Today's solution, tomorrow's problem?

An analysis of West African practices in the use of pro-government militias

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Yet another nexus?
Introduction to the SAD-Nexus Papers

Since 2002, BICC (Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies) has provided information to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) on German arms exports, and the security as well as developmental state of (potential) recipient countries. BICC's project, titled "Security, armament and development in recipient countries of German arms exports", assumes that there are legitimate reasons for states to invest in the military and its armament to guarantee the security of its population. Nevertheless, such financial and human resource allocations are always a trade-off, as they have complex and sometimes unknown effects on a country's development. Although there are long debates on the linkages between a state's investment in armament and its positive and negative effects on development (the so-called 'guns and butter' debate) and the linkages between armament and security, there is little systematic research on the question of how armament affects both security and development. In other words, the nexus between security (S), armament (A) and development (D)—the SAD nexus—is critically understudied. The *SAD-Nexus Papers*—as a format—will address current challenges within that nexus. To do so, the Papers of the series discuss issues that cover the entire nexus as well as those focussing only on specific segments of the nexus, for instance the relationship between armament and security. Thus, several Papers of the series might form a 'series within a series', addressing the same topic from different thematic angles.

The *SAD-Nexus Papers* complement the existing formats of the **country reports** and the **Global Militarisation Index**. The former assesses the situation in potential recipient countries of German arms exports with regard to the eight criteria of the EU Common Position, and thus represent an important basis for decision-making for political decision-makers. The latter measures worldwide militarisation by considering the resources allocated to the military and its armament in relation to resources allocated to development (e. g. health and education).

The *SAD-Nexus Papers* are published once a year and are mainly based on original (field) research.

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Executive summary

In this *Paper*, I address the question of whether and under what circumstances the deployment of pro-government militias (PGMs) can reduce violence against civilians, specifically in the Sahel. My analysis—based on a literature review and case studies on Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria—suggests that rather than representing a solution, PGMs tend to become part of the problem. In most cases, PGMs actively carry out acts of violence against civilians or passively contribute to an increase in violence.

According to my analysis, PGMs most tend to contribute to violence against civilians when:
\   they are aligned with a government that shows little respect for human rights and makes little effort to curb violence against civilians by its own security forces;
\   they take on offensive roles and cooperate with state security forces;
\   they are a group of ethnically homogenous members that are armed by the state.

Only when PGMs are socially embedded in the communities they aim to protect and are at least normatively controlled by local authorities, as well as defensively oriented and predominantly unarmed, do they—for example in Cameroon—contribute to a decrease in violence against civilians.

The findings presented in this Paper have implications for German development policy. As outlined, PGMs can—under very specific circumstances—help to strengthen the resilience of the local population in armed conflicts. However, in view of the negative effects of most PGMs, transitional development assistance programmes must be tailored according to the risk arising from the presence of PGMs. Furthermore, since many of these groups prevail past the end of the armed conflict in question, they need to be considered in post-conflict reconstruction processes, especially in demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes and security sector reforms (SSR) to allow sustainable peace and development.

Finally, the findings also have implications for German and European policy on arms transfers. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are key partners of Germany's Enable and Enhance Initiative (*Ertüchtigungsinitiative*) and may also receive military arms and equipment via the European Peace Facility (EPF). At the same time, three of these governments not only cooperate with PGMs, but have also (allegedly) provided them with weapons. While German arms shipments to countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are unlikely to take place under the first initiative, they cannot be ruled out under the EPF. This underscores the need for strict arms export restrictions or post-shipment controls at the European level.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Papier diskutiere ich die Frage, ob und unter welchen Umständen der Einsatz von Pro-Regierungs-Milizen (*pro-government militias*; PGMs) Gewalt gegen Zivilist:innen, insbesondere in der Sahelregion, reduzieren kann. Meine Analyse – basierend auf einer Literaturrecherche und Fallstudien zu Burkina Faso, Kamerun, Mali, Niger und Nigeria – legt nahe, dass PGMs eher Teil des Problems werden, als dass sie eine Lösung darstellen. In den meisten Fällen verüben PGMs aktiv Gewalt gegen Zivilist:innen oder tragen passiv zu einer Zunahme der Gewalt bei.

PGMs tragen, meiner Analyse zufolge, am ehesten zu Gewalt gegen Zivilist:innen bei, wenn
\   sie mit einer Regierung verbunden sind, die Menschenrechte wenig achtet und kaum Anstrengungen unternimmt, Gewalt gegen Zivilist:innen durch die eigenen Sicherheitskräfte einzudämmen;
\   sie offensive Rollen übernehmen und mit staatlichen Sicherheitskräften kooperieren;
\   es sich um ethnisch homogene Gruppen handelt, die vom Staat bewaffnet werden.

Nur wenn PGMs sozial in die Gemeinschaften, die sie schützen sollen, eingebettet sind und zumindest normativ von lokalen Behörden kontrolliert werden sowie defensiv ausgerichtet und überwiegend unbewaffnet sind, tragen sie – wie beispielsweise in Kamerun – zu einem Rückgang der Gewalt gegen Zivilist:innen bei.

Die in diesem Papier vorgestellten Ergebnisse haben Implikationen für die deutsche Entwicklungspolitik. Wie dargestellt, können PGMs – unter bestimmten Umständen – dazu beitragen, die Resilienz der lokalen Bevölkerung in bewaffneten Konflikten zu stärken. In Anbetracht der negativen Auswirkungen der meisten PGMs müssen Programme der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, insbesondere in (Post-) Konfliktsituationen, jedoch auf das Risiko zugeschnitten werden, das durch die Präsenz von PGMs entsteht. Da viele dieser Gruppen über das Ende eines bewaffneten Konflikts hinaus bestehen, müssen sie auch in Wiederaufbauprozessen – insbesondere bei Programmen zur Demobilisierung, Entwaffnung und Wiedereingliederung (DDR) und bei Reformen des Sicherheitssektors (SSR) – berücksichtigt werden, um nachhaltigen Frieden und Entwicklung zu ermöglichen.

Schließlich haben die Ergebnisse auch Auswirkungen auf die deutsche und europäische Rüstungsexportpolitik. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger und Nigeria sind wichtige Partner der deutschen Ertüchtigungsinitiative und können auch über die Europäische Friedensfazilität (EPF) militärische Waffen und Ausrüstung erhalten. Gleichzeitig arbeiten drei dieser Regierungen nicht nur mit PGMs zusammen, sondern haben ihnen (vermutlich) auch Waffen geliefert. Während deutsche Waffenlieferungen an Länder wie Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger und Nigeria im Rahmen der ersten Initiative unwahrscheinlich sind, kann man sie im Rahmen der EPF nicht ausschließen. Dies unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit strenger Waffenexportbeschränkungen oder Post-Shipment Kontrollen auf europäischer Ebene.

Introduction

Since 2009, the Sahel region has become a hotspot for the activities of radical Islamist movements such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province and the like. Initially, the activities of these movements were concentrated in Nigeria and Mali, but soon began spilling over to other countries including Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The international community, with France, Germany and the European Union at the forefront, undertook great efforts to support these states with bi- and multilateral missions. Additionally, regional initiatives such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force were put in place to curb the spread of transborder incursions and violence against civilians. Consequently, governments in the Sahel region received considerable support in the form of military equipment and training for their security forces. Governments and people in the Sahel region did not only turn towards international and regional actors for assistance, however. Many of them also armed so-called pro-government militias (PGMs) and civilian defence forces (CDFs). From 2009 onwards, such groups proliferated in nearly every country in the region, providing local security and supporting understaffed state forces in their fight against the insurgents.

However, the existence of PGMs and CDFs and the support they receive from their respective governments represent a dilemma for donors. On the one hand, PGMs might be a short-term solution to the pressing problem of providing local security. On the other, such a government-subsidised, or at least accepted, proliferation of armed groups might itself become a long-term problem for security and development. Firstly, such groups tend to develop their own agendas and can become spoilers of peace.[1] Secondly, national or regional government support for such

groups may constitute an illicit transfer of arms and materiel that can fuel violence in the region.

The latter point is of particular importance for (German) policy on arms transfers to these states. Germany has recently provided military equipment to governments in the Sahel region, albeit not without some reluctance due to recipient countries' poor performance with regard to the criteria of the EU Common Position on Arms Exports. In 2020, Nigeria received German military equipment worth €3.8 million, Burkina Faso received goods valued at €350,000, while in 2019, Cameroon received German equipment worth €377,000. Finally, Mali, one of the five focus countries of Germany's Enable and Enhance Initiative (*Ertüchtigungsinitiative*), received military hardware from Germany worth €28 million between 2013 and 2020. Much like the European Peace Facility (EPF), the German initiative presents a funding mechanism envisioned to enable regional actors to bolster security and stability in their own neighbourhoods by providing both military training and military equipment (including weapons of war). On 1 December 2021, the European Commission established assistance measures under the EPF to strengthen the capacities of the Malian armed forces, approving €24 million of assistance. Given these numbers, it is highly important to know more about PGM activities, their ties to governments, and their effect on the security situation in the region. Investigating these ties allows us to better assess the chances of an illicit transfer of weapons and equipment and the long-term perspectives for security and development in the region.

A better understanding of the impact of PGMs on security and development is not only relevant with regard to the (German) policy on arms transfers, however. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has set itself the principle that all projects in conflict-affected countries have the prevention of crises and the development of peace as their overarching goal (BMZ 2022). In the Sahel, a key region for German development cooperation, this principle is highly relevant given the tense security situation. Here, many bilateral partners

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1 \   This report is based on the concept of negative peace, which understands peace as the absence of physical violence. Similarly, when using the term (local) security in this Paper, I refer to a rather narrow concept of human security. The concept of human security is based on the idea that the individual is the proper referent for security and that security has to be understood in a holistic way. In that reading, not only violence executed by state and non-state actors can constitute a threat to security, but also factors like inadequate healthcare or climate change. I support the focus on the individual but narrow the concept down to physical security.

such as the governments of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Nigeria also cooperate with PGMs—which, as described above, can increase the level of violence and become spoilers of peace. Assessing the relationship between a PGM and a government, therefore, not only allows us to better understand the role of PGMs for local security, but also the likelihood of a flow of (German) resources and funds to groups that pose a threat to peace and development. However, as these groups often enjoy local support and may—under specific circumstances—also contribute to local security, their involvement as local actors in the post-conflict reconstruction and development process could also be a viable option. Therefore, assessing the risk associated with these groups is crucial.

These findings also contribute to a broader and more detailed understanding of non-state armed groups within German development policy. Regarding current challenges for conflict resolution, the federal government's guidelines identify non-state armed groups as a high risk (Bundesregierung 2017). However, the guidelines only refer to organised crime or terrorist organisations, leaving a gap with regard to pro-government armed groups, and thus potentially overlooking a decisive factor for conflict resolution. Since PGMs are involved in many conflicts, have a significant effect on their dynamics and may become spoilers of peace, it is crucial for German development cooperation to be sensitive to the ties and impacts of PGMs. In particular, those instruments of German development cooperation that are deployed in (post-) conflict settings, such as the Civil Peace Service (CPS) or transition assistance (*Übergangshilfe*), rely on knowledge about violent actors to be able to work—in accordance with their mission—locally and close to the target group. Assessing the impact of PGMs on security therefore also offers an opportunity to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of development cooperation approaches.

This first of the new SAD-Nexus Papers summarises past research on the effects of PGMs on security and compiles information on current practices of cooperation between governments and PGMs in five

selected countries in the Sahel region to provide a nuanced basis for decision-making with respect to the outlined dilemma.

The report is composed of two major parts. Part one consists of an intensive literature review which answers the question *'What do we know about the effects of PGMs?'* Based on the literature screened in that process, it also identifies several risk factors and develops an analytical framework for part two. The second part presents an analysis of current West African practices in the use of PGMs and, based on the findings of part one, answers the question of *'Will today's solution be tomorrow's problem in the region?'*

PART I:
What do we know about the effects of pro-government militias?

The first part of this study summarises what we know about the effects of PGMs from existing empirical research. To do so, it first defines the theoretical concept of PGMs and distinguishes it from related concepts such as paramilitary groups and civil defence groups. In a second step, empirical findings regarding the impact of PGMs on security and the likelihood of a renewed escalation of violence are summarised, while risk factors are identified in a third section.

What is a pro-government militia?

