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PhD Dissertation

**PARAMILITARY GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICAN BORDER
REGIONS**
**A Comparative Case Study of JNIM and ISGS in the Liptako–Gourma and
Ghana–Burkina Faso Regions**

Annie Abena Aku Agyemfra

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Supervisor: Associate Professor dr. Paragi Beata

DEDICATION

To my beloved children, Eleazar and Eleana,

May this dissertation always remind you that difficult journeys can be overcome with faith, courage, perseverance, and grace.

May you one day look at these pages and be inspired to pursue your own dreams, knowing that no worthwhile journey is impossible when you refuse to give up.

This work is dedicated to you, with all my love.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how transnational paramilitary groups exercise governance in fragile borderlands of West Africa, focusing on Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). While existing scholarship has extensively examined armed groups in the region through violence, terrorism, and counterinsurgency, less attention has been given to how these groups establish and exercise governance across different borderland environments. The study therefore compares two contrasting contexts: the entrenched paramilitary governance of the Liptako–Gourma tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and the emerging governance influence of JNIM and ISGS along the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, informed primarily by a governmentality perspective and complemented by insights from scholarship on rebel governance and legitimacy. It draws on academic and policy literature, institutional reports, conflict-event data, and three semi-structured expert interviews. The analysis examines the rationalities and strategies underpinning paramilitary governance, community responses, legitimacy claims, and the interaction between paramilitary governance and state and multilateral interventions.

The findings demonstrate that paramilitary governance exists along a continuum rather than as a binary condition of governance or non-governance. In Liptako–Gourma, JNIM and ISGS have developed more institutionalized governance practices, including taxation, dispute resolution, security provision, economic regulation, and the enforcement of social and religious norms. Along the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, governance remains emergent and fragmented, expressed primarily through influence-building, religious outreach, selective mediation, and early attempts at social embedding. Legitimacy is similarly plural and conditional, while communities respond through accommodation, negotiation, resistance, and withdrawal according to changing security and livelihood conditions. The study further demonstrates that state and multilateral interventions shape, rather than simply respond to, these governance dynamics. The thesis contributes to scholarship on insurgent governance and African borderland politics by conceptualizing paramilitary governance as adaptive, relational, and context-dependent. It extends attention beyond consolidated territorial control to include proto-governance in emerging frontier zones and highlights the importance of community responses and external interventions in shaping the development and limits of paramilitary authority.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
CAN	Aid to the Church in Need
ACCORD	African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes
AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CSIS (US)	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSiS (Eu-rope)	Centre for Security Studies
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains)
FLM	Macina Liberation Front
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin
KA IPTC	Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD-SWAC	Sahel and West Africa Club
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Armed non-state actors have become central to the study of security and governance in Africa, particularly in regions where state authority is weak, contested, or absent. The persistence of armed groups across fragile borderlands highlights the limitations of state-centric understandings of order, sovereignty, and security. While these groups are often described in policy discourse primarily through the language of terrorism and violent extremism, growing scholarship has shown that governance is not defined solely by the formal institutions of the state but often emerges through hybrid arrangements involving communities, traditional authorities, international actors, and armed non-state groups. This dual role as both violent challengers and political governors creates profound dilemmas for states and international actors, especially in contexts where local institutions are fragile and legitimacy is contested. These dynamics are especially evident in the Sahel, where the rise of groups such as *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) underscores how paramilitary actors exercise forms of authority that rival, coexist with, or directly undermine state structures.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate paramilitary governance in West African borderlands through a comparative lens. It focuses on two distinct cases: the Liptako-Gourma region, where paramilitary control has become entrenched, and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, where threats are emerging but not yet consolidated. By juxtaposing these cases, the study seeks to uncover how governance practices differ across contexts of *entrenched* versus *emerging* paramilitary presence, and how these variations influence state legitimacy, community responses, and the outcomes of multilateral interventions. The significance of studying these governance dynamics lies not only in their immediate implications for security but also in their broader impact on state legitimacy, social cohesion, and the effectiveness of international interventions. Understanding how such groups rationalize their authority, develop governance strategies, and construct legitimacy is essential for assessing both the resilience of fragile states and the vulnerabilities of borderland populations. Furthermore, these insights shed light on wider debates about sovereignty, authority, and governance in contemporary international relations and security studies.

In doing so, the thesis engages with three interrelated academic debates. First, it engages with scholarship on armed non-state actors and rebel governance (Arjona, 2017) moving beyond narrow security framings to analyse how these actors govern everyday life. Second, it draws on borderland studies to

highlight the importance of frontier in shaping political authority, where state control is partial or episodic (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010 & Nugent, 2019). Third, it employs governmentality-inspired approaches (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2009 & Rose, 2000) to examine how governance is rationalized, contested, and adapted in fragile border regions. By situating paramilitary governance within these wider literatures, the research provides a framework for understanding the diversity of governance logics in fragile African borderlands and the implications they hold for statehood, legitimacy, and security interventions.

1.1 Contextualization

This section highlights how border regions, often marked by weak state authority and overlapping actors, provide a critical lens for examining the governance practices of armed groups. The subsections that follow explore the Sahel and West Africa as a regional security and governance context, existing perspectives on governance, the particular dynamics of African borderlands, ungoverned spaces and the role of non-state armed actors, as well as the external actors' responses to the non-state armed actors, thereby setting the foundation for the research problem.

1.1.1 The Sahel and West Africa as a Regional Security and Governance Context

Understanding contemporary patterns of paramilitary governance in African borderlands requires situating them within the broader regional context of the Sahel and West Africa. Although these regions are frequently invoked in studies of conflict, governance, and security, their geographical and analytical boundaries are neither fixed nor universally agreed upon (Walther & Rettaillé, 2021). Rather than representing immutable geographical entities, both the Sahel and West Africa have evolved as regional constructs whose meanings have been shaped by changing ecological, political, economic, and security concerns (Acharya et al., 2026).

The term Sahel, derived from the Arabic word *sāḥil* meaning "shore" or "coast," was originally used to describe the ecological transition zone separating the Sahara Desert from the Sudanian savannah. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the concept was primarily employed by geographers, environmental scientists, and development practitioners to describe a semi-arid region characterised by climatic variability, pastoral mobility, and recurrent drought (OECD/SWAC, 2014; Walther & Rettaillé, 2021). During the drought crises of the 1970s and 1980s, international organizations and development agencies increasingly adopted the Sahel as a regional framework for humanitarian assistance and development planning. Since the early twenty-first century, however, the term has acquired a

broad political and security meaning, particularly following the escalation of armed conflicts in Mali after 2012. It is now widely employed by governments, regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, international organizations including the United Nations, and security scholars to describe an interconnected regional space shaped by transnational insecurity, governance challenges, and cross-border mobility (Lecocq et al., 2013; Walther, 2017; Thurston, 2020).

Traditionally, the Sahel has been defined as a semi-arid ecological belt stretching across the African continent between the Sahara Desert to the north and the Sudanian savannah to the south. Extending from the Atlantic coast through countries including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan, the Sahel has historically functioned as a zone of ecological transition characterized by seasonal pastoral mobility, trans-Saharan trade, and extensive social and cultural interactions that long predate the establishment of modern state boundaries (OCDE/CSAO 2014; Walther & Retaille, 2021). While this ecological-geographical understanding remains important, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes the Sahel as a political and security space shaped by shared governance challenges and transnational security dynamics (Lecocq, et al., 2013; Walther, 2017; Thurston, 2020).

Unlike the Sahel, whose origins are primarily rooted in ecological and geographical classification, West Africa has evolved principally as a historical, political, and institutional region. Although the expression has long appeared in geographical and historical scholarship to denote the western portion of the African continent, its contemporary meaning has been shaped by successive processes of colonial administration, decolonization, state formation, and regional integration (Nugent, 2003). Following the wave of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the concept increasingly acquired political significance as newly independent states sought mechanisms for regional cooperation to address shared developmental, economic, and security challenges. This process culminated in the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, which institutionalized West Africa as a regional political and economic community and subsequently expanded its role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, democratic governance, and regional security (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016).

In contemporary scholarship and policy discourse, West Africa is therefore understood not merely as a geographical expression but as a dynamic regional space constituted through historical interactions, political institutions, economic interdependence, and shared security concerns. The concept is widely employed by regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union, international organizations including the United Nations, development agencies, and scholars of African politics, regionalism, and international security to analyse challenges that transcend national boundaries, including

cross-border governance, migration, violent extremism, transnational organized crime, and regional integration (Acharya et al., 2026; Nugent, 2019). This broader understanding underscores that West Africa is both a geographical region and a political community whose contemporary relevance lies in the interconnected nature of its governance and security dynamics.

Increasingly, however, the distinction between the Sahel and West Africa has become less analytically rigid. Recent scholarship argues that contemporary insecurity cannot be understood solely within national or sub-regional boundaries because armed violence, illicit economies, environmental pressures, and population movements increasingly transcend conventional geopolitical divisions (International Crisis Group, 2021; OECD/SWAC, 2022). Rather than representing separate geopolitical spaces, the Sahel and the northern regions of coastal West African states are increasingly viewed as constituting an interconnected security environment in which developments in one area have significant implications for neighboring states (International Crisis Group, 2021; Thurston, 2020). The expansion of violent extremist organizations, the proliferation of illicit trafficking networks, and the increasing movement of displaced populations have reinforced this regional interdependence, challenging conventional distinctions between the Sahel and the wider West African region.

This regional interconnectedness is consistent with the logic of regional security complex theory, which argues that the security of neighboring states becomes closely intertwined because threats, vulnerabilities, and responses are rarely confined within national borders (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Although this thesis does not adopt Regional Security Complex Theory as an analytical framework, the concept provides a useful contextual lens for understanding why and how *insecurity* in the central Sahel has increasingly shaped governance and security dynamics across neighboring West African borderlands. The growing interconnectedness of the Sahel and West Africa demonstrates that governance and security challenges increasingly transcend national boundaries. Borderlands, situated at the intersection of states, communities, and transnational networks, have become key sites where the effects of these regional dynamics are most visible. Understanding these spaces therefore requires moving beyond conventional state-centric perspectives to examine how authority is exercised, negotiated, and contested across frontier regions. This regional context provides the foundation for examining governance in African borderlands.

1.1.2 Governance in Africa on Borderlands

Governance is, at its most basic, a government's capacity to set and enforce rules and to deliver services within its territorial jurisdiction, irrespective of the regime type in place (Fukuyama, 2013).

He stated that,

“The ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not” (Fukuyama : 2013, p. 350).

This state-centric formulation privileges the state as the site of rule, treating governance as coterminous with the reach of sovereign authority inside recognized borders. Others define it more expansively: Rosenau (1995, p. 13) conceives of governance as systems of rule operating at every level of human activity, from the family to the international organization, wherever the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control produces order beyond formal jurisdiction. This relational understanding resonates with Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) "border as method" approach, which treats borders not as fixed lines demarcating sovereign territory but as "complex social institutions" (p. 3) that are actively produced, multiplied, and contested by the very actors who cross, police, and inhabit them — reframing the border itself as a site of shared, rather than exclusively state-held, governance. This wider view has shaped how the governance of border areas has been defined within migration studies and cross-border criminology. Bosworth and Guild (2008) examine governance as it operates through the criminalization of mobility, showing how border control functions as a means of governing populations "through crime" rather than through territorial rule alone. Governance, then, remains a contested concept, spanning formulations that range from the strictly state-centric to the plural and multi-level.

Governance has traditionally been conceptualized through a state-centric paradigm, deeply rooted in classical political theory nurtured in the Global North. At its core, this notion assumes that the state holds a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory, as famously articulated by Max Weber (1978)¹. The Weberian ideal-type posits the state as the central and rational actor in political life, governing through bureaucratic institutions, codified laws, and formal authority structures. Under this framework, the state's capacity to control territory, maintain order, and enforce compliance becomes the principal yardstick for assessing governance. Governance, therefore, is primarily equated with the effective functioning of state institutions and their ability to manage society through

¹ Weber's classic definition appears in *Economy and Society* (first published 1922; English trans. 1978).

laws, public administration, and sovereign control. Scott (2020), while critical of the outcomes of such centralized schemes, affirms this foundational notion by demonstrating how modern states attempt to render society “legible” precisely to enhance their capacity for control and governance.

Governance has also been conceptualized more broadly as the ensemble of practices, institutions, and modes of coordination through which collective affairs are directed. Dean (2009) argues that governance extends beyond the formal institutions of government to encompass the diverse ways in which conduct is organized and social order is maintained. From a more institutional perspective, governance has increasingly been conceptualized by development economists and policy scholars in terms of the quality and effectiveness of institutions. Governance in this regard, though not always explicitly defined, emerges in the works of North (1990) and Acemoglu et al. (2001; 2012) as the institutional capacity to shape incentives, manage power relations, and uphold societal order. For Acemoglu and Robinson, it hinges on whether institutions are inclusive—promoting accountability and participation—or extractive, serving narrow elite interests. For North, governance, lies in the evolution of institutions that reduce uncertainty and transaction costs. In addition, Douglass North’s (1990) influential definition of institutions as “the rules of the game in a society”—includes not only formal rules such as constitutions and laws, but also informal constraints like social norms, customs, and codes of conduct. North emphasizes that these informal elements are foundational to how societies structure governance and enable cooperation under uncertainty.

Therefore, governance, extends beyond the formal apparatus of the state to include the diverse array of institutions—both formal and informal—that regulate social order. In this view, institutions are not limited to codified laws or bureaucratic structures but encompass deeply embedded norms, traditions, and conventions that shape behavior. This is most evident in the work of Kaufmann, Kraay, and Zoido-Lobaton (1999), who define governance as the traditions and institutions by which authority is exercised in a country. Their Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) framework outlines six key dimensions of governance: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. These dimensions reflect a managerial and quantitative/quantified approach to governance that aligns closely with the institutionalist legacy of Weber.

While these models have significantly contributed to understanding governance in consolidated states, in many African contexts, particularly in peripheral or border regions, these assumptions do not hold especially in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where state authority is often partial, episodic, or absent altogether (Isser et al., 2024). The literature on African borderlands challenges traditional conceptions

of borders as mere barriers, emphasizing their role as “conduits and opportunities”² for cross-border interaction (Nugent & Asiwaju, 1996) and have contributed to the scholarship of governance.

Borderlands in Africa have long been identified as peripheral spaces where the authority of the central state is weak, contested, or only partially recognized. Unlike metropolitan cores, border regions often represent what Boone (2003) calls the “margins of state authority,” characterized by limited administrative penetration, low infrastructural development, and overlapping claims of sovereignty. Nugent (2003) similarly argues that African borderlands are not just geographical margins but also political frontiers, where citizenship, belonging, and governance are constantly negotiated.

The literature on African borderlands reveals structural porosity as a defining characteristic shaped by colonial legacies and governance challenges. African borders, largely established through Europeans³ colonial expansion during the Scramble for Africa, were demarcated with limited regard for pre-existing ethnic, cultural, political, and socio-economic relationships, contributing to enduring patterns of border porosity (Feyissa et al., 2010). Boundaries frequently bisected ethnic groups, kinship networks, and trading routes (Herbst, 2000). While this facilitates legitimate cross-border activities such as visiting kin, herding, farming, and trading, but simultaneously enables criminal activities including human trafficking, gun-running, and terrorism (Abdullahi & Gawi, 2021). Pastoralist mobility, seasonal migration, and smuggling economies—ranging from livestock and agricultural produce to arms and gold—have reinforced the fluidity of these spaces (ICG, 2021). Although these patterns are broadly observable across the continent, the degree of border permeability has also been shaped by differences in colonial administrative practices, particularly between French and British rule, the former often pursuing more centralized territorial control while the latter tended to rely on indirect governance (Nwankwo, 2020). These differing logics of colonial statecraft have continued to influence the uneven capacity of postcolonial governments to regulate frontier zones and to shape how border communities negotiate authority in the present. As a result, borderlands are rarely just “lines on a map”; rather, they constitute what Hagmann and Péclard (2010, 542) describe as “negotiated political orders”, where

² The phrase became influential in African border studies, emphasizing social and economic interconnections across colonial frontiers.

³ While the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) did not directly delineate most African colonial boundaries, it established the diplomatic principles and legal framework that guided European territorial claims during the broader Scramble for Africa. The subsequent partitioning and demarcation of the continent occurred through bilateral treaties, military expeditions, colonial occupation, and boundary commissions between approximately 1876 and 1912 (Pakenham, 1991). The Berlin Conference is therefore more accurately understood as institutionalizing the process of partition rather than directly drawing most of Africa's colonial borders.

power and authority emerge through ongoing interactions among states, communities, and non-state actors.

Crucially, the marginalization of borderland populations contributes to their vulnerability to alternative forms of governance. Borderland communities face systematic exclusion from state services, economic opportunities, and political decision-making processes (Feyissa et. al., 2010; Shanguhyia, 2021). This marginalization stems from geographic isolation, colonial legacies of neglect, and states' focus on central regions rather than peripheries (Shanguhyia, 2021). Border populations experience restricted access to essential services like healthcare and education, security threats, and economic exclusion, creating environments of instability and vulnerability (Nugent, 2019). The weakness or absence of state structures in these regions contributes to the emergence of local stateless forms of power and alternative political organizations where the absence of public services and infrastructure fosters the emergence of hybrid authorities, including customary leaders, religious figures, traders, and, increasingly, armed groups (Nugent, 2019). Scholars further note that many African governments treat border regions primarily as security zones rather than developmental priorities (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Decades of cross-border insecurity and state neglect have fostered community consciousness that critiques the modern state's role as protector and provider, potentially opening space for non-state governance arrangements (Shanguhyia, 2021).

The historical trajectory of African borderlands further reinforces this hybridity. From colonial indirect rule to postcolonial neglect, border populations have relied heavily on informal mechanisms of dispute resolution, cross-border trade, and kinship-based reciprocity to sustain social order (Nugent, 2019). During the colonial period, many African frontiers were treated not as central spaces of governance but as marginal zones where indirect rule prevailed. Colonial authorities often lacked the administrative or coercive capacity to penetrate peripheries and instead relied on traditional chiefs, Islamic clerics, and local intermediaries to enforce limited control (Herbst, 2000). In this sense, borderlands were never fully incorporated into the institutional architecture of the colonial state but were governed through negotiated arrangements that embedded hybridity at the very foundation of statehood.

With independence, many postcolonial governments inherited this pattern of neglect. Development strategies disproportionately concentrated resources in capital cities and economically strategic regions, leaving borderlands under-invested and politically marginalised (Boone, 2014). The absence of meaningful state presence often forced border communities to rely on informal mechanisms of dispute resolution, kinship-based reciprocity, and long-standing cross-border trade networks to sustain social

order (Nugent, 2003; Raeymaekers, 2009). Such practices not only reflected adaptation to weak state authority but also actively shaped borderland resilience, creating alternative systems of regulation that could operate parallel to or in defiance of official state structures.

The recognition that African borderlands are characterized by negotiated political orders and plural forms of governance necessitates moving beyond conventional state-centric understandings of political authority. While the modern state remains an important factor in shaping governance outcomes, scholarship on African politics increasingly emphasizes that authority is often dispersed among multiple actors operating within the same political space. This perspective is reflected in the work of Chazan et al. (1999), who argue that political life in Africa is best understood through patterns of interaction among diverse actors rather than through the actions of the state alone. Their Political Interaction Framework highlights the dynamic relationships among state institutions, local communities, traditional authorities, religious actors, economic networks, and other societal forces that collectively shape political order. This perspective is particularly relevant in borderland regions where the reach of state institutions is often uneven and where multiple sources of authority coexist.

The significance of these dynamics has become increasingly apparent within a broader regional environment characterized by persistent insecurity and governance challenges. Security scholars have described a broad geographical belt stretching from the Horn of Africa through the Sahara and Sahel to parts of West Africa as an “Arc of Instability,” highlighting the interconnected nature of conflict, weak governance, socio-economic marginalization, and transnational security threats. This perspective emphasizes that instability in border regions cannot be understood solely within the confines of individual states. Instead, it reflects broader regional processes shaped by cross-border mobility, transnational networks, economic interdependence, and shared historical trajectories (Cooke et al., 2016; United Nations, 2013). The prominence of such regions in contemporary security debates has often led to their characterization as “ungoverned spaces” (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010).

1.1.3 Ungoverned Spaces in African Borderlands and its scholarly critique

The concept of ungoverned spaces gained prominence in security and policy circles in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010). It emerged as an alternative to the prevailing failed states narrative, which had largely adopted a top-down understanding of state weakness and collapse (Marsai & Tarrósy, 2022). The ungoverned spaces literature shifted attention from the state unified political entity to specific territories where governmental authority was weak,

contested, or absent. Such spaces increasingly came to be viewed as potential safe havens for transnational criminal networks, insurgent groups, and terrorist organizations.

