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Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Burkina Faso's Est region

USAID Customary Resilience

Anna Schmauder

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December 2021

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Project description

This report is part of the USAID-funded study *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.* The data presented in this chapter are based on the 1,437 surveys and 656 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) collected in Gao and Ménaka (Mali), Tillabéri (Niger), and Centre-Nord, Est, and Sahel (Burkina Faso) between October 2020 and April 2021. Our online database with key findings, including links to the general synthesis report, our methodology, and four other regional reports, can be found here: https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-legitimacy.

Abbreviations

IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
KII	Key Informant Interview
MPP	People's Movement for Progress
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

1 Introduction

For the past four years, Burkina Faso's eastern region has been the theater of violent extremist expansion. Rather than a mere spillover dynamic, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have successfully implanted themselves in eastern communities, exploiting widespread grievances against the central state and local elites amid decades of state neglect and prevailing hierarchical socioeconomic relations.[1] As the interface between the neighboring Sahelian states of Mali and Niger and coastal states of Benin and Togo, understanding the drivers and limitations of community resilience against violent extremism in the Est region constitutes an urgent endeavor in the quest to counter and prevent violent extremism.[2]

This report focuses on the role of customary governance actors – traditional chiefs and religious leaders – to assess their contribution to community resilience against violent extremism. To understand their contribution, this report delves into data collected in five selected municipalities, building on a total of 246 surveys with community members and 137 key informants.[3] These municipalities are Fada N'Gourma, the capital of the Est region, as well as Bogandé, Diabo, Gayéri, and Kantchari. Diabo was selected as the municipality that has been most spared from violence, while Kantchari is located in an area that has seen an increase in VEO presence. The municipalities are all home to several ethnicities, with Gourmantché generally being the largest ethnic group.[4] Despite having a large Muslim presence, local state administrations are characterized by a disproportionate representation of Christians across the administrations in these five municipalities, while traditional authorities tend to be animist. Our respondents also generally pointed to Christian religious leaders as their municipalities' most influential religious authorities.

1 Quidelleur, T. 2020. The Local Roots of Violence in Eastern Burkina Faso, Noria Research.

2 For an analysis of the risk of violent extremist spill-over to Benin see: de Brujine, Kars 2020. Northern Benin and the risk of violent extremist spill-over, CRU Report, Clingendael.

3 For the methodology chapter of this study, please see De Bruijne, K. 2021. Methodology "Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances". The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

4 The predominant ethnic group in Bogandé are Gourmantché, but it also hosts significant Mossi and Fulani communities. In Diabo, the Zaossés, Gourmantché and Mossi form majority ethnicities. Diabo also hosts Bila and Fulani minorities. Fada N'Gourma is predominantly Gourmantché, and hosts Bissa, Fulani, Zaocé and Mossi minorities. In Gayéri and Kantchari, Gourmantché form the majority ethnic group, with significant Mossi and Fulani communities.

The data highlights the precarity of communities in the Est region, as we find the lowest levels both of trust in customary authorities and of community resilience in a comparison with five other Sahelian border regions.[5] As the region currently witnesses a rise in extremist violence, this means that there are many potential social fissures that could be exploited by VEOs to solidify their presence. In order to understand why customary authorities are perceived to function so poorly in eastern Burkina Faso and to dissect the relevance of their position in a context of VEO mobilization, this report takes four steps. First, it begins with an analysis of key challenges and threats, including an assessment of the security situation in the Est region at large and the studied municipalities in particular. Subsequently, the chapter explores customary authorities' role in community resilience and the limitations of their governance in the Est region. Next, the analysis focuses on the specific contribution of customary leaders in addressing the rising threat of violent extremism, with a particular focus on their role in community security provision and reconciliation. The report concludes with a final section on implications for policy makers and programming partners.

5 Only Ménaka region in north-eastern Mali scores similarly low rates of community resilience. For a comparative analysis of our findings on customary authorities and community resilience in the Liptako-Gourma please see Synthesis report: Molenaar, F. 2021. Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

2 Est – key challenges and threats

2.1 General governance challenges

Est is rich in land and natural resources for both agriculture and pastoralism. Home to vast cross-border natural reserves, Est links transhumant grounds from northern Benin to western Niger, providing a corridor for pastoralists to access the livestock export market in the regional capital, Fada N'Gourma.[6] Yet amid spreading VEO presence, access to key trade roads, including those serving neighboring countries, has been severely restricted. In addition, the Est region's remoteness and vastness also translate to limited infrastructure and basic services, such as access to education and health facilities. The survey data reveal a high level of discontent with existing service provision. Only 16 percent of respondents consider that necessary resources are available in their municipality – a share even lower than in the neighboring northern regions of Sahel and Centre-Nord. Half of our respondents consider their community leaders to be inefficient – the highest share in the six regions of Liptako-Gourma covered in this study.

Widespread discontent with governance provision has manifested into broad civil society mobilization. In April and August 2021, thousands marched in the regional capital of Fada N'Gourma following the call of the civil society movement U Gulmu fi (Gulmu has awakened/risen).[7] Protesters denounced authorities' neglect and inaction with regard to both the security crisis and the crisis in basic service delivery in Est – highlighting needs in road and health infrastructure and increasing pressure on the services by rising numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs).[8] In the face of limited state investment in Est, community members depend on themselves and collaborative action, such as in joint community working projects for

6 Bisson, L. Cottyn, I. de Bruijne, K. and Molenaar, F. 2020. Between Hope and Despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso. CRU Report, the Hague: Clingendael.

7 The name refers to the regional kingdom 'Gulmu' of the main ethnic group Gourmantché.

8 Radio France Internationale, "Burkina Faso: l'exaspération des populations de l'Est face à l'insécurité", August 2, 2021. Laoundiki, C. "Burkina : Le Mouvement « U Gulmu fi » sonne la mobilisation des populations pour faire bouger les lignes dans la région de l'Est", leFaso.net, April 25, 2021. Douce, S. "Dans l'est du Burkina Faso, des villages piégés par les djihadistes", le Monde, July 9, 2021.

basic service delivery. This is corroborated by our survey results, as 75 percent of all respondents in Est indicated they had participated in such joint projects – the most common of them consisting of caring for displaced persons and supporting the repair or construction of public property.[9]

While respondents at our research sites still experience their municipalities as relatively protected compared to the municipal outskirts and more rural parts of Est, community resilience is dependent on external support.[10] The economic impact of the crisis is heavily felt amid decreasing communal tax revenues.[11] Amid the economic impact of a deteriorating security situation and a largely absent state response, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to address the rising need for food and water provision – the main threat to their livelihood identified by our respondents in Est (see Figure 1 below).[12] Yet the capacity and reach of development and humanitarian actors remains limited, and civil servants are largely unable to respond to the rising humanitarian needs. In this context, the largest share of respondents to this study are left to their own devices – relying on their personal networks of friends and family in times of need (see Figure 2 below). The three most commonly mentioned remedies to cope with the impact of external shocks – both environmental and security related – consist of falling back on savings, taking out loans, or selling or slaughtering livestock (see Figure 3 below).[13]

9 According to our survey data, 51 percent of respondents indicate to have cared for displaced persons, while 53 percent have supported the repair or construction of public property.

10 Interview with religious leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

11 Interview with local state authority, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2020, Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

12 Interview with NGO representative, Gayéri, 16 December 2020. Interview with religious leader, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

13 According to our survey data, 65 percent of respondents across all five municipalities use their own savings, 50 percent take out a loan and 38 percent will sell or slaughter livestock to cope with the impact of external stressors.

Figure 1 Security threats (per region)

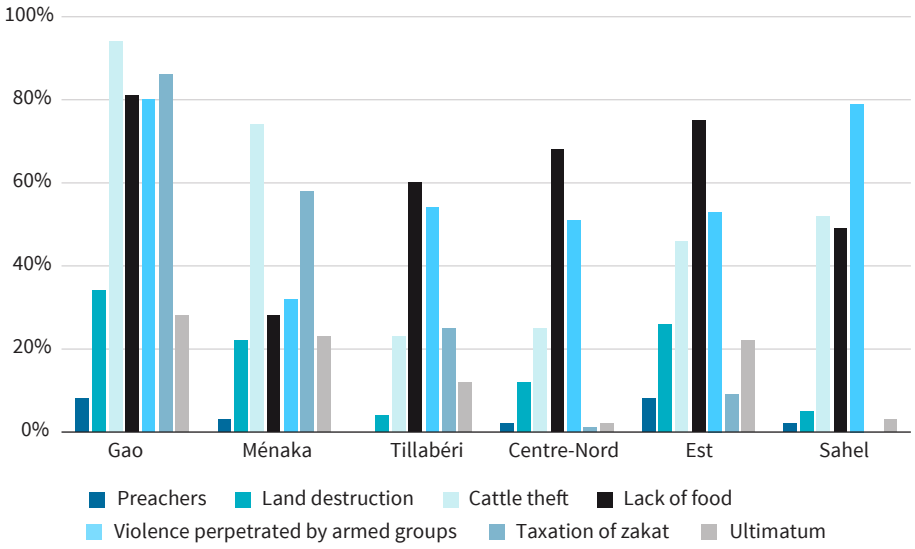


Figure 2 Key person/authority that helped households deal with shocks (per region)