Non-state armed groups other than insurgents remains an understudied topic. This limited focus is epitomised by the term militia, which has become a catch-all for a wide array of different actors (Jentzsch et al. 2015; Leenders and Giustozzi 2019). Militias can range from neighbourhood vigilante groups to militarily trained pro-government forces, which makes it necessary to delineate specific categories. In this Paper, the focus lies on militias that have a reciprocal relationship with government—even if this connection is neither linear nor constant over time. Pivotal for the definition as pro-government militia (PGM) is the group's allegiance to the government and their (at least temporary) goal to preserve the (political) status quo by applying status-quo-oriented violence (Schneckener 2015; Ferguson 2015). This political allegiance, which can further be strengthened by additional ties such as a common religion, ethnicity, or regional origin, distinguishes them from other non-state armed actors aiming to, for instance, overthrow the government, gain regional autonomy, or change the social status quo. The allegiance of these groups is typically reciprocated by the government through some form of support. In short, militias can be regarded as PGMs if they are pro-government, receive support from the (local or national) government, are armed, have at least some level of organisa-

tion, and are not part of the regular security forces (Carey et al. 2013).

The relationship between a PGM and the government can vary to a wide degree. Researchers have thus differentiated further between "informal" and "semi-official" PGMs (Carey et al. 2013: 251). Informal PGMs do not possess any official link to the government (Carey and Mitchell 2017) which allows the government to deny such a connection even if the link is widely known within the country. Conversely, semi-official PGMs have some legal or formalised status (Carey et al. 2013) that links them to the government. However, even if established or recognised by decree and with members receiving some form of regular compensation, semi-official PGMs still differ from official formations such as paramilitary units. Paramilitary units can be understood as regular (auxiliary) forces under the direct control of the government that support or supplement the regular armed forces (e. g. Üngör 2020). In contrast, governments cannot exercise such tight control even over semi-official PGMs, not to speak of informal PGMs (Carey and Mitchell 2017). Additionally, paramilitary units typically receive (more) training and equipment which, in combination with the tighter control exercised by the government concerned, is assumed to translate into higher accountability when compared to a PGM (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018).

As outlined by Jentzsch et al. (2015), many armed militias start out as organisations established for the protection of local communities and thus generally have a more defensive and localised character than PGMs (Clayton and Thomson 2014; Carey and Mitchell 2017). In the literature, these groups are mostly termed 'civilian defence forces' (CDFs). CDFs' activities, therefore, may or may not coincide with the government's objectives and thus can be both pro- or anti-government. However, both concepts, that of

PGMs and CDFs, have a common intersection (Peic 2014; Clayton and Thomson 2014; 2016). In cases where CDFs are co-opted and share common goals with the government, they become de facto PGMs—at least temporarily.

In other cases, groups labelled as civil defence forces or militias might emerge as the result of an initiative by the (local) government, making them a PGM by definition, as long as they uphold their alliance with the government. Against the murky empirical realities on the ground, marked by a certain fluidity of state-militia alignments (Jentzsch et al. 2015) which translates into frequent alliance-switching and changing loyalties, the definition of Carey et al. was therefore criticised for being dichotomous and overly static (Barter 2013; Jentzsch et al. 2015; Staniland 2015; Otto 2018). This line of reasoning is further supported by the empirical observation that roughly 25% of all armed groups between 1989 and 2007 switched sides at least once during the conflict in question (Otto 2018).

It is an often-voiced concern that militias, since they by definition operate outside of the regular command structure of official defence and police forces, might be difficult for governments to control; a fact that might lead to violence against civilians (Carey et al. 2014). In the literature, this is referred to as the so-called 'principal–agent' problem, characterised by a divergence of interests between a principal—in this case the government—and an agent authorised to act on his behalf, in this case the PGM. Since oversight and control is limited, the principal can never be sure if the agent is acting in his best interest or if he is maximising his own interests. This general problem can be exacerbated by several factors. Informal relations, for example, can further reduce the ability to control the agent. In other words, the greater the autonomy granted to PGMs, the greater the risk that they "engage in behavior that is unfavorable to the government" (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018: 205). A group's autonomy, independent coercive power, and consequentially its future bargaining leverage vis-à-vis the government can further be increased by financial and material resources provided by the government (Bolte 2021: 252). The more resources a PGM controls, the less control a government can exercise over the PGM. In particular,

weapons provide such groups with not only coercive agency but also an effective veto power. Similarly, weak state capacities can generally reduce the ability to exert control as the government lacks the means to exercise its will.

Takeaway points

\ PGMs are armed groups with a minimum level of organisation that can be regarded as being pro-government, not an integral part of the regular security forces (Carey et al. 2013) and recipients of government support.
\ The support provided by the government or its local authorities can vary to wide degree and can consist of payment, material support, protection from criminal prosecution or official sanction or commendation.
\ PGMs can be formally or informally organised by the government or can be self-organised and co-opted.
\ The degree of government control of such organisations is crucial.

Effects of pro-government militias: A systematic review of existing research

In the following, I review, based on existing empirical research, how arming civilians and forming pro-government militias may affect local security. This Paper therefore focusses on the armament-security axis of the SAD nexus and pays less attention to the effects of PGMs on development. This lacuna will be addressed by the next SAD-Nexus Paper.

As highlighted above, I follow a rather narrow concept of human security, which assumes that the individual is the proper referent for security, but is limited to the aspect of physical security and thus neglects challenges like healthcare, climate change, and so on. In this reading, human security becomes essential for (negative) peace, while violence against civilians is its antithesis.

In this section, I take a closer look at the proximate effects of PGMs on security by asking whether

and under what circumstances they contribute to or reduce violence against civilians. After that I attempt to assess their long-term effects on security by addressing the question of how they influence the chances of renewed violence.

How do PGMs affect security?

In asymmetric armed conflicts—such as those currently fought between governments and Islamic insurgents in the Sahel region—civilians play an important role for all warring parties. They provide crucial resources like information, money and food or give legitimacy to any order implemented by either governments or insurgents. The interplay of the perpetration of violence on the one hand and the protection from violence on the other lies at the heart of governments' and insurgents' strategies to win the support of the local population. Both often resort to violence against civilians to ensure compliance and to punish 'wrong' behaviour, for instance if civilians cooperate with the opponent.[2] At the same time, protection from violence adds legitimacy to the group that offers protection, which in turn increases the chances of voluntary cooperation.

The introduction of PGMs has the potential to influence this situation in two directions: On the one hand, they can help to better protect the local population from attacks by insurgents and/or government troops. On the other, they can also be willing helpers for government forces in subduing the opposition and its supporters in the population. My literature review revealed several factors that are decisive in whether PGMs reduce or contribute to violence against civilians:

\ *Government intentions and the ability to control*

The most important factor is the reason for a government's decision to cooperate with a PGM in the first place. The possibility of denying responsibility

for violent actions is seen as one major incentive for governments to cooperate with PGMs (Carey et al. 2015; Aliyev 2016). Another is to boost the ranks of their fighting forces. If a government decides to follow a strategy of applying indiscriminate violence against civilians, PGMs might enable it to do so by acting as force multipliers (in case of low-capacity states) and/or by reducing the political costs of this strategy (Koren 2015; Ambrozik 2019). In these cases, PGMs are likely to commit torture and enforce disappearances (Mitchell et al. 2014), amongst other forms of violence against civilians (Alvarez 2006). This is especially true when both the government and its PGMs belong to the same ethnic group, as a shared identity and common (political) goal in these cases increases not only the PGM's commitment but also their willingness to engage in excessive violence (Schon and Magid 2020). Furthermore, the loss of government control over its militia may promote the PGM's offensive activities, which, in turn results in increasing violence against civilians (Schneckener 2014; 2015). However, most empirical studies reject the assumption that it is the lack of government capacity to control, and if necessary, sanction PGMs that leads to violence. Rather, Koren (2015) claims that PGMs are unlikely to perpetrate mass killings against the will of the government. Similarly, Stanton (2015) argues that in many cases where the government did not target civilians, PGMs did not do so either. Further-more, according to Stanton (2015), there is a large number of cases in which the government exercised a high level of violence against civilians, while PGMs did not engage in any such violence against civilians. Cases in which violence against civilians was solely committed by PGMs are quite rare. Where PGMs committed atrocities, government forces tended to do so as well. Particularly in Africa, the most lethal instances of violence against civilians are still carried out by official defence forces, suggesting that states do not delegate the dirty work to PGMs (Raleigh and Kishi 2018: 5). This also holds true for sexual violence. In this respect, government forces are by no means better than militias (Cohen and Nordås 2015). Hence, the state's (dis)respect for human rights seems to be a key factor in determining PGMs' level of violence. Consequently, it is less the degree of control than the intention of a government that determines the violence used against civilians—both by state forces and PGMs. Beyond this, however, the violence of

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2 \ This punitive violence can target individuals (selective violence) or groups (indiscriminate violence). Selective violence is frequently used when the actor has enough information on potential collaborators; indiscriminate violence occurs when such information does not exist (Kalyvas 2006; Brandsch 2020).

PGMs is also linked to the regime type and state capacity, since the likelihood of PGMs being involved in violent action against civilians in high-capacity autocratic states is low compared to low-capacity states (Ahram 2014; Carey et al. 2015; Ahram 2016). The reason for this is that low-capacity states might rely on the capacity of PGMs for coercion, while high-capacity states do not, since their existing security forces are capable enough.

\ *Ethnicity and local knowledge*

PGMs can be an important part of a counterinsurgency campaign (Jentzsch et al. 2015). Governments typically either recruit PGMs from the localities and ethnic groups where the armed conflict is fought or from their own ethnic background. Both strategies provide some advantages but reflect differing rationales. When PGMs are recruited locally, they typically speak the language of, and are socially embedded in, the local community. This usually enables them to gather more information on a local level. This knowledge is crucial in defeating an insurgency and will also change the type of violence being used (Lyall 2010; Aliyev and Souleimanov 2019; Aliyev 2017). For instance, the research of Clayton and Thomson (2014; 2016) shows how the involvement of CDFs in counterinsurgency affects the level of violence civilians are exposed to; by using CDFs and harnessing their local knowledge, insurgents and opponents can better be identified. Thus, the government's violence can be better targeted, indiscriminate use of force is reduced and thereby, the number of civilian victims of government attacks decreases. Further, due to their embeddedness in the local community, PGMs tend to be less violent towards the civilian population as compared to forces employed from other regions or communities (Jones 2012; Aliyev and Souleimanov 2019). This is especially true for PGMs that recruit from the same ethnic or religious constituency as the insurgents (Stanton 2015). Often, this helps to enhance the relationship with the local population and bolsters the legitimacy of the orders implemented by the state (Abbs et al. 2019; Schon and Magid 2020). Consequently, the government can gain an important advantage in the conflict, which can reduce the number of civilian casualties and shorten the overall conflict duration. This, however, only holds true if the government in question refrains from any indiscrim-

inate violence against the population—or parts of it—and holds its militia forces in close check in that regard (Jones 2012).

However, governments can also recruit PGMs from groups with closer socio-political ties to themselves. In these cases, the strategic rationale is to gain higher levels of loyalty and increase control. Theoretically speaking, this may reduce the principal–agent problem and increase government control over the PGM (Abbs et al. 2019; Aliyev and Souleimanov 2019; Arif 2021). This may come at the cost of increased violence against civilians, as these recruits often lack the local information that is needed to identify insurgents and separate them from the civilian population. Furthermore, they may be more willing to exert violence due to their lack of ties to the local population. In these cases, the result is an increased ethnic mobilisation and a proliferation of ethnic self-defence groups. As the case of Syria shows, PGMs made up of government co-ethnics can keep a non-inclusive government in power (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019). This usually comes at the cost of increasing interethnic polarisation and a high civilian death toll, however (Abbs et al. 2019; Jones 2012). In consequence, this means that the ethnic composition of the PGM potentially has a high influence on its effects by either decreasing the level of violence due to local embeddedness or increasing it by a lack of local ties.