Rabasa et al. (2007: xv) define an ungoverned territory as “an area in which a state faces significant challenges in establishing control. Ungoverned territories can be failed or failing states, poorly controlled land or maritime borders, or areas within otherwise viable states where the central government's authority does not extend.” This definition broadens the understanding of state weakness by recognizing that even relatively stable states may contain territories that remain beyond effective governmental control. According to Rabasa et al. (2007), one of the defining characteristics of ungoverned spaces is the limited penetration of the state into society, evidenced by weak or non-functioning institutions, poor infrastructure, and the absence of effective administrative and security structures. Such territories are frequently found in geographically challenging environments, including deserts, mountains, forests, and remote borderlands, where states often lack the resources or capacity to establish a sustained presence. Consequently, these areas can become conducive environments for illicit economies, transnational criminal networks, and armed groups that exploit governance deficits.

Despite its widespread adoption, the notion of ungoverned spaces has attracted considerable criticism within the academic literature. Scholars argue that the concept implies a complete absence of governance and rests on a binary distinction between governed and ungoverned territories (Taylor, 2016). This perspective assumes that governance is synonymous with state authority and overlooks the fact that alternative forms of authority frequently emerge where state institutions are weak or absent. Similarly, Clunan and Trinkunas (2010) contend that few territories are genuinely devoid of governance; rather, authority is frequently exercised through a variety of formal and informal institutions that regulate social, political, and economic life. In reality, many territories described as ungoverned are characterized by complex and overlapping systems of rule involving customary authorities, community leaders, militias, criminal networks, and insurgent organizations. These critiques therefore suggest that the term risks reinforcing binary distinctions between order and disorder or governance and anarchy, while failing to recognize the multiple forms through which authority is organized beyond the state.

These critiques are particularly relevant in the African context and influential in studies of African borderlands. Hansen (2019) argues that the Horn of Africa and the Sahel should not be understood as governance vacuums but rather as interconnected regions characterized by fragmented and contested forms of authority. State weakness in these regions has not resulted in an absence of governance but

in the emergence of multiple actors that regulate economic activities, mediate disputes, provide security, and exercise political authority. Particularly, scholars increasingly reject the notion that frontier regions are institutional voids or spaces devoid of governance. Instead, African borderlands are understood as politically dynamic environments characterized by multiple and overlapping forms of authority that shape everyday governance. Christian Lund (2006; 2011), for example, argues that public authority should be understood as an effect of institutions claiming legitimacy rather than as an exclusive attribute of the state. In many African contexts, customary authorities, religious institutions, local associations, and community-based structures exercise forms of public authority that coexist with, complement, or occasionally challenge formal state institutions. Rather than existing outside governance, these actors participate in the production and maintenance of political order through locally recognised practices of regulation, dispute resolution, and social control.

Similarly, Hagmann and Péclard (2010) contend that governance in Africa is best understood as a process of continuous negotiation among multiple actors rather than as the unilateral exercise of state authority. Their concept of negotiated statehood demonstrates that governance frequently emerges through bargaining, accommodation, and collaboration between state and non-state actors, particularly in peripheral and borderland regions where state authority is unevenly exercised. Likewise, Meagher (2012) illustrates how informal institutions and social networks frequently assume important governance functions in contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent. Rather than representing institutional failure, these informal governance arrangements often constitute adaptive responses through which communities organise economic activity, regulate social relations, and maintain local order.

Similarly, studies of Somalia demonstrate that areas characterised by weak state penetration are rarely devoid of governance. Despite the limited reach of the Somali state, Al-Shabaab has established extensive governance structures in territories under its influence, including systems of taxation, dispute resolution, and security provision. The group's ability to provide predictable forms of order and justice in certain localities illustrates that governance functions do not disappear in contexts of limited statehood but are instead assumed by alternative actors that derive legitimacy from their capacity to govern (Menkhaus, 2006; Hansen, 2013). Similarly, Marsai and Tarrósy (2022), writing specifically on the Sahel, observe that governance cannot be understood solely through the actions of the state, as a variety of local institutions and non-state actors continue to perform functions commonly associated with public authority. Collectively, these studies suggest that the principal challenge is not the absence of governance but understanding how different actors exercise authority within politically and socially complex environments.

The literature therefore challenges the binary distinction between governed and ungoverned territories and instead points to the existence of multiple and overlapping forms of authority in areas of limited statehood. In many African borderlands, governance functions continue to be performed despite weak state penetration, often by a diverse range of actors operating outside formal state institutions. This insight is particularly important for understanding the growing influence of armed non-state actors in fragile borderland environments. Where state institutions struggle to provide security, justice, and basic services, alternative actors frequently emerge to fill governance gaps and exercise varying degrees of authority and legitimacy. The following section therefore examines the role of armed non-state actors and their increasing importance as providers of governance and security in contexts of limited state presence.

1.1.4 Armed Non–State Actors and Governance Practices

The proliferation of armed non-state actors across the Sahel and broader West African region has prompted a growing body of scholarship that examines how such groups engage in governance. These actors, particularly paramilitary groups are first and foremost known for their violent campaigns, including ambushes, assassinations, bombings, and direct confrontations with state forces (Pérouse de Montclos, 2021). Their use of force serves as a primary mechanism through which they assert territorial influence and challenge state authority (Raineri, 2022).

In areas where the state is weak or absent, paramilitary groups often step into the vacuum, performing roles typically associated with the state (Raineri, 2022). Research on rebel governance, notably by Mampilly (2012) and Arjona (2017), provides a foundational understanding of how non-state actors gain legitimacy and establish control through governance functions such as distributive justice, taxation, education, and public order⁴. These actors often operate through hybrid arrangements that include negotiation with local leaders and selective incorporation of existing socio-political institutions. In so doing, they directly influence key indicators of legitimacy including service provision, procedural fairness, and normative alignment with community expectations. In fragile borderlands, the absence of reliable state services makes such functions particularly salient. Communities often accept, pragmatically or reluctantly, the authority of non-state actors when these actors provide security from rival

⁴ Mampilly's work is based on the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, while Arjona draws extensively from the Colombian civil war context.

factions, mediate conflicts, or ensure access to trade and pastoral routes (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010; Raleigh, 2011).

As noted in studies of the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, and the eastern DRC⁵, insurgent groups gain traction not merely through coercion but also by positioning themselves as providers of order and dispute resolution where the state is absent (Mlambo, 2023). This pattern is also evident in the responses of violent extremist organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparative study of Boko Haram and al-Shabaab demonstrates how both groups strategically portrayed themselves as alternative providers of governance by disseminating public health information, imposing preventive measures, and framing their responses as evidence of their capacity to protect and govern populations in areas where state presence was weak or ineffective (Marsai & Tarrósy, 2022). These actions illustrate that the pursuit of legitimacy by armed non-state actors extends beyond military control and coercion to include the provision of services and protection, reinforcing their claims to political authority and governance. These dynamics underscore the centrality of security as governance, where the provision of protection and essential services becomes a key basis for political authority and social acceptance. Consequently, in fragile borderlands and contested spaces, communities often engage pragmatically with whichever actor can most effectively deliver security, order, and basic governance, regardless of the actor's formal legitimacy or legal status (Arjona, 2017; Mampilly, 2012).

The question of legitimacy is central to understanding the authority of armed non-state actors in African borderlands. In contexts where the state is absent, predatory, or inconsistent, communities often assess authority not through formal legality but through pragmatic performance, cultural resonance, and moral comportment. Yet, legitimacy is never uncontested: while some communities view non-state governance as functional or even morally justified, others comply primarily out of coercion or fear. This layered and negotiated character of legitimacy reveals why insurgent governance cannot be reduced to violence alone, but must be analyzed as an attempt to embed authority within fragile social and political orders (Englebert, 2000; Lund, 2006).

International organizations have increasingly acknowledged the governance roles played by armed actors in borderlands. The United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU), for example, note that in contexts such as the Sahel, eastern DRC, and Somalia, armed groups often function as *de facto* administrators, levying taxes, regulating local markets, and providing justice systems in areas where state

⁵ These cases illustrate parallel governance: Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and various Mai-Mai groups in eastern Congo.

authority is absent. The ISS-Africa Report 37 (2021) likewise emphasizes that in the Sahelian borderlands, the persistence of violence is tied not only to insurgency but to the competition between rival forms of governance — state, traditional, and insurgent. Such recognition demonstrates that armed groups are not merely destructive actors but also political ones, embedded in longer histories of borderland authority (ISS-Africa Report 37, 2021; CSIS report, 2019; Hoffmann & Vlassenroot, 2014).

Importantly, the governance dimension of armed groups in borderlands should not be romanticized. Scholars caution that their rule often combines coercion with selective service provision, producing uneven and frequently exploitative forms of authority. Armed groups in African borderlands are best understood not solely as spoilers but as actors engaged in governance. Their authority rests on a combination of coercion, provision, and legitimacy-seeking practices that resonate with localized norms and needs (Cantens, 2022; OECD-SWAC, 2022). Situating them within this broader governance lens provides a crucial analytical foundation for examining how paramilitary groups such as JNIM and ISGS articulate governance in the frontier spaces of West Africa.

1.1.5 Responses of External Actors (States and International Actors) to Armed Non-State Groups

Across African borderlands, armed groups such as jihadist movements, militias, and rebel factions are overwhelmingly framed by states and international actors as security threats rather than governance actors. National governments typically conceptualize these groups through the language of terrorism, violent extremism, and organized crime, stressing their disruptive impact on territorial integrity and regime stability (Charbonneau, 2021). For example, Ghana’s Anti-Terrorism Act (Act 762, 2008)⁶ criminalizes all forms of support, financing, or recruitment linked to designated “terrorist organizations,” with little distinction between their coercive and governance practices (Zeldin, 2008). Similarly, Burkina Faso has declared a state of emergency in several northern and eastern provinces since 2019, justifying sweeping military campaigns under the banner of counter-terrorism (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Regional bodies reinforce this framing. The African Union (AU)’s Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (1999)⁷ and the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013) explicitly treat jihadist groups as “terrorist threats” to be dismantled through military and legal means. Likewise, the

⁶ This Act aligns Ghana with global counter-terrorism norms under UN Security Council resolutions.

⁷ The Convention was adopted in Algiers in 1999 and remains the key continental legal instrument on counter-terrorism.

withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS in 2024 underscores how securitized framings often overshadow cooperative governance approaches. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has repeatedly sanctioned Al-Qaeda affiliates in West Africa under its global counter-terrorism regime, while peace operations such as MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane were primarily justified as missions to eliminate armed “terrorist” actors rather than to engage with their governance roles (Charbonneau, 2021).

This security-first discourse has two implications. First, it narrows state and international policy responses to the coercive dimension of these groups, emphasizing counter-insurgency, policing, and border militarization. Second, it obscures the governance strategies these groups pursue—such as dispute resolution, economic regulation, or service delivery—that shape civilian perceptions of legitimacy (Thurston, 2020). While policymakers often dismiss such practices as “criminal predation” or “terrorist manipulation,” scholarly literature emphasizes their significance for understanding the endurance of armed groups in fragile peripheries (Bøås, 2015).

In short, while states and international organizations primarily conceptualize armed groups as existential security threats, the academic debate has increasingly shifted toward exploring their role as hybrid governance actors in contested spaces. It is precisely this tension—between the securitized framing of policy and the governance-focused analyses in scholarship—that this study seeks to engage.

1.2 Research gap

Existing scholarship and policy analysis on armed non-state actors in Africa has expanded considerably over the past two decades, but important gaps remain in how the governance strategies of armed groups are conceptualized and compared across contexts. Most studies focus on entrenched insurgencies in core conflict theatres such as the Liptako–Gourma region (spanning Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), where JNIM and ISGS exercise visible forms of territorial control and parallel governance (Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2023). In these settings, governance practices have been documented, though often primarily through the lens of counterterrorism and security studies rather than systematic analyses of governance logics and legitimacy claims. As a result, existing literature tends to overemphasize violence and coercion, while under examining the rationalities and gradations of authority through which these groups seek to embed themselves within local communities.

Meanwhile, emerging frontier zones – such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands – remain under-researched, despite growing evidence of militant activity, ideological outreach, and early governance signals (UNDP, 2024). Much of the policy commentary on coastal West Africa portrays these areas merely as “spillover zones” or passive recipients of insecurity radiating from the Sahel (Aning & Danso, 2012). Such framing overlooks how insurgent groups proactively cultivate influence in these spaces, even in the absence of consolidated territorial control. Academic work has yet to systematically interrogate how these incipient governance strategies compare with the more institutionalized arrangements observed in entrenched theatres.

Moreover, there is a lack of comparative analysis across entrenched and emerging contexts. Most studies either focus on long-established conflict zones (e.g., Mali or northern Burkina Faso) or on preventive strategies in coastal states (e.g., Ghana, Togo, Benin), but few examine how governance by armed groups is simultaneously established, adapted, and contested across different borderland environments. Methodologically, there is a notable absence of comparative case studies that trace the spatial and temporal variation of paramilitary governance strategies in West African border regions.

Finally, both academic and policy discourses continue to privilege securitized framings that portray armed groups as terrorists including states enacting laws to criminalize such groups, while neglecting their role as competing authorities in fragile borderlands. International and regional interventions, while extensive, are largely designed to suppress militant violence rather than to understand or respond to their governance strategies (Furlan, 2020). This risk reinforcing a cycle in which governance functions provided by non-state actors are ignored until they become entrenched, limiting the scope for early, preventive responses.

1.3 Research objectives, questions and the structure

In response to these identified gaps, this thesis examines the dynamics of paramilitary governance in West African borderlands, to explain the emerging threat landscape along the Ghana–Burkina Faso border. Building on and contributing to earlier scholarship on paramilitary groups, this study investigates how paramilitary groups themselves rationalize their authority, operationalize governance strategies, and construct legitimacy in contexts of limited or absent state control. Employing a comparative case study design – by exploring and analysing the presence of *Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) in the Liptako–Gourma region – the research draws on secondary sources and expert interviews with regional specialists to explore variations

between *entrenched* and *emerging* zones of paramilitary influence by addressing the following specific questions:

1. How do JNIM and ISGS establish and exercise governance in entrenched areas like Liptako-Gourma, and what rationalities underpin their governance strategies?
2. In emerging threat zones such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso border, how do JNIM and ISGS attempt to exert influence or extend governance despite limited territorial control?
3. How do local communities perceive, negotiate, or resist the governance efforts of JNIM and ISGS across entrenched and emerging contexts?
4. How do multilateral and state security interventions interact with paramilitary governance strategies in these two contrasting environments?

To present the findings, the thesis has been organised into seven chapters that build progressively from contextual framing to empirical analysis and theoretical synthesis. Following this Introduction Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual-theoretical framework by reviewing the relevant literature on perspectives from governmentality, rebel governance, hybridity, and legitimacy Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methods, detailing the methodological approach, data sources, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 turns to the first case study, examining paramilitary governance in the entrenched frontier of Liptako–Gourma, while Chapter 5 analyses the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands as an emerging frontier where governance signals and influence strategies are still largely symbolic and exploratory. Chapter 6 draws these cases together through a comparative analysis, providing a theoretical synthesis and outlining key policy implications. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the main findings, acknowledging the study’s limitations, and identifying avenues for future research.

1.4. Contribution and significance

The research offers a nuanced understanding of how paramilitary governance evolves across different stages of territorial presence, providing insights into the complex interplay between governance, legitimacy, community dynamics, and security interventions in fragile West African borderlands. By exploring the variations in governance mechanisms, community interactions, and responses to multilateral security interventions, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which non-state actors shape the political and social order in fragile border zones. In doing so, it moves beyond binary narrations of paramilitary groups as either illegitimate spoilers or legitimate rulers found in the literature on armed non-state actors and insurgent governance (Arjona, 2017), offering a more nuanced understanding of paramilitary governance and its implications for state legitimacy and social cohesion in West Africa. It further draws on borderland studies (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Nugent, 2019) to show that West African border regions are not peripheral security backwaters but zones of negotiated authority,

where paramilitary, state, and customary actors continually contest and co-produce order across contexts of partial and episodic state control.

Conceptually, it advances the understanding of governance by applying a governmentality-inspired lens (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2009; Rose, 2000) to the activities of paramilitary groups, moving beyond conventional state-centric and security-focused approaches. By foregrounding rationalities, techniques, and subject-making practices, it enriches the analytical vocabulary for studying how armed non-state actors such as JNIM and ISGS govern in both entrenched and emerging contexts. Empirically, the study contributes original insights through a comparative analysis of the Liptako-Gourma region and the Ghana-Burkina Faso borderlands—two sites that represent different stages of paramilitary governance. While from a policy perspective, the study provides evidence that can inform more context-sensitive security and governance interventions in fragile border regions.

Overall, the study deepens scholarly understanding of the complex interplay between violence, legitimacy, and governance in West African borderlands. It demonstrates that paramilitary governance cannot be fully understood through a focus on violence alone, but must also be examined through the lens of the socio-political orders these actors construct, contest, and inhabit.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the theoretical and conceptual framework for analysing the governance practices of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) across two contrasting West African borderland contexts: the entrenched conflict zone of Liptako-Gourma and the emerging threat zone along the Ghana–Burkina Faso border. The aim is to situate the study within the relevant theoretical literature debates on governance, governmentality, legitimacy, and hybrid political orders; and delineate the analytical lens and components of the framework through which paramilitary governance will be examined. The chapter begins by outlining the definitional and classificatory challenges of describing armed non-state actors, with a focus on the varied labels applied to actors such as JNIM and ISGS in both policy and scholarly discourse. This is important because labels such as “rebel,” “insurgent,” “militant,” or “jihadist” are not merely descriptive but carry political and analytical implications that shape how such groups are studied, engaged with, and understood. Establishing terminological clarity at the outset ensures analytical consistency in subsequent chapters.

Following this, the chapter draws on three interlinked strands of theory to construct the analytical framework. First, Foucauldian governmentality theory (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2009) is introduced to capture the discursive, productive, and normative dimensions of rule, showing how armed groups seek to govern not only through coercion but by shaping social norms, identities, and everyday life. Second, the chapter integrates scholarship on rebel governance, hybrid political orders, and negotiated statehood (Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2017; Hagmann & Péclard, 2010), which together provide conceptual tools for analysing authority as the outcome of negotiation, adaptation, and institutional bricolage in fragile borderlands. Finally, legitimacy theories (Suchman, 1995; Gilley, 2009) are incorporated to examine how non-state governance is accepted, contested, or resisted by local communities and other actors.

The terminology used to describe armed non-state actors such as JNIM and ISGS is neither neutral nor uncontested. Different labels—*rebel group*, *insurgent movement*, *extremist organization*, *jihadist group*, *militant group*, or *paramilitary actor*—are applied in varying contexts by states, international organizations, the media, and the scholarly community, each carrying specific analytical and political implications (Felbab-Brown et. al, 2017; Berger & Moghadam 2024; Berti, 2016; Geis, & Clément, 2021). For instance, *rebel group* is often used in political science to denote an organized, armed challenger to an established government with the aim of changing the political status quo (Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015). *Insurgent* is more common in security and counter-insurgency literature, implying

a sustained, asymmetric campaign against state authority, often with political or ideological objectives (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; O'Neill, 2019). Labels such as *extremist* or *jihadist* tend to appear in policy and media discourse, particularly in the context of counterterrorism, where they emphasize ideological motivations rooted in a radical interpretation of religion (Neumann, 2013). Philosophers and scholars of radicalization, however, caution against conflating “radical” with “extremist.” While radicalism can simply denote advocacy for deep political or social change, extremism implies a willingness to employ violence or reject democratic norms to achieve those aims (Uzair & Milan, 2020). However, their frequent use risks collapsing diverse armed actors into a singular category, obscuring variations in local governance practices, community relations, and strategic objectives. Similarly, *militant* is often deployed in journalistic contexts to describe actors engaged in sporadic violence without necessarily indicating organizational sophistication or governance ambitions.

The term *paramilitary group*, as adopted in this study, offers a broader and more flexible category that captures both the coercive and organizational dimensions of these actors. It refers to armed, organized groups that operate outside formal state security structures yet maintain command hierarchies, exercise territorial or social control, and engage in governance-like functions. This label is particularly appropriate for JNIM and ISGS in West African borderlands because it accommodates their dual identity as both combatants—engaging in violent operations—and governors—providing dispute resolution, imposing taxation, regulating geoeconomic activity, and influencing social norms (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Thurston, 2020).

In practice, these labels are also used strategically by different actors. States may adopt the *terrorist* label to delegitimize an opponent and frame them as a security threat warranting exceptional measures (Zeidan, 2003). Conversely, armed groups may reject such designations, preferring terms that emphasizes religious legitimacy, resistance, or liberation (Villegas, 2025). Scholarly literature tends to favor more neutral terminology, though debates remain over the analytical precision and political consequences of different labels (Berger & Moghadam, 2024).