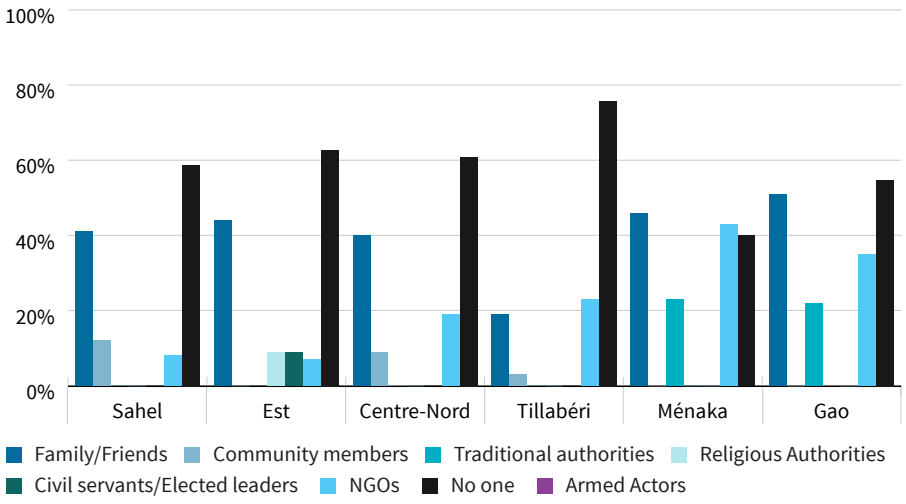
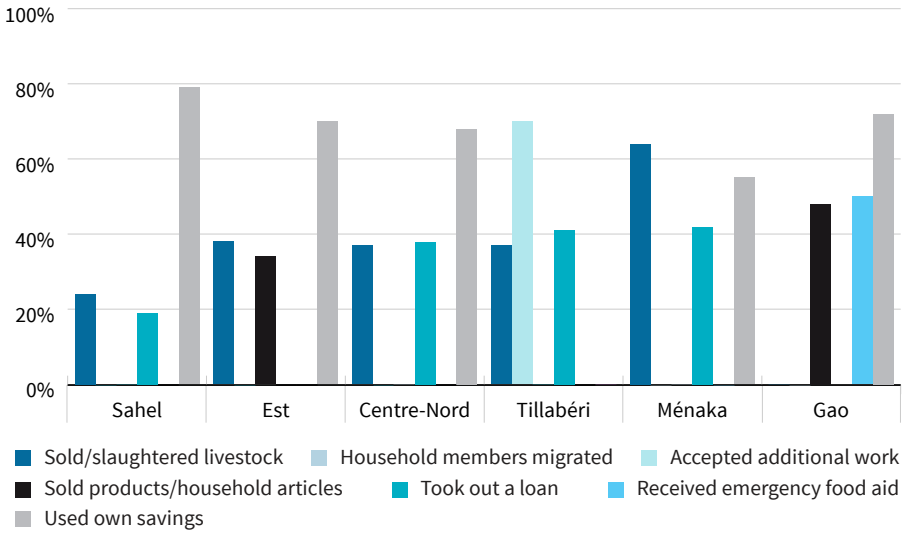


Figure 3 How households cope with shocks (per region)



In addition, existing resilience mechanisms centered on land are crumbling as the deteriorating security situation limits access to arable land and natural resources, while simultaneously increasing pressure on land and resources in areas coping with an IDP influx, as aptly illustrated by a resident in Gayéri:

> *We have a lot of difficulties because we were not prepared for this. Imagine, you had just two or three people to feed, but one morning you find yourself with twenty people to feed, to look after, to clothe.*[14]

Est currently houses more than 136,000 IDPs, ranking third behind Sahel and Centre-Nord, but recording the second highest increase in IDPs in Burkina Faso.[15] Since the beginning of 2021, the number of IDPs in Est has increased by 32 percent.

14 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent #372, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

15 Global Shelter Cluster, 2021. "Factsheet Burkina Faso." Lankoande D. (@Dieuson1). Twitter, September 7, 2021.

While the housing of displaced households constitutes a resilience mechanism and state administrations are largely perceived as responsive, the displacement effect has exacerbated pressures on community funds that were already insufficient to begin with. As highlighted by a civil society representative in Bogandé:

> *Widows, orphans and IDPs are increasing by the day […] people are fleeing their hamlets to come here without any means. Basically, we must conclude that given the immensity of the challenges, the means of solution remain minimal.*[16]

As many communities are displaced, tax revenues on the local and regional levels are missing and the dual threats of food insecurity and violent extremism have heightened the pressure, putting existing resilience mechanisms under strain. Respondents highlighted the uniqueness of their situation:

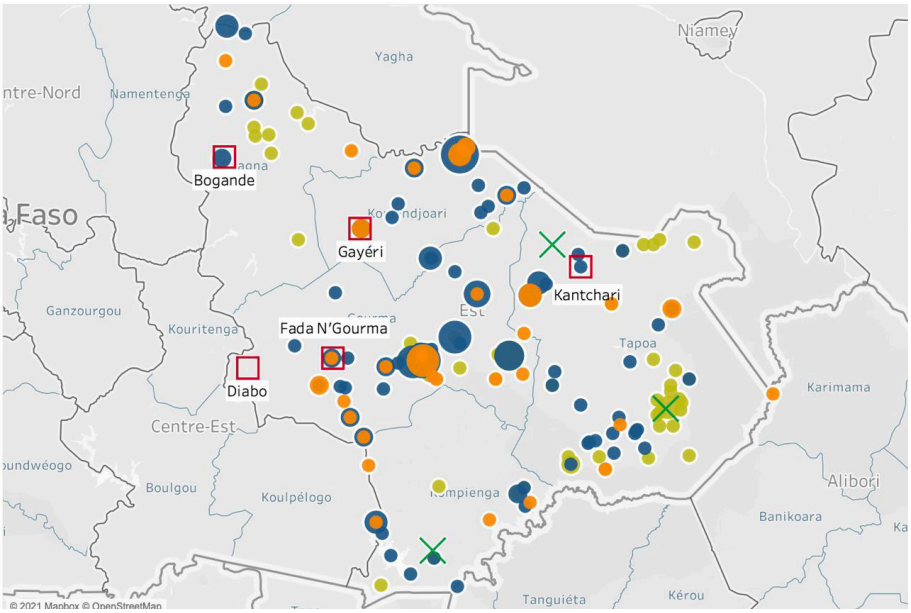
> *[S]ome of us have lost almost everything. We have lost brothers; our cattle have been stolen and our fields looted. We have never experienced such a life in our community before.*[17]

16 Interview with a member of the civil society actor, Respondent, Bogandé, 10 December 2020.

17 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

2.2 Security situation in Est region

Map 1 Conflict Events June 2020 – June 2021, Research Locations, ISGS/JNIM cells December 2020 in the Est Region



With the advent of jihadist militants in the north of Burkina Faso, and the creation of the homegrown Ansarul Islam in 2016, the security of Burkina Faso has steadily declined.[18] Despite being spared from these developments at first, Burkina Faso's Est region has experienced an increase in violent incidents since 2018 – amid a low

18 Eizenga, D. 2019. The Deteriorating Security Situation in Burkina Faso. Raoul Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, Bulletin FrancoPaix, Vol.4 no. 3.

deployment rate of security and defense forces.[19] Once the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) militants spilled over from the north of Burkina Faso and bordering Niger, both groups rapidly spread throughout all departments of Est, with seemingly fluctuating strongholds. Toward the end of 2018, violence committed by ISGS and JNIM intensified rapidly,[20] triggering counterterrorism operations and airstrikes by the Burkinabé security forces in Komandjari, Kompienga, and Tapoa. In the face of expanding military operations in Est from 2018 onward, VEO activity in the region continuously expanded and VEO involvement in violent incidents more than doubled until 2020.

ISGS and JNIM operate across all departments of the Est region; first they were in collaboration, but since 2020 they have also taken action against each other.[21] While JNIM's strategy in other Sahel countries, such as Mali, is considered distinct from ISGS' excessive violence against civilians, because it directs attacks largely at security forces and symbolic targets such as government representatives and local leaders,[22] strategic differences between the two groups are less clear-cut in Est. Water and forest agents were counted among the first targets in 2018, given their involvement in the expropriation and destruction of local properties.[23] Both groups regularly conduct attacks on security forces and local leaders like village chiefs, imams or priests, but they also target civilians. Standard tactics include the use of IEDs, abductions, incursions in villages, executions, and cattle theft. Likewise, teachers and schools have been regularly targeted, with at least 61 incidents against schools in various departments of the Est region since 2018.[24] Attacks by JNIM and ISGS militants against ranger stations and anti-poaching units are illustrative of a strong presence in various wildlife reserves, including

19 Raleigh, C. Linke, A. Hegre, H. and Karlsen, J. 2010. "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 47, pp. 651-660., first reports of ISGS and JNIM presence in 2018.
See also International Crisis Group, 2020. Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. Africa Report, no. 287, (2020).

20 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.* see figure 4 for overall trend.

21 Most incidents coded as violence by rebel groups cannot clearly identify if JNIM or ISGS were responsible for an attack/involved in an armed clash ACLED data, *ibid.* International Crisis Group 2020, *op. cit.*

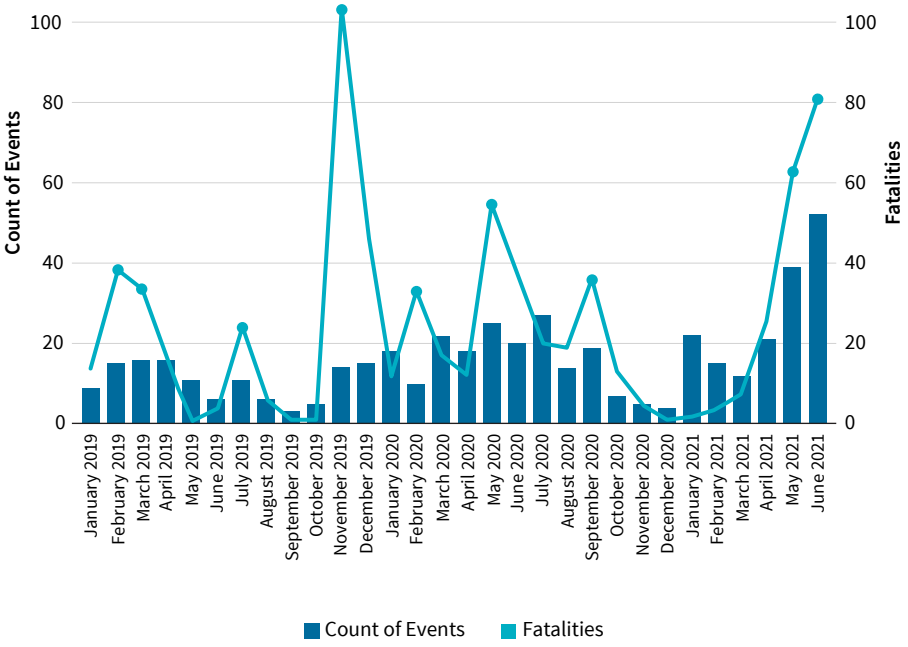
22 Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018. Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Transnational Threats Project.