\ *Proliferation of armed actors and conflict escalation*

Lastly, arming civilians generally entails a proliferation of small arms and armed actors which may increase violence through the dynamics of conflict. Generally, such a proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) plays a key role in increasing the lethality and longevity of armed conflicts and has a huge effect on violence against civilians, including gender-based violence (e. g. Ilesanmi 2021). Furthermore, considering the deployment of PGMs in the Ukraine conflict, Bukkvoll (2019) argues that the degree of autonomy of such groups rises with their relative level of military strength, which means that arming PGMs also means losing control over their actions. The proliferation of armed actors typically also influences conflict duration. PGMs very often develop their own agenda and accumulate resources

to pursue it throughout the conflict. Like other armed actors, PGMs often become involved in criminal activity or in extracting resources from the local population. In doing so, they become part of what is called a civil war economy (e.g. Jean and Rufin 1996). If such interests develop, PGMs may have economic advantages and a stronger socio-political position through their involvement in conflicts, and therefore tend to have little incentive to transition towards peace. This fuels an alienation process between government and PGMs that can result in a (direct) confrontation between the parties (Schneckener 2015; Wither 2020). Consequently, the presence of PGMs reduces the likelihood of peace or swift victory of either side, instead increasing the likelihood of the continuation of low-intensity conflicts (Aliyev 2018; 2019).

Through the involvement of local PGMs, the line between combatants and non-combatants becomes more blurred, and the overall willingness to use violence increases. The insurgent side in particular may become more violent in the face of the emergence of local PGMs; usually, insurgents profit from blending into local communities and thus being undetectable to government forces. If such advantages are being denied, insurgents resort to a more aggressive strategy towards the civilian population. The recruitment of a local PGM itself might be understood as a hostile action by the insurgents. In contested areas, this cooperation deprives the insurgents of a valuable source of recruitment and weakens them. Therefore, they increasingly resort to more indiscriminate violence against those groups suspected to be in support of their enemy (Akins 2020), a method usually applied by counterinsurgents. Thus, PGM recruitment is likely to provoke attacks against such groups and affiliated communities and, thereby, increases civilian casualties. Furthermore, the division of the local population into supporters of the incumbent and supporters of the insurgents fuels social division (Clayton and Thomson 2014; 2016; Brandsch and Python 2020).

How do PGMs affect the likelihood of renewed violence?
Peace and security in post-civil war societies are fragile. In many cases, most of the belligerent parties do not disappear, but rather continue to conduct their conflict under different guises, potentially ready to take up arms again, if necessary. While rebel groups may be defeated militarily, integrated into the military, or turn into political parties taking a share of or full power, the fate of PGMs post-conflict is less predetermined and less studied. While they may also be defeated militarily, they usually do not have a clear option of becoming political players in the aftermath of conflict. Their high diversity in both appearance and numbers, as well as shifting alliances, make them a factor that is hard to predict while at the same time being likely to undermine stability and peace (Alden et al. 2011).

In general, few PGMs dissolve at the end of the conflict. The majority of such groups either cease to exist during the conflict or survive the end of the war (Aliyev 2019). Similarly, concerning the incentives that PGMs face during conflict, they tend not to profit from peace. Those participating in PGMs for economic reasons (Eastin and Zech 2019) and profiting from strong social ties and reputation within the group (Steinert et al. 2019) in particular have little incentive to (re-)turn to peace. This disincentive is further increased by the fact that PGMs are frequently not recognised as a warring party and therefore neither take part in peace negotiations, nor are they included in DDR measures. On the contrary, since their support for the government is crucial during the conflict and their (personal) interests overlap during this period, they run a strong risk of losing this privileged position at the end of hostilities. In fact, conflict recurrence rises by 30% if PGMs have been involved (Steinert et al. 2019).

On the other hand, a government may have strong incentives to keep PGMs in place as a safeguard or an enforcement mechanism for a potential peace agreement. Potentially, the government may even try to use PGMs to renegotiate at some point (Aliyev 2019). In the absence of well-established institutions and facing a lack of resources, post-civil war governments often struggle to maintain control and therefore make use of (excessive) violence to ensure their own position. In this case, members of wartime PGMs that have been involved in human rights violations are suitable agents to perpetrate violence and implement repression in the post-war period in order to maintain a government's

control (Carey and González 2021). As a result, we see an increase in political imprisonment and torture in post-war periods where PGMs survived the end of war.

However, in some cases, the involvement of PGMs may reduce the likelihood of renewed conflict escalation and violence. Provided that PGMs have not been involved in massive violence against civilians and therefore have some legitimacy within their communities, their involvement in peace negotiations and peace agreements provides any settlement with deeper legitimacy and broader support. Thus, PGMs can play supporting roles in state-building (Podder 2013; Boisvert 2015). In order to support peace, participation in negotiations and provision of economic security, i.e., by integration into state forces, are crucial to many members of PGMs (Balta et al. 2020).

Takeaway points

\ PGMs must be demobilised, disarmed or integrated into official security forces after the end of violence.
\ Groups with close ties to the government and limited own resources can turn into organs of repression. More independent groups with their own resources can switch sides and become spoilers of peace.

Conclusion:
PGMs: A double-edged sword

In conclusion, cooperation with PGMs is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, PGMs can contribute to the security of civilians by decreasing civilian casualties, increasing the chances for government victory, and shortening the duration of armed conflict. On the other, PGMs can contribute to conflict escalation and can become perpetrators of human rights violations and spoilers of peace. From the literature review, I identified six risk factors—highlighted in bold below—that increase the probability of PGMs negatively affecting human security.

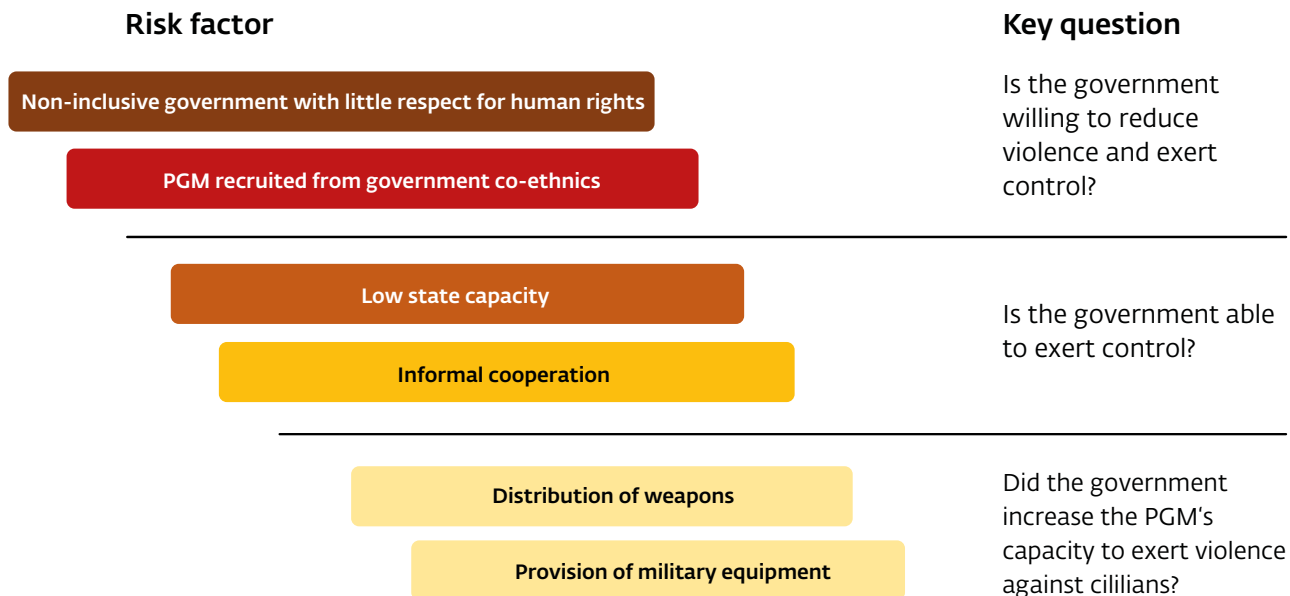Firstly, PGMs rarely commit violence against civilians independently of government forces. **Non-inclusive governments with little respect for**

human rights—such as those that liberalise only due to external pressure or are supported only by one ethnic minority—are the most important risk factor. If PGMs are **recruited from the same ethnic group as the government in power**, they tend to be more loyal but also contribute to perpetuating or even deepening polarisation along ethnic lines, which increases the risk of interethnic violence. A more structural risk factor is state capacity; **low capacities** are thus associated with higher risk, as PGMs could enable these states to exercise repression against their own populations that they would not be able to carry out on their own. **Informal cooperation and low control** increase this risk as it allows states to deny their accountability for atrocities, making abusive behaviour towards civilians more likely. Moreover, informal cooperation and low control also increase the likelihood of PGMs becoming autonomous actors with their own agenda and, thus, spoilers of peace. **Distributing weapons** to PGMs is not only a violation of end-use declarations, but also poses a glaring risk that these weapons will be further proliferated or will be used for criminal activities. The **provision of military equipment** can increase the autonomy of PGMs and thus decrease the ability to exercise government control. However, such equipment does not necessarily constitute a direct threat to civilians, but may enable PGMs to operate more safely or to improve coordination with the formal security forces. Mobile phones and radio equipment, for example, could enable local groups to call in regular security forces. Equipment like binoculars and flashlights may further increase their ability to identify threats from greater distances without running the risk of being attacked.

The literature, however, gives us little information on how these factors interact. I do not consider any of these factors to be a sufficient condition to explain the outcome. In other words, no single factor predetermines whether a PGM may commit violence against civilians. Rather, I assume that most of these factors are necessary conditions, and that some of them are more important than others.

The six risk factors can be clustered around three key questions: First, is the government willing to reduce violence against civilians? Second, is the government able to control its agent effectively? Third,

Figure 1: Risk factors

Risk factor	Key question
Non-inclusive government with little respect for human rights	Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?
PGM recruited from government co-ethnics	
Low state capacity	Is the government able to exert control?
Informal cooperation	
Distribution of weapons	Did the government increase the PGM's capacity to exert violence against cililians?
Provision of military equipment	

did the government increase the PGM's capacity to exert violence against civilians by providing weapons and military material? While the first two questions are central to the issue of violence against civilians, the latter represents more of an amplifying factor. Figure 1 below displays the risk factors and the respective key questions in a hierarchical order.

The literature review also revealed some relevant (time-dependent) processes that generally speak against the deployment of PGMs. Once established, such organisations tend to acquire their own resources and develop their own agendas. PGMs should therefore never be established and supported without a long-term plan to integrate these forces into national security forces or to demobilise them. The proliferation of armed groups typically contributes to escalation dynamics and more protracted conflict, making peacebuilding a more difficult task.

PART II:
Today's solution, tomorrow's problem?
An analysis of current West African practices in the use of PGMs

In this second part of the Paper, I turn my attention to the Sahel, which is currently marked by Islamist incursions and the emergence of PGMs. As the map below shows, many countries saw an increase in civilian casualties in 2021. The question is whether PGMs are a part of the problem or a potential solution to it.

Map I: Violence against civilians in the Sahel

1. Mali
Total civilian casualties:	2146
Civilian casualties in 2021:	456
Number of active Islamist groups:	9
Active pro-government militias:	yes

2. Burkina Faso
Total civilian casualties:	2810
Civilian casualties in 2021:	717
Number of active Islamist groups:	5
Active pro-government militias:	yes

3. Niger
Total civilian casualties:	1316
Civilian casualties in 2021:	715
Number of active Islamist groups:	6
Active pro-government militias:	yes

4. Nigeria
Total civilian casualties:	8245
Civilian casualties in 2021:	3534
Number of active Islamist groups:	2
Active pro-government militias:	yes

5. Cameroon
Total civilian casualties:	1678
Civilian casualties in 2021:	435
Number of active Islamist groups:	2
Active pro-government militias:	yes

Timeframe: March 2019 - March 2022
Source: Natural Earth 2020, ACLED 2021, BICC 2022;
Layout: Vincent Glasow, BICC, March 2022
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsment or acceptance by BICC.

In the following section, I will take a deeper look at five countries in the Sahel in which militant Islamist groups pose an ongoing security threat and have led to the (re-)emergence of PGMs: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. I will assess whether PGMs contributed to or reduced violence against civilians and, in a second step, which of the six risk factors affected the outcome. To analyse the willingness of the respective governments to reduce violence, I will therefore assess whether the *"Non-inclusive government with little respect for human rights"* and *"PGM recruited from government co-ethnics"* risk factors were both present and had an effect on the outcome of PGMs contributing to security. Furthermore, to analyse the government's capacity to control PGMs if necessary, i.e. to make sure that they operate lawfully, do not exceed their 'mandate' or even to dissolve them once their mission has been delivered, I will analyse whether the *"Low state capacity"* and *"Informal cooperation"* factors were present and can explain the effect of PGMs on local security. Finally, I will assess whether the government increased the PGMs' ability to exert violence.