By clarifying the definitional boundaries and contextual uses of these terms, this section lays the foundation for consistent analytical reference throughout the thesis. While the study recognizes the ideological dimensions of JNIM and ISGS, it focuses primarily on their governance practices in fragile border regions. Thus, the term *paramilitary group* will be employed consistently to refer to the actors under examination, acknowledging both their violent capacity and their role as de facto authorities in certain localities.

2.1. Governmentality as an analytical lens

The concept of governance in fragile borderland areas has moved beyond a state-centric framework. As defined in Chapter 1, this shift is particularly evident in border governance, where authority is inherently plural and rarely reducible to the reach of a single sovereign (Rosenau, 1995; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Rather than being the exclusive domain of state institutions, governance is increasingly understood as a dynamic and contested field of power involving a plurality of actors, institutions, and rationalities. Originating in the work of Michel Foucault, governmentality is defined as the “conduct of conduct”—the calculated means by which authorities seek to structure the field of possible actions for individuals and groups (Foucault, 1991, p. 102). This definition offers a powerful analytical lens to examine how authority operates beyond the formal state apparatus. Governmentality shifts the focus from sovereign power and overt coercion to the subtle and productive dimensions of rule, emphasizing how power is exercised through the organization of knowledge, the regulation of populations, and the shaping of norms and practices (Dean, 2009; Rose, 2000). This concept widens the analysis of governance by emphasizing the productive dimensions of power and rule. Governmentality focuses on how subjects are constituted through administrative categories, surveillance, and everyday practices. It stresses the importance of subtle mechanisms of control that work through consent, knowledge, and internalized norms.

This framework highlights how governance can be enacted through non-coercive means, such as administrative classifications, statistical surveillance, behavioural guidance, and moral discourses. It draws attention to the ways in which subjects are constituted not only through institutional control but also through everyday practices and internalized norms. In fragile or hybrid governance settings—such as conflict-affected borderlands—governmentality is particularly relevant for analysing how non-state actors, including paramilitary groups, NGOs, and customary authorities, govern by producing legitimacy, ordering social life, and managing populations without necessarily wielding formal legal authority. It thus expands the understanding of governance to include dispersed, informal, and often invisible mechanisms of control and subject formation.

Mitchell Dean (2009, pp. 20-22) further refines this framework through his “analytics of government,” which breaks down governance into three interconnected elements: rationalities (why governance occurs), technologies (how governance is enacted), and subjectivities (who is governed and how they are shaped). This approach provides a methodological toolkit for dissecting different governance regimes, including those enacted by non-state actors. Nikolas Rose (2000, pp. 324-326) expands on this by

showing how liberal forms of governmentality rely on the autonomy of individuals to act freely, yet within predefined boundaries. This “governing through freedom” enables control not by constraint but by structuring the conditions under which choices are made. In conflict-affected regions, these insights help explain how authority can be exercised by non-state groups through the regulation of daily life, religious practice, dispute resolution, or access to resources—without the need for direct coercion (use of force).

Scholars have adapted governmentality to African settings by recognizing the continent’s complex authority structures. Mbembe (2001) explored how postcolonial commandment blends coercion with performative and symbolic power. Ferguson (2006) applies the concept to development governance, demonstrating how power is exercised through depoliticized technical interventions that obscure political contestation while expanding bureaucratic control. Bayart (2009), in turn, emphasizes the strategy of extraversion, whereby African states derive authority and resources by embedding themselves within global regimes of aid, trade, and security. Together, these works underscore how governance in Africa is enacted through overlapping networks of power that blur the boundaries between state and non-state actors, formal and informal practices, and local, national, and international spheres especially in conflict areas.

For this study, governmentality provides a lens to examine how armed groups engage in everyday governance—regulating populations, shaping norms, and providing services—in ways that both challenge and mimic state authority. Applied here, the focus is on identifying the technologies of governance used by JNIM and ISGS, such as the provision of security, dispute resolution, taxation, and the enforcement of moral codes. This approach foregrounds the ways these groups exercise power not solely through coercion, but also by cultivating forms of consent and legitimacy among local populations.

2.2. Rebel and Paramilitary Governance

The concept of rebel governance has emerged as a distinct analytical field within political science and conflict studies, offering a framework for understanding how armed non-state actors perform governance functions in territories under their control or influence. Mampilly (2012, p. 5) defines rebel governance as “the set of institutions, rules, and practices established by insurgents to regulate the political, economic, and social life of populations under their authority”. This perspective moves beyond viewing armed groups solely as agents of violence, highlighting their capacity to act as political actors who can establish systems of order, deliver services, and create mechanisms of legitimacy.

Arjona (2017, pp.4-9) expands on this by introducing the concept of the rebelocracy, where insurgent groups actively reshape local governance structures, sometimes replacing existing institutions and at other times integrating with them. Kasfir (2015, pp. 27-28) similarly emphasizes that governance by armed groups is not uniform; it ranges from minimalist control to fully institutionalized authority, depending on the group's strategic objectives, resources, and the nature of local social structures.

In the West African context, paramilitary governance often blends coercion with adaptive engagement with local norms and institutions. Such groups have been observed to establish dispute resolution mechanisms rooted in Islamic law, regulate economic activities through taxation and trade oversight, and enforce moral codes that align with their ideological objectives. These governance functions serve both instrumental purposes—such as resource extraction and population control—and symbolic ones, including the projection of authority and the cultivation of legitimacy (Bøås, 2024). In border areas specifically, this amounts to a form of border governance, whereby armed and criminal actors exercise authority over cross-border mobility, trade, and informal economies — a dynamic long documented in migration studies and cross-border criminology (Bosworth & Guild, 2008; García Pinzón & Mantilla, 2020).

A more recent contribution to this growing literature is provided by Furlan (2020, pp. 490–496), who argues that insurgent governance should be understood as a multidimensional rather than uniform phenomenon. He develops a typology that distinguishes governance according to seven dimensions, including inclusivity, treatment of civilians, mechanisms of compliance, interaction with other actors, institutional organization, bureaucratization, and executive style. By demonstrating that insurgent organizations govern in different ways and to varying degrees, Furlan advances the comparative study of rebel governance beyond binary distinctions between governance and non-governance. His framework complements earlier scholarship by providing a systematic basis for comparing governance practices across insurgent organizations while reinforcing the broader argument that governance among armed groups is shaped by organizational capacities, territorial conditions, and local political contexts.

Rebel and paramilitary governance in West Africa typically operates within hybrid political orders where state institutions are weak or contested. In such settings, armed groups may negotiate arrangements with traditional authorities, religious leaders, or local militias, resulting in a patchwork of governance arrangements that combine formal and informal authority (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012). The outcome is a form of governance that is deeply embedded in the local socio-political fabric yet responsive to the transnational networks and strategic imperatives of the armed group.

These perspectives demonstrate that governance by armed groups cannot be reduced to coercion alone but encompasses diverse forms of political authority, institutional organization, and interaction with civilian populations. They also suggest that governance varies according to the historical, territorial, and social environments in which armed groups operate. Understanding rebel governance in this way is particularly relevant for analyzing JNIM and ISGS across entrenched and emerging threat contexts. By framing these practices within the broader literature on rebel governance, this study situates West African paramilitary actors within global debates about how non-state armed groups govern, claim legitimacy, and interact with other authority structures.

2.3. Hybrid Political Orders

The concept of hybrid political orders provides a valuable lens for understanding governance in contexts where state authority is contested or only partially established. In border governance specifically, this hybridity is structural rather than incidental, since jurisdictional authority itself is split, overlapping, or absent along the borderline (as discussed in Chapter 1). Boege et al. (2009, pp. 13-15) describe hybrid political orders as systems in which diverse actors—including state institutions, traditional authorities, religious leaders, community-based organizations, and armed groups—coexist and interact in shaping political authority. Rather than viewing governance as a monopoly of the state, this framework acknowledges that multiple centers of power may operate simultaneously, often overlapping and sometimes competing.

In such orders, the boundaries between formal and informal governance are blurred. Authority may be derived from state law, customary norms, religious precepts, or the coercive power of armed groups. Meagher (2012, pp. 1075-1078) stresses that these hybrid arrangements are not simply a sign of state failure but reflect a negotiated coexistence in which different actors adapt to one another's presence, sometimes collaborating and at other times clashing. Lund (2006, pp. 689-692) similarly notes that these forms of governance are rooted in local legitimacy structures, which can be as influential—if not more so—than state institutions in determining the everyday lives of communities.

The hybrid political orders framework is thus essential for analyzing the governance practices of paramilitary groups in entrenched and emerging contexts. It highlights how authority is distributed across multiple actors and demonstrates that even when paramilitary groups exercise significant coercive power, their governance often depends on embedding themselves within pre-existing local systems of

legitimacy and regulation. This approach also allows for an examination of how such hybrid arrangements evolve over time, particularly as state interventions, community responses, and the strategic priorities of armed groups shift.

2.4. Negotiated Statehood

The concept of negotiated statehood offers an analytical extension to the hybrid political orders framework by focusing on the processes through which authority is continually redefined through interaction among diverse actors. This is nowhere more visible than in border governance, where the very question of whose jurisdiction applies is itself a matter of ongoing negotiation rather than settled fact (see Chapter 1). Hagmann and Péclard (2010, pp. 544-545) argue that in fragile or contested settings, statehood should not be understood as a fixed condition but as the outcome of ongoing negotiations between state representatives, local elites, non-state armed actors, civil society organizations, and external actor such as international agencies or neighboring states. In this view, the state is one actor among many in the governance arena, and its authority is mediated through bargains, alliances, and compromises that can shift rapidly in response to changing political or security dynamics.

Negotiated statehood is not limited to formal agreements or peace deals. Rather, it encompasses the everyday arrangements that allow different governance actors to coexist, share resources, and regulate their areas of influence. These negotiations can be explicit—such as ceasefire agreements, local security pacts, or power-sharing arrangements—or implicit, emerging from patterns of mutual accommodation and avoidance of direct confrontation. In conflict-affected areas, such processes often involve trade-offs between the provision of security, control over economic resources, and influence over local populations (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Lund, 2006).

In the West African region, for instance, the governance strategies of paramilitary groups differ in both entrenched and emerging contexts. In entrenched zones, this strategy has been shaped not only by their military capabilities but also by their ability to reach accommodations with certain community leaders, traders, and even rival armed actors. These arrangements can involve recognition of local dispute-resolution mechanisms, tolerance of specific economic activities in exchange for taxation or logistical support, or temporary non-aggression pacts. In an emerging context negotiated statehood takes on a different character. Here, the comparatively stronger presence of state institutions—border security forces, administrative offices, and formal courts—means that paramilitary groups have less autonomy and must navigate a more complex set of constraints. Their negotiations may be less about formalizing territorial control and more about creating temporary openings for influence, whether by co-opting

certain community leaders, leveraging cross-border trade networks, or exploiting the uneven enforcement of state authority in remote areas (Thurston, 2020).

By applying the negotiated statehood perspective to both entrenched and emerging contexts, this study captures the fluid, processual nature of governance in West African borderlands. It enables an analysis that moves beyond static comparisons of “state” versus “non-state” authority and instead focuses on the evolving bargains and relationships that underpin governance outcomes. This perspective is crucial for understanding how JNIM and ISGS adapt their governance approaches in response to the distinct opportunities and constraints present in the Liptako-Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

2.5. Legitimacy in Non-State Governance

Legitimacy is a core concept in political science that examines the relationship between rulers and ruled, addressing fundamental questions about political authority and the "oughtness" perceived by the public in political regimes (Wiesner & Harfst, 2022, pp. 3-5; Merelman, 1966, pp. 548-550). The concept remains "essentially contested" with no academic consensus on its conceptual and empirical core, primarily due to ongoing controversies between normative-theoretical and empirical approaches (Wiesner & Harfst, 2022, pp. 3-5). Political legitimacy encompasses the justified exercise of political power and citizens' beliefs about compliance and justice, extending beyond state institutions to include international organizations and other entities (Peter, 2023). Psychological learning theory and cognitive dissonance help explain how positive affect toward political systems develops into legitimacy attitudes (Merelman, 1966). The concept has spread widely across social sciences, influencing organizational behavior and performance, with research addressing key questions about what legitimacy is, why it matters, who confers it, and how it changes over time (Deephouse et al., 2017, pp. 27-29).

Legitimacy in governance represents a central yet contested concept in political science, shaping whether and how authority is accepted, complied with, or resisted by the governed, with scholars offering diverse approaches to understanding its role beyond traditional democratic frameworks. Steffek (2003, pp. 255-257) proposes a discourse approach to legitimacy in international governance, arguing that legitimacy depends on popular assent to justifications of goals, principles, and procedures rather than requiring democratic participation. This challenges conventional views that treat democracy deficits as inherent problems in international governance. Brassett & Tsingou (2011, pp.3-5) conceptualize legitimacy along a spectrum between legitimacy and legitimization, advocating for methodological pluralism while noting that discussions of legitimate global governance can serve as vehicles for

broader ethical objectives. Yu and Lee (2011) trace the evolution of legitimacy sources from traditional factors like conquest and religion to modern foundations, including welfare, good government, democracy, and rule of law. Hurd (1999) and Suchman (1995) acknowledge legitimacy's fundamental importance in political science while critiquing its definitional ambiguity and measurement challenges.

Unlike mere power or coercion, legitimacy implies voluntary acceptance and internalized justification of authority by the governed (Beetham, 1991, p.11). It serves as a foundational element for stable governance, distinguishing between domination sustained by force and authority sustained by consent. Max Weber's typology remains a classical starting point in legitimacy theory, categorizing legitimate authority into three ideal types:

1. Traditional legitimacy: Based on long-standing customs and inherited status.
2. Charismatic legitimacy: Rooted in the exceptional qualities or leadership of an individual.
3. Legal-rational legitimacy: Founded on rule-based, impersonal systems of law and governance (Weber, 1978, pp. 215-217).

Modern legitimacy, especially in postcolonial and conflict-prone regions, often blurs these categories. Institutions—whether state-based or paramilitary—derive legitimacy from a mix of tradition, charisma, legal frameworks, and performance. Importantly, legitimacy is not static; it is subject to constant renegotiation in response to crises, failures of service delivery, or shifting public expectations (Gilley, 2009).

In African border regions, the understanding of legitimacy transcends Weberian categories and is often embedded in community-based perceptions, moral worldviews, kinship networks, and spiritual cosmologies. Authority is judged not only by procedural legality but also by pragmatic effectiveness, cultural resonance, and moral comportment (Englebert, 2000). Leaders—whether state agents, traditional rulers, or paramilitary commanders—are expected to uphold values that align with communal well-being and the fulfilment of collective obligations. Legitimacy in African societies often hinges on:

- *Embeddedness in local norms:* An authority's ability to navigate and uphold indigenous norms, customs, and dispute resolution mechanisms is critical to being perceived as legitimate (Lund, 2006).
- *Moral performance and protection:* Providing security, justice, and welfare often outweighs formal legality in determining legitimacy. A paramilitary group may be seen as legitimate if it protects communities from banditry or state abuse (Blundo & De Sardan, 2006).

- *Social reciprocities and obligation:* Governance is relational and embedded in reciprocal expectations. Legitimacy flows from fulfilling communal responsibilities rather than abstract rule-following (De Sardan, 2008).

This pluralistic and negotiated understanding of legitimacy creates space for non-state actors, including paramilitary groups, to become accepted authorities—even in defiance of state claims. Legitimacy in non-state governance refers to the social acceptance of authority by actors operating outside traditional state structures. As Suchman (1995, p. 574) notes, legitimacy is a perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. This perspective resonates with broader debates in political science, where legitimacy is understood as both an internal and external phenomenon—rooted in the acceptance of authority by domestic populations, but also shaped by recognition and norms in the international sphere (Hurd, 1999; Gelpi, 2003; Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Non-state governance systems seek political legitimacy by uniting firms, social actors, and stakeholders into communities that accept shared rule as appropriate and justified (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007, p.348). However, legitimacy requirements vary across different governance institutions and result from interactions between communities accepting authority and prevailing legitimating norms in specific issue areas (Bernstein, 2011). The construction of legitimacy in non-state governance is highly contested and strategic, with actors using legitimacy claims to further their interests. Multi-stakeholder initiatives are perceived as more legitimate due to their congruence with democratic principles, though this reliance may constrain their ability to develop stringent standards (Hatanaka & Konefal, 2017, pp.2-4). Understanding legitimacy requires examining multiple sources and recognizing subnational variations, as governance actors may enjoy different levels of acceptance across different regions (Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018).

Scholars distinguish between different forms of legitimacy that are relevant to armed non-state actors. Pragmatic legitimacy is rooted in the material benefits and security provided to local communities—such as protection from rival armed actors, facilitation of trade, or provision of dispute resolution mechanisms (Mampilly, 2012, pp. 49-74; Arjona, 2017, pp.3-5). Moral legitimacy derives from the alignment of governance practices with prevailing ethical or religious norms, often linked to ideological or theological narratives (Hudson, 1977, pp.9-14; Razi, 1990, pp. 51-54). Coercive legitimacy, though paradoxical in name, refers to compliance generated through the credible threat of force; it operates when communities recognize that resistance to an actor’s authority is both risky and costly (Schatzberg, 2001, pp. 24-30; Gilley, 2009, pp.12-18). Building on Schlumberger’s (2010) insights

into non-democratic legitimacy, these forms of authority highlight how non-state actors often craft a layered claim to rule that extends beyond mere violence.

In the hybrid and fragile settings of West African border regions, these forms of legitimacy often overlap. Paramilitary groups may simultaneously provide security, promote a religious or moral order, and maintain the capacity for coercion. Over time, the balance between these sources of legitimacy can shift, depending on changes in security conditions, the presence or absence of state institutions, and the evolving relationship between armed actors and local communities. By situating legitimacy within the broader governance framework, this study underscores how paramilitary actors operate in a constant negotiation between coercion, service provision, and normative alignment. Understanding these legitimacy dynamics is essential for analysing the durability and fragility of armed group governance across entrenched and emerging contexts in West African borderlands.

2.6 Rationalities and Strategies of Cross border Paramilitary Governance

Understanding the governance of paramilitary groups requires an examination of both the underlying rationalities—the guiding logics or justifications for their rule—and the strategies—the concrete practices through which these rationalities are enacted. Drawing on Dean’s (2009) “analytics of government,” rationalities explain why governance occurs, while strategies describe how it is implemented in specific contexts.

Rationalities of Governance

Paramilitary governance rationalities in West Africa typically combine religious, political, security, and economic dimensions, often overlapping in practice.

Religious Rationalities: For instance, jihadist actor’s governance is justified as an implementation of shari’a, framed as a divinely mandated order. This religious legitimacy is presented as morally superior to secular governance, reinforcing both internal cohesion and local acceptance among religiously inclined populations (Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021).

Security Rationalities: Governance is also rationalized as necessary for protecting communities from rival armed actors, criminal networks, or predatory state forces. By positioning themselves as the only reliable security providers, these groups cultivate both pragmatic legitimacy and dependence (Bøås, 2024).

Political Rationalities: In some contexts, governance serves to challenge state sovereignty and promote alternative political orders. This may involve rejecting state-imposed laws, establishing new administrative systems, and positioning themselves as defenders of marginalized or neglected populations (Kasfir et al., 2017).

Economic Rationalities: Economic control is justified as necessary for sustaining the group's operational capacity and ensuring order in local markets. Taxation, regulation of resource extraction, and control over trade routes are framed as legitimate means of funding governance and maintaining stability (Kasfir et al., 2017).

Strategies of Governance

Rationalities are operationalized through a range of governance strategies that combine coercion with service provision and symbolic authority. Security Provision - armed patrols, checkpoints, and rapid responses to local disputes or threats - reinforce the perception of the group as a guarantor of safety. Also, the justice systems through the establishment of courts based on Islamic law or adapted customary systems allows these paramilitary groups to resolve disputes efficiently and, in some cases, more fairly than state mechanisms. Justice provision strengthens both moral and pragmatic legitimacy (Revkin, 2018). Another dimension of governance strategy is coercion and punishment - public punishments, targeted assassinations of opponents, and intimidation campaigns to maintain discipline and deter resistance. Even in areas with limited control, the capacity for targeted violence can ensure compliance. These governance strategies extend toward economic regulation and taxation including control over markets, agricultural production, and trade routes not only generates revenue but also asserts authority over economic life. This can include imposing zakat (alms) or market fees (Bøås, 2024). Also, propaganda and information control through sermons, leaflets, social media content, and public meetings, these groups promote their ideological narrative, counter state messaging, and legitimize their governance (Revkin, 2018). Another notable governance strategy dimension is co-optation of Local Leaders - negotiating with traditional chiefs, religious authorities, and community elders enables armed groups to embed themselves within pre-existing legitimacy structures (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012).