23 FIAN Burkina Faso, 2018. Rapport d'etablissement des faits et d'analyse de la situation de Kounkoufouanou sous l'angle des droits humains.

24 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.*

the W-Arly-Pendjari Park, where militants can hide in seclusion and exploit gold mining and illegal poaching activities.[25]

Figure 4 Overall trends 2019 - 2021



Fatalities related to these incidents increased fourfold from 2018 to 2019 but decreased slightly in 2020 (see Figure 4 above).[26] Our survey data reflect this, as 52 percent of respondents indicated that the security situation had improved over

25 The abduction of an individual who was believed to be poaching in the area without the militants' permission showcases these groups' control over illegal poaching activities. Militants are suspected of taxing poaching in areas under their control. ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.*: Incident on December 17 in Tapoa-Djerma.
Wilkins, H. and Paquette, D. "Burkina Faso's wildlife reserves have become a battle zone, overrun by militants and poachers", Washington Post, September 13, 2020. In the area of Pama/Kompiembiga, a JNIM cell is directly involved in running various artisanal gold mines.

26 In 2018, 60 incidents involved VEOs, while this number increased to 92 in 2019 and to 135 in 2020. In 2018, 57 casualties were caused through these events, while in 2019, 224 casualties and in 2020, 144 casualties were caused during events with VEO involvement. Note that these number do not exclusively pertain to events perpetrated by VEOs but rather observe VEOs' general involvement in political violence (based on ACLED Data see : Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.*)

2.2 Security situation in Est region

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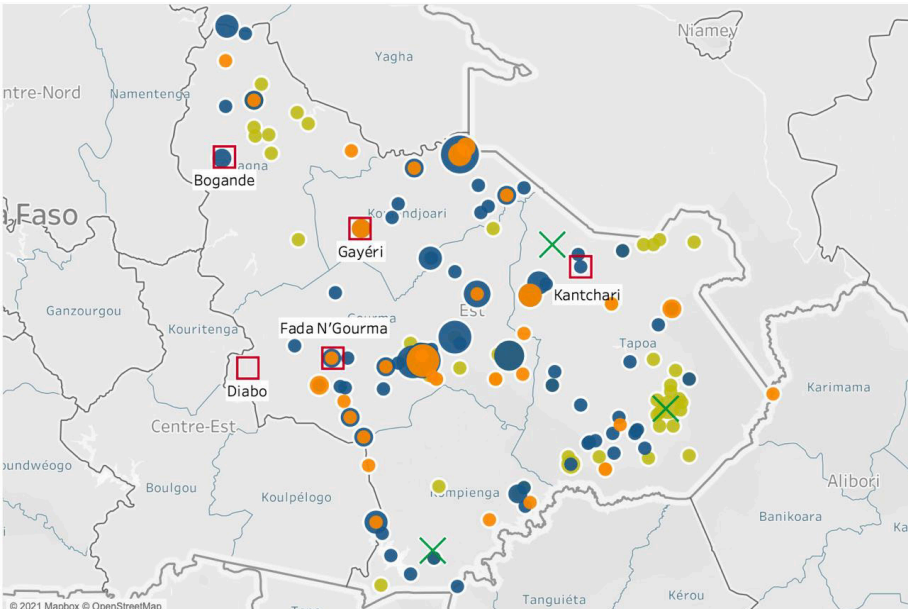


With the advent of jihadist militants in the north of Burkina Faso, and the creation of the homegrown Ansarul Islam in 2016, the security of Burkina Faso has steadily declined.[18] Despite being spared from these developments at first, Burkina Faso's Est region has experienced an increase in violent incidents since 2018 – amid a low

18 Eizenga, D. 2019. The Deteriorating Security Situation in Burkina Faso. Raoul Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, Bulletin FrancoPaix, Vol.4 no. 3.

The first half of 2021 has seen yet another significant uptick in violence, with fatalities already exceeding the total level of violent incidents in 2020.[29] Since mid-2020, JNIM has established a strong grip on the areas bordering Benin, side-lining ISGS, which has been pushed closer to the border with western Niger.[30] JNIM operates from three main bases – in Pama/Kompiembiga, in Singou/Arli, and in Tapoa-Djerma, with frequent movement of fighters between bases. The modus operandi of the three eastern JNIM cells showcases a relative autonomy from the main organization, resulting in a level of brutality more akin to the one ISGS generally exhibits.[31] JNIM has claimed the majority of attacks in 2021, which largely involve violence against civilians as well as VDP forces.[32] In May 2021, JNIM militants killed almost 30 civilians in the village of Kodyel in the Komandjari province in response to VDP mobilization and previous abuses of Fulani community members.[33] This highlights the inextricable intertwinement of intercommunal, jihadist, and state violence in the region, which has been further fueled by the government's decision to arm civilians in the fight against VEOs through the creation of the VDP.

To counter the exacerbated levels of violence, Burkinabé security forces have intensified their counterterrorism efforts in the form of air-ground operations, patrols, checkpoints, and numerous arrests since 2019.[34] Yet, counterterror operations have accelerated the dynamic of insecurity, as atrocities against civilians and particularly members of the Fulani community are well documented.[35] In Tanwalbougou, just 40 km from the regional capital of Fada N'Gourma, twelve community members detained in the context of a counterterror operation appear

29 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit. See figure 4 for overall trend.*

30 It should be noted however that ISGS fighters are in part working with JNIM, highlighting the complex flux between competition and cooperation of VEOs in the area.

31 Author Phone Interview with Analyst Héni Nsaiba, August 3, 2021.

32 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.* Almost 2/3 of all violent events against civilians in 2021 have been attributed to JNIM.

33 Nsaibia, H. and Duhamel, J. 2021. Sahel 2021: Communal wars, broken ceasefires, and shifting frontlines. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. As a response to the attack, VDP of the village and surrounding areas laid down their arms.

34 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit*

35 In Burkina Faso's northern Sahel region, in 2020 more civilians were killed by security and defence forces than by VEOs. See Sahel chapter: Willeme, A. 2021. Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: The case of Burkina Faso's Sahel region. The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

to have been victims of extrajudicial killings by security forces.[36] The creation of the VDP has intensified this dynamic, tapping directly into local intercommunal and ethnic conflict dynamics (see Box 1 below). Since VDP fighters are mostly recruited from existing ethnic self-defense groups, previous incidents of violence between Koglweogo self-defense groups and Fulani community members are perpetuated through the VDP, but with a more explicit legitimization by the Burkinabé government.[37]

Box 1 Ethnic profile of Koglweogo and VDP in Est

The introduction of VDPs has changed the ethnic composition of self-defense groups in Est. From their emergence in 2016 onwards, Koglweogo in Est have been considered relatively inclusive, containing both Gourmantché and Mossi forces, and including Fulani members. By early 2019, decisive Koglweogo action against banditry in Est appeared to have resulted in a rather favorable view of the group by Fulani in the region.[38] After that, however, the dynamic rapidly shifted. As many Koglweogo have integrated into the VDP amid the promise of central state support, and there has been a strong anti-Fulani bias in the ongoing counterterror campaign, Fulani have been largely excluded as locally recruited VDPs.[39] In this context, the Fulani represent the only main ethnic group in eastern Burkina Faso that is not represented within the VDP forces at the forefront of the fight against violent extremism – making them an apparent target for counter-terrorism efforts and consequently for VEO recruitment. As of mid-2021, Fulani members are far and few amid the Koglweogo and VDP forces and Fulani communities are targeted, including through summary executions.

36 Human Rights Watch, "Burkina Faso : Enquêter de manière crédible sur des exécutions présumées", May 20, 2020. LeFaso.net, "Fada N'Gourma : Douze présumés terroristes retrouvés morts dans leurs cellules", May 13, 2020.

37 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.* Incidents of violence between Koglweogo and Fulani occured primarily in the Gourma province in 2019 and 2020.

38 Rangé, C. Ba-Konaré, D. Brosse,C. Compaore, I. Kaboré, A. Kibra, L. Maïga, B. Miphal, O. Ouattara, C. Ouoba, B. and Ouoba, Y. 2020. Analyse contextuelle des dynamiques socio-politiques et des demandes de développement dans la région Est du Burkina. Rapport, Nogent sur Marne: Le Gret :13.

39 Willeme, A. and Schmauder, A. 2021. The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland. Conflict and Fragility, Op-ed, the Hague: Clingendael Institute.