Mali

Since a military coup and the start of an insurrection in the north of the country in 2012, Mali has been ranked among the most fragile states in the world by the Fund for Peace's State Fragility Index (FFP 2021). Two successive military coups in 2020 and 2021 further exacerbated the security situation. Even though northern Mali has long been the most conflict-ridden region of the country, violence has spread to other parts. Central Mali became heavily affected by violent conflict when various militant Islamist groups began to exploit deeply rooted local conflict lines (Thurston 2020; Eizenga and Williams 2020). Long neglected by the government, the region is now labelled the most dangerous region in the country (Le Roux 2019).

The current (re)emergence of local CDFs is closely linked to the threat of militant Islamist groups, but is also rooted in Malian history. Local self-defence groups are entrenched in a coexistence of state and traditional governance structures (Aurélien and Sangaré 2019). After several deadly attacks by Islamist groups against Dogon communities—and the absence of state protec-

tion—these communities founded the Dan Na Ambassagou[3] in 2016. Mainly recruiting among traditional hunter groups like the Dozo, the Dan Na Ambassagou serves as an umbrella body for existing CDFs and hunter groups. Although they are mainly organised on a rather local level, the Dan Na Ambassagou have thereby established an overarching organisation consisting of a political and a militarily branch—with the latter being more powerful (Aurélien and Sangaré 2019; Crisis Group 2020b). Furthermore, in the face of ongoing violence, other communities, such as the Fulani, have also formed self-defence groups for their protection (HRW 2018). In the fight against Islamist groups, the Malian government and the Dan Na Ambassagou cooperate: Members of the CDF units have served as scouts and provided information to Malian state forces operating in the region (Crisis Group 2020b). In addition, the groups patrol towns, villages and markets, manning checkpoints, conducting security checks on public transport and undertaking house searches (HRW 2018).

Do PGMs increase or decrease violence against civilians?

In the Malian context, PGM activities have a major impact on the level of violence against civilians. HRW (2018) reports on 26 attacks by Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo groups in which more than 150 civilians were killed. The Ogossagou massacre in March 2019, committed solely by the Dan Na Ambassagou, was one of the deadliest, with more than 150 people killed and over 200 houses set on fire (Crisis Group 2020b). In February 2020, the village was again attacked by members of the Dan Na Ambassagou, and over 35 people were killed (HRW 2020b). Moreover, the groups loot, extort ransom or protection from the population, and Dozo also targeted their own communities when they failed to provide recruits (HRW 2018; HRW 2022). Reports indicate that the groups were not accompanied by state forces during these incidents (Crisis Group 2020b; HRW 2020b), so it seems likely that the **Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo independently and deliberately attacked civilians**. Additionally, the activities contributed passively to an increase in violence by initiating vicious cycles of tit-for-tat: Initially, the emergence of self-defence groups triggered a violent

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3 \   Dogon for "hunters who trust in God". The groups mainly recruit from ethnic Dogon, but also include ethnic Bambara.

response by Islamist groups. Dogo officials and people affiliated with the groups were targeted. These attacks were met with massive and indiscriminate retaliation against predominantly ethnic Fulani[4] people, as they were suspected to support militant Islamist groups like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and others (Crisis Group 2020b). Overall, rather than protecting civilians from violence, the operations of self-defence forces are now causing more civilian deaths than attacks from Islamist groups (Lierl 2020). In sum, then, we can state that PGMs' activities in Mali have a strong negative impact on the level of violence by explicitly exacerbating violence against civilians.

> ▶ *Actively (independently) and passively contributed to violence against civilians.*

Government intention: Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?

Long-simmering conflicts between the central government and the Tuareg communities in the north led to an open rebellion in 2012, but a secession of the region was prevented militarily with French support. However, this episode had lasting effects on the Malian state. Referring to the tense security situation, the military staged a coup in the same year. Although constitutional rule was restored under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (2013-2020), the security situation remained tense with growing ethnic conflicts and various militant Islamist groups active in the country. While the political rights of minorities were not curtailed and neither the government nor the state forces were dominated by a single ethnic group (Freedom House 2021a), the human rights record of the then-government remained problematic. This period also saw numerous reports of human rights violations by state forces (Crisis Group 2020b; AI 2020).

Consequently, the Political Terror Scale (PTS) rated Mali in 2020 as a country in which civil and political

rights violations had expanded to impact large numbers of the population (PTS 2020). By 2022, the country had undergone two more military coups in 2020 and 2021 (DW 2021) and is currently under the leadership of a military transitional government under Colonel Assimi Goïta. Mali is ranked as "not free" by Freedom House (2022). Considering that the state forces are notorious for atrocities (AI 2020; HRW 2021a; HRW 2022), we can further state a lack in respect for human rights, which affects the activities of the Dan Na Ambassagou and results in impunity for their atrocities (HRW 2021a). After the Dan Na Ambassagou killed more than 150 people in Ogossagou in March 2019, the Malian government condemned the incident after international pressure, but no prosecution ensued (Crisis Group 2020b), and the government refused to take accountability for the atrocities (Pérouse de Montclos 2021). In February 2020, the village was again attacked by members of the Dan Na Ambassagou, killing 35 people. Reportedly, some of the perpetrators were the same as those in 2019 (HRW 2020b)—thus, even though state forces did not actively participate in these attacks, we can assume that the lack of state will to prosecute is likely to be one of the factors for the (repeated) violence. Furthermore, since Dan Na Ambassagou's violence and that of state forces is primarily directed against the same group, the Fulani, the question arises as to whether, in addition to the lack of a will to prosecute, there is also an unspoken approval of this operation on the part of the Malian government.

The Dan Na Ambassagou mostly draw from traditional hunter groups. Anchored in a rich history of local governance, their legitimacy often stems from traditional authorities and (ethnic) groups of their communities (Molenaar et al. 2019). Ethnically homogeneous groups thereby emerged, which in turn fuelled violence by targeting other ethnic groups. Even when state forces and the Malian government interact with the self-defence forces, they did not intervene in recruitment practices. Nevertheless, while Dozo and Dan Na Ambassagou enjoy government support, Fulani self-defence groups are regulated—for example, Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo are spared from the motorbike ban, while the weapons ban is not enforced against their members. In contrast, the bans have been enforced against members of the Fulani self-defence groups (HRW 2018). While this may also be due to the stronger position of Dan Na

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4 \ The Fulani, called Peul in French, are a mainly Muslim ethnic group scattered across several West African countries. Against a backdrop of dwindling resources and increasing land conflicts, the pastoral Fulani often come into conflict with sedentary communities. Their marginalisation is now being exploited by Islamist groups to recruit them. This has led to indiscriminate accusations and mistrust of the Fulani, which in turn has further exacerbated divisions between them and other groups.

Ambassagou and Dozo, it also demonstrates that the Malian government can regulate, at least in some areas—if it wants to. This supports the assumption that the Malian government approves of the Dan Na Ambassagou's activities.

In essence, even if the government is neither ethnically homogenous nor intervenes in the recruitment of PGMs, the groups have strong ethnic characteristics, and ethnic violence is fuelled by biased state support. Furthermore, the lack of respect for human rights and subsequent impunity for atrocities encourage an increase in violence against civilians by PGMs.

Government capacity: Is the government able to exert control?

Mali is a state with low capacity. The country's history is marked by movements opposed to the central state's government. State institutions are prone to corruption and fail to provide security and public services. This very low state capacity is particularly prevalent in rural and conflict-affected areas—like central Mali (Freedom House 2021a). Thus, mistrust of state actors is widespread (Bodian et al. 2020).

Consequently, the Fund for Peace (2021) ranked Mali among the 20 most fragile states in the world. Against this background of low state capacity and a history of local security structures, the Malian state has previously bolstered its regular forces with CDFs in times of crisis (Diallo 2017). In central Mali, the government interacts with the Dan Na Ambassagou both directly (e.g., by appointing members to protect regional authorities, see Aurélien and Sangaré 2019) and indirectly (e.g., by granting impunity for assaults). Despite this, there is no formal framework for cooperation between the government and local CDFs in Mali.

On the contrary, the 2004 law on associations enables the government to dissolve groups with a combat- or militia-like character.[5] Moreover, the

government explicitly identified the militias in the central regions as a security threat in the 2017 Plan de securisation integree des regions du centre. This gap between legal framework and political practice results in a very informal cooperation that leaves the government with extensive leeway in terms of accountability for the deeds of 'their' PGMs, but also results in a very low level of control. However, the government tacitly acknowledged their ties by announcing the inclusion of the Dan Na Ambassagou in a DDR programme to provide them with a prospect for the future (HRW 2018). Even closer collaboration was envisaged by the then-prime minister by further incorporating members of the Dan Na Ambassagou into security and counter-terrorism efforts (Crisis Group 2020b). However, relations between the government and the Dan Na Ambassagou became strained with the increase of ethnic targeting and subsequent national and international pressure to prevent ethnic violence. Thus, in the face of this increase in intercommunal violence, the Malian government announced plans to disarm all militias in central Mali in 2019. While they had been exempted from the ban until then, the Dan Na Ambassagou were now also to be disarmed. However, the groups refused disarmament amidst continuous insecurity, and the authorities did not impose the necessary measures due to fears of violent resistance (Crisis Group 2020b). So, while the Malian government has in many cases demonstrated a lack of will to control these groups, the lack of capacity also seems to play a role, as demonstrated by the inability to disarm them. It remains unclear, however, whether this inability to control is used strategically to avoid accountability—which would tend to indicate a lack of will—or whether it genuinely is due to a lack of capacity.

In sum, the Malian government exploits the gap between the legal framework and practical cooperation to claim 'uncontrollability' of the militias and to deny governmental accountability. The government also lacks the capacity to enforce measures against the PGMs. Thus, low state capacity and informal cooperation result in a very low level of control by the Malian government over the PGMs.

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5 \   Article 13: Associations may be dissolved by a decree issued by the Council of Ministers: 1. which engage in or provoke armed demonstrations in the street; 2. which, by their form and organisation, have the characteristics of combat groups or private militias. (Law n° 04 - 038 / of 5 August 2004 on associations)

Provision of support: Is the government increasing the PGMs' capacity to exert violence?

To assess the impact of PGMs on local security, I finally examine whether the (local) government increased PGMs' capacity to exert violence against civilians. The cooperation between the government and Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo remains informal. The Dan Na Ambassagou are thus mainly funded by donations from businessmen, individual security forces members and government officials as well as taxes and ransom from villagers and looting in attacked villages (HRW 2018; Crisis Group 2020b). While the groups supported the government in its fight against Islamists, the government in turn supported the operations of Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo by exempting the groups from the motorbike ban[6] and not enforcing the weapons ban against their members (HRW 2018). Furthermore, perpetrators of large-scale atrocities like the Ogossagou massacres remained at large and were not subject to any persecution. To the contrary, Dan Na Ambassagou members have allegedly received military training from retired members of the state forces (HRW 2018). In these cases, then, government support is primarily intangible.

How about the provision of material support? Dozo and Dan Na Ambassagou have their origins in hunter groups. Therefore, they are traditionally armed with artisanal or single-barrel shotguns. In recent years, however, their armament has increasingly included modern weapons such as AK-47s and large quantities of ammunition. Even though general proliferation of arms in the Malian conflict and the transfer of weapons between Malian, Ivorian and Burkinabè hunter groups has led to a high proliferation of weapons (Sollazzo and Nowak 2020), we can assume a link between government provision of weapons and the level of violence that the groups exercise. While the Malian government and its armed forces have never officially acknowledged a transfer of weapons to the groups, various credible analyses assume that the government has informally supported Dan Na Ambaddagou and Dozo with weapons and ammunition (Le Monde 2017; HRW

2018). As the groups have long ceased to focus their attacks on Islamist fighters alone and have begun targeting civilians and ethnic Fulani in particular, it can be assumed that the weapons are also being used in these operations. This is supported by eyewitness accounts confirming the use of modern weapons in attacks by Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo (HRW 2018). Since the use of assault rifles and especially the large amount of ammunition not only fuel violence but also enable large-scale attacks in the first place, there is likely a strong link between the provision of weapons and the capacity to exert violence.

> In essence, since Dan Na Ambassagou and Dozo derive from hunter groups and are thus traditionally equipped with artisanal weapons, the informal provision of modern weapons from the Malian government has increased the groups' ability to exert violence.