The balance between rationalities and strategies differs across entrenched and emerging threat environments. The entrenched zones have durable territorial presence, governance strategies are more institutionalized, with regular courts, structured taxation, and stable security arrangements. In the emerging zones, by contrast, strategies are more adaptive and fluid—often limited to short-term alliances,

selective dispute resolution, and symbolic shows of force. These variations reflect differences in the degree of state presence, security competition, and community receptiveness.

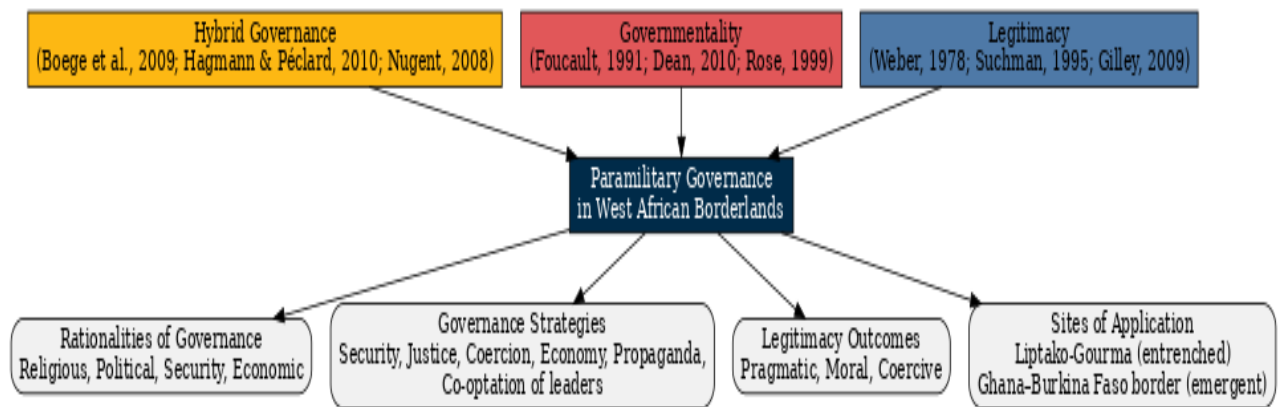
2.7 Integrated Conceptual Framework and Analytical Logic

The integrated conceptual framework developed for this study synthesizes insights from governance theory, governmentality, rebel governance literature, hybrid political orders, and legitimacy theory. Its purpose is to provide a structured lens through which to analyze how JNIM and ISGS establish, exercise, and contest authority in both entrenched and emerging threat contexts. The framework assumes that rationalities influence strategy selection, which in turn shapes legitimacy outcomes. These outcomes feed back into the group's governance capacity, either reinforcing or undermining their authority. Contextual differences—particularly state presence, community receptiveness, and security competition—mediate this process, producing variation between entrenched and emerging threat zones. By integrating governance (institutional and functional aspects) and governmentality (discursive and productive power), this framework captures both the visible and less tangible dimensions of paramilitary authority. It also situates these within the hybrid political orders and negotiated statehood that characterises West African borderlands. This framework links to the research questions as it identifies how rationalities and strategies manifest differently in entrenched vs. emerging contexts (research question 1&2); provides a lens to examine how legitimacy is constructed, contested, and mediated by community responses (research question 3), and it positions state and multilateral interventions as external factors shaping governance strategies and legitimacy outcomes.

Table 1 Components of the framework

COMPONENT	ELEMENTS	ILLUSTRATIVE REFERENCES
1. CONTEXTUAL INPUTS	- Geopolitical Environment: Entrenched zones (e.g., Liptako–Gourma) vs. emerging threat zones (e.g., Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands) - Actors: JNIM, ISGS, local communities, traditional authorities, state actors, multilateral security forces - Institutional Landscape: Degree of state presence, strength of local governance structures, existing socio-political norms	—
2. RATIONALITIES OF GOVERNANCE (WHY)	- Religious logics; - Political logics - Security logics - Economic logics	Dean (2009); Thurston (2020); Bøås (2024)
3. GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES (HOW)	-Service delivery (security, justice, dispute resolution) -Coercive enforcement (punishment, targeted violence) -Economic regulation and taxation -Symbolic/discursive control (propaganda, legitimacy narratives) -Co-optation & negotiation with local elites	Lund (2006); Meagher (2012)
4. LEGITIMACY OUTCOMES (WHAT)	- Pragmatic legitimacy: Acceptance due to security/services - Moral legitimacy: Alignment with religious/cultural norms - Coercive legitimacy: Compliance via fear/force	Suchman (1995); Gilley (2009)
5. EXTERNAL FACTORS	-State & multilateral interventions: Military campaigns, development programs, border security operations -Community responses: Negotiation, adaptation, passive acceptance, active resistance - Transnational linkages: Cross-border mobility, external funding, ideological networks	—

Figure 1: Visual Representation of Conceptual Framework



3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents and justifies the methodological approach employed to investigate the borderland governance practices of paramilitary actors in West African borderlands. Given the complex and dynamic nature of these environments—where the boundaries between state and non-state authority are fluid—the research design integrates philosophical, theoretical, and practical considerations to capture both material and ideational dimensions of governance. The approach is shaped by two guiding imperatives: first, to examine the mechanisms that underpin the emergence, adaptation, and persistence of armed governance; and second, to interpret how legitimacy, authority, and governance strategies are socially constructed, contested, and reproduced within specific local and transnational contexts.

The chapter is structured to demonstrate methodological coherence and transparency. It begins by setting out the epistemological stance that guide the study, followed by an explanation of the comparative case study design and its rationale. The subsequent sections describe the selection of cases and the sampling strategies adopted, the multi-source qualitative data collection methods, and the analytical procedures applied, including the operationalisation of key concepts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, ensuring that the research process meets the standards of rigor expected in scholarly inquiry while remaining sensitive to the ethical and security challenges of conducting research in fragile/conflict-affected regions.

3.1 Philosophies, approaches, considerations

Before turning into a more elaborate discussion on the methods and data, I address the epistemology and ontological questions as well as the broader philosophical underpinnings of the present research. The ontological base of research refers to the question of what we study, whereas epistemology refers to the question of how we study certain phenomenon. Ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions are interconnected. A discussion on the researcher's epistemological standpoint is quintessential because it shows the researchers' understanding and approach to social reality and knowledge (Keating & Della Porta 2008, p.2).

This research adopts a critical constructivist realist framework, combining ontological commitments of critical realism with the interpretive insights of constructivism to examine the complex dynamics of transnational paramilitary groups in West African border regions. Critical realism offers a foundation

for identifying and explaining real causal structures and mechanisms that underpin the emergence, adaptation, and persistence of these groups (Bhaskar, 2008; Archer, 1995). Constructivism, on the other hand, foregrounds how the meanings, identities, and norms that shape responses to insecurity are socially produced, negotiated, and contested (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Recent methodological work demonstrates that these positions can be combined productively in empirical research, enabling the tracing of how socially constructed understandings condition actors' perceptions and strategies, while still uncovering the material and institutional mechanisms that produce observed outcomes (Fiaz, 2014; Bogna, Raineri, & Dell, 2020).

This integrative approach is particularly suited to the study's comparative focus on entrenched governance zones such as Liptako-Gourma and emerging threat areas like the Ghana–Burkina Faso border, where the material realities of violence—territorial control, security provision, and coercive capacity—intersect with historically rooted political narratives, community legitimacy structures, and socio-cultural meanings of authority (Dunn & Balzacq, 2016). In a region where hybrid governance arrangements blur the boundaries between state and non-state authority, this philosophical orientation enables a deeper understanding of governance as both a set of material practices and a contested social process (Abrahamsen, 2003). By adopting this critical constructivist realist stance, the research aims to produce knowledge that acknowledges the material realities of transnational paramilitary violence while remaining sensitive to how security threats, governance structures, and social relations are interpreted differently by various stakeholders, including state agencies, regional blocs, and multilateral organizations, across West African border regions. By applying a governmentality-informed approach, the research avoids both the ontological relativism of strong constructivism and the positivist assumptions of purely materialist approaches, offering a balanced framework for examining the multifaceted dimensions of security challenges in the region (Fiaz, 2014; Bogna, Raineri, & Dell, 2020).

3.2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a comparative case study approach to investigate the governance strategies, rationalities, and legitimacy dynamics of transnational paramilitary groups in two distinct West African borderlands. According to Chapter 1, current research frequently minimizes paramilitary groups to homogenous security risks by emphasizing their military prowess rather than their governance mechanisms. These gaps necessitate a design that is exploratory, interpretive, and context-sensitive—characteristics that are central to qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, pp.5-8). The choice of a qualitative approach is therefore rooted in the study's objective:

to understand not only *what* governance practices occur, but *how* and *why* they emerge in particular on socio-political and historical contexts at borderlands. Addressing these “how” and “why” questions requires a methodology capable of capturing complexity, nuance, and the dynamic interplay between actors, institutions, and local populations—something that quantitative approaches are less equipped to achieve (Maxwell, 2013, pp.3-5). Accordingly, qualitative methods enable the researcher to unpack the ways paramilitary governance interacts with local institutions, cultural norms, and historical trajectories, while also tracing the causal mechanisms that sustain or disrupt such governance arrangements.

A qualitative design is especially suited to studying paramilitary actors operating at borders because while the number of atrocities can be measured, their governance activities are often informal, covert, or deliberately ambiguous – making them resistant to conventional. While borderland governance has focused on the regulation of territory, mobility, and state sovereignty across borders, critical border scholarship emphasizes that borders are also sites where authority, inclusion, and exclusion are continuously negotiated among multiple actors (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013); paramilitary groups frequently operate through hybrid governance arrangements that combine coercion, religious or cultural legitimacy, and strategic service provision (Mampilly, 2015). These arrangements are context-dependent, varying across time, space, and the constellation of actors involved. Understanding such complexity requires iterative, interpretive analysis rather than rigid, predefined variables (Kasfir et al., 2017). Moreover, much of the knowledge about paramilitary governance exists in dispersed sources—expert testimony, policy reports, local media accounts, and ethnographic studies. A qualitative approach facilitates data triangulation across these diverse materials, strengthening the credibility and validity of findings. It also enables the incorporation of perspectives from actors who have direct engagement with, or knowledge of, paramilitary governance—insights that may be overlooked in purely document-based or statistical analyses (Patton, 1999, pp.1197-1198).

The study’s philosophical orientation—critical constructivist realism—assumes that social phenomena such as paramilitary governance are both materially grounded and socially constructed. This ontological and epistemological position aligns naturally with qualitative research, which emphasises meaning-making, process tracing, and context-sensitive explanation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Blaikie & Priest, 2019) rather than isolating a single causal variable. In addition, as highlighted in the contextualisation chapter, conflict-affected borderlands such as Liptako-Gourma and the Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier are characterised by fluid political authority, overlapping sovereignties, and rapidly shifting alliances (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012). Capturing these dynamics demands a research strategy that

privileges depth over breadth, allowing for rich, “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p.6) and attention to the subjective experiences and interpretations of actors involved, offering insights that would be lost in purely quantitative designs.

Case study approach and case selection

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to systematically explore governance by transnational paramilitary groups in two West African borderland contexts: the Liptako–Gourma region (encompassing parts of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The comparative design is central to the study’s aim of examining how governance strategies, legitimacy claims, and community relations vary or remain similar between entrenched governance zones and emerging or peripheral threat environments. A case study approach is particularly suited to understanding complex sociopolitical phenomena by focusing on a small number of units to generate context-rich insights (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017). Comparative case studies enable researchers to identify patterns, divergences, and context-specific variations by examining a phenomenon across more than one setting (Goodrick, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005). In the context of this research, comparison allows for thematic cross-case analysis of governance rationalities, technologies, and legitimacy-building strategies employed by paramilitary actors, while also capturing how these are shaped by differences in state presence, security dynamics, and local socio-political structures.

This study does not adhere strictly to either a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) or a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD). Instead, it employs a thematic comparative framework that draws on different cases to capture how similar governance dynamics manifest under different contextual conditions (Hantrais, 2008; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The cases are contrasting in context and characteristics, yet they are examined through shared thematic lenses — namely, governance rationalities, legitimacy, and social adaptation — to allow for a more nuanced comparative understanding. This choice reflects the complexity of West African security environments, where cases share certain historical, geographical, and socio-cultural features but differ in the maturity and institutionalization of paramilitary governance. The approach enables the research to remain analytically structured yet contextually flexible, preserving the depth and nuance of each case. This thematic structure follows Ragin’s (2014, pp.14-17) emphasis on configurational comparison, where each case is examined according to a common set of analytical dimensions, allowing for systematic cross-case insights without flattening contextual differences.

The comparative approach enhances the rigor and contribution of the research by illuminating variation in paramilitary governance that would be invisible in a single-case design. It provides analytical leverage to explore how broader theoretical propositions about governmentality and hybrid governance hold across different contexts (Boege et al, 2009). It also strengthens the theory-building potential of the study through identifying patterns that transcend specific cases while remaining grounded in context (George & Bennett, 2005). By using a qualitative comparative case study grounded in a thematic framework, the research not only advances empirical knowledge of governance in West African borderlands but also contributes methodologically by demonstrating how comparative analysis can be adapted to the study of dynamic, fluid, and hybrid governance arrangements in conflict-affected regions.

Although comparative case study research offers considerable analytical depth, it is not without methodological limitations. One of the most frequently cited critiques concerns the issue of generalizability. Unlike large-N quantitative studies that seek statistical representativeness, case study research is designed to generate in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of complex social and political phenomena (Yin, 2014). Consequently, findings derived from a limited number of carefully selected cases cannot be generalized statistically to all contexts or populations. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, however, the principal strength of case study research lies not in statistical inference but in its capacity to produce context-dependent knowledge, refine existing theories, and generate new conceptual insights. Similarly, Maoz (2002) contends that comparative case studies strengthen analytical rigor by enabling systematic comparison across carefully selected cases while preserving the contextual complexity necessary for explaining causal processes.

In line with Yin (2018), this study therefore seeks analytical rather than statistical generalization. Analytical generalization involves relating empirical findings to broader theoretical propositions rather than claiming representativeness of a wider population. The objective is not to demonstrate that all African borderlands experience governance in identical ways, but rather to examine whether the analytical concepts guiding this research—governmentality, legitimacy, and hybrid governance—provide useful explanatory frameworks across contrasting borderland settings. The comparison between an entrenched governance environment (Liptako–Gourma) and an emerging governance environment (the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands) enhances the robustness of these theoretical inferences by allowing similarities and differences to emerge across distinct contextual conditions.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges that contextual specificity inevitably shapes both the findings and their interpretation. Governance practices, historical trajectories, state capacity, and community dynamics differ considerably across African border regions. Consequently, the findings should be understood as theoretically transferable to contexts sharing comparable institutional and political characteristics rather than universally applicable across all borderland environments. By making these limitations explicit, the study follows established qualitative research standards while recognizing that rich contextual analysis represents a methodological strength rather than a weakness of comparative case study research (Willis, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

As indicated above, this study focuses on two distinct yet interrelated borderland contexts in West Africa: the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The Liptako–Gourma Region, located at the tri-border between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is a core theatre of paramilitary governance and violent extremism in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2021; Thurston, 2020). According to the Border Security Report (2019) issued by the Mixed Migration Centre, the region, which includes the administrative regions of Gao (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso), and Tillabéri (Niger), is characterised by profound historical, ecological, and socioeconomic interconnectedness despite being separated by national boundaries. The Liptako–Gourma region has been particularly significant due to its porous borders, ethnic fault lines, and strategic trade routes, offering fertile ground for both the entrenchment of non-state governance structures and contestations of authority between rival armed actors and state forces. Liptako Gourma has become a strategic paramilitary zone as a result of militant movements taking advantage of these conditions and mobility to move between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Assanvo et al., 2019, Border Security Report, 2019). The Ghana–Burkina Faso Borderlands is an emerging governance context, marked by rising paramilitary activity since 2019 due to spillover from Burkina Faso’s Sahel region (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024).

The cases were chosen using a purposive, theory-driven sampling strategy (Yin, 2018; Seawright & Gerring, 2008), which prioritizes cases that offer maximum analytical leverage for answering the research questions and addressing the identified gap. Purposive theory-driven sampling involves selecting cases that are most likely to illuminate the phenomenon of interest based on theoretical considerations rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2014, p.268). This strategy is particularly well-suited to qualitative research where the goal is an in-depth understanding of complex, context-specific processes (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, purposive sampling allows the deliberate selection of two border regions affected by the same transnational paramilitary networks (JNIM and ISGS) but situated

at different stages of governance consolidation. This enables exploration of how governance rationalities and strategies evolve across contexts, directly responding to the study's problem statement and research questions.

Purposive sampling can indeed limit the generalizability of findings because the sample is intentionally selected rather than drawn randomly—and this selection process, being based on researcher judgment, may introduce bias into the case selection (Bryman, 2016). Rather than undermining the methodological integrity of the study, these limitations reflect the objectives of qualitative inquiry. Purposive sampling is not intended to achieve statistical representativeness but to identify information-rich cases capable of generating meaningful theoretical insights (Patton, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Consequently, the limitations associated with purposive selection should be understood alongside the principle of analytical generalization discussed above. The value of the selected cases lies in their capacity to illuminate governance processes under contrasting conditions of paramilitary entrenchment rather than in representing the full diversity of African borderlands. By selecting cases that differ in the institutionalization of paramilitary governance while sharing broader regional characteristics, the study maximizes theoretical leverage and strengthens comparative explanation (George & Bennett, 2005; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). In line with George and Bennett's (2005, p. 83) emphasis on "case selection for maximum theoretical leverage," this strategy is optimal because it prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for rich, contextualized analysis of governance processes. Given the study's focus on under-researched borderland governance dynamics, purposeful sampling ensures that the cases selected are information-rich (Patton, 2014) and directly relevant to theory-building in hybrid governance and governmentality scholarship.

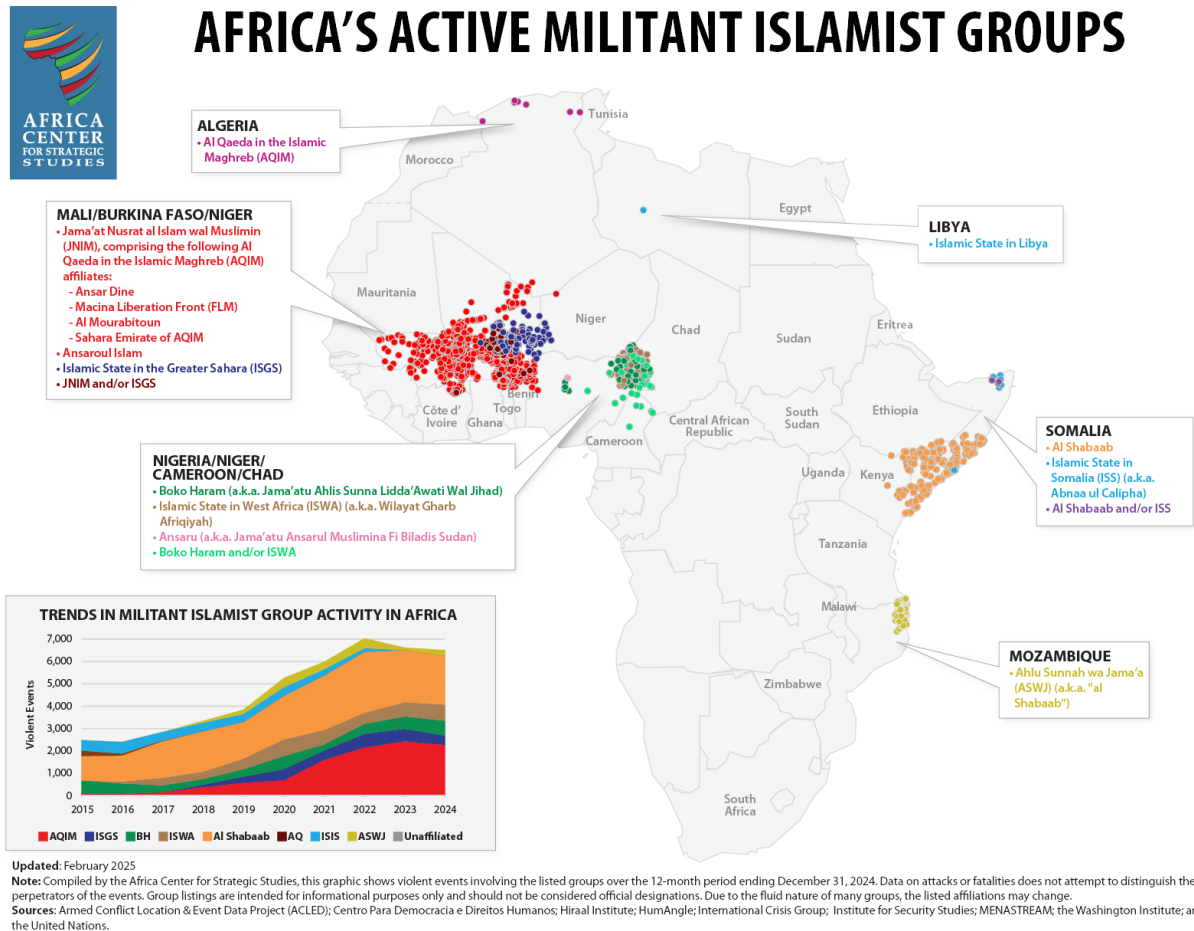
The comparison between the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands is justified because both are border regions affected by the same transnational paramilitary actors, yet they differ sharply in the degree of governance entrenchment and the strength of state presence. This variation directly reflects the study's research problem—understanding how paramilitary governance manifests in contrasting contexts of entrenched control versus emerging influence. While the comparative design strengthens the analytical value of the study, the selection of two cases inevitably places limits on the breadth of empirical coverage. Other borderland contexts across West Africa may exhibit different trajectories of paramilitary governance, state–society relations, or patterns of community adaptation that are beyond the scope of this research. Consequently, the findings are not intended to constitute a comprehensive account of governance across all West African borderlands. Rather, the se-

lected cases provide theoretically meaningful contrasts that enable an in-depth examination of governance under different conditions of paramilitary consolidation. This focused comparative strategy prioritizes explanatory depth over geographical breadth and is consistent with the theory-building objectives of qualitative comparative case study research (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017).

