

WEST AFRICA 2021

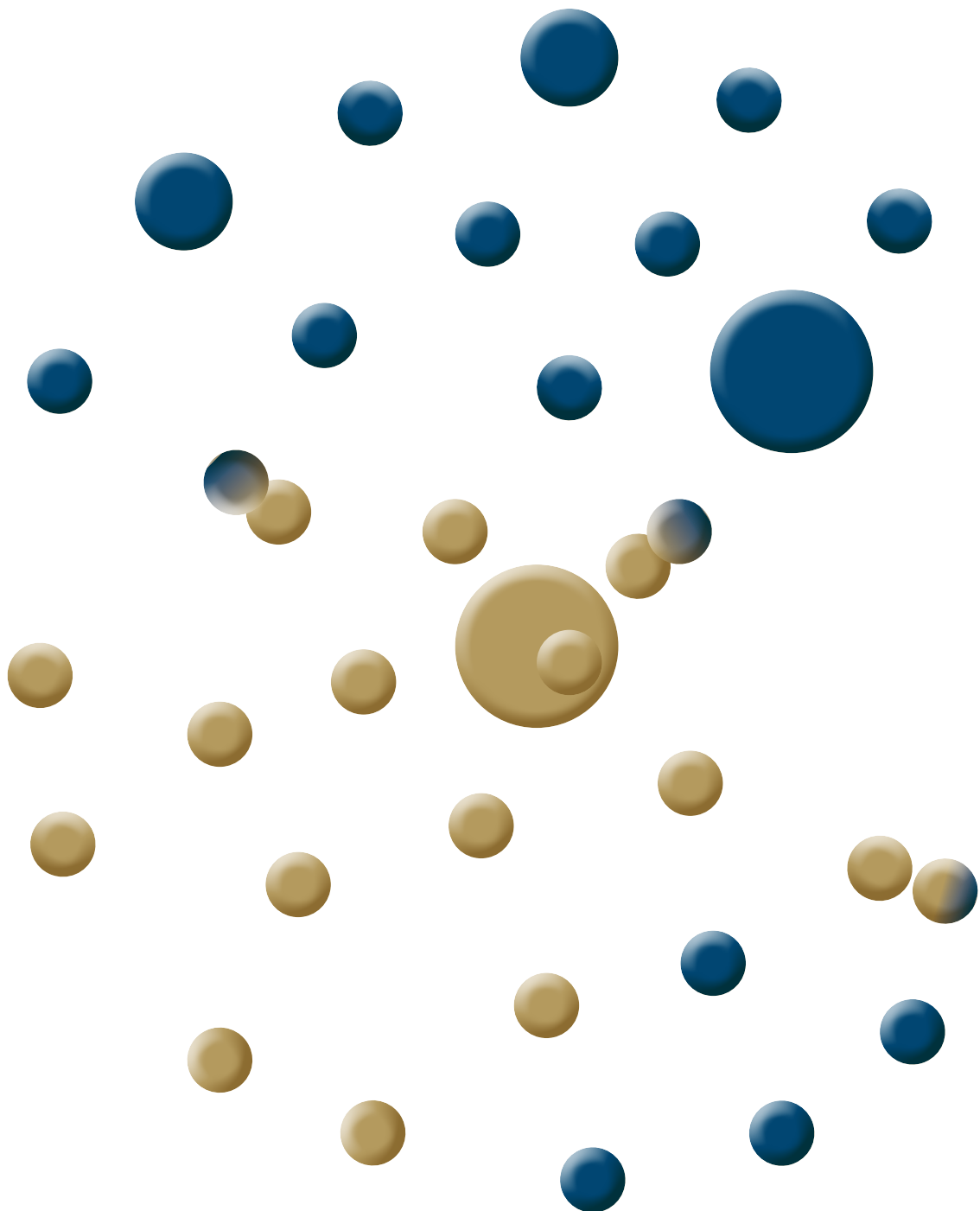
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

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

Since the first reported case of COVID-19 in 2020, infections have spread significantly across West Africa. The pandemic has strained a region already heavily impacted by extremist violence, poverty, major education challenges, and climate unpredictability. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs), non-state armed groups (NSAGs), and governments all responded to the pandemic in various ways, exploiting the circumstances and increasing their appeal locally. 2020 saw extremist and other armed groups in the region react to COVID-19 in various ways. For example, VEOs and NSAGs changed their propaganda, altered their in-person activities such as preaching tours for recruitment and outreach in violation of public health measures and changed their mobilization and recruitment tactics. The following year, in 2021, such actors were more aware of the potential impacts and opportunities presented by COVID-19. They capitalized on this understanding of the pandemic as a prime opportunity to scale up violence, drive recruitment, and work towards their dreams to build so-called ‘states’ – a long-term vision to rule and reign over specific land, often cutting through internationally-recognized borders.

In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic death tolls in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Republics of Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania were under-reported due to inadequate data collection, and lack of testing equipment leading to undetected cases.¹ These countries also lacked personal protective equipment, which would otherwise have helped prevent the spread of COVID-19.² Furthermore, despite the global COVID-19 vaccine rollout, by December 2021, only 9% of the population across Africa was vaccinated – falling considerably short of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) target of 40% for every country.³ Between March 2021 and January 2022, Nigeria had administered the most vaccines per capita in West Africa at 9.93 doses per 100 people, followed by: Niger (7.35 per 100 people), Mali (6.96), Burkina Faso (6.02), Cameroon (3.86), and Chad (2.28).⁴ This wider situational context regarding the pandemic and ongoing health crisis was, and will be, referred to and capitalized on by violent extremist organizations and non-state armed groups, as outlined in this report.

With the delayed rollout of vaccines in the region and negligible vaccines administered in remote areas where violent extremist groups generally operate, these groups did not focus their propaganda efforts on countering the vaccine rollout. However, propaganda from extremist groups about vaccines will likely follow when vaccine drives increase.

1 World Health Organization, (2021), *Six in seven COVID-19 infections go undetected in Africa*, <https://www.afro.who.int/news/six-seven-covid-19-infections-go-undetected-africa>.

2 Africa CDC, (2020) *Strategies for managing acute shortages of personal protective equipment during COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://africacdc.org/download/strategies-for-managing-acute-shortages-of-personal-protective-equipment-during-covid-19-pandemic/>.

3 Peter Mwai, (2021), *Covid-19 vaccinations: African nations miss WHO target*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/56100076>.

4 World Health Organization, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus. (COVID-19) Dashboard*, <https://covid19.who.int/>. (accessed January 25, 2022).

Throughout 2021, while COVID-related public health measures continued, compliance with these directives and restrictions has lessened.⁵ These measures led to the continued closure of shops, markets, places of worship, schools, and social gatherings and included domestic and international travel restrictions. Alongside continued food insecurity and conflict, these factors led to severe economic, social, and religious disruptions that fueled protests and public unrest in several West African countries, as described below. A combination of these elements, while not immediately applicable to the impact of violent extremism (VE) on the region, forms a context in which VEOs operate.

A significant element that shaped 2021 in this region was the death of key leaders – both in extremist groups and in government leadership. Leaders of both Boko Haram factions, Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), died in the continuing conflict, as did the leader of Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS).⁶ The president of Chad, Idriss Déby, also died in May 2021.⁷ The death of these leaders led to infighting and a changing of tactics from both VEOs and militaries. 2020 saw an upsurge of extremist attacks, recruitment efforts, and state-building activities such as regulating prices, adjudicating disputes, and levying taxes in territories where they exert power across West Africa. Meanwhile, 2021 brought a continued increase in activity from the groups as they learned to operate in new domestic and international dynamics affected by COVID-19 and changes in leadership. While a direct correlation between violent extremist attacks and COVID-19 is challenging to demonstrate, there are strong indications that extremist and terrorist actors attempted to exploit the pandemic while criticizing and undermining governmental responses to the pandemic.

In 2021, extremist groups across West Africa continued to create and disseminate propaganda to promote their ideological and general stances and activities. While in 2020, content disseminated related more closely to the pandemic and undermining public health measures, in 2021, there was considerably less content published that related to COVID-19. The content of propaganda was attenuated to activities of the groups, ideologies, visions, and attacks. The reduced COVID-19 content could be for several reasons: including VEOs potentially perceiving a reduced need to address the pandemic and because COVID-19 was less relevant with reduced public health measures. There was also an increased narrative focus on the social and political impacts of changes in leadership in countries.

Overall, the pandemic added another layer of complexity to the protracted humanitarian crisis in Central Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin area as VEOs stepped up their service provision efforts. The ongoing international

5 Stanley Azuakola, [2021], *West Africa Tackles COVID-19: Contrasting Regional Approaches to Combating the Pandemic*, Global Policy, <https://www.global-policyjournal.com/blog/22/03/2021/west-africa-tackles-covid-19-contrasting-regional-approaches-combating-pandemic>.