Burkina Faso

The security situation in Burkina Faso has deteriorated in recent years, with the military coup in January 2022 marking a new peak in instability. Having witnessed one of the world's highest increases in terrorism over the last few years (GTI 2020), the country's security is severely challenged. Islamist groups spilling over from Mali are the main reason for this increase in terrorism. However, even though the groups originate in Mali, many members are Burkinabè (Crisis Group 2020a)—the situation is far from being a problem imposed from the outside. The state response, meanwhile, has done little to defuse the tense situation.

Overwhelmed by the Islamist insurgency, the government turned towards local CDFs to bolster its forces. As in Mali, local CDFs have a long tradition in Burkina Faso, being embedded in "national and even regional trajectories of co-production of security between local and national actors" (Tisseron 2021: 9). In the past, the Koglweogo often emerged as a rather ad hoc response to security challenges by community members and were subsequently organised into self-defence groups by local elites. Other groups such as the *Dozo* have performed similar tasks but are

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6 \ In 2018, the government issued a ban on using motorcycles for transportation between villages in the Mopti region. The ban was to act as a security measure to hinder Islamist (suicide) attacks.

descended from traditional hunter groups. Occasionally, Dozo and Koglweogo compete for dominance within certain regions (Hagberg 2019). However, they provided local security, remedial justice, and took over policing tasks—but distanced themselves from state forces (Dupuy and Quidelleur 2018) and must therefore be labelled as CDFs. Recently, the various CDFs expanded their scope of duties and now respond to both banditry and terrorism: in the face of increasing Islamist attacks against their communities, local CDFs drawn from Dozo and Koglweogo groups have stated their support for the state's fight against terrorism (Tisseron 2021). This initial rapprochement and the common opponent already strengthened relations between the government and the CDFs and subsequently led to the co-opting of the groups by the Burkinabè government: in November 2019, in face of another deadly terrorist attack on Burkinabè territory, then-President Roche Marc Christian Kaboré publicly announced a "general mobilisation of the sons and daughters of the nation, without consideration of region, ethnicity, political opinion, and religious confession" (Sidwaya 2019, translated by the author) to counter the security threat. This call on the civilian population was another step towards a formalisation of linkages to local CDFs.

The 2020 decree regarding the Volontairs pour la défence de la Patrie[7] (VDP) then subsumed existing CDFs like the Koglweogo and Dozo under one umbrella and transformed them into government-aligned PGMs. Given the deteriorating security situation and a "shortage of manpower" in the Burkinabè armed forces, the VDP was to act as an auxiliary force, stated Defence Minister Chériff Sy (Le Faso 2020b). Even before the establishment of the VDP, Koglweogo cooperated with state forces occasionally (Dupuy and Quidelleur 2018; Leclercq and Matagne 2020). With local knowledge as their distinctive feature, VDP principally operate in their region of origin and support state forces with reconnaissance, intelligence, zone surveillance, convoy escorting, and sweeping tasks. A further main objective is to establish a village security network to anticipate attacks (Tisseron 2021).

Do PGMs increase or decrease violence against civilians?

Through their local knowledge, cooperation with local CDFs is supposed to be a decisive factor in the fight against Islamist groups by anticipating Islamist attacks and thereby decreasing violence and protecting not only state forces, but also the civilian population (Tisseron 2021). However, this has so far failed to materialise, as the persistently high number of Islamist attacks against civilians and state forces indicates. On the contrary, the activities of Koglweogo and VDP seem to increase violence against civilians.

Burkinabè state forces are repeatedly accused of human rights violations, and there are some reports of extrajudicial killings committed jointly by state forces and the VDP (HRW 2022); in these incidents, it remains unclear whether state forces or the VDP were the driving force. Nonetheless, there are also numerous cases of **VDP exerting violence against civilians actively and independently**: The VDP has not only been implicated in numerous serious crimes, including arbitrary arrests, torture and unlawful killings targeting suspected armed Islamists and criminals (HRW 2022); there are also reports on indiscriminate humiliation, torture and killings of Fulani by VDP members (CICS, cited in Le Faso 2020a). Furthermore, there have been several reported massacres against Fulani communities in recent years. Most notorious are two killings in the country's central-north region in early 2019, during which more than 200 Fulani were killed by Koglweogo (VOA 2019a; VOA 2019b). Thus, the VDP and the groups aligned under its umbrella have significantly contributed to an increase in violence against civilians. Furthermore, the establishment of the groups also **contributed passively to an increase in violence against civilians**: VDP members and villages hosting them are now more likely to be targeted by Boko Haram than the military. This is echoed in increasing attacks against the VDP and their communities—such as the attack on Solhan in June 2021, in which 138 people died, or the killing of a prominent VDP member in December 2021 (RFI 2021; VOA 2021a).

> ▶ *Actively (independently) and passively contributed to violence against civilians.*

Government intentions: Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?

Burkina Faso has experienced repeated (military) coups in recent decades. Until 2014, long-time ruler Blaise Compaoré, who had seized power in 1987, was president of the country. Massive protests led to his resignation at the end of the year. After a transition period, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president in November 2015 and confirmed in his position in 2020. Thus, Burkina Faso is ranked as "partly free" by Freedom House (2022).

One of the reasons for this is the factionalisation of the elites. About 50% of Burkina Faso's population are ethnic Mossi, including former President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and the majority of his cabinet (18 out of 25 members). Traditionally, the Mossi are sedentary farmers with large land wealth, which in turn builds the basis of their political power. Other ethnic groups such as the Fulani, who are traditionally pastoralists, have only a small share of political power in the country (VOA 2021b). We can thus identify a non-inclusive government.

In recent years, the government has been challenged by the rise of militant Islamist groups and a general increase in violence and banditry as well as disputes over land and resources, a general mistrust in elites and aggravating ethnic conflicts. The government's response has been primarily repressive and military. In 2020, Burkina Faso, similarly to Mali, was rated as country in which civil and political rights violations had expanded to impact large numbers of the population (PTS 2020). Moreover, abusive and indiscriminate violence against civilians by state forces (Dufka 2018; AI 2020; HRW 2022) not only reflects a lack of respect for human rights, but has also further alienated the population from the state. This holds particularly true for ethnic Fulani, who are often suspected to support Islamist groups and are, therefore, indiscriminately targeted by state forces. A report by HRW (2020c) identifies 180 extrajudicial killings, the majority of which targeted Fulani, in the northern town of Djibo alone from November 2019 to June 2020. State forces are blamed for the killings; so far, no steps have been taken to hold the perpetrators accountable.

When the Burkinabè government established the VDP, they formally aimed towards non-discriminatory recruitment, without "distinction as to gender, religion or ethnicity" (Decree No. 2020-0115). However, the reality proves otherwise. While other groups like the Dozo are also partially subsumed under the VDP umbrella, most of the VDP consists of Koglweogo members. Similar to the government's structures, the Koglweogo are dominated by ethnic Mossi (Hagberg 2019). As the government co-opted these existing groups, this led to a perception of the VDP as a "Mossi force" (Schmauder and Willeme 2021). This dynamic is reinforced by the recruitment process: To prevent infiltration by Islamist militants, recruits are screened. Since Fulani are often indiscriminately perceived as supporters of the Islamist groups, this leads to their exclusion from the VDP (Tisseron 2021; Schmauder and Willeme 2021). The violence of the VDP against the civilian population roughly follows the pattern that can also be observed with state forces: Massive violence is not prosecuted and is mostly directed against the Fulani minority. Schmauder and Willeme (2021) emphasised that 89% of VDP attacks against civilians in 2020 were against Fulani.

> To conclude, the Burkinabè government is non-inclusive and lacks respect for human rights. This has a strong effect on the VDP's impact on local security: not only state forces, but also the Koglweogo and VDP engage in excessive violence against civilians. Ethnically homogeneous recruitment of government co-ethnics not only fuels the violence, but also leads to the targeting of specific ethnic groups.

Government capacity: Is the government able to exert control?

Even though Burkina Faso is ranked as somewhat less fragile than other countries in the region (FFP 2021), I still regard it to exhibit a low state capacity. This becomes particularly evident in dealing with militant Islamist groups, which has in turn further undermined government capacity. Under pressure from the civilian population and members of the armed forces, the government resigned in November 2021 after 50 members of security forces were killed by militant Islamists (DW 2021; Le Monde 2021). Subsequently, the government's corruption and incapability to increase security served as justification for an

army-led coup against President Roche Marc Christian Kaboré and the installation of a transitional military government in January 2022. Reportedly, parts of the population applauded this act (France24 2022).

Overstretched state capacity was one of the main reasons the government resorted to local self-defence groups to bolster its forces. As early as 2005, a decree8 was passed to establish local security committees to facilitate communication between communities and state security agencies (Venturi and Toure 2020). While state cooperation with these groups remained informal and loose for some time, the decree regarding the Volontairs pour la défence de la Patrie[9] (VDP) institutionalised these ties. Thereby, the government officially took over supervision of the groups. To control the newly established VDP, the decree formulated a set of regulations and rules. A code of conduct, training on human rights and the imposition of (disciplinary) sanctions provide a behavioural framework for the VDP. Control is to be ensured through a multi-level approach, combining militarily and community-based means (Decree No. 2020-0115). We can thus identify a semi-official level of cooperation with a high formal level of control.

However, the degree of formalisation and control depends to a large extent on the groups' local embedding: While in the northern parts of the country, VDPs are identified by focal points in villages and then placed under the supervision of a committee made up of soldiers, in the central and eastern regions, VDP members merely sign a contract with the military commander of the respective region (Tisseron 2021). Furthermore, as the Koglewogo and Dozo were active long before the decree was passed, they have a long-standing and close collaboration with local authorities (Hagberg 2019) and present themselves as a protector of both people and property in the communities (Leclercq and Matagne 2020). This not only provides these groups with legitimacy, but also represents a locally anchored form of control.

In sum, even though the Burkinabè government depends on the VDP to fight Islamist forces, it seems able to exert control over these groups. An official decree provides the formal and legal framework for cooperation with the VDP. Furthermore, in most cases, the groups are not only tied closely to military structures, but local authorities also exercise normative control.

Provision of support: Is the government increasing the PGMs' capacity to exert violence?

To assess the impact of PGM on local security, I finally examine whether the (local) government increased PGMs' capacity to exert violence against civilians. As formalised in the VDP decree, members are to receive 14 days of training on rules of engagement, discipline and human rights. In principle, these measures can reduce the risk of the groups committing violence. Moreover, issuance of communication and visual equipment (Tisseron 2021) enables the VDP to operate more effectively. Per the decree, they are also to be trained in combat and first aid (Decree No. 2020-0115).

In reality, members are handed weapons without prior training and the provision of training, equipment and weapons depends on the will of regional authorities. VDP members in the north receive basic combatant and first aid training prior to the provision of firearms, but this is lacking in the central and eastern regions. Moreover, not all VDP members receive weapons. Accordingly, members who have not (yet) received weapons acquire them themselves. Furthermore, and contrary to the decree's regulations of return and recollection, the weapons often remain with the VDP even after the end of a mission (Tisseron 2021).

Clear-cut links between the government's provision of weapons and the ability to exert violence by the VDP and Koglweogo are hard to track. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the proliferation of weapons has had an impact on the level of violence. Traditionally anchored in hunter groups, members of the Koglweogo and Dozo, who now operate under the state umbrella of the VDP, are equipped with traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, and machetes. Even

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8 \   Decree No. 2005-245/PRES/PM/SECU/DEF/MATD/MJ/MFB/MPDH of 12 May 2005 regarding the creation, composition, powers and functioning of the local security committees.

9 \   Decree No. 2020-0115/PRES/PM/MDNAC/MATDC/MSECU/MINEFID of 12 March 2020 regarding the status of the "Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland".

if an illegal weapons flow exists due to the transnational networking of hunter groups in the border region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire (Sollazzo and Nowak 2020), these are usually artisanal weapons (Mangan and Nowak 2019). Therefore, the provision of modern weapons by the government is a significant measure and generally increases the capacity to perpetrate violence. The targeted provision of weapons in areas that are particularly affected by terrorist attacks (Tisseron 2021) increases the ability of the VDP to defend not only themselves but also their communities and thus, theoretically, local security. In practice, however, violent tit-for-tat dynamics often develop and are further fuelled by a proliferation of weapons and thus undermine local security. The Burkinabè Collectif contre l'impunité et la stigmatisation des communautés (CICS) has noted that "violence against civilians has increased since [...] the Koglweogo and then the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), came into play in the fight against terrorism" (Burkina24 2021, translation by the author). In recent years, there have been repeated large-scale killings by Koglweogo, which have not stopped even under the state umbrella of the VDP (Le Faso 2020c) but are rather fuelled by impunity (DW 2020). Since some of the weapons are handed over to the VDP without further control and the government seems to have little interest in prosecuting violence, it can be assumed that the VDP also use the weapons provided against civilians, and especially Fulani. This makes further escalation through the proliferation of weapons likely.