In this thesis, the term “entrenched” is used to describe contexts in which paramilitary governance has become institutionalized, routinized, and socially embedded over time. In entrenched zones—such as the Liptako–Gourma region— paramilitary groups exercise sustained authority and established durable systems of control, regulation, and legitimacy, often functioning parallel to or in place of the state. “Entrenched” governance thus implies a sustained presence, typically over several years, that allows these groups to develop administrative capacity, normative authority, and socioeconomic integration within local communities. This phase reflects the deep consolidation of non-state authority, where governance is not merely imposed through violence but reproduced through local consent, adaptation, and dependency.

This is contrasted with “emerging” paramilitary governance, which denotes incipient or fluid forms of authority where control remains contested, unstable, or experimental. The distinction captures different temporal and structural stages of paramilitary governance formation across West African border regions. For instance, in the Liptako–Gourma region, ISGS exhibits an entrenched form of governance, characterized by territorial consolidation and taxation systems, while in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, JNIM’s presence represents an emerging form, marked by mobility, negotiation, and limited administrative control.

Map 1: Geographic Distribution of Islamist Paramilitary Groups in Africa



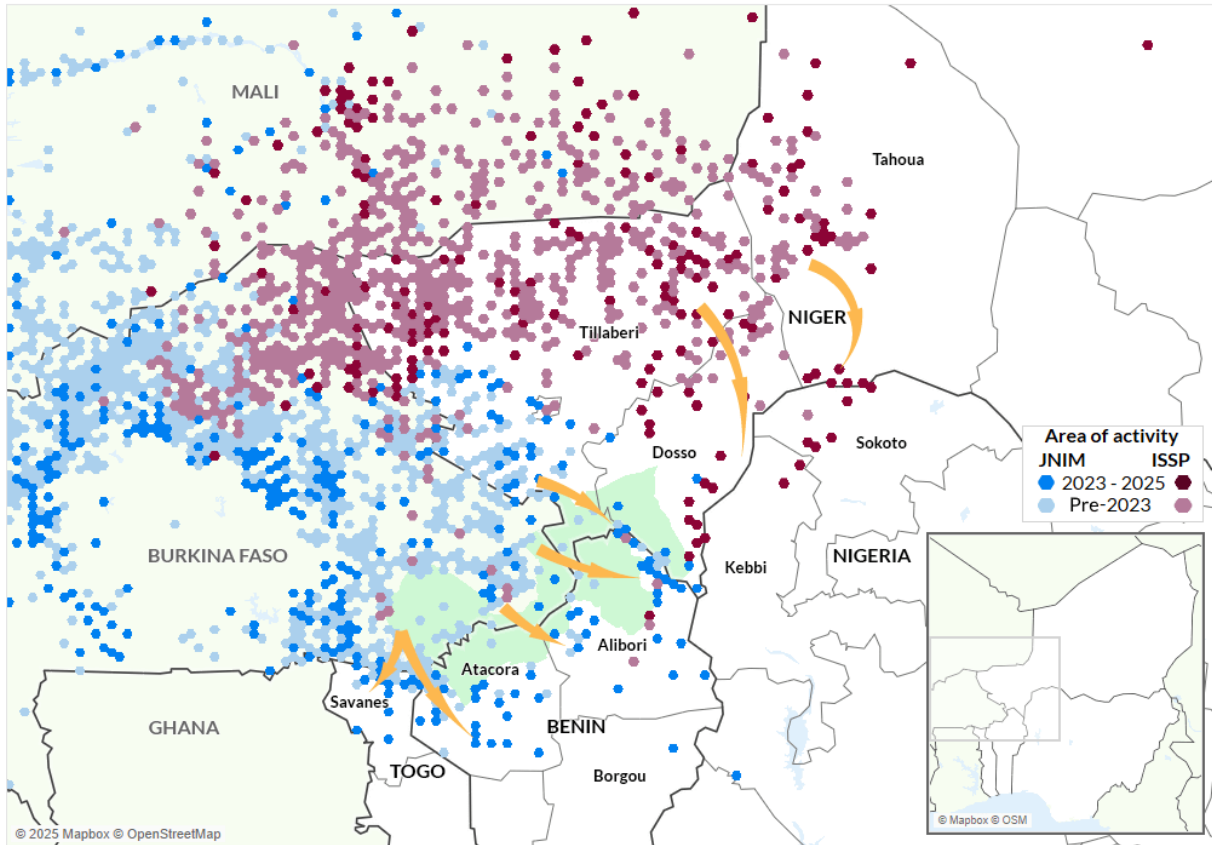
Source: The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024).

This map illustrates the geographic spread and operational presence of active militant Islamist groups across Africa as of late 2024. Of particular relevance to this study is the concentration of (JNIM) and (ISGS) in the Mali–Burkina Faso–Niger corridor, extending into northern Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The selection of JNIM and ISGS as focal groups stems from their sustained and overlapping operational footprints across these contiguous zones, as reflected in Map 2 below.

Map 2 : JNIM and ISSP presence in the Sahel and littoral borderlands.

JNIM and ISSP expansion in the Sahel and littoral borderlands

January 2023 - February 2025



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (2025).

Methodologically, the cases represent contrasting governance environments within a shared broader geopolitical, cultural, and historical setting, which controls for certain background variables while allowing for meaningful variation in the main explanatory factor—the maturity of paramilitary governance (George & Bennett, 2005; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). This comparative logic strengthens the study’s explanatory potential and contributes to theory-building on hybrid governance, legitimacy construction, and non-state authority in African borderlands.

3.3 Data sources and collection

Given the study’s qualitative and comparative design, study draws on a combination of secondary documentary evidence and targeted expert interviews to explore the governance strategies of Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in entrenched and

emerging threat contexts in West African borderlands. Given the challenges of conducting extensive fieldwork in conflict-affected areas, a multi-sourced qualitative dataset was assembled to enable triangulation between different types of material enhance validity and capture the complexity of paramilitary governance. This approach responds directly to the call in qualitative methodology for integrating diverse forms of evidence to better understand context-dependent phenomena (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2018). The design further aligns with the study's critical constructivist realist framework, allowing for the integration of material realities (e.g., patterns of violence, institutional structures) with the social construction of legitimacy, governance, and security narratives.

The secondary data included academic literature, grey literature, policy reports, and credible media accounts. This includes academic literature on rebel governance, hybrid political orders, and governmentality in African contexts as well as Policy reports and briefings from reputable think tanks and NGOs (e.g., International Crisis Group, Small Arms Survey, Institute for Security Studies). Media articles from credible regional and international outlets documenting JNIM and ISGS activities, governance practices, and interactions with communities and state actors was another secondary source employed as well as multilateral and government documents, including intervention mandates, security assessments, and official statements from ECOWAS, the African Union, and UN agencies. It was critical to employ conflict event datasets such as ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) to identify patterns of violence, spatial reach, and shifts in activity over time. The secondary data was further complemented with semi-structured expert interviews.

3.3.1 Secondary and Documentary Sources

The *academic literature* consulted for this study was identified through a systematic search process designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of scholarship on rebel governance, governmentality, and hybrid political orders in African conflict border zones. Searches were conducted between January 2024 and July 2025 using databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Scopus, as well as targeted searches within key journals' own websites (African Affairs, volumes 123–124; Third World Quarterly, volumes 45–46; Journal of Modern African Studies, volumes 62–63; Small Wars & Insurgencies, volumes 35–36; Conflict, Security & Development, volumes 24–25). The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: “rebel governance”, “armed group governance”, “governmentality Africa”, “hybrid political orders”, “paramilitary governance”, “Sahel armed

groups”, “JNIM governance”, “ISGS governance”, “borderland security Africa”, and “negotiated statehood”. Boolean operators (e.g., “AND,” “OR”) and phrase searching were used to refine results.

Searches were filtered to English and French sources allowing coverage of both foundational theoretical contributions and recent empirical work specific to JNIM, ISGS, and West African border regions. Inclusion criteria required that studies (a) be peer-reviewed, (b) provide conceptual or empirical insights relevant to armed group governance, and (c) focus on African or comparative non-state governance contexts.

This process yielded a corpus of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and edited volumes, supplemented by credible policy research outputs. Foundational works included Mampilly (2015) on rebel governance, Arjona (2017) on wartime institutions, Hagmann & Péclard (2010) on negotiated statehood, Dean (2009) and governmentality and Meagher (2012) on hybrid political orders. More recent scholarship on JNIM, ISGS, and Sahelian governance was drawn from journals such as *African Security* (e.g., Thurston, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 4), *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (e.g., Raineri, 2022, Vol. 32, No. 8), and *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* (e.g., Rupesinghe, 2021, Vol. 10, No. 1). These academic works were used to define key concepts, identify analytical dimensions of governance (e.g., legitimacy, service provision, coercion), and guide the comparative framework applied to the two case contexts.

The decision to focus on this body of academic literature was twofold. First, it ensures the conceptual foundations of the study are anchored in established theoretical debates on governance, legitimacy, and state–non-state authority relations. Second, it incorporates the most recent empirical findings on JNIM and ISGS, ensuring that the analysis reflects the evolving dynamics of West African security governance. This systematic, database-driven approach mitigates the risk of selective citation and strengthens the transparency and replicability of the research process.

In addition to peer-reviewed academic works, this study systematically engages with *grey literature and policy reports* to capture the most recent, context-specific, and operationally relevant insights on paramilitary governance in West African borderlands. The search process for grey literature was conducted systematically between January 2024 and July 2025, using the online repositories and publication archives of leading international, regional, and local policy and research organizations such as ReliefWeb, International Crisis Group (ICG) archives, United Nations Office for West Africa and the

Sahel (UNOWAS), and Sahel Research Group publications. Search keywords included: “Sahel security governance,” “Burkina Faso armed groups,” “border security Ghana,” “ISGS policy response,” “JNIM local governance,” “community resilience Sahel.” Inclusion criteria required that reports be (a) produced by reputable think tanks, NGOs, or multilateral organizations, (b) based on recent or primary field research, and (c) address governance, security, or socio-political dynamics in the study areas.

Grey literature and policy reports were particularly valuable in contextualizing temporal and spatial variations in governance practices and in documenting interactions between armed groups, communities, and state/multilateral actors. It provided up-to-date empirical data, situational analyses, and field-based perspectives that may not yet appear in scholarly publications but are essential for understanding the evolving dynamics of JNIM and ISGS in both entrenched (Liptako-Gourma) and emerging (Ghana–Burkina Faso border) contexts. This systematic integration of grey literature ensures that the analysis is grounded in both conceptual and policy-relevant evidence, strengthening the empirical base for addressing the research questions.

Media reports provided contemporaneous accounts of incidents, public statements, and local perceptions. Systematic searches were conducted between January 2024 and July 2025 using Factiva, Al-Africa, Reuters, BBC Monitoring, and direct access to archives of BBC Africa, Al Jazeera English, The Guardian, Le Monde Afrique, Jeune Afrique, and Ghana’s Daily Graphic.

Keywords included: “JNIM governance,” “ISGS governance,” “Sahel jihadist administration,” “Liptako armed groups taxation,” “Burkina Faso border armed groups,” “community resistance jihadist.” Searches were filtered to retain only reputable outlets with verifiable sourcing. Inclusion criteria required that the report (a) be published by a verified and reputable news outlet, (b) contain verifiable accounts of governance or state-like activities by armed groups, and (c) provide regional or community-level details relevant to the two case contexts. These reports were used to track sequences of governance-related events, capture community-level narratives, and corroborate information from academic and policy sources. The inclusion of media sources therefore ensures access to on-the-ground reporting that can capture rapidly evolving developments in both entrenched (Liptako-Gourma) and emerging (Ghana–Burkina Faso border) contexts.

To systematically map the spatial-temporal distribution of armed group activity, *databases*, such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) served as the primary conflict event dataset. The dataset was accessed in January 2025 and filtered for 2014–2024, covering Burkina Faso,

Mali, Niger, and Ghana. Search parameters included all events involving JNIM and ISGS, categorized as battles, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence, and strategic developments. These were geocoded and cross-referenced with qualitative sources to identify governance-related patterns, such as consolidation phases, shifts in territorial control, and community negotiations. "ACLED's reliability is well-established in African conflict research—its detailed, micro-level event coding enables rigorous subnational analysis (Raleigh et al., 2010). Comparative studies have shown that ACLED outperforms broader datasets by capturing diverse event types though researchers are advised to account for potential coding inconsistencies (Eck, 2012). ACLED was selected because of its extensive coverage of political violence and protest events across Africa, including detailed geocoded records for the Sahel and Ghana–Burkina Faso border regions.

Using multiple secondary data sources allows for data triangulation (Denzin, 2012), increasing the reliability of findings by cross-verifying events, narratives, and interpretations across different mediums and institutional perspectives. Academic literature anchors the study conceptually, grey literature provides field-level insights, media reports capture real-time developments and local voices, and the ACLED dataset offers a quantitative backbone to track patterns over time. This integrated approach is particularly suited to the study's focus on paramilitary governance in West African borderlands, where rapidly changing dynamics require both depth of understanding and empirical precision.

3.3.2 Expert Interviews

To complement the documentary evidence, three semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with individuals possessing extensive professional or research experience on paramilitary group governance, Sahelian security dynamics, and West African borderlands (see Table 2). All respondents had prior field exposure in either the Liptako-Gourma region, the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, or both. The sample comprised two males and one female experts, each holding advanced academic or professional credentials in security studies, development policy, or peacebuilding, and occupying positions that regularly require engagement with or research on paramilitary governance. This profile ensured that interviewees could offer informed perspectives on governance strategies, legitimacy claims, and state–non-state interactions relevant to the selected cases.

The interviews were semi-structured in format, allowing for guided discussion around the research questions while enabling respondents to elaborate on areas of personal expertise. This format was

chosen for its flexibility in exploring complex and context-specific governance arrangements (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide included thematic prompts relating to each of the four research questions, covering issues such as governance rationalities, strategies in entrenched vs. emerging contexts, community perceptions, and the role of state/multilateral interventions. Participants were selected using a purposive, theory-driven sampling strategy - emphasis on information-rich cases (Patton, 2014), whereby individuals were identified based on their direct relevance to the research questions and theoretical framework. The aim was to engage those with specialized knowledge capable of providing informed, context-specific insights into the governance strategies and legitimacy dynamics of JNIM and ISGS. While the primary selection logic was purposeful, limited snowball sampling was employed when initial contacts recommended other suitable experts within their networks. This approach is common in conflict research where knowledgeable informants are relatively few, and direct cold-contact with security actors or vulnerable populations would raise ethical and safety concerns (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

All interviews were conducted remotely via secure video conferencing platforms due to geographic dispersion of respondents, logistical constraints of research and COVID-19–related travel restrictions. One interview was audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. For the other two, where organizational confidentiality policies prohibited recording, detailed contemporaneous notes were taken and expanded immediately after the sessions. All transcripts and notes were anonymized, securely stored, and systematically coded for integration into the qualitative analysis.

The decision to conduct a small number of targeted interviews reflects the study's emphasis on expert interpretation rather than statistical representativeness. Consistent with Seawright and Gerring's (2008) recommendations, the experts were chosen for their ability to shed light on the causal mechanisms, governance rationalities, and context-specific factors identified in the secondary data. As such, the semi – structured expert interviews serve as a complementary data source to contextualize, triangulate and test patterns derived from the broader corpus of academic literature, grey literature, media reporting, and conflict datasets (Berry, 2002). Although the sample size limits generalizability, the interviews' value lies in offering nuanced, empirically grounded interpretations that can yield nuanced insights that complements and challenges patterns found in documentary sources - an approach well-suited to high-risk, access-constrained research environments. Integrating these carefully selected ex-

pert interviews with the broader secondary evidence base strengthens the study’s methodological robustness. This design therefore supports a credible and well-triangulated analysis that meets established standards of qualitative research rigor (Patton, 2014; Yin, 2018).

Table 2: Summary Table on information on expert interviews.

<i>ID (number or letter)</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Gender; age,</i>	<i>Place; date of interviews</i>
<i>Expert Interviewee A</i>	Expert	M; 37	Online (Google meet) 5 June 2025
<i>Expert Interviewee B</i>	Advisor	M, 44	Online (Google meet) 6 June 2025
<i>Expert Interviewee C</i>	Expert	F, 42	Online (Teams meet) 16 June 2025

Considering the number of interviews (‘small n’), they will be referred as Expert Interviewee A, Expert Interviewee B and Expert Interviewee C without providing any further information (location, date). To demonstrate how different types of evidence complement one another each question is aligned with the relevant data sources in Table 3:

Table 3: Mapping of data Sources to Research Questions.

Research Question	Academic Literature	Grey Literature & Policy Reports	Media Reports	Conflict Event Dataset (ACLED)	Expert Interviews
RQ1: <i>How do JNIM and ISGS establish and exercise governance in entrenched areas like Liptako-Gourma, and what rationalities underpin their governance strategies?</i>	Provides theoretical and conceptual frameworks for rebel governance, governmentality, and hybrid political orders (e.g., Mampilly, 2011; Arjona, 2017; Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Meagher, 2012) and region-specific studies on JNIM and ISGS.	Offers operational-level insights from organizations such as ICG, UN, and think tanks on governance functions, service provision, and legitimacy strategies in Liptako-Gourma.	Supplies time-sensitive, event-driven accounts of governance activities, public statements, and propaganda by JNIM and ISGS.	Quantifies frequency, intensity, and spatial distribution of incidents in Liptako-Gourma to correlate with governance patterns.	Provides nuanced interpretations of governance rationalities and strategies based on field and policy experience, clarifying linkages between violence and governance.
RQ2: <i>In emerging threat zones such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso border, how do JNIM and ISGS attempt to exert influence or extend governance despite limited territorial control?</i>	Analyses on emerging insurgencies and borderland dynamics in West Africa, including early-stage governance strategies.	Reports from ECOWAS, UNOWAS, and Sahel security observatories detailing cross-border infiltration and influence-building activities.	News coverage documenting specific incidents, recruitment efforts, and governance-like activities in border communities.	Event data capturing incursion attempts, low-intensity violence, and patterns of cross-border movement.	First-hand perspectives on how governance efforts differ in early-stage contexts compared to entrenched strongholds.
RQ3: <i>How do local communities perceive, negotiate, or resist the governance efforts of JNIM and ISGS across entrenched and emerging contexts?</i>	Studies on community–armed group relations, legitimacy, and social adaptation in African borderlands.	NGO and humanitarian reports capturing community attitudes, coping strategies, and negotiation mechanisms.	Local and regional media accounts reflecting public sentiment, community mobilization, and local resistance narratives.	Indirect indicators of community resistance or accommodation inferred from patterns of clashes, protests, or militia mobilization.	Expert insights into community agency, elite mediation, and cultural factors influencing acceptance or rejection of paramilitary governance.
RQ4: <i>How do multilateral and state security interventions interact with paramilitary governance strategies in these two contrasting environments?</i>	Comparative studies on intervention–insurgency dynamics, including governance disruption strategies.	Policy briefs and operational assessments from ECOWAS, G5 Sahel, AU, and security sector reform initiatives.	Real-time reporting of joint operations, policy changes, and cross-border security coordination.	Data on intervention-related incidents and shifts in insurgent activity patterns.	Analytical perspectives on the interplay between governance structures and external interventions, informed by field exposure and institutional engagement.