6 Bulama Bukarti, [2021], *This Looks Like The Beginning Of The End Of Boko Haram – We Should Accelerate It*, Daily Trust, <https://dailytrust.com/this-looks-like-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-boko-haram-we-should-accelerate-it>.

7 Declan Walsh, [2021], *Idriss Déby Dies at 68; Poor Herder's Son Became Chad's Longtime Autocrat*, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/world/africa/idriss-deby-chad-obituary.html>.

economic downturn caused by the virus negatively impacted governments' ability to confront VEOs throughout 2021 and their efforts at boosting employment.⁸ Additionally, international funding was redirected from various programs to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Despite governments' efforts to provide for the needs of the people in the face of an unpredictable global pandemic, their responses were compromised by the extensive demands of supplies and tools needed to combat COVID-19. VEOs exploited these circumstances and continued to increase their appeal through service provision of food, funding, or clothing for the poor.¹⁰ For example, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) claimed to have distributed food, clothes, and cash worth tens of thousands of United States dollars to poor people in the Lake Chad area. As such, they have put considerable effort into attempting to win the sympathies of people living with less governance and where known drivers of radicalization are present.

8 Oxfam, (2021), *The West Africa Inequality Crisis: Fighting Austerity and the Pandemic*, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621300/rr-west-africa-crisis-austerity-pandemic-141021-en.pdf>.

9 European Council, (2021), *COVID-19: the EU's response to the economic fallout*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/covid-19-economy/>.

10 Sahara Reporters (2021), *825 Packets Of Food Worth N3.4million, 353 Bundles Of Clothes Were Distributed To The Poor During Ramadan, Says Boko Haram*, <http://saharareporters.com/2021/05/28/825-packets-food-worth-n34million-353-bundles-clothes-were-distributed-poor-during>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Prepare for an increase in propaganda against vaccines in West Africa. Violent extremist organizations in West Africa have not started public campaigns against COVID-19 vaccines, mainly because of the low number of vaccine doses administered in remote areas where these groups operate. There is a strong likelihood that VEOs will start disseminating anti-vaccination content once vaccines become more available. This will particularly be the case if pro-vaccine campaigns start and/or populations are mandated to be vaccinated. Governments in West Africa should anticipate this trend and address it by creating sustained educational pro-vaccination campaigns before such efforts begin and particularly as doses become available in areas affected by VEOs.

2

Governments and international allies are encouraged to **remain engaged on multiple fronts to present a united, common approach to responding to VEOs.** In particular, support to address localized community causes of radicalization to violence should be provided by international donors and local governments alike. The rule of law, human rights affirmed law enforcement action, and harmonized approaches between local and international actors should also continue to be prioritized.

3

As the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to devastate governments and communities, violent extremist organizations are increasing service provision in rural areas to win the loyalty and support of local communities. This trend may increase in the coming years during the potential struggles to repair the economic damage of COVID-19. To counter the latest VEO tactics, **governments and international organizations should increase humanitarian assistance to affected communities and build more sustainable solutions while addressing shortages of basic necessities to foster peace.**





METHODOLOGY

This paper outlines how VE actors, VEOs, and NSAGs in West Africa responded to and took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The authors collated and analyzed existing and relevant primary and secondary literature covering January 2021 to December 2021 across West Africa and the Sahel. Analysis was carried out on primary materials disseminated by VEOs on platforms such as Telegram, in propagandistic magazines such as al-Naba and Dabiq, and other VEO content hosted on websites such as Jihadology, Unmasking Boko Haram, BBC Monitoring, and SITE. Such content helped the authors outline the broader narratives around COVID-19 and VE, including how VEOs exploited grievances online and offline. While examining VEOs and NSAGs in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, – and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Togo, and Benin – 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.

All fatality data and graphs are generated from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database. The report relied on ACLED because it is arguably the most comprehensive and accurate data available in the region. Unlike other databases that mainly use newspaper reports, ACLED draws on field researchers and online, open-source data, triangulating findings from different sources to ensure maximum accuracy. It is noteworthy that not all violent activity is captured by ACLED because of a lack of access to certain remote areas where VEOs are active. However, ACLED captures the majority of incidents that are sufficient for making broader inferences from the region for this report. It is also worthy of note that ACLED continues to update previous figures as more information comes to light. Thus, a slight difference in numbers may be observed by researchers that use the same data at a different time.

The report presents fatality figures of violent incidents claimed or attributed to the significant VEOs in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel. Groups in the Lake Chad Basin are Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which are collectively referred to as Boko Haram throughout.

For the Sahel, the groups whose attacks are included are *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) – an amalgamation of four al-Qaeda affiliates active in the Sahel,¹¹ and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which is operating under ISWAP in the organizational style of Daesh. Fatalities of rebels, separatists, organized criminal groups, and ethnic militias operating in different jurisdictions across West Africa are excluded from the figures presented in this report.

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

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has led to many deaths in West Africa and the Sahel and economic, religious, and sociocultural disruptions. Unfortunately, the region is no stranger to complex struggles, including health, security, educational, political, and climate change challenges. COVID-19 has only increased the complexity of this environment. With the virus came along psychological, social, economic, and physical impacts through requirements for lockdowns, social distancing, disruptive international and domestic travel restrictions, curfews, reduced public gatherings, and the increased spread of information and mis/dis-information on both mainstream and social media platforms.¹² While COVID-19 has been challenging for the entire world, the health crisis in West Africa is made even more complex by the ongoing insecurity caused by VEOs and NSAGs. Although long-term consequences are yet to become evident, increased extremist violence in the Sahel and growing instability can be attributed, in part, to the pandemic, as VEOs exploited or redirected governmental attention to the pandemic.¹³

In 2020, VEOs and NSAGs capitalized on the devastating impact COVID-19 had on this already insecure region, which continued to fuel their approach in 2021. The successes of these groups in 2020 were subtle but also far-reaching. The global focus on the pandemic also allowed VEOs and NSAGs to operate undetected more easily and more often, enabling them to grow deeper roots in communities, convincing the people that their service provision and leadership were superior to that of the democratically elected leadership.¹⁴

2021 brought a continuation of such strategies for these groups - entrenching their impact and influence in an unstable region and spreading anti-government messaging regarding the governmental decisions and restrictions in response to the pandemic. In the face of the ongoing crisis of COVID-19 and dire issues such as food insecurity, low levels of education, and corruption, VEOs, and NSAGs stepped in to claim that their approaches were more effective and beneficial to local communities.¹⁵ While it is impossible to assess (without empirical field research) the precise impact of this on recruitment and radicalization, a United Nations report found that VEOs in West Africa have “successfully exploited local grievances and weak governance to command growing numbers of followers and resources, notwithstanding internal divisions and rivalries.”¹⁶ These vulnerabilities were likely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the report noted that JNIM in particular “[has] made

12 Fiifi Edu-Afful, (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/>.

13 Jason Burke, (2021), ‘An economic calamity’: Africa faces years of post-Covid instability, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/13/an-economic-calamity-africa-faces-years-of-post-covid-instability>.

14 Audu Bulama Bukarti, (2020), *How is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?*, Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>.

15 Lina Raafatt, (2021), *The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: How Al-Qaeda and The Islamic State Are Battling for Legitimacy in the Sahelian Context*, The Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/schism-jihadism-sahel-how-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-are-battling-legitimacy-sahelian>.

