards, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2020/05iswapmay262020eidalfitrphotos.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Unmaking Boko Haram, (2020). ISWAP – Photostreams – 2015 onwards, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2020/05iswapmay262020eidalfitrphotos.pdf>.

# RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

COVID-19 and violent extremism make for a perfect storm for radicalization and recruitment. With swathes of people stuck at home during lockdowns and curfews, the number of hours spent on the internet is believed to have increased the risk of online radicalization and recruitment to extremism. On the flip side, the imposition of lockdowns and travel restrictions have disrupted terrorists' operational planning, mobility, networking, and finance-related activity on the ground. As such, many VEOs and NSAGs around the globe exploited the uptake in digitization and reliance on virtual solutions to fuel their recruiting drives during 2020.<sup>47</sup>

As explained above, groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and JNIM disseminated their messages online and offline to target communities to recruit them. This included content ranging from visual and audio material to written statements that spread the ideological world views while denigrating and attempting to demoralize their enemies. These were produced and distributed even before COVID-19, but there was a dramatic rise in frequency during the pandemic in 2020. They became infused with COVID-19 relevant messaging. Furthermore, increased digitalization brought about by COVID-19 led to groups launching new methods of propaganda. One example is the ISWAP bi-weekly *Wakiliyar Labarai* (newsletter) launched in May 2020. The groups saw the inability of Muslim groups to travel and disseminate counter-narrative messages as an opportunity to get ahead.

This prompted several delegates for the Lake Chad the Sahel at July 2020 UN Security Council meeting on Lake Chad to lament COVID-19 exacerbating conflict drivers. They noted the pandemic was making communities even more vulnerable to worsening humanitarian crisis, finding it "extremely dangerous" for the regional security of West Africa.<sup>48</sup> In sum, the increase of online activity, in general, demonstrates the adaptability of VEOs to the changing circumstances, which in this case, they used as an opportunity to disseminate propaganda and dangerous content to radicalize and recruit.

<sup>47</sup> Edu-Afful, F. (2020). COVID-19 exacerbates the risk of violent extremism in the Sahel and West Africa, <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/covid-19-exacerbates-the-risk-of-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa/>.

<sup>48</sup> United Nations, (2020). Situation in West Africa, Sahel 'Extremely Volatile' as Terrorists Exploit Ethnic Animosities, Special Representative Warns Security Council, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14245.doc.htm>.

# FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

Increased security and less freedom of movement have made recruiting foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) harder in much of the world, but that has not been the case in West Africa. In the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Iraq, as seen with the emergence of ISIS, many FTFs came from the world over as individuals and families travelled to join the cause. However, in West Africa, most fighters' recruitment occurs across multiple, usually neighbouring countries where the groups are militarily active. Thus it is more appropriate to speak of cross-border operations in West Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has not had the same impact on recruitment or activity in Lake Chad and the Sahel as it would have had on ISIS in, for example, 2016. Before COVID-19, VEOs in the region operated in ways that did not respect the current internationally accepted borders. People travelled across borders and joined groups regardless of which 'country' they were from or in. For example, Chadians crossed the border in their thousands in 2014 to join Boko Haram's self-declared caliphate in northeast Nigeria.<sup>49</sup>

If national governments struggled to secure their borders before COVID-19, the pandemic only worsened matters, given that resources were redeployed to enforce intra-state restrictions. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, both the Shekau and ISWAP factions were able to operate across the four countries of the Lake Chad region: Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. While the Chadian side of the border has a small resident cell of Shekau's JAS, attacks on Niger and Cameroon were mostly committed by fighters in the Nigeria part of the Lake Chad area. The 90% increase in violent activities in Northern Cameroon occurred at the same time as fatalities in Nigeria jumped by 80%.<sup>50</sup> This suggests that cross-border activity in the region increased markedly in 2020.