By combining theoretical insights from academic literature, operational details from policy reports, event chronology from media coverage, systematic quantitative trends from ACLED, and nuanced interpretations from expert interviews, the study is positioned to engage in a layered, contextually grounded analysis of paramilitary governance. This triangulation allows each research question to be addressed from multiple vantage points, reducing the risk of single-source bias and enhancing the credibility of findings. The integration of qualitative documentary evidence with targeted expert testimony provides both breadth and depth, enabling the analysis to trace governance rationalities, strategies, and legitimacy dynamics across entrenched and emerging threat environments. The next section outlines how these data sources are systematically coded, categorized, and interpreted using thematic content analysis, ensuring that empirical patterns are connected to the study's critical constructivist realist framework and its comparative examination of JNIM and ISGS in the Liptako-Gourma and Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis process was designed to systematically integrate and compare evidence from multiple qualitative data sources—academic literature, policy and grey reports, media coverage, conflict event datasets, and expert interviews—so as to address the four specific research questions. The approach combined elements of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) and thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011), chosen for their suitability in identifying patterns across heterogeneous textual materials while allowing for the integration of context-specific meanings relevant to the governance practices of JNIM and ISGS. Analysis was guided by the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, which draws on theories of governance, governmentality, hybrid political orders and legitimacy. The research questions were operationalized into thematic categories corresponding to:

1. Governance rationalities and strategies in entrenched contexts
2. Modes of influence in emerging contexts
3. Community perceptions, negotiation, and resistance
4. Interactions with state and multilateral interventions.

These themes served as the deductive coding frame against which all data were examined. However, the analysis also incorporated inductive coding to capture unanticipated insights emerging from the data. This hybrid deductive–inductive approach allowed for theory-driven analysis while remaining open to novel findings.

The analytical process began with the systematic compilation of the multiple data sources. Academic, policy, and grey literature were collected and organized in a Zotero database, with each entry tagged for thematic relevance and geographic focus, distinguishing between the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. Media reports relevant to the study were collated and imported into NVivo software after a careful screening process to remove duplicates and irrelevant content. Additionally, conflict event datasets from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) were downloaded for the study period, filtered to capture only the relevant regions and actors, and subsequently cleaned for descriptive coding. Expert interview data consisted of one verbatim transcript and two detailed note sets, all of which were anonymized and formatted for integration into the analysis.

All textual materials were read in full at least once to ensure familiarity with the content and context. From this initial engagement, a comprehensive codebook was developed, combining pre-defined analytical categories drawn from the conceptual framework with emergent codes identified during the reading process. Coding was conducted in NVivo 14 for all textual sources, ensuring systematic tagging and retrieval of themes, while descriptive coding for the conflict dataset was undertaken in Microsoft Excel to facilitate structured quantitative summaries. Following the initial coding, related codes were aggregated into higher-order thematic categories that aligned with the central research questions. These categories included themes such as service provision as legitimacy, negotiation with customary leaders, symbolic displays of power, and intervention impact. Comparative coding matrices were developed to align evidence from different data sources for each theme, facilitating a structured comparison between the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

The study employed a rigorous triangulation process to enhance the credibility of findings. Data from multiple sources—including academic literature, media reports, conflict datasets, and expert interviews—were cross-verified to strengthen reliability, following best practice guidance from Yin (2018) and Denzin (2012). Insights from expert interviews were not treated as standalone evidence but were used to provide contextual depth and interpretative nuance to the patterns emerging from documentary and dataset analysis. To maintain transparency throughout the process, all coding decisions and subsequent revisions to the codebook were systematically recorded in an analytic memo file, in line with Wicks (2017) recommendations. Particular attention was paid to identifying and documenting disconfirming evidence to avoid confirmation bias. The analysis was iterative in nature, involving continuous movement between the empirical data and the theoretical framework until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring that the final interpretations were both comprehensive and analytically robust.

3.5 Research reliability, ethical considerations and limitations

To guarantee the quality, integrity, and responsible conduct of the research process, factors including validity, reliability, and ethical issues were taken into account. Reliability refers to the consistency of the mechanism the researcher is attempting to examine and the extent to which the results are truly independent of unintentional circumstances of the investigation (Kirk & Miller, 1986, as cited in Patton, 2014). Given the politically sensitive nature of security research, strict data confidentiality measures were enforced. For instance, all the interviewees were anonymized to prevent retaliation of any form. Additionally, researcher positionality is acknowledged, particularly in relation to biases that may arise from being a Ghanaian scholar analyzing regional security dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The primary limitation is the inability to conduct fieldwork due to security risks time constraints and having being pregnant twice throughout the research period. However, the combination of thematic and content analysis, remote interviews, and secondary data ensures methodological robustness. Another limitation is potential bias in government and media reports, which was mitigated through source triangulation (Bowen, 2009).

4. PARAMILITARY GOVERNANCE IN ENTRENCHED ZONES: THE LIPTAKO-GOURMA CASE

4.1 Historical Evolution of JNIM in Liptako-Gourma

The evolution formation of JNIM reflects a complex trajectory of paramilitary consolidation, strategic adaptation, and territorial expansion in the Sahel, shaped by regional instability and long-standing political marginalization. JNIM, which was formally declared in March 2017, is the largest uniting of jihadist groups in Mali and the larger Liptako-Gourma region. Its creation marked a critical moment in the consolidation of Al-Qaeda's influence in the central Sahel, as it unified previously fragmented jihadist entities under a single command structure and ideological framework loyal to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), Al-Mourabitoun, and the Saharan Emirate of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a key player in Sahelian militancy, were the four separate armed groups that became part of it (Afriyie, 2024; International Crisis Group [ICG], 2021). These groups were already active and are likely to have coordinated their operations well before the official establishment of JNIM, therefore, the roots of JNIM's establishment are deeply connected to the broader history of jihadist insurgency in the Sahel. In practice, however, the alliance has been characterized by fragmented interests, fluctuating territorial control, and divergent motivations among its constituent factions (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2021).

Iyad Ag Ghaly, founded Ansar Dine in 2011, when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg separatist movement based in northern Mali, refused to appoint him as its head. The group sought the imposition of Sharia law and aligned ideologically with AQIM, though it maintained a localized political agenda rooted in the grievances of northern communities (Thurston, 2020). Al-Mourabitoun – Formed in 2013 from the merger of MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) and al-Mulathameen Brigade led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Al-Mourabitoun extended jihadist operations into Niger and Burkina Faso, gaining notoriety for high-profile attacks, including the 2016 Ouagadougou assault (Zenn, 2017). Macina Liberation Front (FLM) was established around 2015 under Amadou Koufa, the FLM represented the expansion of jihadist ideology into central Mali, mobilizing primarily Fulani (Peul) constituencies. Its emergence demonstrated the localization of jihadist mobilization around identity and governance grievances (Benjaminsen & Ba 2019; International Crisis Group, 2022). AQIM's Sahara Emirate provided transnational operational experience, logistical resources, and an ideological bridge connecting local jihadist dynamics in Mali to the broader Al-Qaeda network (Nsibia & Weiss 2020).

Today, JNIM's core leadership is effectively concentrated around Iyad Ag Ghaly of Ansar Dine and Amadou Koufa of the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), alongside the relatively less active FLM-offshoot Katiba Serma, commanded by Abu Jalil al-Fulani as depicted in the Figure 2 depicting the active groups that are active as JNIM. Iyad Ag Ghali, the founder of Ansar Dine, is considered the leader, or emir, of JNIM (Solomon, 2015; Thurston, 2020).

Figure 2: Tracing The Current Leadership Of JNIM.

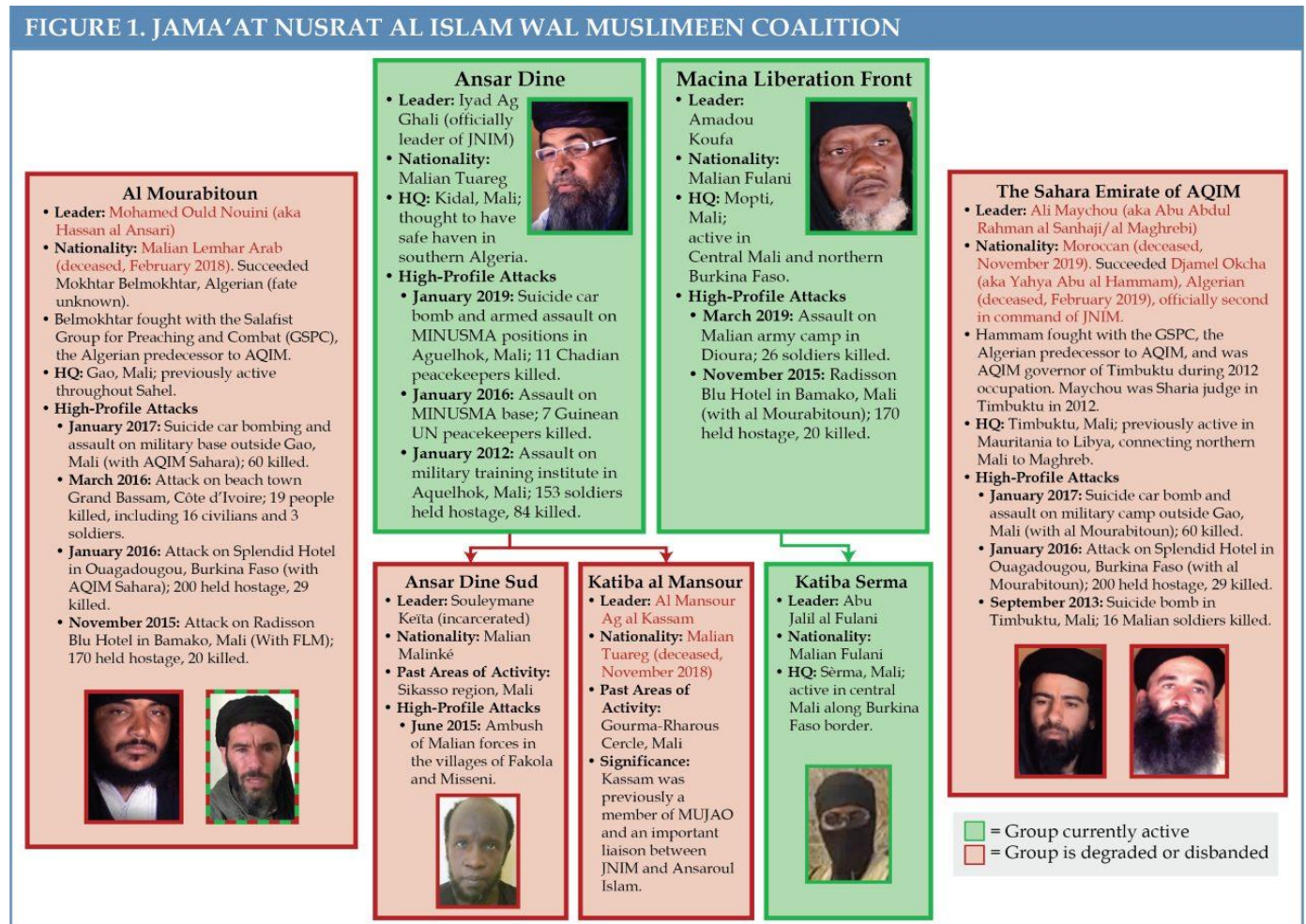


Photo credits (clockwise from top left): Iyad Ag Ghali, Amadou Koufa, Djamel Okcha, Ali Maychou (JNIM video images via SITE Intelligence), Abu Jalil al Fulani (Menastream), Souleymane Keita (police photo via AFP.com-STR), Mokhtar Belmokhtar (video image via CNN), Mohamed Ould Nouini (JNIM video image via SITE Intelligence)

Source: Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2020).

4.2 Historical evolution of ISGS in Liptako-Gourma

The emergence and expansion of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are deeply intertwined with the broader evolution of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, particularly following the collapse of state authority in northern Mali after 2012. In May 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former commander of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and later Al-Mourabitoun, formally established ISGS by swearing loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and identifying his group with the international Islamic State (IS) movement (United Nations Security Council, 2020).

ISGS's origins can be found in the early 2010s, when jihadist organizations in northern Mali were disbanding. By recruiting more indigenous West African fighters from Songhai, Fulani, and Arab populations in the Gao region, MUJAO's 2011 establishment signaled a first move away from the Algerian-dominated Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Look, 2013). The growth of MUJAO was accompanied by the Tuareg re-insurgency in 2012 and the following jihadist takeover of the major cities in northern Mali. In 2013, MUJAO and Al-Mourabitoun united as well, but soon after, major ideological differences surfaced, especially about transnational jihadist affiliations (United Nations Security Council, 2020). The formal establishment of ISGS in 2015 resulted from these internal fissures, especially between those aligned with Al-Qaeda's decentralized approach and the proponents of the more centralized Islamic State ideology. Although initially unrecognized by the IS central command, ISGS gained operational traction in the Liptako-Gourma region. The Liptako-Gourma region provided an ideal environment for ISGS's expansion, owing to its porous borders, ethnic fault lines, and historic underdevelopment (Thurston, 2020). ISGS's presence was confirmed internationally by 2017, with its designation as a major threat by both the Institute for Security Studies. (2021). Africa Report 37 (2018) and France's Operation Barkhane (Eizenga & Williams, 2020).

The Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger in 2017 raised ISGS's reputation internationally, and attacks on state security forces, civilians, and foreign troops characterized the fast operational expansion of ISGS between 2017 and 2020 (Raleigh et al., 2021). By 2019, ISGS and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) were engaged in violent competition, which resulted in ongoing intra-jihadist conflicts in Tillabéri, Niger, and Ménaka, Mali. The region became even more unstable as a result of these internal disputes, which led to widespread displacement and civilian deaths. By modifying its operational strategies and taking advantage of state vulnerability, ISGS proved resilient in the face of military pressure, retaining influence throughout eastern Mali, western Niger, and northern Burkina Faso (CSIS, 2021). The group's formal integration into the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) structure in 2022

marked a significant turning point in ISGS's development. Stronger ties to Islamic State networks in the Lake Chad Basin and larger West African jihadist groups were indicated by this reclassification. By this affiliation, ISGS maintained its operational focus on the local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma while solidifying its identity as a component of the transnational Islamic State project (Nsaibia & Raleigh, 2021).

Overall, the historical emergence and expansion of JNIM and ISGS in Liptako-Gourma illustrate the evolution of Sahelian paramilitary groups from fragmented insurgent groups to consolidated regional force. The group's trajectory reflects a calculated adaptation to changing security landscapes, international military interventions, and the local socio-political environment, setting the stage for the group's entrenchment in one of West Africa's most fragile cross-border regions.

4.3 Governance Rationalities and Strategies

In the context of the Liptako-Gourma region, the governance strategies JNIM and ISGS reflect complex rationalities and diverse methods of rule. Drawing on Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, this subsection explores how these groups justify their exercise of authority and the mechanisms through which they regulate communities in the Liptako-Gourma region. Rather than reducing these groups to mere violent actors, this perspective examines the logics and modalities underpinning their governance and their attempts to structure order in contested spaces.

4.3.1 Rationalities of Governance

The rationale behind governance by paramilitary groups in the Liptako-Gourma region is shaped by a combination of ideological motivations, socio-political grievances, and strategic pragmatism. Recalling on Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, rationalities represent the underlying logics and justifications through which these groups legitimize their presence and establish authority over local populations. Both movements deploy rationalities that fuse transnational jihadist ideology with highly localized grievances, reflecting their dual ambition to serve global Islamic causes while embedding themselves in local socio-political contexts (Nsaibia & Raleigh, 2021).

A consistent theme emerging from secondary literature is that local community members frequently perceived the appeal of these groups to be rooted in narratives of protection, justice, and moral order.

Across Ménaka (Mali) and Tillabéri (Niger), groups like JNIM gain influence by positioning themselves as protectors of marginalized communities—particularly the Fulani—who often experienced state neglect or became victims of inter-ethnic violence (Institute of Security Studies, 2019; Assanvo et al., 2019). For JNIM, the rationality of governance is primarily anchored in the justification of restoring justice through the application of Sharia law and defending Muslim communities from state abuse, foreign occupation, local elite predation, and rival militia violence. This rationale is further revealed by expert interviewee A:

In areas such as the border villages of northern Burkina Faso, JNIM fighters are described not merely as combatants but as “arbiters of disputes” and protectors against abusive security forces.

This expert account aligns with findings by Nsaibia, (2023), who documented how JNIM deliberately integrated itself within local disputes, using the rhetoric of justice to expand influence. Furthermore, JNIM’s leadership frequently invoked historical grievances, particularly the socio-political marginalization of pastoralist communities, to justify their actions (Cold-Ravnkilde et al., 2025). This blend of ideological framing and grievance mobilization forms a core rationality explaining their expansion across the tri-border zone. In contrast, ISGS exhibits a more purist jihadist rationality grounded in the Islamic State’s broader caliphate project. Interviewee A mentioned community in Tillabéri as an example to illustrate that ISGS propagates narratives of absolute religious rectitude, frequently labeling rival jihadist factions, state actors, and even civilians who resist their rule as “apostates.”

This strict binary categorization of in-group and out-group was corroborated by secondary sources, with Thurston (2020) documenting ISGS’s justification of extreme violence as a religious duty to purge impure elements. Additionally, as observed and documented in local testimonial reports and corroborated by propaganda analysis, ISGS rationalizes its governance through a narrative of a unified transnational Islamic polity, often denouncing national borders as illegitimate colonial constructs - a framing reinforced through slogans portraying borders as artificial divisions and state forces as “apostate enforcers” of colonial boundaries (Le Roux, 2019; Badawy & Ferrara, 2017).

An important cross-cutting rationality, emerging from both expert interviews and literature, is the pragmatic use of governance to secure operational survival. While ideological narratives remain dominant, both JNIM and ISGS are known to justify their rule by providing relative security and regulating local economies, especially in zones of high state absence. This is reflected in the work of Chauzal and van Damme (2015), who described how these groups filled governance vacuums not just as ideological

actors, but also as pragmatic power holders adapting to localized survival imperatives. Expert interviewee A emphasized that,

after the withdrawal of Malian forces, ISGS and JNIM rationalized their control by offering a degree of order in otherwise lawless environments.

In summary, the rationalities of governance in Liptako-Gourma reflect a hybrid logic: JNIM adopts a flexible grievance-based justification, blending local protection narratives with broader jihadist ambitions, while ISGS employs a rigid ideological rationality, focusing on doctrinal purity and the projection of transnational Islamic identity. Both, however, share a pragmatic rationale tied to territorial survival and control, particularly in environments characterized by weak state institutions and chronic insecurity.

4.3.2 Strategies of governance

Building upon the ideological and rational justifications explored above, the strategies of governance employed by JNIM and ISGS in the Liptako-Gourma region reflect structured, multi-dimensional approaches aimed at exerting control, managing populations, and embedding themselves within local socio-political landscapes. In line with Dean's (2009, pp.28-29) "analytics of government," governance strategies pertain to the "how" of rule: the operational tools, practices, and mechanisms through which authority is materialized and sustained. This subsection draws from both secondary literature and corroborating expert interviews to map out the key governance techniques employed by these groups, recognizing important variations between JNIM's adaptive governance model and ISGS's coercive enforcement mechanisms. Expert interviews with interviewee A and B focusing on the Sahel consistently pointed to the dualistic character of governance strategies among these groups—combining both coercion and service provision, with differences in emphasis and execution between JNIM and ISGS. Experts noted that both groups systematically fill governance vacuums left by absent or predatory state actors, but employ distinct methods tailored to their ideological orientations and operational priorities.

For JNIM, governance strategies predominantly revolve around negotiated authority, characterized by co-option of customary power structures and incremental integration into local governance ecosystems. This is echoed in the work of Eizenga and Williams, (2020), who detailed JNIM's use of customary intermediaries to extend influence while avoiding full confrontation with existing local governance institutions. Expert interviewee A complements this:

JNIM fighters serve as mediators of local disputes, particularly in cases where traditional leadership was compromised or state justice mechanisms were inaccessible.

JNIM's strategies further encompass the provision of basic arbitration mechanisms, low-level taxation (often justified in terms of Islamic obligations such as zakat), and protection services against rival militias or state actors, creating a "functional legitimacy" among targeted communities (Nsaibia, 2023). Additionally, JNIM has shown flexibility in rule enforcement, adapting the application of Sharia principles to local cultural norms to avoid alienating potential support bases. This is consistent with observations by the Malimay Report (2025), that demonstrates how JNIM's operational strategy blends coercion with negotiation, allowing for deeper social embedding. Expert interviewee A reinforced that:

JNIM often avoids imposing harsh punishments at initial stages of expansion, focusing first on building acceptance through security provision and resolving inter-communal tensions.