In addition, intercommunal conflict centered around land ownership has increased rapidly, pitting community members considered "foreign" against landowning "native" families. While these conflict lines escape simplistic ethnic distinctions, grievances against landowning "native" families exploited by VEOs in the area have largely resulted in a deliberate targeting of Gourmantché, the ethnic group considered the historical inhabitants of eastern Burkina Faso. Originating in competition over resources, the conflict now involves a multiplicity of actors, such as state and security forces often considered to favor "native" landowning community members; communal self-defense militias that have in part integrated into the state security apparatus since the creation of the VDP; and militant jihadist groups taking up the cause of marginalized land-using communities. Even though VEOs do not exclusively target pastoralist communities for recruitment, their rhetoric often taps into existing grievances experienced by many pastoralists, who tend to be dependent on land utilization rights.[40]

2.3 Security situations in our research sites

Since April 2021 – in the aftermath of the data collection – Est has experienced a rapid surge in security incidents, with attacks against both Burkinabé and foreign civilians standing out in particular. In the southeastern town of Madjoari, located at the Arly National Park bordering on the Pendjari National Park in Benin – jihadists have since June 2021 imposed an embargo, sealing off all roads leading to the community. The resulting exodus has seen the displacement of 13,000 of the community's 14,000 inhabitants – those remaining have been confronted with a massive inflation of everyday goods such as petrol and salt.[41] This example highlights the tactic of control deployed by violent extremist actors, seeking to impose themselves not only through violent attacks but through sealing off and isolating relevant communities – similar to tactics employed in central Mali.

In contrast, the five municipalities covered in this study are still characterized by relative stability, exemplified through the presence of state security and defense forces. While military positions are undermanned and faced with limited logistic capacities, respondents in the urban centers surveyed highlighted the situation as "more frightening than harmful."[42] Yet sentiments about security are largely

40 Bisson, L. et al 2021, *op. cit.*

41 Boudani, Y. "Burkina Faso: Madjoari, une ville placée sous embargo par des groupes armés", Radio France Internationale, July 4, 2021.

42 Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020. The largest contingents of security and defense forces are found in the regional capital Fada N'Gourma and at the Boungou mine.

focused on urban centers, where security provision is focused, leaving villages in their periphery and more rural areas largely uncatered to.[43] Thus, while the municipalities included in our data collection have so far largely escaped large-scale attacks, the increase in consecutive attacks in the surrounding villages has left inhabitants in a state of constant alert.[44]

By way of example, the Foutouri province bordering Niger between Kantchari and Gayéri has been subject to a cycle of violence in which presumed JNIM fighters have killed more than 30 individuals, including VDP fighters, in an apparent response to VDP mobilization as well as abuses against Fulani.[45] While the security of Kantchari has in response been reinforced by security and defense forces and VDP, surrounding villages have emptied amid a rapidly increasing displacement crisis.[46] In Bogandé, the killing of its Koglweogo chief in October 2020 caused widespread fear.[47] Last, in a series of attacks in the village of Tanwalbogou, 40 km east of Fada N'Gourma, suspected VEOs killed several gendarmerie and VDP forces. In this context, even in municipalities that are considered relatively stable by most inhabitants, targeted killings and attacks have highlighted the vulnerability of the region. The rising insecurity further undermines the connectivity of communities, as key road axes have become targets of regular kidnappings.[48]

Given the state of emergency that has existed in the region since early 2019, all five municipalities have adopted a set of security measures that includes nightly curfews, patrols, and controls at the entrances of cities as well as circulation restrictions for two- or three-wheeled vehicles such as motorbikes and tricycles.[49] Yet in practice, security actors in Est are underequipped and underfunded, limiting their ability and willingness to conduct patrols outside of military bases. Security provision is further supported by community surveillance committees often set up by local administrations. These committees function as localized intelligence-gathering mechanisms that monitor suspicious movement and encourage

43 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

44 Interview with youth representative, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

45 Mednick, S. "Gunmen kill dozens in attack in eastern Burkina Faso", Associated Press news, May 3, 2021. Nsaibia, H. and Duhamel, J. 2021, *op. cit.*

46 Interview with religious leader, Kantchari, 17 December 2020. Interview with religious leader, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

47 Interview with religious leader, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2020.

48 In mid-July, three people including an administration official were kidnapped on the road between Kantchari and Fada N'Gourma, in the proximity of Tanwalbougou. LeFaso.net, "Gourma : Trois personnes portées disparues dont un haut responsable", July 16, 2021.

49 Sahel Security Alerts (@Sahel_Security), June 7, 2021, Twitter.

information-sharing between relevant community actors – albeit with limited inclusiveness of Fulani inhabitants, further reinforcing the broader anti-Fulani trend of counterterror interventions.[50]

In some instances, these localized security measures have been complemented by local-level pacts of nonaggression. In the municipality of Kantchari in particular, respondents noted the willingness of some community members to negotiate with VEOs, and pacts of nonaggression have been reported in the village of Nagré in the Gourma province.[51]

In this setting, the state's security response is both insufficient and further increases the stigmatization and victimization of civilians. As elsewhere in the Sahel, counterterrorism operations have led to a surge in extrajudicial killings and abuses.[52] The extent to which security forces and VDPs sent by the central administration can contribute to community resilience is therefore extremely limited. Moreover, not only have the extrajudicial killings and abuses overwhelmingly targeted Fulani civilians, but they have also in the process further decreased social cohesion among ethnically plural communities. Asked to explain the main conflict in his community, one inhabitant of Fada N'Gourma explained:

> *I think the main issues […] are the stigmatization that consists of singling out one part of the population as the cause of this crisis that we are experiencing.*[53]

The most recent example highlighting the deadly consequences of this stigmatization occurred just 50 km outside Fada N'Gourma. Multiple Fulani marketgoers in Tanwalbogou were arrested and later found killed.[54]

Amid this context characterized by a deteriorating security situation, feeble social cohesion, and rising humanitarian emergencies – what role, if any, can traditional community actors play in community resilience in Est?

50 Interview with Koglweogo member, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2020.

51 Interview with traditional leader, Kantchari, 4 March 2021.

52 Nsaibia, H. 2020. State atrocities in the Sahel: The impetus for counterinsurgency results is fueling government attacks on civilians, ACLED. Human Rights Watch, "Sahel "Mettre fin aux abus commis lors des opérations de lutte contre le terrorisme", February 13, 2021.

53 Interview with community member, Respondent, Fada N'Gourma, 12 December 2020.

54 Human Rights Watch, "Burkina Faso: Credibly Investigate Apparent Executions", May 20, 2020.

3 Traditional and religious authorities' contributions to community resilience

The fall of the Compaoré regime in 2014 opened a previously unknown arena of political competition, including in Est. After more than 30 years of monopolized executive power, the first democratically legitimized government unlocked a new plethora of alliances between local elites, regional stakeholders, and the central state government. As in the northern part of the country, this reordering has since taken place in a context that has increasingly relied on non-state actors. Efforts by political parties to mobilize populations have until recently largely relied on two main actors: the Koglweogo structure that emerged as a community response to the deteriorating security and the chieftaincy of the Gulmu kingdom.[55] Yet amid the rise in extremist violence since late 2018, the fragile order that had emerged in the aftermath of 2014 has been upset by an eroding traditional hierarchy and the simultaneous integration of community-led security forces into state structures through the creation of the VDPs.

3.1 Chieftaincy

During the nearly 30-year rule of former president Compaoré, chiefs constituted essential pillars of his regime. As community representatives, their mobilization power distinguished them as "big electors," rewarded by the central government with material and financial benefits.[56] The fall of Compaoré initiated a new phase

55 Absalon, P. 2021. (unpublished) "Facteurs d'instabilité, Profils conflictuels et Portraits sociétaux de la confiance entre civils et militaires": 32.

56 Somé, M. 2003. "Les chefferies moosé dans la vie politique du Burkina Faso depuis 1945", in Perrot, C. and Fauvelle, F. "*Le retour des rois : Les autorités traditionnelles et l'Etat en Afrique contemporaine*", Paris: Karthala, pp. 219-243. Hagberg, S. Kibora, L. Barry, S. Gnessi, S. and Konkobo, A. 2018. "'Nothing will be as before!' Anthropological perspectives on political practice and democratic culture in 'a new Burkina Faso'", Uppsala Papers in Africa Studies, no.3 :43. Hagberg, S. 2007. "Traditional chieftaincy, party politics, and political violence in Burkina Faso", in Buur, L. and Kyed, H. "State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa", New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 131-153.

of politicization as political parties attempted to court chiefs in order to win community influence.[57] Since 2015, many chiefs have ended up being supported by the political party in power, the People's Movement for Progress (MPP).[58]

In contrast to neighboring Niger, where the chieftaincy has been formally integrated into the governance system, and to Mali, where chiefs are recognized as actors of local administration, the chieftaincy in Burkina Faso is not formally regulated. Nonetheless, chiefs constitute actors of territorial administration and have increasingly taken on roles in local development infrastructures such as the Committee for Village Development.[59] Even amid an eroding regional traditional hierarchy, community chiefs usually command their own traditional order with representatives in surrounding villages who act as liaisons to the municipal chief.[60] Mainly carried out by royal Gourmantché families (see Box 2 below), this monopolization of local power positions has created frustration between the royal elite and other ethnic groups such as "Mossi, Fulani and less prominent Gourmantché."[61]

Box 2 The kingdom of Gulmu

The kingdom of Gulmu is the seat of the traditional leadership in Est. The king of Gulmu heads the royal/traditional lineage. While his leadership over traditional leaders in the region has gradually eroded, the king commands an entourage that includes different "ministers," who are traditional leaders responsible for questions such as communication, "war" (responsible for the security of the royal court and the chief), and community member relations.[62] Traditional leaders in

57 Hagberg, S. et al. 2018., *op. cit.* In some cases, the politicization of chiefs went to such extremes as they incited violence against political adversaries. See: Hagberg, S. 2007, *op. cit.* The crucial political role of regional aristocracy was further underlined during the transition phase in 2015 when the interim prime minister sought refuge with the monarch of the majority Mossi ethnic group - Mogho Naaba. BBC news, "Mogho Naba: Burkina Faso's mediator monarch", September 23, 2015.

58 Hagberg, S. et al 2018, op cit. In the province of Est's regional capital Fada N'Gourma, Gourma Province, the government party MPP did receive the largest share of votes in the November 2020 legislative elections.