> The VDP received lethal weapons from the Burkinabè government. Contrary to the formally established mechanisms, these were often handed over without training and further control over their whereabouts. In this way, the government increases the PGM's ability to exert violence. The targeted proliferation into volatile areas presents another substantial risk of exacerbated violence.

Nigeria

Nigeria is ranked among the most fragile states in the world in the Fund for Peace's State Fragility Index (FFP 2021). Weak support for the nation state leads to a generally high level of violence, with violent conflicts underway in almost all parts of the country. A leading source of violence in the country is the Islamist groups—Nigeria is both birthplace and epicentre of Boko Haram and its splinter group Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP)[10], which now trumps Boko Haram in terms of popular support (Crisis Group 2019) and military success (Day et al. 2020). Since 2009, the groups' attacks and the countermeasures taken against them have caused more than 30,000 deaths and displaced two million people in Nigeria alone (ACLED 2021; Meagher and Mustapha 2020).

Trapped between Boko Haram and an over-stretched state, local communities established CDFs to protect the population, with the groups subsequently having been co-opted by the state. There is, however, a longer history of vigilante groups in Nigeria emerging in times of crisis (Agbiboa 2020a; 2020b), often stemming from traditional hunters (Day et al. 2020). However, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)[11] received most civilian and state support in the fight against Boko Haram. Amidst attacks by Boko Haram and an extremely violent and indiscriminate crackdown by the state forces, the CJTF emerged in 2013 as a local CDF, protecting their communities against Boko Haram and, to a lesser extent, state forces in Maiduguri, later spreading to other parts of the north-eastern region (Agbiboa 2020b).

Soon after the emergence of the CJTF, the violence of state forces against the local population decreased as they no longer placed the population under general suspicion but recognised their efforts in fighting Boko Haram. This was the first step towards a co-optation by the government. Subsequently, state forces not only made use of the CJTF's local knowledge, but also became actively involved in its organisation (Agbiboa 2020a).

As the CJTF recruit from local communities, their members are familiar with the relevant language, people and terrain. Thus, their knowledge is crucial for

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10 \ The distinction is blurred, as both factions are often simply referred to as 'Boko Haram'. The parent group also uses its Arabic name Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (English: 'The people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and jihad').

11 \ Also called yan gora ('those who hold the stick') or kato da gora ('youth with sticks').

operations of state forces. CJTF members carry out intelligence and surveillance missions, patrol communities and roads, but also cooperate closely with the military in joint patrols, security scans and checkpoints. There are also reports of CJTF carrying out interrogations in detention centres (Crisis Group 2017a; Agbiboa 2020b). In addition, CJTF have assisted local police not only in gathering intelligence, but also in investigating robberies or detaining suspects (Day et al. 2020). Thereby, the CJTF evolved from a mere CDF to a state co-opted force and thus can be characterised as a (temporary) PGM. Its membership is estimated at 30,000 (Agbiboa 2020b).

Do PGMs increase or decrease violence against civilians?

In the fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP in Nigeria, the impact of the CJTF on the level of violence against civilians is twofold. Cooperation with the CJTF on the one hand decreased the level of violence against civilians as state forces used less violence against communities in face of the emergence of CJTF for two reasons: First, general suspicion and subsequent punishment by state forces declined substantially because due to the emergence of the CJTF, civilians were perceived as less hostile towards them. Second, based on CJTF's local knowledge, state forces were better able to identify suspects, and indiscriminate violence by state forces and the number of suicide attacks decreased (Crisis Group 2017b).

However, on the other hand, the CJTF undermined this rather positive effect by contributing to an increase in violence against civilians. In 2014, hundreds of prisoners were extrajudicially executed by members of the CJTF and the Nigerian army in a military detention centre in Maiduguri (AI 2015; Crisis Group 2017a; 2017b). Although, in these cases, the military seems to have taken the lead (AI 2016), active and large-scale support by members of the CJTF nevertheless contributed in at least an 'enabling' sense to an increase in the violence. In IDP camps, members of the CJTF and the Nigerian Army were involved in cases of sexual violence (AI 2018; CIVIC 2019). Furthermore, members of the CJTF pressured communities through extortion and ransom money (Day et al. 2020). The **CJTF have thus actively contributed to violence against civilians**—but only in

cooperation with state forces. Moreover, in the Nigerian case, too, the **emergence of the CJTF increased the level of violence against civilians passively**: While Boko Haram used to spare civilians, the emergence of local PGMs was perceived as hostility towards Boko Haram, and the group subsequently increased their indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population (Pérouse de Montclos 2014) and targeted individuals affiliated with the CJTF (Agbiboa 2020b).

> ▶ *Actively (only in cooperation with army) and passively contributed to violence against civilians.*

Government intention: Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?

Since 2015, retired Army Major General Muhammadu Buhari has been the President of Nigeria, having been re-elected in 2019. Since his inauguration, the status of human rights and political freedom have declined (ICIR 2021) and Freedom House (2022) ranked the country as being "partly free". Nigeria is shaped by deep socio-economic and political cleavages and ranked above only the most fragile states in the world in the Fund for Peace's State Fragility Index (FFP 2021). While the government does not fully reflect the country's great ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, strong constitutional federalism has prevented domination of the central government by a single ethnic group (Agbiboa 2017). Yet, the nation state enjoys little legitimacy (Tar and Bala 2018), which leads to a generally high level of insecurity, with violent conflicts experienced in almost all parts of the country. In most cases, these conflicts are not mitigated, but rather fuelled by state forces, with abusive behaviour being widespread (HRW 2022) and the army having a long record of using excessive violence against civilians.

Violence against civilians has only escalated during the fight against Boko Haram: Over the course of two incidents in 2013 and 2015, more than 500 civilians were killed by state forces (Omeje 2017). In keeping with this, the CJTF's levels of violence against civilians in cooperation with state forces increased to a high level (AI 2016). HRW (2022)

reported a "worsening repression of fundamental rights in the country". Violent crackdowns on protests against security forces' brutality (ICIR 2021) have provided further evidence of the government's lack of respect for human rights. The PTS accordingly gave Nigeria a rating of four (meaning that civil and political rights violations had expanded to large numbers of the population) in 2020 (PTS 2020). However, even though the level of institutionalisation is high with respect to the government's cooperation with the CJTF (Day et al. 2020), neither the federal nor the regional government intervene in the CJTF's recruitment processes. On the contrary, as the group is embedded in its communities, they recruit heterogeneously, both in ethnic and religious terms (CIVIC 2018). No targeted political or ethnically motivated recruitment by the government can therefore be identified.

> Taken together, even though the Nigerian government is rather inclusive and thus recruitment did not follow ethnic patterns, its lack of respect for human rights has a significant impact on CJTF activities and thereby on security on the ground: The CJTF have only used excessive force against civilians in collaboration with the state armed forces.

Government capacity: Is the government able to exert control?

Nigeria is a low-capacity state. Since 2015, Nigeria has constantly been ranked among the world's 15 most fragile states by the Fragile State Index (FFP 2021). Furthermore, the Nigerian nation state lacks the support of its population. Thus, the emergence and persistence of self-defence groups in Nigeria is intertwined with the widespread perception that the corrupt state is unable and unwilling to provide security and justice for its citizens (Agbiboa 2020a; 2020b).

However, in the fight against militant Islamist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP, these groups have not only aligned themselves with the government, but have been co-opted to bolster state forces. Consequently, ties became closer and more formalised: The CJTF formally operates under the supervi-

sion of the Attorney General and under the command of the Nigerian military, which has laid the foundation for even closer collaboration by structuring the CJTF along military lines of command (Day et al. 2020). The CJTF is also closely entrenched in federal government structures, as local state governors issue orders directly to the CJTF, and some state officials have a dual role, holding positions in state institutions and the CJTF (Crisis Group 2017b). These strong ties between the CJTF and (local) government clearly have a semi-official character and enable the government to exert control over the CJTF.

Formalisation increased further with the establishment of the 'Borno Youths Empowerment Scheme' (BOYES) in 2013, under which 1,850 members of the self-defence groups went through a formal vetting process and received military training and a monthly stipend (Crisis Group 2017b; Borno State Government 2022). Moreover, repeated rounds of integration into the regular armed forces (ICIR 2016; Jumbo-Asukwo 2018; PM News 2020) have not only proven the state's need to bolster its armed forces; since membership in the armed forces offers advantages compared to membership in the CJTF (e.g., regular income, better equipment), integration is a strong incentive and thus provides the state with effective leverage over the groups. Strong legitimacy and accountability also derive from the CJTF's embedding in local communities (Agbiboa 2020b). Here, close entrenchment has also proven to be an instrument of control: Only following initial abuses were CJTF members in Maiduguri deployed close to their neighbourhoods in order to prevent further transgressions (ICG 2017b), making use of the effects of social cohesion.

> In sum, although the government had to resort to the CJTF in the fight against Boko Haram due to its low capacity, cooperation is quite formalised. Furthermore, the ability to control is high given close ties to military structures and the federal government. The close embedding in local communities provides an additional instrument of normative control.

Provision of support: Is the government increasing the PGMs' capacity to exert violence?

To assess the impact of PGMs on local security, I finally examine whether the (local) government increased PGMs' capacity to exert violence against civilians. Even though cooperation between regional governments and the CJTF is close, most members of the CJTF do not receive regular financial support and thus depend on community-based funding or ransom payments (Crisis Group 2017a; Crisis Group 2017b). Within the regional government-initiated BOYES programme, 1,850 CJTF members went through a formal vetting process, receiving military training as well as a monthly stipend and health coverage. The selected members were also equipped with uniforms, cars, and identification cards and some received modern weapons (Crisis Group 2017a; Crisis Group 2017b). In general, however, provision of military equipment and training is rare due to concerns about the controllability of the militias. Most CJTF members thus only received non-lethal equipment like metal detectors and torches and were provided with means of transportation. These measures enhance effectiveness and secure the CJTF's defensive operations and thus have a positive effect on local security.

Originating from hunter groups, CJTF members were initially armed with traditional weapons such as machetes, sticks, and bows and arrows (Agbiboa 2020b). Though the possession of homemade weapons is not uncommon in rural Nigeria (Nowak and Gsell 2018), the acquisition of a firearm is usually beyond the financial means of community members (Agbiboa 2020b). Even when cooperating with the Nigerian military, the CJTF therefore often remain simply armed, e.g., with machetes, and modern weapons such as AK-47s remain in the hands of the armed forces. However, in the face of a clear superiority in weaponry on the part of Boko Haram and ISWAP, parts of the CJTF received weapons from the government to fight Islamist groups. In these cases, weapons are handed out to 'trustworthy' and/or higher-ranking members of the CJTF for the duration of an operation, with the Nigerian Army usually taking back the weapons thereafter (Agbiboa 2020b). However, the CJTF has reportedly been loaned assault rifles by the army in Borno state. In addition, some CJTF members have bought weapons themselves or taken them from captured opponents (Crisis Group 2017a; 2017b).

Nevertheless, it was the provision of pump-action guns by the military that significantly transformed the operational capabilities of the CJTF, enabling them not only to operate more defensively in their own communities, but also to accompany the military in offensive operations against Islamist insurgents outside their communities (Agbiboa 2020b). In addition, an 850-member 'CJTF Special Forces' received specialised military training in greater weapons skills and operational capability and was also equipped with modern weapons to operate on the frontline (Crisis Group 2017b; Agbiboa 2020b). Reportedly, members of the CJTF are more likely to exert violence when they are not operating within their own communities. Therefore, the likelihood that they will act more violently in frontline activities is high. These operations are carried out in cooperation with the military, which is notorious not only for massive but also indiscriminate violence against civilians. Indeed, cooperation between the CJTF and the military has already resulted in numerous civilian casualties. When the CJTF, now equipped with modern weapons, accompanies the military in offensive operations, this not only increases their capability but also the likelihood that they will use violence against civilians.