16 United Nations, (2022), *Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities*, Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities.

decisive progress” in the year, that the Malian “capital city itself is under threat.”¹⁷

2021 in West Africa was a year of changes in VEO leadership and heightened political instability. Abubakr Shekau and Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi, leaders of both Boko Haram factions Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), died in in-fighting, as did the leader of Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS). The conflict between Boko Haram factions brought a different set of tactics, focusing on fighting each other or security forces in the Lake Chad Basin rather than targeting civilians.¹⁸

Following the announcement of the first infection of COVID-19 in West Africa in March 2020, an upward trend in infections continued in the region. According to WHO, the total number of COVID-19 cases up to February 22, 2022, stands at 253,293 in Nigeria, 8,743 in Niger, 7,248 in Chad, 30,347 in Mali, 20,751 in Burkina Faso, and 58,616 in Mauritania.¹⁹ Not only was the region facing outbreaks of COVID-19, but the WHO warned that West Africa was also facing new outbreaks of Marburg and Ebola, risking major stress on the already ill-equipped health systems.²⁰ Nigeria saw a COVID-19 death rate (deaths per 100,000 people) of 1.4, Mali 2.9, Niger 0.9, Burkina Faso 0.9, Chad 1.1, and Mauritania 17.4.²¹ While these death rates appear to be low, experts believe that the accurate figures are much higher due to a general lack of reliable data on the region.²² In July 2021, Africa battled the third wave of COVID-19. The WHO stated that this latest wave was “driven by a mix of public fatigue, social mixing, ineffective use of public health and social measures, and vaccine inequity and the spread of new variants.”²³ In the same month, Nigeria recorded its highest number of cases of COVID-19 in four months.²⁴ By August 2021, Africa was far behind the rest of the world in COVID-19 vaccinations, with just 1.6% of the continent being vaccinated, compared to 49.2% in the US and 48.9% in the EU.²⁵

Conflict and displacement also increased in 2021. The Lake Chad region saw the number of people leaving their homes rise, with 65,000 people displaced in the first quarter of 2021, while the World Food Programme (WFP) warned that they were struggling to feed people.²⁶ In May 2021, the president of Chad, Idriss Déby died of injuries sustained during a clash with the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), a rebel group formed in 2016 to overthrow Déby. This led to an escalation of battles between FACT and the Chadian army.²⁷

A UN report published in April 2021 stated that, as a result of conflict, climate change, and COVID-19, “almost one in four people in the border areas of Burkina Faso, northern Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and north-east

17 United Nations, (2022), *Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions*.

18 Audu Bulama Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons From the Rise of Boko Haram*, Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/violent-extremism-sub-saharan-africa-lessons-rise-boko-haram>.

19 World Health Organization, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*, <https://covid19.who.int/>, [accessed 23 February, 2022].

20 Al Jazeera, (2021), *West Africa healthcare strained by Ebola, COVID outbreaks: WHO*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/19/west-africa-health-care-strained-by-ebola-covid-outbreaks-who>.

21 Peter Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa: Concern grows over third wave of infections*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53181555>, [Figures last updated 27 September 2021].

22 Sky News, (2021), *COVID in Africa*, <https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-in-africa-why-is-the-death-rate-so-low-12236347>.

23 Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa*.

24 Punch, (2021), *COVID-19: Nigeria records 404 new cases, highest in four months*, <https://punchng.com/covid-19-nigeria-records-404-new-cases-highest-in-four-months/>.

25 Ido Vock, (2021), *How the world failed Africa on Covid-19 vaccination*, The New Statesman, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/08/how-world-failed-africa-covid-19-vaccination>.

26 Zeinab Mohammed Salih, (2021), *‘On bad days, we don’t eat’: Hunger grows for thousands displaced by conflict in Chad*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/17/on-bad-days-we-dont-eat-hunger-grows-for-thousands-displaced-by-conflict-in-chad>.

27 Declan Walsh, (2021), *Idriss Déby Dies at 68; Poor Herder’s Son Became Chad’s Longtime Autocrat*, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/world/africa/idriss-deby-chad-obituary.html>.

Nigeria are expected to need aid in 2021, 5 million more than a year ago, and a 52% rise compared to 2019.”²⁸ The report found that almost 14 million people in the Sahel would face food insecurity in 2021, a 76% increase year on year. It noted that “COVID-19’s compounded impact has significantly contributed to soaring food insecurity in the region, particularly in vulnerable communities,” thereby increasing “the vulnerability of populations and the severity of their needs.”²⁹

VEOs have long taken advantage of the combination of dire living standards and, more recently, pandemic stresses to intensify their attacks and challenge state authority in the region. VEOs such as Boko Haram, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansar ul Islam carried out several high-profile attacks and territorial gains in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad.³⁰

28 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, (2021), *Almost 30 million will need aid in Sahel this year as crisis worsens, UN warns*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/28/almost-30-million-will-need-aid-in-sahel-this-year-as-crisis-worsens-un-warns>.

29 OCHA/Giles Clarke (2021), *Humanitarian Needs and requirements Overview: Sahel Crisis*, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021%20Sahel%20Crisis%20HNR0%20EN.pdf>.

30 Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

ATTACKS AND GROUP ACTIVITIES

West Africa witnessed another year of record VEO violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises caused by insecurity, climate change, and COVID-19.³¹ The Lake Chad region experienced a reduction in attacks on civilians mainly because of infighting in Boko Haram, giving affected communities some much-needed respite. However, this reduction in fatalities did not apply to security forces. Conversely, a continued escalation in the central Sahel led to high numbers of civilian fatalities and serious concerns raised by the countries experiencing these attacks, the United Nations, and other international bodies. While the reduction in civilian fatalities in the Lake Chad region is undoubtedly good news in the short term, it may be problematic in the medium- and long-term as ISWAP is committed to winning local support.³²

Civil War within Boko Haram

The inter-factional warfare within Boko Haram that led to the death of faction leaders is perhaps the most defining development in the Lake Chad region in 2021. Abubakar Shekau, a leader of one faction of Boko Haram, was killed in May 2021. Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, the leader of the other faction, died several months later, in September 2021. The two factions differed in their narratives towards COVID-19. Shekau's JAS faction framed it as Allah's punishment of disbelievers and hypocrites (suggesting that it would not afflict true Muslims). They rejected public health measures and prescribed solutions that differed from prescribed health measures – congregational prayer, Friday prayer services, and other social interactions – as the cure for the virus.³³ The other faction, ISWAP, adopted ISIS's guidance by calling on members to not travel to Europe (where the pandemic was spreading) and to “cover the mouth when yawning and sneezing and to wash their hands frequent[ly]” to stop the pandemic,³⁴ which suggests that ISWAP believed that the pandemic would afflict their members and should accept public health measures, at least in part.

However, these differing narratives on COVID-19 were not the cause of the infighting in Boko Haram or a contributor to it. The civil war was instead a result of differences that predated COVID-19. Following Boko Haram pledging allegiance to Daesh in 2015, the group rebranded from Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS) to Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Its then-leader, Abubakar Shekau, morphed from an independent leader (imam) to the governor (wali) of Daesh in charge of West Africa.³⁵ Soon after, ideological and operational disagreements in the top echelon of Boko Haram culminated in the deposition of Shekau by Daesh – a decision he defied. Ultimately this led to a splintering of Boko Haram in 2016 into (1) the Daesh-recognized faction that

31 OCHA/Giles Clarke, (2021), *Humanitarian Needs and requirements Overview: Sahel Crisis*, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021%20Sahel%20Crisis%20HNR0%20EN.pdf>.

32 Bulama Bukarti, (2020), *ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria*, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iswas-recent-attacks-could-signal-new-deadlier-approach-nigeria>.

33 Audu Bulama Bukarti, (2020), *How is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?*, Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>.

34 Aitor Hernandez-Morales, *ISIS tells terrorists to steer clear of coronavirus-stricken Europe*, Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-isis-terrorists-europe/amp/>.

35 Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

maintained the name ISWAP; and (2) a Shekau-led faction that reverted to the previous name, JAS.³⁶

This splintering led to each faction declaring the other Khawarij (Kharijites – renegades) worthy of elimination, resulting in a civil war that led to over a thousand casualties, including senior commanders. This internal crisis reached a turning point in May 2021 when Shekau was killed in an ISWAP attack against his group. In the following weeks, ISWAP's leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, released several messages 'gloating' about Shekau's death and laying out his vision to reunite and reposition ISWAP under the guidance and direction of Daesh. When ISWAP announced the reunification of Boko Haram under al-Barnawi weeks later, Shekau's leading commander, Ibrahim Bakura, issued a rebuttal and vowed to keep fighting ISWAP, leading to more clashes and casualties on both sides.³⁷

From August 2021, news of the most significant fatality on the side of ISWAP began to trickle in. The leader Al-Barnawi was wounded in a battle with JAS fighters in August and reportedly died in September 2021, leaving both factions without their most knowledgeable, experienced, and charismatic leaders. This development was confirmed by multiple sources and later by the Nigerian army.³⁸ Al-Barnawi was a staunch Daesh loyalist who had been reinstated as governor of ISWAP earlier in 2021 after being demoted in 2019. Al-Barnawi explained that he was reinstated to carry out Daesh's orders to eliminate Shekau and implement changes that intended to strengthen the grip of Daesh on Lake Chad.³⁹ If confirmed, his death will likely disrupt the strategic vision and capability of Daesh in the Lake Chad area over the short term. Indeed, the Nigeria Security Tracker from the US-based Council on Foreign Relations shows a slight decrease in violence as measured by deaths per month since al-Barawi's death, though reporting lag for 2022 data may alter those final figures.⁴⁰

The chaos inside Boko Haram and pressure by state forces and reported food insecurity triggered mass defections from the group. From May 2021, over 8,000 members handed themselves over to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities.⁴¹ Although most of the defectors were civilians living in Boko Haram territory, a small percentage were fighters. The defection of combatants would further deplete Boko Haram's ranks. Still, desertion by civilians who previously believed in the group's ideology is not without its impact, as it will likely demoralize Boko Haram leaders and members. However, the vulnerabilities – such as poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity – worsened by COVID-19 – could strengthen ISWAP's ability to recruit people using its charitable and proselytization activities explained below.