59 Idrissa, R. 2019. Tinder to the Fire: Burkina Faso in the Conflict Zone. Rosa Luxembourg Studies, Research Papers on Peace and Conflict Studies in West and Central Africa.

60 Interview with community member, Respondent, Gayéri, 8 March 2021.

61 Rangé, C. et al 2020, *op. cit.*: 13.

62 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

Est are members of the majority ethnicity Gourmantché, while minority groups considered "foreign," such as the Fulani are represented by their own customary leaders *vis-à-vis* traditional leaders.[63]

The traditional chieftaincy has long been considered a crucial actor in Est's political economy. As community representatives, chiefs are widely considered to be the first interlocutors for both administration and implementing actors.[64] NGOs and humanitarian actors are effectively dependent on chiefs as a crucial interlinkage. One NGO member said:

> *Their convening power is their main asset. They are listened to a lot and therefore have a good reputation and legitimacy. So, if there are instructions to be given or messages to be sent to the population, these authorities are important partners. […] it is thanks to them that we reach our targets.*[65]

Where support of a chief is secured, even opposition by parts of the concerned population can be smoothed. As explained by an NGO representative in Fada N'Gourma:

> *When we want to carry out an activity in a village, we often have to deal with the traditional and religious authorities, because in order to get in touch with the population, we first have to get their support for the project, and I believe that it is their role and our role to support the population. Once we wanted to set up a project in a village and part of the local population did not agree, and I can say that the intervention of the local traditional chief in the matter helped to put things right.*[66]

63 Interview with community member, Respondent, Fada, 9 March 2021.

64 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020.

65 Interview with NGO member, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

66 Interview with NGO member, Respondent, Fada, 14 December 2020.

Local state officials similarly consider this mobilization power a support.[67] A leading civil servant in Fada N'Gourma explained how chiefs contribute to governance because people listen to them: "as soon as we are able to convince them of an initiative, as soon as they speak, everyone is on board."[68] Through the chiefs' representatives in villages on the periphery of municipalities, chiefs also act as liaisons to surrounding localities – further extending their reach.[69]

In the face of the displacement crisis in Est, the housing of new arrivals has similarly included coordination by the king of Gulmu. As explained by a chief:

> *[T]he king has a large number of people who are under his responsibility, they are internally displaced due to attacks in the surrounding villages, we help them in many ways financially and materially. Any foreigner who wants to settle here must notify the king before settling with his family. However, if this person does not have land to settle, the king is responsible for giving it to him.*[70]

Yet, as the section on conflict resolution later in this report highlights, the prerogative of land allocation is accompanied by an increase in communal conflict over access to and utilization of land, highlighting the limitations of this mechanism.

3.2 Limits to traditional governance

While traditional leaders are generally considered to be important community actors, interview data indicate that widespread clientelism, politicization, and the resultant internal conflicts have eroded the status of traditional leadership, undermining the very basis of their legitimacy. Given their position as interlocutors between NGOs, the state administration, and security actors, traditional leaders have been found to instrumentalize and manipulate their counterparts to their own advantage. Chiefs and religious leaders are accused of favoring their entourages and parishes in the distribution of donations and aid, while leaving out those

67 Interview with state authority, Respondent, Gayéri, 16 December 2020. Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

68 Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

69 Interview with Koglweogo member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

70 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 9 March 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 9 March 2021.

less fortunate.[71] This is reflected in the comparative data in our synthesis report, which show that traditional and religious authorities in Est are less perceived as serving their community interests than is the case in other regions of Burkina Faso and that they are also perceived as more biased when it comes to their treatment of various subgroups in society.

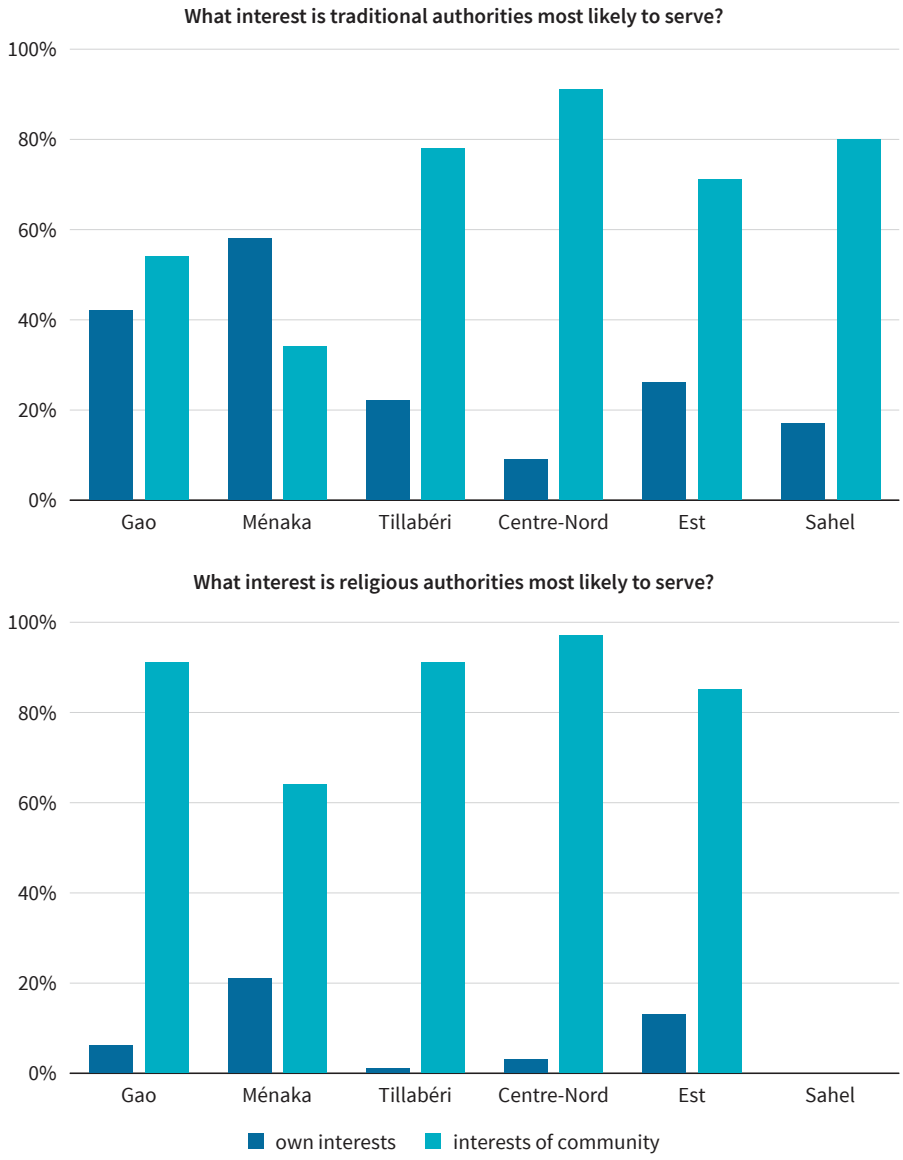
In addition, some animists consider (Christian) religious leaders' distributions to be biased against them and Muslims, believing the leaders distribute resources among their congregation while overlooking those outside of it.[72] This similarly matches the finding in our synthesis report that religious authorities in Est are more perceived as serving their own interests than is the case in other regions in Burkina Faso and that they are also more likely to favor some subgroups over others.[73]

71 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gayéri, 15 December 2020.

72 Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Bogandé, 10 December 2020: "*The main grievance often is the fact that sometimes when these religious authorities (priests, pastors) are given food to distribute it is only the people of their churches who benefit, (while) the Muslims and animists do not.*"

73 Synthesis report: Molenaar, F. 2021. Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

Figure 5 Whose interest are traditional and religious authorities most likely to serve?



Yet an even bigger obstacle to traditional leaders' contribution to community resilience follows from increased infighting among leaders and their politicization. In Est, the toppling of the Compaoré regime in 2014 gave new impetus to contestations of the hereditary hierarchy.[74] As a close ally of Compaoré, the previous leader of the Est's chieftaincy – His Majesty Kupiendiéli the 31st, king of Gulmu – was deemed guilty of clientelism and corruption by association.[75] As a result, his ability to fill traditional positions in his kingdom became increasingly contested. Following preceding cases in the early 2000s, for example, the chief's decision on the succession in the town of Diabo was questioned through the competing claim of a self-proclaimed traditional leader.[76]

As such, the popular uprising has "opened up the competition over political and economic power" – undermining the previous clientelist system not only in the political sphere, but similarly within the chieftaincy.[77] Since the king's death in 2019, the chieftaincy of Fada N'Gourma has become further divided. Two descendants of the chieftaincy family were enthroned by two rival camps in 2020, each linked to an opposing political camp.[78] Midierba Thiombiano ("Untamba") and Tiguié Mohamed Thiombiano ("Hampanli"), former first deputy mayor of Fada N'Gourma, each considers himself to be the legitimate king of Gulmu. This contestation and infighting of chieftaincies has in part been invited by chiefs' politicization, which is particularly pronounced during electoral periods and around municipal elections.

In Burkina Faso, chiefs are forbidden neither from running for office, nor from becoming members of a political party or campaigning for politicians. This has established them as big electors. To secure a chief's support is considered equal to securing the support of his community.[79] Yet, their politicization is looked

74 Thurston, A. 2019. Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso. Research Paper on Peace and Conflict Studies in West and Central Africa, Dakar: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung: 24.

75 Absalon, P. 2021, *op. cit.*:33

76 On the contestation in Diabo in the early 2000s, see: LeFaso.net. "Diabo : crise au sein de la Chefferie coutumière", September 27, 2004. Thurston A. 2019, *op. cit.* provides a short summary of the tension. As the king himself described in a 2017 interview, these contestations risk undermining social cohesion as competing factions create 'disorder or war between people in the same village'. leFaso.net. "Sa majesté Kupiendieli, 31e roi du Gulmu : "La situation de deux chefs à Diabo est un défi à ma personne", December 8, 2017.