A similar trend was observed in the central Sahel where VEOs operate along the tri-border region along northern Mali's Gao region, western Niger's Tillabéri, and the northern Burkina Faso provinces of Soum and Oudalan. As shown in *Figure 2* above, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger saw an unusual spike in 2020. An attack in the northeastern Ivory Coast by VEOs based in northern Burkina Faso was the first incident in the area in half a decade.<sup>51</sup> All this points to how the cross-border operations of ideologically motivated VEOs continued, if not increased, despite inter-state travel restrictions. While there is no data on cross-national recruitment campaigns and state-building efforts, given that VEOs in West Africa increased their trans-national violent activities, they likely also grew or at least maintained their non-violent efforts. One heuristic point is known: their digital content on encrypted messaging apps was distributed transnationally during the period in question.

<sup>49</sup> Bukarti, B. (2020). *The Challenge of Boko Haram Defectors in Chad, War on the Rocks*, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/the-challenge-of-boko-haram-defectors-in-chad/>.

<sup>50</sup> Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, (2020). *Boko Haram Violence against Civilians Spiking in Northern Cameroon*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/boko-haram-violence-against-civilians-spiking-in-northern-cameroon/>.

<sup>51</sup> Agence France Presse, (2020). *About 10 Dead in Jihadist Attack on I.Coast Border Post: Security Sources*, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/06/11/10-dead-in-jihadist-attack-i-coast-border-post/>.

# COUNTRY SUMMARIES

## **NIGERIA**

Nigeria continued its battle against insurgent groups threatening the stability and political integrity of Africa's most populous state in addition to facing the pandemic. Boko Haram has been the largest VEO in Africa since 2011, widely known for launching frequent indiscriminate attacks involving kidnapping and abductions. The group has been fighting mainly to shape an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria. From 2009 to the end of 2020, Northeast Nigeria experienced the deaths of 35,000 people due to conflict largely related to Boko Haram.<sup>52</sup> The UNDP also estimated in 2021 that an additional 314,000 people have likely died through the end of 2020 due to indirect physical and economic impacts from the conflict.<sup>53</sup>

Nigeria declared its first case on 16 February 2020 when an Italian, who returned from an international journey, tested positive for the virus. COVID-19 has had an accelerating impact on the VEO activities in Nigeria, as there was a steady rise in attacks during 2020. In addition to the regular attacks on the military, groups have targeted health care workers, religious and educational institutions. Borno state, where many of these attacks routinely happen, became one of the largest centers of the virus in Nigeria by May 2020, with internally displaced person camps affected.<sup>54</sup>

VEOs in Nigeria lack broad-based community support. However, mis- and disinformation disseminated by VEOs, as well as service provision from such groups and publicized condemnation of the government, fed into communities' lack of compliance with public-health measures.

## **MALI**

2020 COVID-19 statistics on the number of cases and deaths in Mali were proportionally lower when compared to other countries globally. However, the expected real number of cases is almost certainly higher than the official data. Whilst restrictions were announced by the government, curfews and similar measures were challenged by residents. Regardless of the pandemic, the country was going through a deep, protracted crisis resulting in diminished perceptions of the government. The pandemic also layered onto a complex base of already-tense social relations.

For its part, prominent local al-Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) exploited the public unrest exacerbating by COVID-19 by claiming that its effort to dismantle France's influence and supplant secular systems with Islamic ones had become a popular demand.<sup>55</sup> VEOs and NSAGs in Mali have intervened to address some of the gaps

<sup>52</sup> United Nations Development Programme. (2021). *Assessing the Impact of Conflict on Development in North-East Nigeria*, [https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/library/human\\_development/assessing-the-impact-of-conflict-on-development-in-north-east-ni.html](https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/library/human_development/assessing-the-impact-of-conflict-on-development-in-north-east-ni.html).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bukarti A. B. (2020). *How Boko Haram is Responding to COVID-19*, <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>.