> To conclude, while non-lethal equipment enhanced defensive operations and thus curbed violence, members of the PGM received modern weapons from the government. In particular, these enabled the CJTF to participate in offensive operations with the Nigerian armed forces and thereby increased violence against civilians.

Niger

Niger is situated at the crossroads of several conflict lines within the Sahel region, and the Islamist groups operating in the Sahel region have found a base in the country: In the south, fighters from, and attacks by, Boko Haram spill over from Nigeria, while in the western border areas with Burkina Faso and, to a larger extent, Mali, attacks by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and affiliated groups have increased. The

groups principally recruit along local and ethnic conflict lines—and make use of local grievances (De Tessières 2018). Islamist terror and the state's counter-insurgency operations are now claiming high casualties among the civilian population (HRW 2021b).

In contrast to Mali, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso, local self-defence groups have only emerged in a few cases. The Nigerien government quickly disbanded emerging ethnic self-defence groups (Pérouse de Montclos 2021) and was reluctant to collaborate with PGMs for fear of ethnic violence (Crisis Group 2017b), having witnessed the rise and effects of ethnic militias in the past (Molenaar et al. 2019). Thus, until recently, the government mainly used civilians to generate knowledge on suspected ISGS supporters (Crisis Group 2017b; De Tessières 2018). This changed further to increasing attacks by the militant Islamist groups. In heavily affected communities along the border with Nigeria, self-defence groups emerged and were subsequently supported by civilian and security officials (Crisis Group 2017b). This has provided them with a certain level of official formalisation. Similarly, CDFs started to emerge in the border areas with Mali. Here, the increase in ISGS attacks against, and pressure on, the civilian population as well as the withdrawal of state forces from the border regions have left the civilian population more vulnerable. Therefore, in 2020, the first CDFs were established in western Niger to defend their communities against ISGS and to persecute members of the Islamist group (Crisis Group 2021a). In southern Niger, CDFs also started to emerge in 2020. Initially established to take action against banditry, the groups were soon recognised by state forces and local authorities (Crisis Group 2021b). The groups not only align with the local government and state forces but also receive (non-)material support, and thus can be labelled PGMs.

Do PGMs increase or decrease violence against civilians?

Even if a tangible contribution to curbing Islamist terror or banditry cannot be demonstrated, local self-defence groups are perceived as supportive of (civilian) security by the population and local authorities (Crisis Group 2021b). However, especially in the Malian border region, the rise of CDFs provoked excessive violence by Islamist groups: Shortly after the first reports of CDFs, communities were

attacked by the ISGS through targeted killings and massacres in an extremely brutal manner (Crisis Group 2021a). This violence continues: In two incidents alone, almost 100 people, mostly members of local self-defence groups, were killed in an attack by ISGS in November 2021 in the Mali border area (Der Standard 2021; The Guardian 2021; Reuters 2021). Similarly, Boko Haram in the Nigerian border region targets communities that have set up CDFs (Crisis Group 2017b). Taken together, the timing and direction of violence indicates a link between the establishment of CDFs and Islamist attacks: ISGS attacks increased after communities had established CDFs and people associated with the CDFs, were deliberately attacked (Crisis Group 2021a). Moreover, the Islamists not only targeted their violence against groups of civilians protected by CDFs (Der Standard 2021), but also against a CDF camp (Reuters 2021). It can thus be assumed that the attacks took place not in spite of, but precisely because of the CDFs. Hence, the **emergence of the local CDFs has passively increased the level of violence against civilians.**

> ▶ *Passively contributed to violence against civilians.*

Government intention: Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?

Over the past decade, Niger has overcome its history of (military) coups and consolidated its democracy. In 2011, the then-President Mahamadou Issoufou was elected and confirmed in office in 2016. Since then, there have been serious efforts by the government to counter violent conflicts by integrating armed non-state actors into the state and security apparatus while simultaneously mitigating the risk of a proliferation of armed groups and ethnic violence. Furthermore, all minority groups in Niger have been guaranteed political representation and some access to power. In addition, the government has decentralised some administrative functions and thereby granted local authorities a certain degree of financial independence (Pérouse de Montclos 2021). These efforts appear to have been rewarded, as in 2021, Mohamed Bazoum was sworn in as president in the country's first democratic transition of power (France24 2021). Still, the country faces severe challenges from Islamist terrorism. This

ongoing threat from militant (Islamist) groups has also served as a justification for the government to restrict human rights (Freedom House 2021b). Thus, Freedom House (2022) ranked Niger as "partly free".

According to the Political Terror Scale, Niger, with a score of three in 2020, is rated slightly above the other cases discussed in this Paper, yet political imprisonment and brutality are common (PTS 2020). Furthermore, the relations between the state and its citizens are undermined by indiscriminate targeting and abusive behaviour by state forces (Crisis Group 2020c). Overall, it can be stated that the government is striving for a more inclusive legitimacy. Nevertheless, it lacks respect for human rights, as abusive behaviour by its forces and repressive actions towards its population demonstrate. Since the self-defence groups that have been established so far are closely embedded locally and enter into limited and, above all, non-offensive cooperation with state forces, this behaviour has not (yet) had an impact on the activities of the local self-defence forces. Furthermore, due to the local character of the groups, the ethnic composition of the government also has no influence on the groups' recruitment practices (Crisis Group 2021b).

In essence, even if the Nigerien government is rather inclusive, it lacks respect for human rights. However, there is no evidence that the emerging self-defence groups are involved in excessive violence against civilians. Further, recruitment is not ethnically dominated.

Government capacity: Is the government able to exert control?

Niger is a state with low capacity. The country has been ranked among the most fragile states in the world in the Fund for Peace's State Fragility Index (FFP 2021) for over a decade. Nevertheless, the Nigerien regular forces were able to mitigate the impact of Islamist terrorism on the civilian population (Samson and Moumouni 2016), since Boko Haram's attacks on Nigerian territory were initially limited compared to neighbouring countries (Crisis Group 2017b), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) principally directed its attacks against state forces (Crisis Group 2020c). This also hindered a proliferation of

self-defence groups. This picture has shifted recently: Particularly in the border regions with Mali and Nigeria, which are heavily affected by Islamist terrorism and banditry, state representation is dwindling (Crisis Group 2021b). With the absence of state protection, the need for local security initiatives has increased, leading to the emergence of self-defence groups. In the past, the government demonstrated that it can exert control over militias: Cooperation with Malian militias in the border area was restricted following allegations of ethnic violence (Crisis Group 2020c). The currently emerging groups are closely integrated at the local level and receive support from local elected officials (Crisis Groups 2021b). Since traditional authorities in Niger have a strong status within their communities as well as being part of the formal state apparatus (Molenaar et al. 2019), they have a high ability to control the groups.

Overall, the Nigerien government seems able to exert control over the groups—despite informal cooperation. In the past, the government disbanded militias when they became violent towards civilians. The groups that now emerge are not only under the control of local authorities, but are embedded in a system of traditional authorities. This not only enables normative control but also another level of state control through the embedding of traditional authorities into the state apparatus. Thus, we can identify a strong state ability to control the groups.

Provision of support: Is the government increasing PGM capacity to exert violence?

To assess the impact of PGM on local security, I finally examine whether the (local) government increases PGMs' capacity to exert violence against civilians. Since local CDFs emerged only recently in Niger, there is little (material) state support so far, with the groups being predominantly equipped with traditional weapons. The state forces welcomed their support in repelling attacks, thus rewarding the activities of the CDFs in an intangible way. However, local authorities made a financial contribution to the purchase of artisanal weapons (Crisis Group 2021b).

Since the groups operate very locally and defensively, these weapons have not yet contributed to an increase in violence against civilians.

To conclude, the Nigerien CDFs have received financial support from local authorities for the purchase of artisanal weapons on a small scale. Since the groups act defensively, there is no evidence that state support increased the CDFs' capacity to exert violence against civilians.

Cameroon

From 2014 onwards Cameroon—once one of the anchors of stability in the region—has deteriorated into violence, and is now ranked amongst the most fragile states in the world (FFP 2021). In recent years, the country, which shares a 1,700 km long border with Nigeria in the north, has increasingly suffered from Islamist incursions. Attacks on villages in northern Cameroon began in 2014 and have posed a major threat to the civilian population. Islamist violence increased again sharply between 2019 and 2020 (ACSS 2020), when Nigeria's armed forces went on the offensive and pushed Boko Haram across the border, and the Islamic State of West Africa shifted its area of operations to the area around Fotokol. To curb the problem, the Cameroonian government turned towards a proven strategy: Cooperation with local militias.

Local militias have a long history in Cameroon. Such groups were actively formed as PGMs between the mid-1950s and 1970s to support colonial power France, and subsequently the new independent government in their fight against the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), a left-wing liberation movement (Crisis Group 2017b). After the end of the violence in 1971, local militias never vanished completely. From the mid-1980s on, they gained renewed significance in the face of increasing banditry and the need to protect their villages. During this time, they mostly operated without any government support, but rather filled a security vacuum. It was at this point that the groups first became known as vigilante committees (Nkou Mvondo 2002). From 2014 onwards, in the fight against Boko Haram and its splinter groups, affected

communities reactivated their vigilante committees. By 2017, nearly every village in the north had its own vigilante group(s) numbering in total approximately 14,000 to 16,000 members (Crisis Group 2017b). It was also during this period that the government not only explicitly supported the emergence of the CDFs but officially recognised their merits. This de facto acknowledgment strengthened the groups' affiliation to the government and made them informal PGMs. The vigilante committees in Cameroon work closely with local authorities and the armed forces. They support the local authorities by patrolling the area and by reporting and detaining suspects that are threatening the community. They thereby act as liaisons for official security forces such as the Gendarmerie and the Forces Armées Camerounaises (FAC), to whom they serve as informants, translators and local guides. Their 'jurisdiction' is typically limited to their own village or district. In some instances, however, PGMs also have also taken part in offensive operations of FAC.

Do PGMs increase or decrease violence against civilians?

In the fight against Islamist incursions, vigilante groups in Cameroon have so far affected the security situation positively. Even though government troops have shown little respect for human rights[12] during their fight against Islamists, vigilante groups have done little to escalate violence. On the contrary, they have contributed to improving the security situation of the local population in recent years. Their knowledge of the local language and their ability to identify suspects—two skillsets the army lacks, leading to unnecessary casualties (Crisis Group 2017b)—have particularly helped to **reduce violence against civilians** in counter-insurgency operations. Knowing the local habits, vigilante groups have, for instance, a better "sense of the normal and the abnormal" in particular situations, which makes them apt to detect threats (Crisis Group 2017b).

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12 \ According to HRW reports (2021) soldiers destroyed homes and killed several civilians in retaliation for separatist attacks, and forced civilians into performing night patrols to protect their residential area against attacks by Boko Haram. In a 2017 report by Amnesty International, it is further noted that the "use of torture in "Cameroon's fight against Boko Haram has become widespread and routine, and practiced with impunity" (AI 2017).

Consequently, vigilante groups have thwarted a high number of suicide bombings or mitigated their impact when the identified perpetrators were forced to detonate their explosive devices before reaching sensitive areas such as town centres and markets (Touo 2020). It could be considered problematic that some vigilante groups have reportedly asked the local population for 'contributions' in form of money and cattle (Anjoh and Shey 2020; Crisis Group 2017b; Crisis Group 2018). Overall, however, the local population widely credits vigilante groups with the pushback of Boko Haram's activities, meaning that the groups enjoy a high level of popularity—especially after having been acknowledged by the government (Anjoh and Shey 2020). State officials and local authorities frequently label them as "a vital force in the fight against Boko Haram" (Ntede Edongo and Elom 2019: 51).

Nevertheless, there is evidence that **vigilante groups have also contributed to violence against civilians**. The most prominent case of human rights violations by vigilante group members were the so-called Ngarabuh killings. The incident happened on 14 February 2020 in the town of Ngarbuh. Overall, 21 civilians, amongst them 13 children and a pregnant woman, were killed by security forces and ethnic Fulani from a vigilante group to punish the population accused of conspiring with the enemy, in this case anglophone separatists (HRW 2020a). The massacre was committed while a vigilante group accompanied regular units on an offensive operation. Whether the violence came from the militiamen or the regular soldiers has not been determined; so far, only three soldiers have been held accountable for the crime.