The internal chaos of Boko Haram did not entirely detract from attacks on enemies. Both factions continued to commit deadly attacks on civilians; however, they focused on attacking security forces in all four countries of the Lake Chad region. For instance, in July 2021, at least six Cameroon soldiers were killed in an attack by JAS in the country's far north.⁴² Some 26 Chadian soldiers were killed in early August 2021, and 14 others were wounded

36 BBC News, (2021), *Abubakar Shekau: Nigeria's Boko Haram leader is dead, say rival militants*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57378493>.

37 Bulama Bukarti, (2021), *The Beginning Of The End Of Boko Haram*.

38 Bulama Bukarti, (2021), *This Looks Like The Beginning Of The End Of Boko Haram*.

39 Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, (2021), *ISWAP – Abu Musab al-Barnawi Leadership Reinstatement Audio (Kanuri and Hausa versions) – May 2021*, Unmasking Boko Haram, Link redacted Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, (2021), *ISWAP – Abu Musab al-Barnawi Audio Explaining Abubakar Shekau's Death – June 6, 2021*, Unmaking Boko Haram, Link Redacted; Bulama Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/violent-extremism-sub-saharan-africa-lessons-rise-boko-haram>.

40 Council on Foreign Relations, (2022), *Nigeria Security Tracker*, <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/>

41 Vanguard, (2021), *Over 8,000 Boko Haram terrorists have surrendered*, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/09/over-8000-boko-haram-terrorists-have-surrendered/>.

42 France 24, (2021), *Boko Haram attack kills several soldiers in Cameroon, regional governor says*, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210724-boko-haram-attack-kills-several-soldiers-in-cameroon-regional-governor-says>.

in an attack on the Lake Chad island of Tchoukou Telia.⁴³ Three weeks later, the group's fighters raided a military post in southeastern Niger, killing 16 soldiers and wounding nine more, as another attack in the same month killed 12 Nigerian soldiers.⁴⁴ Having achieved the upper hand on JAS, ISWAP attacks focused on security forces instead of civilian targets, in line with the group's policy.⁴⁵

While civilians in the Lake Chad region had a period of some respite, the situation worsened for their Sahelian counterparts, as detailed in a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report. The report estimated that 420 civilians were killed and tens of thousands driven from their homes in western Niger alone between January and early August 2021. HRW documented nine attacks between January and July in towns and villages in "western Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, located near the Mali and Burkina Faso borders."⁴⁶ It was also reported that on March 21, 2021, violent extremist actors killed "at least 170 ethnic Tuaregs in the Tahoua region, the deadliest attack on civilians in Niger's recent history."⁴⁷ On August 16, attackers on motorbikes assaulted the village of Dareye-Daye, which was already raided in March, and massacred 37 people. Just two days later, 47 civilians and police officers died when a security convoy was attacked in the north of Burkina Faso.⁴⁸

The deadliest extremist attack in Burkina Faso's history came earlier in the year when at least 132 civilians were killed in the northern town of Solhan on the night of June 4, 2021.⁴⁹ In another sign of further expansion of violence in the Sahel, several attacks in Côte d'Ivoire in 2021 claimed the lives of many Ivorian soldiers and civilians living along the border region of Burkina Faso. Two attacks on military forces on March 29 resulted in the deaths of three security personnel in Kafolo and a police post in Kolobougou.⁵⁰ Improvised explosive devices were used for the first time in Côte d'Ivoire in April 2021, and then again on June 7 when assailants attacked the town of Tougbo, killing at least one soldier.⁵¹

The number of overall fatalities in the Lake Chad area saw a fall from the 2020 levels. As represented in Figure 1 below, there were 2,751 fatalities in 2020 and 1,894 in 2021, representing a 31.1% decrease. However, in 2021, there has been a dramatic drop in civilian deaths, but there has been a significant rise in state forces fatalities. This is mainly a result of the fact that ISWAP, which rose above its JAS rival early in the year, focused attacks on security forces while ordinary citizens had some respite from the embattled JAS predatory raids.⁵² While the drop in civilian deaths is good news in the short term, increased security fatalities are draining the already-scarce military resources. As a result, VEOs have more freedom of movement and improved control of remote areas, recruiting more people and consolidating their territorial power.

43 Deutsche Welle, (2021), *Chad: Dozens of soldiers dead after jihadi attack*, <https://www.dw.com/en/chad-dozens-of-soldiers-dead-after-jihadi-attack/a-58775413>.

44 Adam Abu-Bashal, (2021), *Boko Haram targets military convoy in Nigeria, kills 12 soldiers*, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/boko-haram-targets-military-convoy-in-nigeria-kills-12-soldiers/2366972>.

45 Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*; Rachel Bryson & Audu Bulama Bukarti, (2018), *Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/Boko-Haram-s-Split-on-Women-in-Combat.pdf>.

46 Human Rights Watch, (2021), *Niger: Surging Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/11/niger-surging-atrocities-armed-islamist-groups>.

47 Ibid.

48 Paul Melly, (2021) *Sahel jihadists: West Africa faces up to policing its terror triangle*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58438905>.

49 Reuters, (2021), *At least 132 civilians killed in Burkina Faso's worst attack in years*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/armed-attackers-kill-100-civilians-burkina-faso-village-raid-2021-06-05/>.

50 Security Council Report, (2021), *July 2021 Monthly Forecast: West Africa and the Sahel*, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2021-07/west-africa-and-the-sahel-6.php>.

51 France24, (2021), *Soldier killed in Ivory Coast attack*, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210608-soldier-killed-in-ivory-coast-attack>.

52 Agha-Nwi Fru & Teniola Tayo, (2021), *ISWAP takes aim at the state in Cameroon*, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/iswap-takes-aim-at-the-state-in-cameroon>.

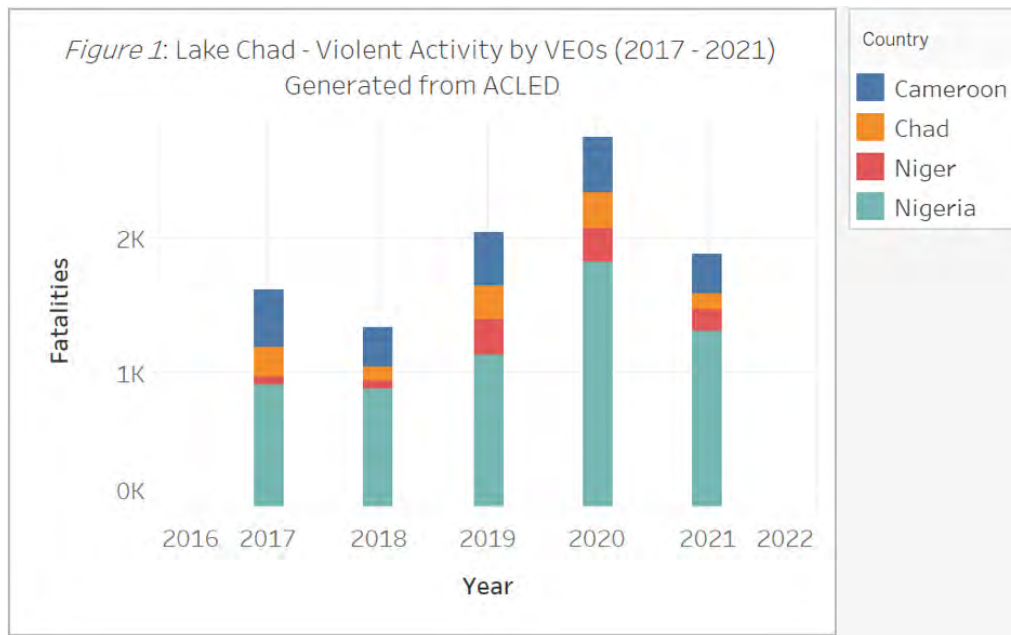


Figure 1: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for January 01, 2017, to December 31, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>.