<sup>55</sup> Bukarti, A. B. (2020). *The West in African Violent Extremists' Discourse*, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16467-the-west-in-african-violent-extremists-discourse>.

associated with the lack of government infrastructures and responses, particularly in water infrastructure and hygiene. Such service provision furthers the opportunity to legitimize the activities of the groups and build on the already-existing level of local reliance where these resources are limited – especially considering that these groups have been providing such social services for at least a decade.<sup>56</sup>

JNIM also claimed responsibility for killing 30 Malian soldiers in April 2020. The group credited COVID-19 for weakening the international troops in the Sahel and thanked God (Allah) for “deciding to send his soldier to help fight the enemy.”<sup>57</sup>

## NIGER

Based on the available data, Niger appeared to have very few COVID-19 cases and a low death toll in 2020. The first case in Niger was reported on 19 March 2020 in the capital city Niamey. By 12 April, six regions were affected; however, the hotspot remains Niamey with about 98% of cases.<sup>66</sup> The country as a whole recorded minimal statistics or official information about COVID-19, so the absence of cases may result from a lack of reporting. In addition, Niger had a lack of adherence to, or implementation of, the restrictions, even though the government developed a COVID-19 Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan, including community engagement, surveillance, testing, and infection control.<sup>58</sup> A lack of adherence and implementation could have contributed to a higher case rate in the country.

It is important to mention that Niger was nonetheless the worst hit by extremist violence in the region. More than any other country in West Africa, Niger faces VEOs on multiple fronts. During 2020, Niger reported over 1,126 armed conflict fatalities, many of which involved Boko Haram in the Diffa region bordering Nigeria.<sup>59</sup> The region hosts large numbers of Nigerian refugees – some 265,696 as of January 2020.<sup>60</sup> The Tillabéri Region is the epicentre of the Sahelian ideological extremism where powerful al-Qaeda and Daesh affiliates wreak havoc. Meanwhile, in the Maradi region of the south-central, the spillover of Nigeria’s growing kidnap-for-ransom industry has been worsening.

To understand the complexities of the country, and the vulnerabilities to extremism and violence, Niger’s context is important to illustrate. Niger borders Libya, from where small and light weapons, as well as opioids, are trafficked into West Africa. Almost 80% of Niger is in the Sahara Desert, causing multiple geographic and social challenges such as its desert terrain and inefficient agriculture. In addition, poor education, high poverty, a lack of infrastructure, very poor healthcare, and high fertility rates (resulting in overpopulation) contribute to the fertile ground for insecurity and health pandemics.

<sup>56</sup> Edu-Afful, F. (2020). *COVID-19 exacerbates the risk of violent extremism in the Sahel and West Africa*. <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/COVID-19-exacerbates-the-risk-of-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa/>

<sup>57</sup> Al-Lami, M. (2020). *Analysis: Key jihadist responses to Covid-19*, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201qi8pJNIM> Statement on the Bamba incursion in Mali, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 11/04/2020.

<sup>58</sup> Relief Web, (2020). *Niger Coronavirus (COVID-19) Situation Report #01* (Reporting Period: 6 to 12 April 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/niger-coronavirus-covid-19-situation-report-01-reporting-period-6-12-april-2020>.

<sup>59</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for 1 January to 31 December 2020 <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>.

<sup>60</sup> UNHCR, (2021). Factsheet Diffa Region Niger, January 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/unhcr-niger-factsheet-diffa-region-january-2021>.

## CHAD

Similar to Niger, Chad reported low COVID-19 cases and deaths as there was grossly inadequate testing capacity. As of the end of 2020, “out of the total of 2,141 confirmed COVID-19 cases registered in Chad (the majority being male aged 25-59 years), 37 were children.”<sup>61</sup> When a lack of PPE for healthcare workers and premature easing of restrictions likely would have equated to higher death tolls and infection rates, systems in place to measure the spread and impact were not adequate, such as delayed availability of diagnostics tests; limited capacity at a decentralized level for surveillance, tracing and case management, and limited enforcement of land border control.<sup>62</sup> It is presumed that many cases were not recorded.