Conversely, ISGS employs a highly coercive governance strategy, prioritizing militarized control and the imposition of strict religious conformity. Secondary literature reinforces these narratives documenting ISGS's routine use of public floggings, forced indoctrination, and market regulation as tools of social control. ISGS governance strategies are marked by a centralization of authority, where local intermediaries have minimal influence, contrasting with JNIM's more decentralised model (DeAngelo, 2025; MalayMail Report, 2025). All three expert accounts reflected widespread perceptions of ISGS governance as punitive and absolute, with examples of public punishments, strict zakat collection, and violent suppression of dissent. Additionally, findings from Le Roux (2019), who highlight ISGS's reliance on economic predation strategies alongside governance services like religious court systems and enforced community contributions. Expert Interviewee A complemented this by noting:

ISGS's governance is not only about ideology. They make themselves part of the local economy by taking a share from cattle markets, controlling smuggling routes, and taxing mining sites.

An additional cross-cutting strategy identified in literature is the instrumental use of mobility and territorial segmentation. Both JNIM and ISGS leverage the porosity of the Liptako-Gourma borders to evade military pressure, establish fallback zones, and maintain operational resilience. However, while JNIM employs mobility to manage fluid territorial influence, ISGS tends to use it for strategic domination and shock campaigns, particularly in conflict hotspots. (Thurston, 2020).

In sum, the strategies of governance in Liptako-Gourma demonstrate significant divergence between JNIM's adaptive, embedded governance model and ISGS's coercive, centralized control strategy. Yet, both exploit state vacuums, community grievances, and economic vulnerabilities to consolidate their authority. These patterns will serve as critical foundations for the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters, particularly in assessing how governance strategies intersect with legitimacy construction, social cohesion dynamics, and responses to multilateral interventions.

4.4 Legitimacy Construction and Contestation

The concept of legitimacy is central to understanding how non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISGS consolidate and sustain their authority in contested border regions. Building on Gilley's (2009) multidimensional framework of legitimacy—encompassing performance, procedural, and normative dimensions—this subsection explores the non-military mechanisms through which these groups cultivate acceptance and assert dominance within the Liptako-Gourma region. Drawing from secondary academic literature and expert interview insights, this section focuses on legitimacy construction as well as the sources and processes of contestation encountered by JNIM and ISGS.

4.4.1 Legitimacy construction

For JNIM, legitimacy is primarily constructed through the provision of dispute resolution mechanisms, religious-based justice, and community protection services. This is reinforced by DeAngelo (2025), who describe JNIM's ability to respond to community security needs and settle local disputes as a cornerstone of their perceived legitimacy. JNIM's adaptive approach to Sharia enforcement—adjusting to local norms—has also been emphasized by Eizenga and Williams, (2020), who noted that JNIM's context-sensitive application of governance practices contributed to the group's appeal, especially among marginalized ethnic groups like the Fulani. In contrast, ISGS constructs legitimacy through the imposition of strict Sharia-based governance, combined with the projection of religious purity and disciplinary enforcement. This aligns with the Africa Report (2025), which noted that ISGS frames itself as a divinely mandated authority committed with purifying society and correcting moral decay. The report further highlighted that ISGS gains pragmatic acceptance among local populations by delivering a predictable—albeit harsh—judicial system and administering redistributive practices such as zakat (Islamic almsgiving). This strategy enhances their legitimacy in areas where state authority is weak. Thus, ISGS legitimacy is more coercively manufactured, relying on fear of punishment

alongside claims of divine duty to justify their rule which is underpinned by expert interviewee C's observations:

ISGS doesn't build legitimacy the way JNIM tries to. They rule mainly through fear—people comply because they are afraid of punishment. At the same time, they claim it's a divine obligation, saying obedience to them is a duty to God.

A shared strategy across both groups involves the instrumental use of security provision. Mampilly (2012), who documented how in governance vacuums, security provision—even through non-state actors—is interpreted as a form of legitimate authority. This is supported by observations made by all experts agreeing that in many rural areas, the mere ability to provide basic security in the face of rampant banditry or ethnic militias enhances the perceived legitimacy of both JNIM and ISGS.

4.4.2 Legitimacy Contestation

Despite these efforts to secure legitimacy, both JNIM and ISGS experience significant contestation of their authority. The Africa report (2021), highlighted that where state institutions or traditional authorities retain some influence, JNIM's legitimacy remains thin and transactional rather than deeply embedded. Additionally, competition with ISGS for territorial control has undermined JNIM's moral standing in certain areas by entangling it in broader jihadist violence. ISGS suffers even more intense contestation, according to expert interviews, due to its rigid, punitive rule and violent resource extraction practices. Local resistance is often reflected in mass displacements, proliferation of community self-defense groups, and instances where communities align with rival jihadist factions to counter ISGS dominance (Le Roux, 2019). This dynamic is explored by the Global Initiative against transnational crime index report (2024), describing ISGS's governance model as prone to erosion over time due to excessive brutality and exploitative economic practices. According to expert interviewee A:

JNIM is far from unchallenged. They run into resistance from local militias, from ordinary people who won't comply, and even from rival jihadists. In places where chiefs or customary authorities are strong, or where people push back against religious impositions, their control becomes much harder to sustain.

Another significant source of contestation for both groups for legitimacy is external military intervention, particularly from the French-led Barkhane operation, local state forces, and international peace-keeping missions (Perouse de Montclos, 2021). While such interventions may displace these groups temporarily, Expert Interviewee A noted that:

When the army or foreign forces push these groups out, it doesn't always weaken them. In fact, it can backfire. People see the fighters as victims of outside aggression, and if the state troops then abuse civilians or leave communities unprotected, locals sometimes end up trusting the armed groups more than the government.

Overall, the legitimacy construction of JNIM and ISGS is fragile and continuously negotiated, shaped by their ability to provide security and services but undermined by coercion, local grievances, and contested authority structures. These competing forces of construction and contestation contribute to the fluid, unstable governance dynamics characteristic of the Liptako-Gourma region.

4.5 Community Responses and Social Adaptation

In the Liptako-Gourma region, the responses of communities to the governance of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are shaped by a complex interplay of survival strategies, pragmatic engagement, avoidance tactics, and occasional resistance. This subsection introduces how communities adapt to paramilitary governance while negotiating their own socio-political and security interests.

4.5.1 Strategies of accommodation and co-existence

In the Liptako-Gourma region, community responses to paramilitary governance often take the form of pragmatic accommodation. Empirical studies show that rural populations, particularly in areas with limited or absent state presence, are frequently compelled to cooperate with groups like JNIM and ISGS as a means of securing basic protection and ensuring economic survival. For example, DeAngelo (2025) documented how villagers in northern Burkina Faso and western Niger engage in practices of "forced co-existence," providing logistical support, food, or intelligence in return for guarantees of safety and dispute resolution. Similarly, International Crisis Group (2021) reported that pastoralist

communities in Tillabéri, Niger, relied on ISGS and JNIM to regulate cattle markets and mediate conflicts, illustrating how governance functions emerge under coercive conditions of necessity rather than choice.

In central Mali, evidence gathered by Human Rights Watch (2021) showed that local residents turned to JNIM for justice in land and family disputes when state courts were absent or corrupt, even while resenting the group's imposition of religious norms. In eastern Burkina Faso, residents described to the Clingendael Institute (Van der Lijn et al., 2022) how militants gained acceptance by guaranteeing safe passage for herders and providing predictable taxation in contrast to predatory state forces. A study by Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubaca (2025) further highlighted how, in borderland communities across Mali and Niger, both groups strategically exploit everyday insecurities—such as cattle theft and inter-communal violence—to position themselves as arbiters of order.

For JNIM, accommodation frequently occurs through negotiated coexistence, where local customary leaders maintain some autonomy while complying with basic rules imposed by the group. This flexible posture allows JNIM to gain tolerance if not outright support, particularly in communities already marginalized by the state system (Eizenga & Williams 2020). According to expert interviewee A:

JNIM makes accommodation possible because they are willing to negotiate fines, settle local disputes, and even let some cultural practices continue. Communities know that if they follow the rules, the group will intervene to keep a kind of order, which helps people survive day to day.

ISGS demands strict compliance, with fewer avenues for negotiation. This survivalist dynamic is echoed in Demuyne and Coleman (2022) who described community compliance with ISGS governance as a “logic of coercive pragmatism.” Expert interviewee A complements this strict compliance noting:

People living under ISGS control often follow the rules not because they agree with them, but because they are afraid. The group has a reputation for harsh punishments and for retaliating against entire communities if anyone steps out of line.

Nevertheless, some communities strategically signal loyalty to ISGS by participating in taxation schemes or attending religious courts, as a means of avoiding worse outcomes.

4.5.2 Adaptation through mobility and economic adjustment

Another prevalent community adaptation strategy concerns mobility and displacement. Lyammouri (2020). discussed the rise of “conflict mobility” in Liptako-Gourma, where pastoralist groups and traders strategically alter their movement routes to avoid extortion or forced recruitment by either JNIM or ISGS. As noted by expert interviewee C:

Many communities engage in seasonal or long-term displacement, either migrating temporarily during periods of intensified conflict or permanently relocating to avoid jihadist control.

In addition to mobility, economic adaptation is a critical strategy. Community members modify their economic practices to align with the governance structures of armed groups. For instance, in areas controlled by JNIM, market days are often coordinated around jihadist-imposed rules, with taxes (zakat) integrated into market transactions. In ISGS-controlled zones, communities adapt by participating in controlled livestock trade, often at reduced autonomy but with the benefit of guaranteed market access under jihadist regulation (Lyammouri, 2020; Pérouse de Montclos, 2021).

4.5.3 Acts of resistance and subversion

Despite these adaptation strategies, all expert interviews consistently highlighted latent and overt resistance to paramilitary governance. Communities engage in information leaking, refusal to cooperate, or covert support to state forces and rival groups when opportunities arise. According to Bøås (2024), such resistance often manifests in small-scale sabotage, non-compliance with taxation, or subtle cultural defiance, such as continuing prohibited ceremonies in secret. Resistance is more visible in areas where self-defense militias have formed, particularly among non-Fulani communities in Burkina Faso and western Niger though often at the risk of triggering brutal retaliations.

4.5.4 Ambivalence and shifting loyalties

Secondary literature point to a significant degree of ambivalence within communities. Loyalties are often fluid, shifting in response to short-term security guarantees, economic opportunities, or protection from rival actors. Assanvo et al., (2019) suggested that in many cases, community cooperation is conditional, and populations oscillate between different power centers depending on who offers the most security and least predation at a given time. This fluidity reflects a broader “politics of survival,”

where communities do not simply choose sides but rather continuously renegotiate their relationship with armed groups in response to evolving local dynamics. For instance, in the Liptako region, several communities have alternated between cooperating with JNIM and ISGS depending on which group offered more favorable terms of protection and taxation. International Crisis Group (2021) reported that villages in Soum province shifted allegiance when ISGS provided temporary relief from JNIM's strict social enforcement, only to later return to JNIM when ISGS imposed harsher taxation and violence. Similarly, in central Mali, research by Thurston (2020) and International Crisis Group (2019) showed that in Mopti, villagers at times aligned with JNIM because it mediated disputes and restrained cattle theft, but shifted away when jihadists began enforcing rigid religious practices or clashing with local hunters' associations (in Dozos). This illustrates how governance and coercion interact in shaping temporary loyalties. Also, in the Southwest Niger (in/around Tillabéri), studies by International Crisis Group (2018) highlighted that communities in Tillabéri often adopt "forced co-existence" with whichever group dominates locally. For example, when ISGS controlled cattle markets and trade routes, communities complied out of fear of collective reprisals. However, when JNIM established parallel justice structures, some villages switched allegiance because of its relatively less predatory approach.

These reports underscore the pragmatic and adaptive strategies communities employ to survive amid fragmented authority and armed contestation. Instead of fixed loyalties, everyday decisions are made in relation to the most immediate providers of security, justice, and livelihoods—even when those providers are violent non-state actors.

4.6 Role of State and Multilateral Interventions in eliminating paramilitary groups

The Liptako-Gourma region has become a focal point of both state-led security operations and multilateral interventions aimed at countering the expanding influence of paramilitary groups, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). This subsection explores the patterns of state presence, multilateral involvement, and their interactions with non-state governance structures. Drawing on expert interview responses and secondary academic sources, it examines how these interventions have both challenged and inadvertently reinforced the governance structures of JNIM and ISGS.

4.6.1 State Responses: repression, withdrawal, and symbolic authority

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, governments have pursued military-led campaigns as the cornerstone of their counterterrorism efforts. However, these campaigns frequently lack coordination and have produced widespread civilian harm (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This corroborates Pérouse de Montclos' (2021) observation that repressive tactics often alienate local populations, while DeAngelo (2025) highlights how fragmented counterterrorism strategies, despite international backing (e.g., Operation Barkhane, G5 Sahel Joint Force), have failed to establish durable control or dismantle insurgent networks. Expert Interviewee C pointed to Burkina Faso, where security operations often single out Fulani populations for collective punishment:

Entire villages have been burned because soldiers believed they were sheltering militants. When families lose their sons or see their homes destroyed, many don't need much convincing to join groups like ISGS. It's not ideology first—it's survival, and revenge.

Where repression has proven unsustainable, states have increasingly adopted a strategy of withdrawal, ceding rural zones to insurgents. Security forces retreat to urban centers at night, leaving entire border villages exposed to armed actors enabling both JNIM and ISGS to entrench their mobility and influence. This aligns with Lyammouri's (2020) analysis of security vacuums that allowed armed groups to exploit porous borders and weak administrative oversight. As Demuynck and Coleman (2022) noted, this withdrawal has also left customary leaders vulnerable to co-optation or elimination, eroding traditional governance mechanisms that previously mediated local disputes. Expert Interviewee B reiterates:

You can't just bomb a place and then leave. That vacuum is a gift to ISGS. Locals say, 'At least these fighters stay here with us, at least they don't disappear after a month'. So the state ends up fighting the war and, strangely enough, feeding the very legitimacy it's trying to destroy.

Despite territorial losses, Sahelian governments attempt to project symbolic authority over contested regions through highly publicized flag-raising, military parades, and official visits. Bøås' (2024) assertion that symbolic state presence contrasts sharply with the embedded authority of paramilitary actors. The Africa Report (2021) similarly observed that such symbolic measures inadvertently strengthen the narratives of JNIM and ISGS, which frame state interventions as superficial and illegitimate.

4.6.2 Multilateral Interventions: fragmented coordination and mixed outcomes

Efforts to counter the influence of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Liptako-Gourma region have been shaped by a complex web of multilateral interventions. While these initiatives—ranging from regional alliances to international military and development programs—aim to stabilize the Sahel, all expert interviewees emphasized that fragmented coordination, competing mandates, and limited local buy-in have produced mixed and often counterproductive outcomes.

Regional security initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) were established in 2017 to coordinate military efforts across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020; Dieng, 2019). However, expert interviewee C noted that:

The force has struggled with funding gaps, poor interoperability, and accusations of human rights abuses, limiting its ability to challenge entrenched paramilitary groups.

These observations reflect findings by Lyammouri (2020), who argues that the G5 Sahel's centralized command structure has failed to adapt to localized security dynamics in Liptako-Gourma. In 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger withdrew from the G5 Sahel and created the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), seeking to assert greater sovereignty and operational flexibility. This shift as “a sign of growing disillusionment with donor-driven regional frameworks,” but also warned that the AES risks replicating the same structural weaknesses: weak civilian oversight and overreliance on military solutions (Osuchukwu et al., 2025). Expert interviewee C for this study consistently emphasized that:

multilateral interventions are perceived as externally imposed and insufficiently aligned with local governance realities and every new coalition—whether G5, AES, or Barkhane—is seen as temporary, but JNIM and ISGS present themselves as permanent fixtures.

This sentiment mirrors findings by the Africa Report (2021), which highlights how jihadist groups exploit the episodic nature of international interventions to bolster their own claims of enduring authority. There have equally been international military interventions from France, the EU, and the UN specifically. French-led Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force, alongside UN stabilization efforts under MINUSMA, have been central to international security interventions (DeAngelo, 2025).

Literature indicates that counterterrorism missions in the Sahel—such as Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA—have often operated in silos, with weak coordination between military, humanitarian, and governance actors. Studies critique the decapitation strategies focusing on eliminating jihadist commanders for producing tactical gains that fail to disrupt deeper governance structures—thus allowing JNIM and ISGS to reconstitute through existing local legitimacy networks (Boeke, 2017). Pérouse De Montclos (2021) critiques these operations for prioritizing counterterrorism over state-building, while DeAngelo (2025) underscores how heavy-handed military tactics by foreign forces have sometimes mirrored the state abuses that drive recruitment for JNIM and ISGS. The 2022 withdrawal of French forces from Mali further fragmented security provision, enabling armed groups to consolidate influence in key areas of the tri-border zone. As Bøås (2024) notes, such power vacuums reinforce the perception among local populations that “foreign interventions are transient, while paramilitary governance is enduring.”

Mampilly’s (2012) argument that insurgent-controlled territories create “dual sovereignties,” where humanitarian actors are forced to navigate both state and non-state governance structures. Thus, development-oriented initiatives, such as the Sahel Alliance and European Union stabilization programs, have sought to address root causes of insecurity through investments in livelihoods, infrastructure, and governance reform.

4.7 Summary of Paramilitary governance in Entrenched Zone Findings

This chapter provided a detailed descriptive account of paramilitary governance by Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Liptako-Gourma region, which has been described as an entrenched zone. It focused on documenting the governance rationalities, governance strategies, legitimacy construction and contestation, community responses, and the role of state and multilateral interventions, relying on both expert interviews and secondary academic sources. The chapter outlined the rationalities of governance applied by JNIM and ISGS, noting the distinct logics through which each group claims authority and organizes governance functions in the Liptako-Gourma region. It described the specific governance strategies employed by these groups, including taxation, justice delivery, regulation of local markets, and community engagement mechanisms.

The chapter also detailed the ways in which JNIM and ISGS construct and contest their legitimacy within local populations. Various practices such as dispute resolution, protection provision, enforcement of moral norms, and the use of religious symbolism were described as key features of their governance efforts. Community responses were documented, illustrating how local populations adopt varying strategies such as accommodation, adaptation, mobility, and at times non-compliance in their interactions with paramilitary governance structures. Particular attention was paid to the social and economic adaptations observed in the context of governance by JNIM and ISGS.

Finally, the chapter described the role of state and multilateral interventions in the region, outlining their presence, operational strategies, and the general patterns of engagement with non-state governance structures. It included descriptive accounts of national security responses, multilateral operations, and their interactions with community-level dynamics. This descriptive chapter serves as a basis for subsequent empirical comparisons and further analysis of governance dynamics across different regions.

5. GOVERNANCE INFLUENCE IN EMERGING ZONES: THE GHANA–BURKINA FASO BORDER CASE

5.1 Historical Background of Paramilitary Activities in Ghana-Burkina Borderlands

The Ghana–Burkina Faso region was once a zone of porous movement, long-distance trade, and shared cultural norms across Gold Coast and Upper Volta societies. However, colonial settlement by European powers recalibrated this reality—Britain and France drew fixed boundaries beginning in the 1890s, culminating in formal treaty ratifications and ground demarcation by 1906. This partition disrupted centuries of fluid inter-societal interaction (Walther & Retaille 2019). Despite this political boundary, northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso remained deeply interconnected through transhumant pastoralism, kinship networks, and cross-border markets (Chalfin, 2001; Tonah, 2000).

Historically, the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands were peripheral to colonial investment, with limited infrastructure and weak state presence. This reflected a broader pattern in which colonial administrations concentrated resources in coastal or urban cores while governing northern territories through indirect rule, leaving them politically and economically marginalized—a condition that persisted after independence (Herbst, 2000; Lentz, 2006; Boone, 2014). The Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands have historically been peripheral to the epicenters of Sahelian insurgency. The rise of armed Islamist groups in the Sahel tracing back to the Algerian civil war of the 1990s and the evolution of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007 (Bøås, 2015 & Assanvo et al., 2019) shows paramilitary activity was concentrated in northern Mali and the desert spaces of Niger and southern Algeria. Burkina Faso, though bordering Mali, largely avoided large-scale violence, and Ghana remained untouched—its northern districts functioning more as transit routes for pastoralism and informal trade than as sites of insurgent activity (Thurston, 2020).