77 Rangé, C. et al 2020, *op. cit*: 13.

78 The family is considered the founder of Nungu, referring to the former name of Fada N'Gourma.

79 Hagberg, S. 2018, *op. cit.* Author Phone Interview with Analyst Abdoul Aziz Azeibou, August 3, 2021.

down upon by most community members amid a widespread belief that the determining factor of a chief's political alliances is financial incentive rather than political conviction.[80]

As highlighted by a respondent in Fada:

> *[M]oney influences traditional authorities a lot. It is the one who offers more money that gets their attention. During election campaigns, you will find traditional authorities openly displaying their position towards this or that political party, and this of course impacts negatively on their reputation.*[81]

Campaigning can thereby turn traditional leaders of a given municipality into political adversaries:

> *When a chief goes out to fight a campaign and meets a villager from another political party, they become political opponents, so there is no more respect, and their roles are skewed.*[82]

This political competition between traditional leaders has gradually translated into succession questions across the chieftaincy itself.[83] As is the case on the regional royal court level in Fada N'Gourma, competing leadership claims have proliferated in smaller communities. While not a new development, since 2019, the situation has evolved from isolated incidents to a more widespread phenomenon that was mentioned as a popular grievance in all five municipalities investigated. The crisis has escalated to such an extent that executive mandates of the government now prohibit the enthronization of new traditional chiefs on the level of Canton and village chiefs – which are customarily nominated by the king of Gulmu.

The emerging reality is one in which communities are represented by two competing chiefs. Chieftaincy rivalries tend to emerge from the same royal lineage

80 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Bogandé, 10 December 2020: *"At the moment they are influenced by political parties through their corruption enabling them to buy their consciousness for electoral aims."*

81 Interview with NGO member, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020: *"Money can buy anything . the one that offers the most money, gets their support."*, See also: Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

82 Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 14 December 2020.

83 Interview with youth representative, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020: *"the involvement of political leaders complicates the succession question."*

within a family, or between the royal family and a contesting family. This setting has reportedly complicated cooperation with chiefs, as respondents express concerns that they will agitate one of the two chiefs by turning to the other, consequently decreasing inhabitants' willingness to involve customary elites in conflict resolution.[84] In Fada N'Gourma, the succession conflict has escalated into violent rows between supporters of opposing chiefs, leading to "harmful rivalries."[85] Amid rivalries within the chieftaincy, chiefs' linkages to local self-defense groups therefore risk spilling over to self-defense fighters.[86] Internal corrosion of the chieftaincy on both the regional and local levels has thus significantly contributed to deteriorated social cohesion. As the next section shows, this has negative consequences for chiefs' ability to strengthen communities' resilience against violent extremism.

84 Interview with civil servant, Respondent and Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020. Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 14 December 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

85 Interview with community member, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021.

86 Kinda, A. "Fada N'Gourma: Affrontements entre partisans des deux chefs traditionnels", Minute.bf, March 19, 2021.

4 Traditional and religious authorities' contributions to resilience against violent extremism

4.1 Security mechanisms: a relation of interdependence

Traditional leaders contribute as intermediaries to existing security mechanisms. As chiefs often act as "information transmission channels,"[87] their function in security provision often boils down to one of awareness-raising. This usually functions in both directions – authorities regularly call on chiefs to create awareness about security measures, but they are similarly approached by community members to adjust said measures when they meet with too much opposition.[88] In Diabo, discontent against an issued early curfew was dissolved following the intervention of the chief, which led to the curfew's adaptation to a more acceptable, later hour.[89]

In the same way, chiefs act as liaisons between the population and security and defense forces. In areas characterized by the presence of VEOs, talking to security and defense forces, including VDPs, is a highly sensitive undertaking, as perceived "collaborators" with state forces risk retaliation by extremist actors. For Fulani inhabitants, obstacles are especially high. As the primary victims of state atrocities in the name of counterterrorism, their main threat emerges from security forces themselves, whose appearances provoke widespread fear, amid repeated summary executions and widespread impunity.[90] In this context, chiefs can, in some instances, act as intermediaries transmitting messages between the fearful population and the security and defense forces. As one inhabitant of Kantchari explained:

87 Interview with police officer, Respondent, Diabo, 16 December 2020.

88 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020. Interview with a self-defense group member, Fada, 12 December 2020.

89 Interview with community member, Respondent, Diabo, 9 March 2021.

90 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 9 March 2021.

> *Religious and traditional authorities can help the community to deal with violence through collaboration with the security forces because some people do not give information to security agents for fear of being executed.*[91]

Yet, caught in the crossfire between VDPs and VEOs, marginalized communities – like the Fulani – have little to gain from providing information.

Yet chiefs' intermediary capacity is hampered by their own role in the creation of non-state armed groups supporting state-led counterterrorism. Chiefs have long been considered enablers of the local Koglweogo forces that thrive on their traditional legitimacy.[92] In Fada N'Gourma, the eastern Koglweogo chief is a descendant of the royal lineage and by marriage related to the current mayor, endowing him with both symbolic and political weight. Chiefs provide material and moral support to members of self-defense groups and regularly endow fighters with their blessings so as to expand their own legitimacy and those of the Koglweogo fighters.[93] Rituals and sacrifices serve as means to extend symbolic protection and to weaken enemy forces,[94] boosting morale among Koglweogo members. As one stated, "Thanks to these rituals we are able to arrest bandits more than ten times as strong as us."[95] While the relationship between traditional leaders and Koglweogo groups depends on local dynamics and the legitimacy and social anchorage of both chiefs and Koglweogo leaders, their support extends beyond simple moral backing. As a Koglweogo leader in Gayéri explained: "All our activities are carried out thanks to them [chiefs] – spiritually, material, economically – without them the Koglweogo would disappear."[96]

With the creation of the VDPs in 2020, chiefs have adapted to a changing security context, in which former Koglweogo fighters have in part integrated into state-sanctioned VDP structures and new volunteers have been recruited on the municipal level. While formal recruitment is typically organized under the

91 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Kantchari, 17 December 2020.

92 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020. Hagberg, S. 2018. "Performing Tradition while Doing Politics: A comparative study of the dozos and koglweogos self-defense movements in Burkina Faso", African Studies Review, no. 62.

93 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 9 March 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 9 March 2021.

94 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021.

95 Interview with a Koglweogo representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

96 Interview with Koglweogo representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

prerogative of local development committees, chiefs have contributed to the recruitment of new volunteers. An inhabitant of Gayéri explained:

> *For the recruitment of volunteers they passed by the traditional authorities who helped them with a certain number of young people who volunteered and who know the zone better.*[97]

Although this ensures community support for existing localized VDP structures, chiefs' involvement in community-based recruitment reinforces and propels stigmatization against those community members considered non-native – in turn reinforcing the propensity of the latter to find means of protection in extremist groups.

These close ties between chiefs and local security actors have also resulted in a situation in which traditional leaders reportedly manipulate their links to security actors to further their own agendas. Amid a close collaboration with communal Koglweogo groups, a chief's intervention is rarely questioned. As explained by the president of the Koglweogo in Gayéri, "if the *chef de village* [village chief] tells us to let something go, we do it immediately without even discussing it."[98] Such favoritism extends to interactions with local police stations as well. As highlighted by a police officer in Bogandé, chiefs tend to be more frequently involved in "resolving cases" of those close to them through interference in ongoing investigations, such as by asking security forces to drop the cases.[99]

4.2 Traditional conflict resolution: Reconciliation through rituals & ancestors

Conflict resolution in the five municipalities covered in Est lies in the hands of multiple actors, who range from non-state actors to state officials, judiciary institutions, and security actors. Their involvement depends on the nature and gravity of the disagreements to be resolved. Smaller issues such as marital disputes – and other issues that can be resolved based on religious principles – are often taken up in front of a religious leader such as a priest or imam. Other cases, such as the frequently reported abduction of girls and banditry, are put forward to social

97 Interview with community member, Respondent, Gayéri, 8 March 2021.
98 Interview with Koglweogo representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.
99 Interview with member of the security forces, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2020.

authorities or security actors such as police forces and Koglweogo members.[100] State officials also get involved in cases of conflict over grazing areas. The most frequently named source of conflict, which concerns access to and utilization of land, is usually transmitted to traditional leaders.[101] Both traditional leaders and security actors underlined the complementarity of their work.[102] While Koglweogo members might be called upon for smaller disputes, they then reach out to traditional chiefs. Vice versa, chiefs might reach out to Koglweogo in cases where they require enforcement power.

The focus of traditional conflict resolution is on reconciliation rather than justice provision, which is usually considered detrimental to social relations. A traditional leader aims to repair relations between the affected parties through a focus on forgiveness, whereas once a conflict is referred to the local administration or judicial authorities, the relationship of the conflicting parties is considered to be beyond repair.[103] In the process, chiefs regularly employ their mastery of rituals and ancestral spirits to pressure the conflicting parties into abandoning their adverse positions. In addition, chiefs might call on other authority figures and those closest to the conflicting protagonists to increase their influence on the protagonists, which might include not only family members but also religious leaders of their respective denomination.[104] In the most common type of communal conflict that creates opposition between different groups of land users – between farmers and between farmers and herders – the traditional method of conflict resolution often consists of one of two mechanisms: forgiveness or equal partition of the land.

100 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Bogandé, 8 March 2021. Interview with community member, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021. Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

101 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

102 According to our survey data, 26 percent of respondents reach out to security actors (including both state security forces such as the police, and non-state armed groups such as the Koglweogo); while 25 percent contact customary leaders. See also: Absalon, P. 2021, *op. cit.*:62

103 Interview with Koglweogo member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020: "*Now when these people leave the home of the mayor and the king of the village without reaching an agreement, they go to the gendarmerie or the police station, but there they will find a solution to the problem, the problem is that these protagonists will never live together again, there will always be stories of revenge*." Interview with a community member, Respondent, Bogandé, 10 December 2020.