Early in the pandemic, Chad suffered the worst defeat in the nation’s history in March 2020 when Boko Haram militants overran a military base, killing around 100 soldiers.<sup>63</sup>

However, like Niger, Chad is faced with diverse security challenges. Most of the country’s post-independence history has been marked by instability and violence, mainly stemming from tensions between its mainly Arab-Muslim north and the predominantly Christian and animist south. The country borders major insecurity hotspots, including Libya, the Central Africa Republic, and Sudan. It hosts more than 450,000 Sudanese refugees, representing approximately 4% of the country’s total population. In addition to the Boko Haram crisis in the western part of the country, multiple rebel groups continue to pose a massive problem for Chad.

<sup>61</sup> Relief Web, (2020). Chad’s Coronavirus Situation Report No. 9 [Cumulative update including the period 26 November to 31 December 2020], <https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/unicef-chad-covid-19-situation-report-no-9-cumulative-update-including-period-26>.

<sup>62</sup> Relief Web, (2020). Chad’s Coronavirus Situation Report No. 9 [Cumulative update including the period 26 November to 31 December 2020], <https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/unicef-chad-covid-19-situation-report-no-9-cumulative-update-including-period-26>.

<sup>63</sup> Bukarti, B. & Crone, D. (2020). Thanks to coronavirus, Boko Haram is making a comeback, The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/voices/coronavirus-boko-haram-nigeria-niger-cameroon-chad-a9470861.html>.

## CAMEROON

After recording its first COVID-19 case on 5 March 2020, each of the country's five regions quickly became affected, making the country one of the main COVID-19 hotspots in West and Central Africa. By that period, the country had 73 mechanical ventilators for 23 million people, and Cameroon experienced a recorded fatality rate of 60% among severe COVID-19 patients.<sup>64</sup> As hospitals saw an influx of COVID-19 patients, tens of thousands of people living with HIV and AIDS refused to turn for their treatment for fear of contracting the virus, leading to concerns that the situation could lead to excess deaths in patients with other serious diseases. At the same time, Cameroon saw a 90% jump in Boko Haram attacks in the Far North region, with the country recording more violent events – such raids on villages, kidnappings, and killings – than Nigeria, Chad, and southern Niger combined.<sup>65</sup>

Additionally, Cameroon has been experiencing a complex crisis from situations that brought insecurity and unpredictability. Firstly, Anglophone separatists, seeking to secede from the Francophone-dominated country, increased attacks in the South West region.<sup>66</sup> This was complicated further by weekly general strikes called “ghost towns” every Monday in the English-speaking region, during which legal firms, schools, and businesses shut down.<sup>67</sup> When the ongoing Boko Haram activity and the unknown nature of the evolving strains of COVID-19 kept wreaking havoc, the impact on the humanitarian situation across the country was tangible.

<sup>64</sup> Journal of Xiangya Medicine, (2020). *The intensive care capacity for severe forms of COVID-19 in Africa: why is Africa not making progress faced with this pandemic?*, <https://jxym.amegroups.com/article/view/6431/html>.

<sup>65</sup> Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, (2020). *Boko Haram Violence against Civilians Spiking in Northern Cameroon*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/boko-haram-violence-against-civilians-spiking-in-northern-cameroon/>.

<sup>66</sup> Jess Craig, (2020). *Briefing: Cameroon's intensifying conflict and what it means for civilians*, The New Humanitarian, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/02/06/Cameroon-elections-anglophone-separatist-insurgency-Ambazonia>.

<sup>67</sup> Home Office, (2020). *Country Policy and Information Note Cameroon: North-West/South-West crisis*, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/944073/Cameroon\\_-\\_North-West\\_South-West\\_crisis\\_-\\_CPIN\\_-\\_v2.0\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944073/Cameroon_-_North-West_South-West_crisis_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_.pdf).









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