In the Sahel, 2021 outpaced 2020 levels of fatalities, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. In 2020, according to ACLED, 2,655 VEO casualties occurred in the three countries of central Sahel, while 2,993 fatalities were recorded in 2021, representing a 12.7% increase. This signifies yet another new horrific record. However, there are differences between countries within the Sahel. For instance, while Mali recorded the highest fatality figures in 2020 with 1,124, this figure dropped to 631 in 2021, making Mali the country with the least fatalities among the three. Burkina Faso, which recorded 1,117 deaths in 2020 to emerge second, jumped to 1,423 in 2021 to become the worst affected country. Niger, the least affected country in 2020 with 414 deaths, saw a doubling in deaths to a total of 939 to become second in 2021.

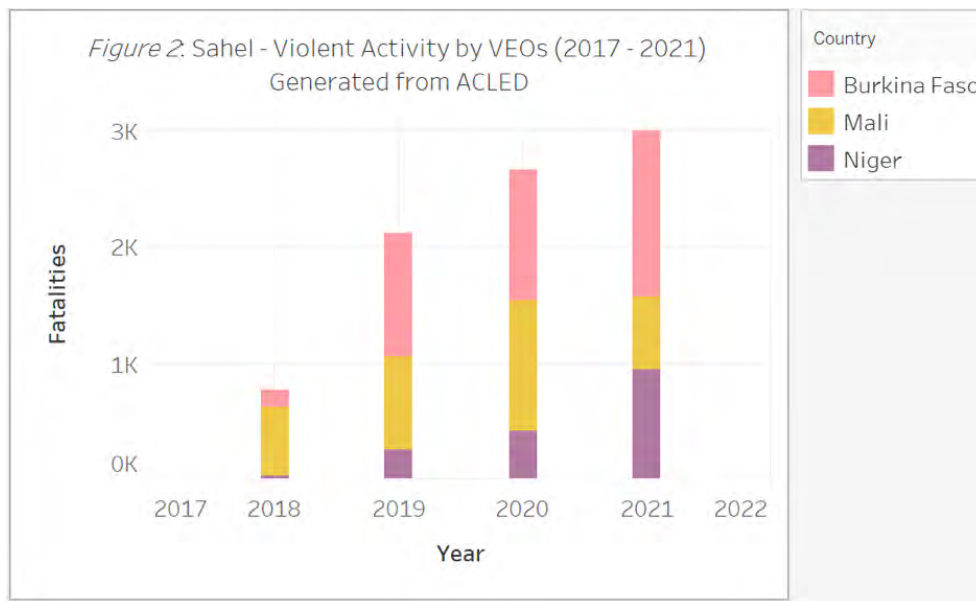


Figure 2: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) for January 01, 2017, to December 31, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>.

Another concerning development in 2021 is extremist organizational expansion southwards into Mali and their ability to commit attacks on major roads in both Mali and Niger. This prompted UN experts to raise their concerns over the impact of VEOs on the African continent just halfway into the year: in a report that was presented to the UN Security Council in July 2021, experts noted that Africa, particularly the West and East, have been hard hit by VE and terrorism, with Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliates spreading their influence, gaining supporters and territories.⁵³ The level of spread has been deemed “concerning” by UN experts as they grow “across borders from Mali into Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Senegal and incursions from Nigeria into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in West Africa.” COVID-19 affects VEO activity by both Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliates as the groups “continued to gloat over the harm done by the coronavirus disease pandemic to their enemies.”⁵⁴

Political Instability and VEOs

The reported attacks, as outlined above, unfolded in the context of climbing COVID-19 cases across West Africa with increasing reports of the Delta variant, an acute vaccine shortage, and increasing violence from a multitude of ethnic and rebel groups. A significant element that shaped 2021 in this region was the death of key leaders – both in extremist groups and in government leadership. As previously illustrated, leaders of both Boko Haram factions, Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) died in the continuing conflict, as did the leader of Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS).⁵⁵ The president of Chad, Idriss Déby, also died in April 2021,⁵⁶ while substantive political changes in Mali also underscored ongoing political

53 Edith M. Lederer, (2021), *UN experts: Africa became hardest hit by terrorism this year*, Afro News, <https://afro.com/un-experts-africa-became-hardest-hit-by-terrorism-this-year/>.

54 VOA News, (2021), *UN Experts: Africa Became Hardest Hit by Terrorism This Year*, https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_un-experts-africa-became-hardest-hit-terrorism-year/6208654.html.

55 Bulama Bukarti, (2021), *This Looks Like The Beginning Of The End Of Boko Haram – We Should Accelerate It*, Daily Trust, <https://dailytrust.com/this-looks-like-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-boko-haram-we-should-accelerate-it>.

56 Declan Walsh, (2021), *Idriss Déby Dies at 68; Poor Herder's Son Became Chad's Longtime Autocrat*.

instability.⁵⁷ The death of these leaders and political shifts led to infighting and a changing of tactics from both VEOs and militaries.

Déby's death and the aftermath placed Chad into further political and security uncertainty. This led to concerns over the country's continued commitment to the fight against VEOs in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel. In Mali, two military coups in nine months (one in August 2020 and another in May 2021) and other geopolitical developments, such as the withdrawal of French and western troops from Mali and ECOWAS, have plunged Mali into further political uncertainties.⁵⁸ The ultimate beneficiary of this insecurity and uncertainty are extremist groups and non-state armed actors. They are adept at exploiting chaos and confusion, as exemplified by the hijacking of the 2012 coup by VEO-linked rebels in northern Mali to establish a version of an Islamic state.⁵⁹ Experts express concerns that JNIM is negotiating "from a position of power," causing fears that the negotiations will benefit the group similarly to those in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Simultaneously, the medium-term economic impacts of the pandemic on the state purse could negatively impact the affected country's ability to fight VEOs who might capitalize on the vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic.

57 Moses Rono, (2021), *Mali's plan for Russia mercenaries to replace French troops unsettles Sahel*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58751423>; Aljazeera, (2021), Mali accuses France of training 'terrorists' in the country, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/mali-accuses-france-of-training-terrorists-in-country>.

58 Moses Rono, (2021), *Mali's plan for Russia mercenaries to replace French troops unsettles Sahel*; Aljazeera, (2021), Mali accuses France of training 'terrorists' in the country.

59 Council on Foreign Relations, (2020), *How Jihadi Groups in Africa Will Exploit COVID-19*, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-jihadi-groups-africa-will-exploit-covid-19>.

60 YouTube, (2021), *Malian jihadists negotiation peace talks 'from a position of power'*, France 24 English, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTWILP7F-NGY>.

THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION

As noted in the 2020 report, public health structures and provisions in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel are weak. The WHO has warned that the structures and systems in West Africa are not adequate to manage outbreaks of viruses in the region. The WHO also noted that West Africa has weaker health systems than other parts of the continent and, by July 2021, faced the highest locally recorded numbers of COVID-19 cases since the pandemic.⁶¹ With the advent of the Omicron variant in South Africa, COVID-19 cases almost doubled across Africa in the first week of December, with the only consolation being early data suggesting that the variant was less severe than its predecessor.⁶² Most countries in the region have fewer than five hospital beds per 10,000 of the population and fewer than two medical doctors per 10,000 people. Half of all West African countries have per capita health expenditures lower than \$50 USD.⁶³

With the ongoing and growing challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments remain overburdened. Even when restrictions received public support, it has been difficult to implement in this region, where the economic support required for a successful lockdown is inadequate. People who do not have savings and need to continue working to ensure a constant income stream are unable to suddenly stop their work or reduce their movement, regardless of the pressing health crisis. VEOs and NSAGs exploited the general situation and worked to promote their ability to provide services in affected communities. These groups have used attacks, informational campaigns, and charity to undermine governments and win the sympathies of communities at particular risk of radicalization.⁶⁴

One example of service provision is that given by ISWAP, the Daesh affiliate in West Africa. Amidst reports by local news outlets that the group was distributing food and other items, Daesh's al-Naba magazine published details of how ISWAP collected millions of naira (the local currency) in zakat⁶⁵ and taxes and distributed them to poor residents in the Lake Chad region. According to al-Naba, during the 2021 Ramadan period (April – May 2021) alone, ISWAP distributed 3,420,000 naira (around \$8,800 USD) and “825 packets of food to the poor, in addition to 353 bundles of clothes for the orphans and children of the Muslims.”⁶⁶ In May 2021, ISWAP published a photo of members of its welfare committee distributing food items to low-income families, including young children, as

61. Al Jazeera, (2021), *West Africa healthcare strained*.

62. Reuters, (2022), *Omicron less severe than Delta but still poses dangers for unvaccinated: WHO*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-less-severe-than-delta-still-poses-danger-unvaccinated-who-2022-01-12/>.

63. The Lancet Global Health, (2020), *COVID-19 pandemic in west Africa*, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30123-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30123-6/fulltext).