104 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

Box 3 Examples of rituals used in conflict resolution

Chiefs will demand both parties to swear on their ancestors and be cursed in the case of breach of promise. Chiefs may also implore opposing parties to consume a drink that will detect the culprit among them. Reportedly, the threat alone is regularly sufficient to coerce parties to submit to the chief's prescribed solution. As the chief of Gayéri explained:

> *To decide disputes, it is not only me who decides, but our ancestors too. For example, if I receive two protagonists on a land issue in my royal hut, there is a wooden post implanted in the middle of this case. Each person has the obligation to swear on their ancestors to tell the truth and nothing but the truth by placing their right hand on the wood and saying these words: 'if I am not innocent in this matter may the ancestors of this village punish me.' Often this process scares some people and pushes them to abandon the case, [and] the guilty recalcitrant get punished by the ancestors.*

Indeed, the allocation and management of land utilization constitutes one of the main sources of conflict between inhabitants, with regular conflicts between those customarily considered landowners and those who are land users. Scarcity of cultivable land as well as eroding land security emerged in our KIIs as some of the main reasons for conflict, resulting in competing claims of land ownership and an increasing marginalization of land users, who continue to be considered "foreigners."[105] Climate change, population growth, and rising cultivation capacities have increased the competition for arable land between community members, between municipal administrations and their inhabitants, between community

105 Referring to those parts of society considered native to the zone and those that have settled in recent decades. Across all interviews, (semi-)nomadic Fulani inhabitants are still referred to as 'foreigners', contrasted against 'native' and largely sedentary Gourmantché and Mossi ethnicities, leading to ethnocentrism and ethnic discrimination. See, for example, interview with a community member, Respondent, Diabo, 9 March 2021: *"The main subjects of disagreement between the different groups present in our municipality, the conflicts of the plots of land in the commune between the natives and the foreigners, there are also the problems of ethnocentrism or the ethnic discrimination between the natives and the foreigners, these conflicts which are frequent in this commune."*

members and newly displaced arrivals, and between community members and their chiefs.[106]

As a result, inhabitants of the selected municipalities increasingly oppose the allocation of land for the construction of public buildings such as schools, as well as to new arrivals following the displacement crisis – leading to competing land claims.[107] As highlighted by a traditional leader in Gayéri:

> *[W]ith this difficult security situation […] when people arrive with their families, they ask for land to cultivate, and they are given it. Sometime later others come to say that this land belongs to them or their grandparents so they cannot cultivate it.*[108]

The absence of formal land registration and titles results in a lack of clarity over land ownership, in which community members are first allocated land which, amid competing claims, may later be taken away again.[109] As land allocation rests under the prerogative of the chief, these dynamics have increasingly antagonized chiefs and community members.[110]

Examples in which individual land conflicts resulted in larger mobilization abound. In the proximity of Bogandé, for example, the trespassing of a Fulani herder into the field of a farmer led to a violent confrontation in which six individuals were killed as the farmers retaliated in an act of collective punishment against all Fulani in the community.[111] Many respondents highlighted the spiraling interethnic conflict dynamics amid the stigmatization of Fulani as extremists. In Gayéri, one interviewee explained "Here in Gayéri we have Fulani herders and Gourmantchés farmers so there is inevitably conflict."[112] Stigmatization and accusations against Fulani community members are in fact widespread, including among community leaders. An imam considered Fulani inhabitants to be "much more likely to be at the origin of the current phenomenon," even while admitting that land conflicts

106 Communal land scarcity is further enhanced as arable land in the eastern region has become a profitable investment for national elite. In their function as witnesses to land sells, chiefs are accused of profiting financially from a dynamic that gradually dis-invests communities from their own land. Phone Interview with Mahamoudou Savodogo, July 30, 2021.

107 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Kantchari, 17 December 2020.

108 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 9 March 2021.

109 Interview with community member, Respondent, Gayéri, 8 March 2021.

110 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Gayéri, 19 December 2020.

111 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Bogandé, 10 December 2020.

112 Interview with a member of the security forces, Respondent, Gayéri, 16 December 2020.

also regularly emerge between Mossi and Gourmantché.[113] A traditional chief similarly contrasted peaceful Gourmantché with Fulani by stating, "[T]he ethnic group that I find difficult to deal with are the Fulani. They are violent by nature, so negotiating with them is not at all easy."[114]

While many authorities described the topic of land conflicts as revolving around well-known grievances, what has changed in the past three years is the level of violence associated with land conflicts, which now regularly exceeds the chiefs' competences. The capacity for traditional conflict resolution is limited, as chiefs lack enforcement power. In an example close to Gayéri, traditional leaders were called on to support a conflict intervention by administrative authorities in a case of land conflict between Fulani herders and non-Fulani farmers. Confronted with the farmers' resolution to "chase all the Fulani out of the village in revenge," the traditional leaders' intervention consisted of pleading for indulgence, "asking them to forgive each other and accept reconciliation."[115] When land conflicts turn violent, as is often the case, chiefs rely on state and non-state security actors to step in – further reinforcing the cycle of (violent) escalation.

This highlights how existing mechanisms of conflict resolution in Est region are ill-equipped to deal with the proliferation of land-centered conflicts. Chiefs' interventions to mediate between community members considered "native" (Gourmantché) and those considered "foreign" (Fulani but also Mossi) is necessarily limited, as the chiefs themselves are part of the indigenous inhabitants considered native to the region. Their measures, which are largely confined to reassurances and calls for peace, therefore remain hollow, in particular as the chiefs themselves may in some instances harbor many of the stigmas against Fulani that have fueled the increasingly ethnic focus of counterterrorism in Burkina Faso.

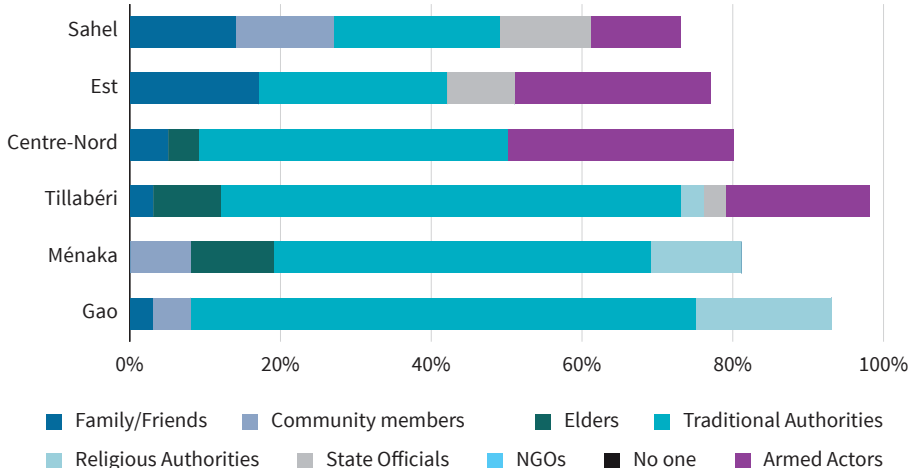
Constraints to chiefs' positions are further exacerbated by the infighting between traditional chiefs, which has decreased community members' willingness to involve traditional leaders in conflict resolution.[116] Internal corrosion of the chieftaincy on both the regional and local levels has thereby significantly contributed to deteriorated social cohesion. Chiefs are considered to be "abandoning their

113 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, anonymized location, 17 December 2020.
114 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, anonymized location, 17 December 2020.
115 Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 16 December 2020.
116 Interview with community member, Respondent, Diabo, 9 March 2021. Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Diabo, 17 December 2020. Interview with a member of the security forces, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2021.

role as guarantors of peace," "leading to hate between community members," and "dividing families."[117] Our survey data show that only 25 percent of the population is turning to traditional leaders for conflict resolution inside the village.[118] Indeed, while many interviewees continue to turn to community actors in cases of conflict, a sense of futility is widespread. As highlighted by one inhabitant:

> *[I]t has to be said that the people are not satisfied with the management of conflicts […]. We have not yet seen a single case of conflict resolved by the administrative authority. And people are not happy at all.*[119]

Figure 6 Community actor contacted for conflict resolution within the community (per region)



As a consequence, a member of the royal family in Gayéri noted: "[W]e have often seen that people increasingly refuse to forgive each other when the king settles disputes."[120] A minister at the royal court in Fada similarly stressed that, despite conflict measures taken,

117 Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 14 December 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Diabo, 16 December 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

118 In parallel, 26 percent of the respondents in the region would turn to religious authorities, a finding which is unique to the Est region.

119 Interview with youth representative, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

120 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 19 December 2020.

> *[G]iven that we are not listened to and also that we do not think that the system [the state] does not consider that others are stakeholders in the situation, we have tried approaches and proposals that have remained in vain.*[121]

When conflict participants are unhappy with a traditional decision, they might choose to direct their grievance to a better equipped authority, such as judiciary authorities or the police.[122]

In the northern parts of the region, municipal administrations have responded to the increase in land-related violence through the establishment of conflict resolution committees in each village that group all relevant actors around a table.[123] In Gayéri, these committees focus particularly on land conflicts through the establishment of "village land reconciliation committees." While these are composed of all relevant governance actors, including civil servants and elected leaders, the involvement of traditional leaders amid the current crisis has especially increased in rural areas.[124]

4.3 Preventing recruitment and improving social cohesion

The relevance of awareness-raising about the threat of violent extremism, as well as the need to improve social cohesion, were highlighted in nearly all KIIs. Efforts tend to focus on the distribution of messages of peace in sermons and other forms of address, as well as on local radio stations. In addition to public messaging, chiefs in some localities have also made efforts to extend their influence over youth. In the case of Gayéri, for example, chiefs set up an association for young people.[125] Compared to other regions in this study, respondents in Est (and Sahel) showed the most confidence in their traditional and religious authorities' effectiveness and capacity to prevent recruitment.