> ▶ *Mainly reduced violence against civilians.*

Government intention: Is the government willing to reduce violence and exert control?

Cameroon has been ruled by President Paul Biya and his Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC) since 1982. Minorities, mainly the anglophone population, have been systematically politically excluded since the end of federalism in the 1970s. The government declared the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), an anglophone

separatist political group, to be an illegal organisation and continues to harass opposition parties, such as the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM).

In 2017, the so-called Anglophone Crisis turned from peaceful protest to violent conflict between anglophone separatists and the government of Cameroon. Cameroon is ranked as "not free" by Freedom House (2021). In 2020, the Political Terror Scale ranked Cameroon as a country where the violation of civil and political rights has expanded to large numbers of the population (PTS 2020). Given the systematic discrimination against anglophone populations and the human rights violations committed by state forces during conflict with anglophone separatists (HRW 2022) and the fight against Islamist insurgents (AI 2017), it can be stated that the government of Cameroon is non-inclusive and lacks respect for human rights.

The recruitment of PGM members, however, lies in the hands of local chiefs who usually appoint them based on morality checks in order to prevent the groups being infiltrated by sympathisers of Boko Haram. This means that the groups recruited from residents of the respective village or district are generally ethnically and religiously homogeneous. There is no evidence that government officials exert influence on these local practices to ensure that there is no targeted recruitment of specific pro-government ethnic groups or religious groups (Crisis Group 2017b; 2018). In this regard, the risk-factor "non-inclusive government" has limited explanatory power: The PGMs have not been created with the intent to counter political opponents and, thus, do not follow a political agenda. To date, vigilante groups in Cameroon have mainly acted as locally operating CDFs acting in unison with the government with the goal of fighting incursions by Boko Haram.

However, the non-inclusive nature of Cameroon's government might play a role in PGMs' involvement in human rights violations when they operate in tandem with government forces against political opposition such as anglophone separatists. As the example of the Ngarabuh killings shows, violence against civilians becomes more likely when PGMs are used in a more offensive manner against ethnic minorities.

Although the government of Paul Biya is a non-inclusive government lacking respect for human rights, there is little evidence that the vigilante groups exert excessive violence (against civilians) to suppress the opposition. Recruitment has not followed an ethnic, political or religious pattern to specifically arm supporters of the current ruling elites.

Government capacity: Is the government able to exert control?

Cameroon is clearly a low-capacity state. On the Funds for Peace Fragile State Index, the country ranks amongst the 15 most fragile states in the world (FFP 2021). Its military consists of some 34,000 soldiers primarily equipped with light weapons (Military Balance 2021). The threat from Boko Haram not only highlights the lack of military capacity to curb such violent attacks, but also the state's poor legitimacy and lack of its institutions' effectiveness (Tull 2015). The demand for vigilante committees and their predecessors has always been driven by local needs to bolster security in the absence of national police and military forces (Crisis Group 2018). This structural factor of low state capacity, however, has little effect on the control of PGMs in Cameroon, since the level of formalisation of these groups and the control executed by local authorities is quite high.

In the Far-North region, for instance, vigilante groups were formed in 1997/98 by order of the local governor. The groups were tasked with supporting the administrative, municipal, and traditional authorities by surveying the territory and reporting "all the acts or the individuals likely to disturb the good order" and to apprehend individuals "considered dangerous or caught in the act of any wrongdoing" (Ntede Edongo and Elom 2019: 52). From the outset, these groups were integrated into local security structures and placed under the supervision of either the Commissioner of Public Security or the Commander of the Territorial Brigade of the Gendarmerie. The local authorities were very cautious about preventing the establishment of alternative security structures and were keen to register every local group in order to maintain oversight and control. After declaring "war" on Boko Haram in 2014, President Paul Biya supported the

foundation of new groups, which he repeatedly praised as an important force in the fight against Boko Haram, calling them a "legitimate exercise of civil defence" (Cameroon Tribune 2019; Adama 2021). As of 2020, about 107 groups were officially registered by the government in the Far-North region (Anjoh and Shey 2020). Vigilante groups in Cameroon thus can be considered to be informal PGMs linked to and controlled by local authorities.

Overall, while the state of Cameroon lacks the capacity to defeat Boko Haram and thus depends on the vigilante groups, its local authorities seem willing and able to exert some control. Beside some reports that some groups began cooperating with Boko Haram by trading stolen livestock and accepting bribes to allow insurgent groups across the border (Crisis Group 2018), there is little evidence that a principal–agent problem has evolved in Cameroon.

Provision of support: Is the government increasing the PGMs' capacity to exert violence?

To assess the impact of PGMs on local security, I finally examine whether the (local) government increased PGMs' capacity to exert violence against civilians. As already outlined above, vigilante groups were initiated by local authorities and put under their command. In practice, the village/district chief, who is often also the leader of his vigilante group, provides the necessary equipment. Vigilante groups are thus mostly armed with traditional weapons such as spears, bows and arrows, machetes, and flintlock muskets. Other weapons are also acquired by the groups themselves (Anjoh and Shey 2020).

Cameroonian authorities have so far been reluctant to arm the vigilante groups with modern weapons to prevent the emergence of an "uncontrollable militia" (Crisis Group 2017b: 11). Though authorities were recently called upon to equip vigilante groups with firearms as Islamist groups had started to specifically target vigilante group members, such support never materialised (Actu Cameroun 2021).

In recent years, however, the national government has provided some equipment such as flashlights, megaphones, machetes, torches and in some cases mobile phones and (motor)bikes (RFI 2015; Actu Cameroun 2016). This material support is distributed through the local administration and is mostly handed over to the members during official ceremonies. Vigilante groups do not receive any official training or allowances. Thus, official symbolic recognition as heroes and medals are often the only reward (cf. RFI 2015; Cameroon Tribune 2019; Pemboura 2019). Against this background, members of these groups increasingly complain that they feel defenceless on the frontline, and that they are being used as shields by the military (VOA 2017).

In essence, PGMs have never received any modern weapons or military equipment from the government. The equipment received neither increased their ability to exert violence against civilians nor did it increase the autonomy of these groups.

Conclusion

Overall, my analysis revealed that PGMs actively carried out acts of violence against civilians in three cases. PGMs thereby committed acts of violence in cooperation with security forces (Nigeria) or independently (Burkina Faso and Mali). In four cases (Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso), the mere existence of PGMs led to increased violence by Islamists against members of the militias and civilians, as indicated by targeted attacks following the emergence of PGMs. In all of these cases, ethnically homogeneous PGMs committed violence against civilians of other ethnic groups. While the use of PGMs in Nigeria was able to reduce violence against civilians committed by Islamist forces, this effect is severely counteracted by their own targeting of civilians. Thus, only in Cameroon did PGMs actively reduce violence against civilians in the fight against Boko Haram. However, some groups participated in acts of retaliation in the more ethnicised conflict between the government and separatists.

Mali	Burkina Faso	Nigeria	Niger	Cameroon
Actively (independently) and passively contributed to violence against civilians	Actively (independently) and passively contributed to violence against civilians	Actively (only in cooperation with army) and passively contributed to violence against civilians	Passively contributed to violence against civilians	Mainly reduced violence against civilians

How did governments' willingness to reduce violence against civilians contribute to the outcome?

The case studies revealed that it is difficult to assess the contribution of the "non-inclusive government with lack of respect for human rights" risk factor. I thus decided to look at the "non-inclusive government" and "lack of respect for human rights" factors separately. If a government lacked respect for human rights, this influenced whether PGMs committed violence against civilians. In cases in which governments did little to prosecute human rights violations by their own forces, PGMs generally participated in such actions. However, PGMs were only rarely recruited from government co-ethnics. Only in the case of Burkina Faso was there a correlation between a non-inclusive government with a lack of respect for human rights and an outcome of violence against civilians. In contrast, in Cameroon, the exclusivity of the government did not affect the outcome. Why is this the case? The findings point to another risk factor, namely how PGMs are deployed. When used in a rather defensive, CDF-like role in their own region as in Niger and Cameroon, they did not actively take part in violent actions that targeted civilians. If PGMs accompanied and supported the regular troops in more offensive actions and in areas beyond their own communities however, they participated in violent actions against civilians. This raises a methodological problem: In cases where armed forces and PGMs conducted joint operations in which civilians were targeted, it is difficult to say whether both are equally responsible or whether one was the driving force behind these incidents.

Risk factors	Contribution to violence against civilians				
	Mali	Burkina Faso	Nigeria	Niger	Cameroon
Non-inclusive government	None	High	None	None	Only for the conflict with separatists
No respect for HR	High	High	High	None	Only for the conflict with separatists
PGM recruited from govt. co-ethnics	None	High	None	None	None

How about states' capacity and ability to exert control to limit or reduce violence against civilians?

All five cases can be described as low-capacity states that were threatened by armed Islamist groups and thus resorted to using PGMs. I can thus assume that a lack of state capacity had a strong effect on the decision to deploy or cooperate with PGMs. However, the deployment itself—as the case of Cameroon shows—does not automatically lead to violence against civilians. That said, since it determines the decision on cooperation with PGMs and thus creates the basis for the outcome in the first place, I regard a lack of state capacity to be a precondition, i.e., as structurally causal. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that informal cooperation between government and PGMs limited the governments' ability to exert control and thus highly contributed to violence against civilians in one case only—Mali.

Risk factors	Contribution to violence against civilians				
	Mali	**Burkina Faso**	**Nigeria**	**Niger**	**Cameroon**
Low state capacity	Structural	Structural	Structural	Structural	Structural
Informal cooperation	High	None	None	None	None

How did the provision of weapons and equipment to PGMs influence the outcome?

In my analysis, the provision of arms to PGMs has proven to be an important risk factor. In three of the cases, weapons were transferred to PGMs and most likely contributed to an increase in violence against civilians in all of these cases (Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria). It is important to note that the provision of weapons enables PGMs (as in the case of Nigeria) to participate in offensive operations of the regular armed forces. The provision of (military) equipment did not have a negative effect on violence against civilians. However, such provisions were mostly limited to basic equipment such as mobile phones, metal detectors, flashlights and megaphones. This equipment cannot be considered capable of enhancing the offensive capabilities of PGMs or increasing their independence from the government. On the contrary, such equipment seems to have helped to reduce civilian casualties in the cases of Cameroon and Nigeria.

Risk factors	Contribution to violence against civilians				
	Mali	**Burkina Faso**	**Nigeria**	**Niger**	**Cameroon**
Provision of arms	High	Most likely	High	None	None
Provision of (military) equipment	None	None	None	None	None

Overall, my analysis showed that the deployment of PGMs did not contribute significantly to reducing violence against civilians in the Sahel region. Most of the countries resorted to such groups out of necessity to fight Islamist incursions. Only Burkina Faso showed evidence that PGMs were intentionally supported and recruited along ethnic lines to secure the survival of a non-inclusive government.

Nevertheless, the factor of governments' lack of respect for human rights was significant in cases in which PGMs contributed to increased violence against civilians; albeit not in the way I had hypothesised. In three of the cases (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria) governments did little to prevent human rights abuses of their own official security forces. In all three cases, PGMs took part in offensive operations of the militaries and also participated in their human rights abuses, suggesting that it is not a lack of control over PGMs that leads to violence. Only in Mali and Burkina Faso did PGMs engage in violent actions against civilians independently. In these cases, however, security forces were still responsible for many atrocities, which means that they did not outsource their dirty work to PGMs. Instead, PGMs, under condition of impunity, quickly adapted to the strategies and behaviour of the security forces.

Finally, whenever weapons were distributed to PGMs, they contributed to an increase in violence against civilians and an escalation of conflict. The exceptional cases of Cameroon and Niger, in which PGMs reduced violence or contributed to it only in a passive way, further revealed another risk factor: The tactical role of these units. If these groups acted as CDFs in a strict sense, i.e., if they were restricted to protecting their own community and did not participate in offensive actions, they showed little tendency towards violent behaviour directed against civilians.

Based on the analysis, the following combination of risk factors seems to be the most appropriate in predicting PGM violence against civilians in the Sahel region:
\ A government that shows little respect for human rights and makes little effort to curb violence by its own security forces against civilians;
\ PGMs taking on offensive roles and cooperating with state security forces;
\ PGMs that are armed by the state, ethnically homogeneous and encounter other ethnic groups in operations beyond their own community.

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