64. Oluwole Ojewale, (2021), *Rising insecurity in northwest Nigeria: Terrorism thinly disguised as banditry*, Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/02/18/rising-insecurity-in-northwest-nigeria-terrorism-thinly-disguised-as-banditry/>.

65. Note: Zakat is a form of obligatory almsgiving through charitable donation from Muslim believers with the means to contribute to those in need.

66. Sahara Reporters, (2021), *825 Packets Of Food Worth N3.4million, 353 Bundles Of Clothes Were Distributed To The Poor During Ramadan, Says Boko Haram*, <http://saharareporters.com/2021/05/28/825-packets-food-worth-n34million-353-bundles-clothes-were-distributed-poor-during>.

seen in Image 1 below. ISWAP is attempting to exploit the food insecurity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic to feed its broader strategy of winning popular support. Additionally, the group allegedly provided infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other services in its territory, actively challenging aid workers in monopolizing humanitarian or development support in the area.⁶⁷



Image 1: Photos of ISWAP Welfare Committee Distributing Foodstuff and Money.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, Ansaru, the al-Qaeda-affiliated faction of Boko Haram, stepped up governance efforts in northwest Nigeria, where local and national governments are struggling with escalating mass abductions of children and villagers by local criminal groups and bandits.⁶⁹ To build favor with locals, Ansaru protects communities within its domain from bandit attacks and fights criminal gangs.⁷⁰ This protection – as well as its preaching and provision of micro-loans to local farmers – is part of the group’s deliberate policy of winning the support of Muslim civilians in a bid to recruit locals as members or at least sympathizers.⁷¹ Like Ansaru, ISWAP and JNIM are actively engaged in a campaign to win over local communities. These groups are likely to further step up their benign tactics as the economic impact of COVID-19 hobbles governments and communities, forcing VEOs or local civil society organizations to step in to support the communities.

67 Vincent Foucher (2020), *The Jihadi Proto-State in the Lake Chad Basin*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/jihadi-proto-state-lake-chad-basin-25441>; 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>; Bulama Bukarti, (2022), *It’s a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS’s Tie With Boko Haram*, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/ISIS-Ties-with-Boko-Haram_Bukarti_March-2022.pdf.

68 Unmaking Boko Haram, (2021), *ISWAP – Photostreams – 2015 onwards*, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/iswap-may262020eidalfitrphotos.pdf>

69 Lami Sadiq, (2021) *How Terrorists Who Declared Ceasefire On Abductions Gunned Down ‘30 Bandits’ In Kaduna*, Daily Trust, <https://dailytrust.com/how-terrorists-who-declared-ceasefire-on-abductions-gunned-down-30-bandits-in-kaduna>.

70 Sadiq, (2021) *How Terrorists Who Declared Ceasefire On Abductions Gunned Down ‘30 Bandits’ In Kaduna*.

71 Bukarti, (2021), *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*.



NARRATIVES AND MIS-INFORMATION

In 2020, when COVID-19 was first reported in West Africa and public health measures and precautions were introduced, select VEOs produced propaganda materials that framed the virus as a divine punishment for sin, as “God’s soldier” to fight the enemies of Islam, and rejected public health measures.⁷² Interestingly, extremist groups in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel did not keep pace in 2021 with the volume of COVID-19 misinformation they disseminated in 2020. Only one piece of content highlighted below directly references COVID-19. This may be a result of different factors, including (a) having produced a significant amount of misinformation on the virus the previous year, VEOs might have thought that they had sufficiently dealt with the topic; or (b) as most public

72 “Snapshot: How Extremist Groups Are Responding to Covid-19 (11 June 2020)”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/snapshot-how-extremist-groups-are-responding-covid-19-11-june-2020>.

health measures had been lifted or wholly ignored in practice, COVID-19 itself had become less relevant to its audiences than the previous year; and (c) the previous campaigns may simply not have been very effective.

The single piece of content in which COVID-19 was directly referenced in 2021 was published by Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the al-Qaeda affiliate operation in Mali. In August 2021, the JNIM al-Zallaga news channel released a 17-minute audio message entitled “Unquestionably, the Help of God is Near.” In it, JNIM’s leader, Iyad al-Ghali, condemns France and other western countries for their “war on Islam and Muslims” and reiterates the narrative that COVID-19 was a hidden soldier sent by God to help fight his enemies – specifically referencing France and the United States. Al-Ghali’s words from the address, quoted and translated below, were accompanied by the poster in Image 2.

“By its war on Islam, its mockery of His Messenger, peace be upon him, and its invasion of the lands of Islam, its persistence in immorality and decadence, France has invited upon itself Allah’s curse and war and punishment. And today, it is reaping some of the consequences for Allah has now unleashed on it – right inside its homes – an army from His hidden armies, which is massacring disbelievers who are mocking Islam, making them an example for next generations. I am referring to what happened to it [France] and its godmother, America, of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still raging. It is a result of their war on jihad for the sake of Allah...”⁷³



Image 2: Poster of JNIM’s Audio Message Released August 2021⁷⁴

Given they had previously rejected vaccines (such as the polio vaccine), and their attacks on vaccine distributors, it was expected that VEOs in West Africa would campaign against the COVID-19 vaccine, however, this did not happen. While groups operating elsewhere in Africa, such as al-Shabaab, have released statements rejecting the AstraZeneca vaccine,⁷⁵ their counterparts in the Sahel and the Lake Chad region did not issue any public statements regarding the vaccine. This may be partly a result of the reality of lower vaccine distribution compared to many other countries. Until December 2021, each West African country was able to secure only a small amount of COVID-19 doses compared to its population, leaving the total vaccination rate on the continent at a low 9% as of December 2021.⁷⁶ This shortage means that only a small portion of those living in towns and cities can

73 Aaron Y. Zelin, (2021), *Unquestionably, The Help of God is Near* (audio) Iyad al-Ghali, <https://jihadology.net/2021/08/10/new-audio-message-from-jamaat-nu%e1%b9%a3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimins-iyad-agh-ghali-unquestionably-the-help-of-god-is-near/> (accessed on 27 October 2021 and translated from Arabic to English by authors).

74 Aaron Y. Zelin, (2021), *Unquestionably, The Help of God is Near*.

75 Michael Odour, (2021), *Al-Shabaab issues warning against AstraZeneca vaccine*, Africa News, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/31/al-shabaab-issues-warning-against-astrazeneca-vaccine/>.

76 Peter Mwai, (2021), *Covid-19 vaccinations*.

access the vaccine. In the remote areas where VEOs operate amid a long-term challenge of vaccine-related disinformation, almost none of the population had received a dose of the vaccine by the end of 2021.⁷⁷

Since vaccines are virtually unavailable in areas of West Africa where VEOs operate and where their primary target audience lives, the question of vaccination was not a pressing issue in 2021. If or when the mass rollout of COVID-19 vaccines starts in the rural areas, there is a chance that VEOs will issue public statements rejecting it. This rejection will be even starker if governments have a vaccine mandate because this could lead VEOs and other radical groups with a large following to escalate their anti-vaccine campaigns – such as feeding conspiracy theories that vaccines are being rolled out for sinister reasons. Given the history of Boko Haram targeting polio vaccinators and ISWAP’s hostile policy towards humanitarian workers,⁷⁸ VEOs will likely target public health workers distributing vaccines if or when such an exercise begins. Therefore, it is imperative for governments and their partners to get ahead of VEOs by carrying out vaccination campaigns and being proactive about the security of distributors, especially in areas where VEOs are most active. Equally, it is important that the anti-vaccination messages disseminated by VEOs are tackled head-on with verified medical information. Building on international best practices for combating vaccine misinformation, public health actors and journalists may want to pre-bunk narratives by using “a logic-based approach, explaining the tactics used to manipulate the information” and develop online visual overlays when discussing misinformation.⁷⁹ Research on pre-bunking suggests that teaching people to analyze misinformation tactics helps them avoid falling for strategic attacks later.⁸⁰

77 Independent, (2021), *Armed gangs raise risks in vaccinating rural Nigerians*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/nigeria-abuja-west-africa-covid-chad-b1971144.html>.

78 David Smith (2013), *Polio workers in Nigeria shot dead*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/08/polio-workers-nigeria-shot-dead>.

79 Lucinda Beaman and Esther Chan, (2021), *VAERS: How to stop misinformation related to the US vaccine database*, First Draft News, <https://firstdraft-news.org/articles/vaers-how-to-stop-misinformation-related-to-the-us-vaccine-database/>.