121 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.
122 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 19 December 2020.
123 Interview with member of the security forces, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 March 2021.
124 Interview with civil society member, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020. Interview with NGO representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 16 December 2020. Interview with youth representative, Respondent, Gayéri, 19 December 2020.
125 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 19 December 2020.

Both Christian and Muslim religious leaders repeatedly pointed out that religion is not the basis for extremist mobilization and activities.[126] They rather highlighted socioeconomic inequalities and widespread poverty as drivers of violent extremist recruitment. As a consequence, their moral signaling alone is an insufficient tool to prevent violent extremism. One religious leader said:

> *[Y]ou know the world today is a world of money. If the traditional chief summons people once or twice to talk about living together, if on the third time they come, and he gives them nothing – I don't think the fourth time someone will come again.*[127]

The statement of a traditional leader in Fada N'Gourma is representative of a widespread impression:

> *We don't have the tools to prevent members of this community from joining armed groups. We can't. It's up to the state to create the right conditions for everyone to be self-sufficient with the resources we have.*[128]

As discussed in the synthesis report, however, preventing and countering violent extremism research shows that it is not unemployment *per se* that drives radicalization and recruitment but rather a combination of factors that matters, including a sense of being recognized within – and contributing to – one's community.[129] Chiefs' contribution to social cohesion is therefore hindered in part by the fact that traditional decision-making processes are perceived to be exclusionary. As an interviewee in Fada N'Gourma highlighted:

126 Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020. Interview with traditional leader, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

127 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 17 December 2020.

128 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Fada, 12 December 2020.

129 Molenaar, F., Demuynck, M., and de Bruijne, K. 2021. Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

> *One of the main grievances of the local population toward the traditional authorities is the lack of sincere communication between these authorities and the local population. Sometimes the population does not feel involved in certain decisions made by these authorities.*[130]

As elsewhere in the Sahel, the exclusionary role of chiefs is most prominently felt by women – a fact that severely undermines general community resilience (as shown in the synthesis report). Given the subordinate role of women in a patriarchal context in which their agency remains confined to the private sphere, women are unable to directly confer with traditional leaders or even to share their experiences and perceptions. Female community members are dependent on male interlocutors to convey their message to a chief, and their access to certain parts of the chieftaincy may even be restricted.[131] The only women exempted are usually the chief's female entourage, consisting of his wife and sisters.[132] As a consequence, chiefs lack women's insights and information that is especially crucial in the context of VEO recruitment.[133]

In interviews, the exclusion of women and their lack of direct interaction with traditional leadership was been attributed less to the royal lineage itself than to the dominant gender stereotypes in eastern Burkinabé society. As explained by one male interviewee "Since time immemorial, women have been considered inferior to men, especially in our localities."[134] It is a social understanding that presents men as the authorities and women as submissive – even more so when leadership positions are at stake.[135] In this context, women are "always relegated to the second place, they are considered inferior."[136] Women are therefore also

130 Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021. See also: Interview with community member, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020*: "There is often a problem of dialogue between the local population and the traditional authorities (…). These authorities often want to impose their decision, but this does not necessarily work because the local population of today is not the same as that of yesterday."*

131 Interview with community member, Respondent, Diabo, 16 December 2020. Interview with women representative, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020. Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021.

132 Interview with local state representative, Respondent, Fada, 14 December 2020.

133 Raineri, L. 2020. Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel. London: International Alert.

134 Interview with community member, Respondent, Fada, 9 March 2021.

135 Interview with NGO representative, Respondent, Fada, 12 March 2021.

136 Interview with women representative, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

perceived as those community members most easily influenced by chiefs.[137] As a male inhabitant from Kantchari explained: "Women are submissive and this makes their influence seem easier than that over men because men have this ability to express themselves, which women don't dare."[138]

While community leaders reported several attempts to improve social cohesion, ranging from inter-religious football competitions to awareness-raising radio shows, the most noteworthy example appears to address better cooperation and coordination among the traditional leaders themselves.[139] One cohesion-promoting initiative that stands out is the creation of an association for chiefs and religious leaders in Gayéri, which our respondents consider as one of the most beneficial developments in recent times. Comprising 21 religious and traditional leaders, the association defines itself as apolitical and interfaith and is considered a major effort to improve relations between traditional and religious leaders and, consequently, social cohesion in the community.[140] This is a crucial initiative for resilience, as the analysis in this report series' synthesis report shows that security measures taken by communal leaders who coordinate with others in the face of security challenges are seen to be more effective than those taken by communal leaders who have not invested in improved coordination in the face of security challenges.

137 Interview with civil servant, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Fada, 8 March 2021.

138 Interview with community member, Respondent, Kantchari, 16 December 2020.

139 Interview with religious leader, Respondent, Gayéri, 16 December 2020. Interview with religious leader, Repondent, Kantchari, 17 December 2020. Interview with community member, Respondent, 15 December 2020. Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Bogandé, 9 December 2020.

140 Interview with religious leaders, Respondents, Gayéri, December 2020.

5 Implications for programming

In Est, the previous power base of political elites has significantly disintegrated amid the erosion of the regional chieftaincy hierarchy through internal competition and the rapid increase in insecurity. While chiefs are regularly consulted and continue to act as moral authorities, the example of the chieftaincy in Est highlights to what extent their infighting has been detrimental to their role in conflict resolution and as partners with (non-state) security forces as well as local administration.

Chiefs' intervention in community conflicts is further limited, as they form part of a social hierarchy that is centered around land ownership. As part of the royal Gulmu lineage, (mostly) Gourmantché chiefs direct great influence and authority over community members not considered to be native – in particular Fulani and also Mossi communities. Amid the dependence on local security actors, customary elites have emerged in the dominant narrative of Fulani stigmatization and marginalization – in turn undermining their capacity to act as effective referees in land-centered conflicts involving native landowners and land users. While this distinction escapes simplistic ethnic classifications, it is noteworthy that chiefs in interviews singled out Fulani community members as being more violent and lying at the root of the current security crisis. They thereby reinforce the larger narrative in Burkina Faso in which Fulani have become increasingly victimized in ongoing counterterror efforts.

This analysis highlights how chiefs are a crucial factor in any attempt to stabilize the Est region and to work toward resilience against violent extremism. As elsewhere in the Sahel, VEO success in mobilizing inhabitants against elites is based on a deeply engrained power imbalance that has for too long worked only for those considered "native." The challenge for intervening organizations consists of finding ways to support stabilization in a situation in which the endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms have eroded while external actors are widely viewed as untrustworthy.

We offer four key recommendations:

- **Prioritize micro-level political economy analysis**: The erosion of the regional chieftaincy hierarchy means that eastern Burkina Faso is characterized by highly localized dynamics, in which chiefs' legitimacy and influence is dependent on their individual contestation, positioning with local security providers such

as Koglweogo and VDPs, and linkages to state authorities. Efforts to support social cohesion and build resilience against violent extremism should therefore be built on mapping exercises of all relevant and legitimate governance actors – focusing on those in control of natural resources. Blanket support of customary leaders in the quest to reinforce resilience against violent extremism risks reinforcing existing grievances and should therefore be avoided.

- **Be mindful of the foreign/native distinction:** A key characteristic of eastern Burkina Faso is the social stratification among those considered "native" and those viewed as "foreign." Even after decades of settlement, non-natives continue to have only subordinate rights to land and natural resources – the central base of livelihood in a region largely dependent on agriculture and pastoralism. While the population in the Est region is ethnically diverse, these distinctions between "insider" and "outsider" remain the overarching regulatory framework. Intervening organizations should be mindful of this dynamic, as any external actor in Est is considered "foreign," and associating with external actors can in turn reduce the trust of key interlocutors. In this regard, supporting traditional leaders in building social cohesion should be entirely process-focused, while ensuring any external backing does not further disconnect chiefs from their community support bases. Specific examples include the replication of the Day of Intercommunal Dialog as organized by authorities in Fada N'Gourma and the establishment of a monthly consultation framework on the municipal level that focuses on bringing together chiefs, religious leaders, security and defense forces, and the administration to ensure open knowledge exchange.

- **Address politicization and infighting**: To ensure credibility in the eyes of the people in their jurisdiction, ways and means must be found to insulate chiefs from politics. Incumbents rely on chiefs' mobilization power, limiting trust and respect in traditional leaders among those who vote for the opposition. As the example of Est aptly illustrates, this politicization of chiefs has further spiraled in rivalry among the customary hierarchy itself, further undermining social cohesion. Improving chiefs' contribution to social cohesion should therefore be supported by regulating the position and responsibilities of traditional leaders – as is for example the case in neighboring Niger. Official status would provide legal regulation of their position and should include a prohibition to run for public office or join political parties, as well as specific clear criteria

for succession questions.[141] Nonetheless, regulation alone does not constitute a panacea. In fact, it may also further inter-elite competition, as institutionalized chieftaincies may create institutional spoils. Any programming should therefore focus first and foremost on existing linkages between the national political arena and local governance structures – including customary authorities.

- **Include traditional chiefs in efforts to prevent ethnic-based violence by self-defense groups**: Traditional authorities in Est are crucial interlocutors for localized self-defense groups. Any effort to counter the dominant approach to counterterrorism needs to consider their leverage over both existing Koglweogo and VDP groups. These efforts are urgent, as we are currently witnessing an increase in the stigmatization and abuse of Fulani in this region. Efforts should be made to underline the reasons why traditional leaders should push back against the human rights abuses committed by self-defense groups. The challenge lies in conveying the urgency to chiefs who so far have profited from existing self-defense groups as they enhance respect for the hierarchy.

141 Studio Yafa, "Burkina : « Les querelles de succession dans les chefferies sont normales»", May 22, 2020.