80 Laura Garcia and Tommy Shane, (2021), *A guide to prebunking: a promising way to inoculate against misinformation*, First Draft News, <https://firstdraft-news.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/>.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND PLATFORMS

In 2020, VEOs in West Africa exploited the increase in digitalization facilitated by COVID-19. This trend continued in 2021. ISWAP, JAS, and JINIM produced dozens of audio, visual, and text media distributed via their usual Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups. Knowing that the content would be taken down and as previously witnessed with these groups, they did not post content on more popular public platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. JNIM continued publishing its al-Zallaga news channel content on Telegram, while Boko Haram disseminated it on Wadih al-Bayan Telegram and its bi-weekly newsletter called *Wakiliya Labarai*.⁸¹ In June 2021, Ansaru launched a new Telegram channel called Al-Yaqt Media Center, which was included on the list of official al-Qaeda outlets in the same month. This is in addition to the group's existing channels, Al-Hijrah and Al-Thabat, which were used to claim responsibility for attacks in 2020.⁸² Al-Yaqt has yet to release any material, but its continued promotion within al-Qaeda's global network indicates al-Qaeda's intention to use all three channels to disseminate Ansaru's activities.⁸³

Extremist groups also continued their offline, face-to-face preaching activities, sometimes in defiance of public health measures that sought to restrict the number of people that could attend social and religious assemblies. For example, Image 3 is a photo of ISWAP operatives distributing pamphlets in August 2021 to travelers on Nigerian highways. The people pictured were commercial drivers who were stopped by the group, who then handed out leaflets after verbal preaching. In the leaflets, ISWAP calls on target audiences to reject the Nigerian government and join the group's war against it. It also calls on people to return to villages by promising to keep them safe and allowing them to live a good life and undertake commercial activities. The leaflets claim that ISWAP did not kill civilians and was not responsible for displacing people from their homes, saying the "Nigerian army highhandedness" caused the displacements. This is indicative of the VEOs offline interaction with ordinary citizens to win them over and counter government messaging campaigns. The fact that ISWAP fighters are able to operate on the highways freely is indicative of the freedom of movement enjoyed by the group.

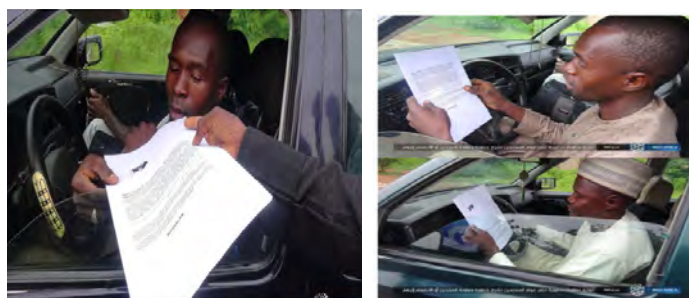


Image 3: Photos of ISWAP Distribution of Preaching Pamphlets⁸⁴

81 Ahmed Salkida (2020), ISWAP Launches Bi-weekly Hausa Newspaper, Humangle, <https://humangle.org/iswap-launches-bi-weekly-hausa-newspaper/>.

82 Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss (2021), *Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise*, Perspectives on Terrorism, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2021/issue-5/zenn-and-weiss.pdf>.

83 *Ibid.*

84 Unmaking Boko Haram, (2021), *ISWAP – Photostreams, 2015 onwards*, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/iswapaug-312021dawaandleafletdistribution.pdf>.

RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

Like in 2020, extremist groups across West Africa used online channels such as Telegram and WhatsApp, and offline methods like village preaching and preaching haunts (makeshift pulpits) on highways to recruit people and counter government messages. Materials disseminated included texts, audio, and visual materials citing an interpretation of Islamic scriptures to promote in-group extremist ideologies while delegitimizing governments and mainstream Islam. Photos and videos were also used to showcase the “happy” life of communities living in territories controlled by the groups – as well as promoting their justice and economic systems to entice people to migrate. For example, in May 2021, ISWAP released photos such as those in Image 4 below, showing its members praying at the 2021 Eid al-Fitr in large numbers and hugging afterwards. Over 50 of these types of images were identified from 2021.⁸⁵ They were intended to: (a) counter governmental narratives of success; (b) lure people to join them, and (c) demonstrate their defiance of COVID-19 public health measures. This is in addition to the preaching activities explained in the section above.



Image 4: Photo of ISWAP members praying during Eid al-Fitr and Hugging ⁸⁶

The groups also used speeches and images of children to recruit young people and intimidate enemies. Both Boko Haram factions deployed this strategy. For example, JAS released a clip in February 2021 of boys training with weapons and studying Arabic at an Islamic school controlled by the group. The boys urged their counterparts in towns and cities across the Lake Chad region to join them in building and living in the so-called Sharia states.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Unmaking Boko Haram, (2021), *ISWAP – Photostreams, 2015 onwards*.

⁸⁶ *ISWAP Eid al-Fitr Nigeria*, Unmasking Boko Haram, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/iswapmay142021eidalfitrinnigeria.docx>.

⁸⁷ Unmaking Boko Haram (2021), Boko Haram – Cubs of Monotheism Video – February 28, 2021, <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2021/02/28/boko-haram-cubs-of-monotheism-video-february-28-2021/>.

Several of the boys, who appear to be in their early teens as shown in *Image 5*, spoke one after the other to justify JAS violence saying:

*“Oh Muslims, the tree of Islamic monotheism does not grow except by sucking blood. It is for this that we stood and are killing. We are the cubs of tawhid. We do not rest nor would we let you rest. We shall continue to train, study and live under...Islam and when we come of age, we shall turn your night upside down and your day into mystery and destruction.”*⁸⁸



Image 5: Screenshot of Boys from JAS’s Video “Cubs of Monotheism”⁸⁹

88 Unmasking Boko Haram, [2021] *Boko Haram – Cubs of Monotheism Video – February 28, 2021*, (online video), <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2021/02/28/boko-haram-cubs-of-monotheism-video-february-28-2021/> (accessed 27/10/2021). Translation from Arabic to English by authors.

89 Ibid.

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

Freedom of movement for foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) has been impacted in the past two years by curfews, closed borders, reduced domestic and international travel, and increased surveillance and security measures in response to the pandemic. In West Africa, FTFs differ from those in Syria and Iraq in that they are mostly from neighboring countries rather than from across the world. This is possible because the borders between the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel countries are immensely difficult to police as they are primarily in ungoverned spaces. Furthermore, VEOs do not recognize the official borders as the beginning or end of territories⁹⁰ because they are more interested in their own land demarcations. As such, people tend to travel across these borders and join groups regardless of which 'country' they are from or residing in.

In 2021, this cross-border movement will continue similarly to 2020. One significant development in 2021 was that former Boko Haram fighters who had left for Libya from at least 2015 onward started returning to the Lake Chad Basin to re-join ISWAP.⁹¹ This occurred after the Boko Haram factions declared the reunification of Boko Haram in the wake of Shekau's death. According to interviews with those familiar with these movements, around 80 fighters arrived in two batches to Nigeria from Libya in April 2021.⁹² By May 2021, reportedly over 300 fighters trained in Libya and other foreign countries traveled back to ISWAP and partook in the battle that led to the fall of Abubakr Shekau in May 2021.⁹³ Their ranks included fighters from Niger, Nigeria, and Mali. Traversing the region is challenging for VEOs and NSAGs as the terrain in West Africa is often unsafe, subject to extreme climates, and variable governance and rule of law. As such, ISWAP relied on an elaborate network of contacts and routes cutting across West and North Africa to get the fighters from Libya to Nigeria via Algeria, Mali, and Niger.⁹⁴

90 European Commission, (2020), Counter terrorism and radicalisation, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation_en.

91 Eric Schmitt, (2021), *U.S. Scrambles to Contain Growing ISIS Threat in Libya*, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/22/world/africa/us-scrambles-to-contain-growing-isis-threat-in-libya.html?smid=tw-share>; Malik Samuel (2021), *Islamic State fortifies its position in the Lake Chad Basin*, Institute for Security Studies, 13 July 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/islamic-state-fortifies-its-position-in-the-lake-chad-basin>.

92 Malik Samuel, (2021) *Islamic State fortifies its position in the Lake Chad Basin*.

93 All Africa, (2021), *Nigeria: How 300 Libya-Trained ISWAP Fighters 'Conquered' Shekau*, 21 May 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202105210697.html>.

94 Samuel, *Islamic State fortifies its position*.

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

NIGERIA

According to WHO, the total number of COVID-19 cases up to February 22, 2022, in Nigeria stood at 253,293,⁹⁵ with a death rate of 1.4 (per 100,000 people).⁹⁶ While these statistics appear to be low, experts believe that the real figures are much higher due to a general lack of reliable data on the region. In July 2021, Nigeria saw a new peak in cases, recording its highest number of cases of COVID-19 in four months.⁹⁷

Throughout 2021, Nigeria not only faced the challenge of addressing COVID-19 and all the related impacts on the healthcare system, employment, education, and social unrest but has also continued to battle against extremist and non-state armed groups. Alongside some of its neighbors, Nigeria is home to several VEOs, primarily Boko Haram and its constituent factions. Boko Haram has been the largest VEO in Africa since 2011, launching indiscriminate attacks frequently involving kidnapping and abductions.⁹⁸ The group has been active in Nigeria for over a decade, fighting to shape its version of the so-called Islamic caliphate in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. The violence has resulted in the death of approximately 30,000 people and the displacement of millions to the neighboring countries of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger.⁹⁹

Possibly the most defining event in Nigeria in 2021 – although it impacted the region as a whole – was the death of the leaders of the factions in Boko Haram. Abubakr Shekau, a leader of one faction of Boko Haram, was killed in May 2021 and Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, the leader of the other, died several months later in September. This development was confirmed by multiple sources and later by the Nigerian army.¹⁰⁰ The death of both these individuals resulted in internal chaos in the factions without their prominent leaders amid ongoing combat, primarily with state security forces.¹⁰¹

ISWAP and Ansaru, both active in Nigeria, have been busy winning the sympathy of local communities. Ansaru, an al-Qaeda-affiliated faction of Boko Haram, stepped up governance services in Northwest and North-central Nigeria. Local and national governments are struggling with escalating mass abductions of children and villagers who are then put up for ransom by criminal groups. To build favor with locals, Ansaru protects communities within its domain from bandit attacks and fights criminal gangs.¹⁰²

95 WHO, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*.

96 Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa*.

97 Punch, (2021), *COVID-19*.

98 Council on Foreign Relations, (2022), *Boko Haram in Nigeria*, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria>.

99 Nanda Kishor, (2020), *Terrorism and COVID-19: Brutality of Boko Haram in Africa*, *Modern Diplomacy*, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/09/terrorism-and-covid-19-brutality-of-boko-haram-in-africa/>.

100 Ibid.

101 France24, (2021), *Nigeria jihadist infighting kills scores in Lake Chad*, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210928-nigeria-jihadist-infighting-kills-scores-in-lake-chad>.

102 Lami Sadiq, (2021), *Terrorists Who Declared Ceasefire*.

MALI

Reported COVID-19 rates in Mali were low compared to the rest of the world in 2021. However, the expected actual number of cases is almost certainly higher than the official data. According to WHO, the total number of COVID-19 cases up to February 22, 2022, in Mali stood at 30,347,¹⁰³ with a death rate of 2.9 per 100,000 people.¹⁰⁴ The population challenged restrictions announced by the government in 2020 – policy enforcement was a struggle in 2021.¹⁰⁵

A concerning development in 2021 was VEO expansion southwards into Mali, and their ability to commit attacks on major roads in both Mali and Niger. This prompted UN experts to raise their concern over the impact of VEOs on the African continent just halfway into the year: in a report that was presented to the UN Security Council in July 2021, experts noted that Africa, particularly the West and East had been hard hit by VE and terrorism, with Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliates spreading their influence, gaining supporters and territories.¹⁰⁶ The level of spread has been deemed “concerning” by UN experts as they grow “across borders from Mali into Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Senegal, as well as incursions from Nigeria into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in West Africa.”¹⁰⁷

Regardless of the pandemic, Mali has faced substantial political instability this year. Prior to 2021, the country went through a protracted crisis that resulted in the governmental capacity and legitimacy being questioned by citizens. Across the sub-region in Mali, a second military coup in nine months saw the deposition and detention of transitional President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, plunging a country plagued by extremist and ethnic violence into further political uncertainty.¹⁰⁸ The military coups in Mali highlighted above and other geopolitical developments, such as the withdrawal of French and western troops from Mali and ECOWAS, have exacerbated these uncertainties.¹⁰⁹ The ultimate beneficiary of this insecurity and uncertainty are extremist groups and non-state armed actors.

NIGER

Between January 2021 and early August 2021, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report estimated that 420 civilians were killed and tens of thousands driven from their homes in western Niger alone. Several high-profile attacks occurred in Niger over the year, with HRW documenting nine attacks between January and July in towns and villages in western Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, located near the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. The Tillabéri Region is the epicenter of Sahelian violent extremism, where powerful al-Qaeda and Daesh affiliates operate. On March 21, VEOs killed at least 170 ethnic Tuaregs in the Tahoua region, the deadliest attack on civilians in Niger’s recent history.¹¹⁰ On August 16, VEOs on motorbikes attacked the village of Dareye-Daye, which had already been raided in March, and massacred 37 people.¹¹¹

103 WHO, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*.

104 Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa*.

105 Wire News (2020), *Mali on lockdown as first coronavirus cases reported, but elections to go ahead* <https://www.france24.com/en/20200326-mali-coronavirus-ibrahim-boubacar-keita-lockdown-epidemic>.

106 Edith M. Lederer, (2021), *UN experts: Africa became hardest hit by terrorism this year*, Afro News, <https://afro.com/un-experts-africa-became-hardest-hit-by-terrorism-this-year/>.

107 The National News, (2021), *UN: Africa suffers most terrorist groups globally this year*, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/2021/07/24/un-africa-suffers-most-terrorist-attacks-globally-this-year/>.

108 Reuters, (2021), *Mali’s former interim president and PM released from their house arrest*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-former-interim-president-pm-released-house-arrest-2021-08-27/>.

109 Moses Rono, (2021), *Mali’s plan for Russia mercenaries to replace French troops unsettles Sahel*; Aljazeera, (2021), *Mali accuses France of training ‘terrorists’ in the country*.

110 Human Rights Watch, (2021), *Niger*.

111 Paul Melly, (2021) *Sahel jihadists: West Africa faces up to policing its terror triangle*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58438905>.

Niger appeared to have very few COVID-19 cases and a low death toll. The region recorded minimal statistics or official information on the impact of COVID-19 on the population, so the lack of cases may be due to a lack of reporting. According to WHO, the total number of COVID-19 cases up to February 22, 2022, in Niger stood at 8,743,¹¹² and had a death rate (deaths per 100,000 people) of 0.9.¹¹³

CHAD

Similar to Niger, Chad reported low COVID-19 numbers and death tolls as a result of extremely inadequate testing capabilities.¹¹⁴ According to WHO, the total number of COVID-19 cases up to February 22, 2022, in Chad stood at 7,248,¹¹⁵ with a death rate (deaths per 100,000 people) of 1.1.¹¹⁶

The protracted humanitarian situation in Chad remains severe. A UN report in April 2021 stated that almost one in four people in Chad are expected to need humanitarian assistance in 2021, putting pressure on both the domestic and international governments to support the population.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, following the death of Chad's President, Idriss Déby, in April 2021, Mahamat Déby emerged as the new leader of Chad. Ongoing mass protests accompanied the transition. Boko Haram factions continued to commit deadly attacks on civilians, particularly on security forces in all four countries of the Lake Chad region. At least 26 Chadian soldiers were killed in early August, and 14 others wounded another at the Lake Chad island of Tchoukou Telia.¹¹⁸

CAMEROON

In 2020, Cameroon quickly became one of the main COVID-19 hotspots in West and Central Africa. The country faces severe humanitarian challenges, bordering many countries with extreme challenges and dealing with the spillover from Nigeria and elsewhere. A UN report in April 2021 stated that almost one in four people in northern Cameroon are expected to need humanitarian aid in 2021.¹¹⁹

Boko Haram's ongoing internal chaos during 2021 did not halt deadly attacks. Far from that, both factions continued to commit deadly attacks on civilians and on security forces in Cameroon. For instance, in July, at least six Cameroon soldiers were killed in an attack by JAS in the far north of the country.¹²⁰ The in-fighting in Boko Haram – as well as pressure by state forces and reported hunger in the group's territory – triggered mass defection from the group. From May 2021, over 8,000 members handed themselves over to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities.¹²¹

112 WHO, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*.

113 Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa*.

114 Anne Soy (2020), Lack of Covid-19 testing undermines Africa's 'success', BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52801190>, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52801190>.

115 WHO, (2022), *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*.

116 Mwai, (2021), *Coronavirus in Africa*.

117 Dehghan, (2021), *Almost 30 million will need aid in Sahel*.

118 Welle, (2021), *Chad: Dozens of soldiers dead*.

119 Dehghan, (2021), *Almost 30 million will need aid in Sahel*.

120 France 24, (2021), *Boko Haram attack*.

121 Vanguard, (2021), *Over 8,000 Boko Haram terrorists*.



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