However, since the mid-2010s, militant activity in Burkina Faso has proliferated and progressively shifted southward, pulling the Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier more tightly into Sahelian conflict dynamics. Between 2015 and 2019, jihadist violence expanded from northern provinces into Burkina Faso’s eastern and western regions. During this period, JNIM consolidated control in Soum and Oudalan, while ISGS entrenched itself in the tri-border Liptako–Gourma zone at the intersection of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (International Crisis Group, 2019; ACLED, 2020; McNulty, 2021). From these strongholds, fighters exploited porous frontiers and ecological niches—forests, reserves, and pastoral

routes—to move southward. By 2018–2019, violent incidents were recorded in eastern Burkina Faso (Tapoa, Kompienga, Gourma), adjacent to the borders of Benin, Togo, and Ghana (International Crisis Group, 2019). The years since 2019 have seen a dramatic rise in violence in southern Burkina Faso and neighboring coastal states. JNIM and ISGS units have extended operations into northern Benin (notably Park W and Pendjari), Togo’s Savanes region, and communities along the Ghanaian frontier (Assanvo et al., 2019; Heni, 2022).

Although Ghana has yet to experience sustained militant campaigns, multiple credible sources indicate rising risks of infiltration and soft penetration along its northern border. Reports suggested militants from Burkina Faso have discreetly used northern Ghana as a logistical and medical rear base and engaging with communities (Reuters, 2024). This dynamic has been compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities—youth unemployment, marginalization, and weak governance—that, according to a UNDP assessment (2024), heightened susceptibility to radicalization. Further, ACN International (2023) identified northern Ghana's porous borders as critical nodes in ongoing regional insurgency dynamics. Regional analyses documented this reconfiguration, emphasizing how violence radiating from the Liptako–Gourma core has re-shaping coastal borderlands, including Ghana’s Upper East and Upper West Regions (International Crisis Group, 2023). BBC (2024) report reiterated how paramilitary groups strongest in the north of Burkina Faso - where they control large areas - have also expanded to the south, along the porous 550km-long (340 mile) border with Ghana.

Meanwhile, northern border regions of Ghana—particularly the Upper East, Upper West, and Northern Regions—security environment has long been shaped by inter-communal tensions, including recurring chieftaincy disputes, farmer–herder conflicts, and ethnic competition, which have historically undermined state authority in border areas (Tonah, 2005; Appiah-Boateng, & Bukari, 2023). It is important to note that the northern border regions of Ghana have a deep-seated history of localized conflict that has frequently spurred the emergence of paramilitary-style groups—not formal insurgent organizations, but rather armed collectives embedded in local power dynamics. In areas like Dagbon, Bawku, and Bimbilla, recurring chieftaincy succession disputes have mobilized armed youth wings and vigilante militias loyal to rival royal houses. For instance, the 2002 Dagbon crisis—marked by the violent death of the Yaa-Na and dozens of elders at the Gbewaa Palace—is emblematic of how such disputes escalate into organized violence (Lund, 2003). Similarly, in Bawku, decades of Mamprusi–Kusasi rivalries have resulted in militia-like mobilization, where ethnic elites and local supporters form youth

defense groups armed with sophisticated weapons—a trend that reflects community-based militarization patterns (ACCORD, 2024).

5.1.1 Present tensions in the Burkina Faso borderlands

Beyond chieftaincy disputes, the northern borderlands have experienced farmer–herder tensions—especially as Fulani pastoralists traverse into Ghana—prompting the formation of self-defense militias to protect land, livestock, and community safety (Tonah, 2002). Although transient, these localized armed formations have persisted over time, illustrating how institutional fragility and porous borders foster conditions that insurgent groups can exploit. Expert accounts also drew attention to how local dynamics in Ghana are increasingly shaped by broader regional insurgency trends. Expert interviewee B explained:

we are seeing is that instability in Burkina Faso doesn't stop at the border—it filters into northern Ghana through pastoralist routes and informal trade channels, which are now being exploited as avenues for extremist influence.

Similarly, expert interviewee C mentioned:

It is not always overt. In some communities, extremist-linked preachers are gradually embedding themselves, often blending into everyday religious or community gatherings in ways that make detection very difficult.

By 2018–2019, paramilitary groups such as JNIM publicly called on Fulani communities—including those near Ghana's borders—to support their jihadist agenda, and assessments suggest that paramilitary groups may have experimented with outreach strategies in border zones, though documented evidence detailing recruitment, marketplace extortion, or cleric influence remains scarce in publicly accessible publications (ICG, 2019). This perspective was confirmed by again expert interviewee C, who stressed the evolving but still fluid nature of the threat. As he explained,

there is no entrenched territorial control yet on the Ghanaian side, but the groups are testing the waters through propaganda, recruitment, and small-scale criminal activity.

5.1.2 Burkina Faso's coups as an explanatory factor

The situation worsened after Burkina Faso's twin coups in 2022 — first in January, which ousted President Kaboré, and again in September, unseating Damiba. These abrupt political transitions severely undermined state counterterrorism capacities, enabling extremist groups such as JNIM and

ISGS to consolidate and expand their territorial control—particularly in the country’s northern regions. By mid-2022, non-state actors controlled nearly 40 per cent of Burkina Faso’s territory under Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba’s weakened rule (Engels, 2025). Subsequent research indicated that jihadist attacks and fatalities continued to escalate post-coup; for example, an OECD study reports that battlefield deaths in Burkina Faso surged in the aftermath of the 2022 coups. (OECD, 2022). This trend continued into 2023 and beyond and the report indicates that battle deaths nearly doubled between mid-September 2023 and mid-September 2024, tallying approximately 8,461 fatalities. Additionally, research indicated that paramilitary groups now control up to 50% of national territory, severely restricting government access to services like education and healthcare (Engels, 2025; ACAPS, 2025; Adeoye, 2024).

The resulting power vacuum in Burkina Faso following the 2022 coups significantly weakened its counterterrorism capabilities and intensified the security threat along Ghana’s porous northern border. Media reporting confirms this shift: The Washington Post documented how jihadist groups such as JNIM have extended their influence toward coastal states like Ghana, using northern borderlands as logistical bases for rest, recruitment, and resupply. These movements underscore Ghana’s northern frontier’s elevation to a “front-line zone” in the evolving security dynamics of coastal West Africa (The Washington post 2025). Reuters similarly reported that Islamist militants are discretely using northern Ghana as a rear base—crossing into Ghana to procure supplies, receive medical treatment, and attempt recruitment among marginalized local communities (Reuters, 2024).

5. 2 Early Governance Signals and Influence mechanisms

Although Ghana has not yet experienced the entrenched paramilitary governance observed in Mali, Niger, or Burkina Faso, early signals of governance-oriented influence by extremist groups have been detected along the northern borderlands. These signals are often subtle, indirect, and opportunistic, reflecting both the frontier nature of the Ghana–Burkina Faso boundary and the militants’ strategy of incremental infiltration rather than immediate confrontation (ICG, 2023).

5.2.1 Subtle Outreach and Social Embedding

In this study, “subtle outreach” refers to low-visibility, non-coercive strategies of social influence used by paramilitary or jihadist actors to cultivate legitimacy, trust, and local acceptance without direct

confrontation or overt violence. Such outreach typically includes religious preaching, humanitarian gestures, social welfare provision, and participation in community rituals (Bøås, 2024; Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021). It operates through persuasion, moral authority, and selective service delivery—aiming to normalize the group’s presence and values within everyday social life (UNDP, 2023).

Similarly, “social embedding” denotes the process by which armed non-state groups integrate into the social, economic, and cultural fabric of local communities (Arjona, 2017; Bøås & Torheim, 2013). Through kinship networks, marriage alliances, trade, and shared religious or ethnic identities, these actors build enduring social linkages that facilitate recruitment, logistical support, and intelligence flows (Higazi, 2015; Raineri, 2022). In the Sahelian context, social embedding often precedes open insurgency, enabling groups like JNIM and ISGS to operate discreetly within local systems of exchange, worship, and mutual aid.

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, JNIM and ISGS have increasingly relied on subtle outreach and social embedding rather than overt coercion. Local observers noted the presence of itinerant preachers and informal religious gatherings in frontier towns such as Paga and Sapelliga, raising concerns among Ghanaian security officials about the potential for ideological infiltration (Aubyn, 2021). While not inherently extremist, these activities resemble *dawa* campaigns documented in southern Burkina Faso, where jihadist groups use Quranic lessons, youth prayer circles, and seasonal charitable support to gradually cultivate influence (International Crisis Group, 2021; Thurston, 2020). Such outreach often involves charitable and religious patronage—including food distributions during Ramadan, mosque renovations, and sponsorship of Quranic schooling—which serve both social welfare and political purposes (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; UNDP, 2023). Conflict monitoring also shows that these *dawa*-style activities frequently intensify in tandem with militant operations, suggesting a deliberate strategy to blur the line between service provision and politicized influence (ACLED, 2023; BBC, 2022).

Additionally, subjects embed themselves in everyday community life by procurement of food, attractive recruitment base and the use of some social institutions. Credible media reporting further illustrates this subtle outreach. Reuters (2024) documents how jihadists cross into Ghana to procure food, fuel, and medical supplies, with security sources warning that this logistical presence risks “allowing militants to put down roots in the country and recruit in some marginalized local communities.” Similarly, DW (2025) highlights how Ghanaians are recruited through family connections across the border, with

some joining militant ranks under the justification of protecting relatives in Burkina Faso. Foreign Policy (2024) adds evidence of militants using Ghanaian towns as rest and recuperation points, including reports of a young Ghanaian treated at a local hospital for months before returning to militant activities in Burkina Faso.

5.2.2 Justice Provision and Dispute Mediation

In this study, “justice provision” and “dispute resolution” refer to non-state mechanisms of conflict management and adjudication established by armed or paramilitary groups within territories where state authority has weakened. These forms of justice are often informal, community-based, and rely on customary, religious, or hybrid norms rather than codified state law (Arjona, 2017); Mampilly, 2012). In local Sahelian contexts, such mechanisms typically involve itinerant or community-appointed judges (*qāḍīs*), customary elders, or religious figures who mediate land, marital, and intercommunal disputes (Thurston, 2020; Baudais & Chauzal, 2011). Unlike formal government institutions, these practices function as instruments of governance by non-state actors, aiming to secure compliance, legitimacy, and social order within contested zones.

Reviewed secondary sources as well as expert interviews emphasized dispute resolution efforts as a strategy of early governance influence. Broader findings in the Sahel reveal that paramilitary groups exploited perceptions of state bias or corruption in local justice systems to strengthen their own legitimacy through mobile dispute-resolution and “shadow courts” (Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2017). Empirical policy analyses and reports extend this observation to Burkina Faso’s southern and eastern borderlands, where groups such as JNIM have experimented with dispute mediation, rudimentary adjudication, and selective enforcement as precursors to fuller territorial control. They used itinerant *qāḍī*-style adjudication and informal courts to resolve land, family, and grazing disputes in areas where state judicial capacity has waned. These mobile justice mechanisms facilitated routinized contact between civilians and non-state authorities, allowing insurgent actors to build reputational capital as providers of order (Kars de Bruijne, 2022; Beavor, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2021, 2022, 2024 & 2025).

Baczko and Dorronsoro (2022) highlighted how ‘portable’ courts established by armed groups—though lacking independence—frequently operate as hybrid legal forums in conflict zones, offering civilians a functional alternative when official structures collapse. Similarly, ACLED (2024) showed that groups like JNIM often initiate localized governance—mediating disputes, enforcing compliance, and delivering rudimentary adjudication—before establishing full territorial control, particularly in

southern and eastern Burkinabè borderlands." Expert interviewee C remarked this governance signal noting that:

There are reports of young Fulani men saying that if chiefs fail them, they can seek help from the brothers across the border who settle disputes faster.

A report issued by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (2020) documented paramilitary group presence especially JNIM and attempts to impose rules in some villages while generally avoiding deep, permanent settlement; this is framed as “governance-lite” rather than full justice systems in the eastern & south-eastern Burkina Faso (Tapoa, Kompienga) / W National Park area (toward Benin/Togo). Also along the lines south-west (toward Côte d’Ivoire/Ghana, the analyst describes repeated incursions and attempted entrenchment in forest reserves and along roads, including reports emphasizing rule-imposition attempts and intimidation more than standing courts. This is evident with research on JNIM and ISGS’s operations which noted how resolving disputes through courts as part of its strategy without pinpointing such “courts” specifically on the Ghana border. (Stiftung, K. 2021; Beevor, 2022).

5.2.3 Economic Regulation and Informal Taxation

A central element of paramilitary groups governance - especially JNIM and ISGS is the imposition of economically framed taxation and protection rents. These include levies styled as zakat, informal road tolls, and mining rents on artisanal gold sites, traders, and transporters. Such practices not only generate revenue for sustaining militant operations but also embed insurgents within local economic networks, creating dependency relationships that reinforce their authority (UNODC Report, 2023). “Militants have targeted Burkina Faso’s artisanal mining industry, imposing control over gold sites and siphoning millions of dollars annually to fund their insurgency”. Reuters’ Sahel investigation documented militants “demanding a cut of gold” and taxing artisanal production and trade routes in Burkina Faso. (Reuters, 2019). Similarly, AP News highlighted that extremists have levied what they call “protection taxes” around mining communities and forced miners to sell their gold exclusively to them, underscoring how artisanal extraction has become embedded in insurgent governance strategies (Mednick, 2020).

Ghanaian security analysts and local traders reports from northern Ghana further indicated spillover of these practices. Local traders reported the spread of new forms of unofficial “road fees” and levies

in frontier markets such as Paga, Kulungugu, and Hamile. While these are sometimes linked to smuggling syndicates, observers noted that they resemble the early zakat-style taxation patterns first documented in southern Burkina Faso, suggesting an extension of jihadist economic embedding strategies into Ghana’s frontier (Aubyn, 2021; UNDP, 2023). Local and regional reporting further pointed to analogous practices within northern Ghana that stimulates environments for further embedding by paramilitary groups. Along the Paga–Pô axis, political economy analyses described entrenched smuggling networks in fuel and commodities that operate through informal crossings and rely on payments to—or collusion with—security officials and local elites, effectively creating quasi-taxation environments for traders and transporters. In the Upper East around Bawku, investigative accounts note “fabricated” checkpoints where smugglers and local strongmen extort cash from travelers approaching Burkina Faso’s border, highlighting how ad-hoc fees and intimidation replicate protection-rent dynamics in frontier trade (Bernard, 2025). The Ghana Shipper’s authority assessment also documented widespread extortion by border personnel at unapproved northern crossings—raising transaction costs for small traders and normalizing unofficial levies in Ghana’s northern borderlands (Ghana Shippers’ Authority, 2023). These practices, while not always directly tied to paramilitary groups, create the enabling environment through which insurgent actors can embed themselves into cross-border economies.

5.2.4 Logistics

A comprehensive Reuters investigation revealed that certain Islamist militants in Burkina Faso are quietly using northern Ghana as a logistical and medical rear base, enabling them to restock on supplies — “food, fuel, and even explosives”—as well as treat wounded fighters. Sources include Ghanaian security officials and regional diplomats, who warn that these actions create a permissive operational space that enables “militants to put down roots in the country and recruit in some marginalized local communities” (Reuters, 2024). This pattern of cross-border logistical access is reinforced by analysis from the Clingendael Institute, which suggests that Ghana continues permissive stand-offs to avoid disrupting militants’ supply lines and sanctuaries, possibly preventing escalation—an implicit indicator of strategic sharing of space (Clingendael Report, 2024). In practical terms, these logistical channels allow groups like JNIM and ISGS to move fighters, arms, and supplies across the frontier, often under the cover of existing trade and social exchanges. Security analysts in this report have warned of northern Ghana becoming a “rear logistics zone”, where militants can stockpile resources and cultivate relationships with marginalized communities (Clingendael Report, 2024).

Further insight is provided in coverage by Foreign Policy, which documents the use of informal corridors used for fuel, fertilizer, and personnel smuggling, with insurgents known to bribe smugglers across Ghana’s northern frontier—a network that militants exploit for movement and outreach into Ghanaian border communities (Foreign Policy, 2024). Together, these sources illuminate how insurgent groups exploit cross-border kinship and smuggling networks, secure spaces of respite, and establish informal logistical infrastructure across the frontier. This transboundary logistics corridor does more than support military movement—it creates invisible governance pathways that lay the groundwork for broader insurgent presence and influence. Such activities parallel patterns documented in southern Burkina Faso, where logistical embedding through roads, markets, and religious networks preceded the visible rollout of armed governance practices (Thurston, 2020; UNDP, 2023).

5.2.5 Strategic Non-Violence and Image Management

Expert interviewee C also underscored that JNIM and ISGS have been careful not to overplay their hand in Ghana. As he put it, “they are not rushing into open attacks here, because Ghana is considered too risky to destabilize at this stage. What they do instead is quieter—they build relationships, project a sense of moral authority, and slowly test where local loyalties might lie.”. This echoes regional analyses suggesting that paramilitary groups adapted their governance strategies to local political economies, balancing coercion with restraint to avoid premature confrontation with stronger states (Pérouse de Montclos, 2021; Bøås, 2024).

A sophisticated dimension of paramilitary governance in Burkina Faso’s borderlands is the strategic use of local non-aggression pacts with communities. In southern and border provinces that have experienced security fragmentation, JNIM has negotiated informal, tacit agreements with village leaders, local militias, and traditional authorities—exchanging curtailed rule-making or taxation for calm and compliance. These local bargains, although fragile and brokered often by intermediaries, serve as a critical early indicator of insurgent governance in the making (Washington Post, 2025). Notably, The Washington Post reports that in areas under JNIM’s growing influence, village elders and fighters entered implicit understandings that granted civilians limited freedoms (e.g., no interference in religious or cultural conscience) in exchange for their acquiescence—and the revolt subsided (Washington Post, 2025). The group’s long-established trajectory in Mali offers precedents: scholars observed that such non-aggression agreements, rooted in local socio-political logics, often predate full territorial control (Achek, 2024). These pacts not only enable strategic restraint but also help JNIM cultivate a

public image of reasoned governance rather than mindless violence. In turn, communities may perceive militants less as existential threats and more as alternative authorities offering order where the state cannot—effectively blurring the boundary between withdrawal of violence and the initiation of governance.

5.2.6 Paramilitary auxiliaries and co-option of local militias.

While JNIM and ISGS operate as non-state paramilitary groups with transnational ambitions and autonomous command structures, their expansion along the Burkina Faso–Ghana frontier often depends on interactions with locally constituted militias and state-aligned auxiliaries. These auxiliary forces, such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), represent a distinct category of armed actors: they are formally sanctioned by the Burkinabe state but function with significant local autonomy (International Crisis Group, 2023; FIDH, 2024). The VDP were legally created under the 2020 law on homeland defense to support the national armed forces in rural areas where the state’s presence is minimal. Although they operate under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, their command chains are often informal and village-based, resulting in uneven discipline, localized loyalties, and frequent human rights abuses (Tisseron, 2021; ISS, 2019). This semi-official status makes them agents of the state’s counterinsurgency apparatus, yet their weak oversight and dependence on community networks also expose them to manipulation by jihadist actors.

Field reports by the Clingendael Institute (2024) and ISS (2019) indicated that in some southern Burkinabe provinces, VDP units have entered tacit non-aggression arrangements or resource-sharing pacts with jihadist groups to ensure local survival. Such arrangements do not amount to ideological alignment but rather reflect pragmatic coexistence in zones of fragmented authority (Karr, 2025). Paramilitary groups benefit by outsourcing coercion and surveillance to these auxiliaries, allowing them to govern indirectly through intermediaries without exposing their own fighters. In this context, the auxiliaries differ from paramilitary groups both in origin and function. The auxiliaries (like the VDP) are state-initiated, community-recruited, and aim to defend localities, even if they drift toward informal power. The paramilitary groups (like JNIM and ISGS) are anti-state insurgent formations that seek to replace or undermine official governance.

However, their interaction produces hybrid governance in which boundaries between state and insurgent authority blur. Militants exploit auxiliaries’ local legitimacy and access to information, while

auxiliaries leverage jihadists' control of territory or trade routes for protection or survival. As a result, the Ghana–Burkina Faso border region illustrates a fluid spectrum of coercive governance—where state-sponsored militias, insurgent networks, and community defense groups coexist and occasionally collaborate in administering security and justice (BBC, 202; Reuters, 2024).

5.3 Community Perceptions and Resistance Dynamics

Community responses to the early signals of paramilitary influence along the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands reflect a complex mix of pragmatism, caution, and resistance. Historically, northern Ghana’s border populations have lived with intermittent state presence and limited service provision, shaping how they perceive non-state governance initiatives (UNDP, 2023). Local communities—village leaders, traders, religious figures, and youth networks—have responded in diverse and adaptive ways to Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), whose influence began manifesting through various governance signals as discussed above such as informal taxation, religious outreach, and arbitration of disputes in the tri-border environment.

5.3.1 Cooperation and Pragmatic Accommodation

Early insurgent governance in the Burkina Faso–Ghana frontier has often been met with pragmatic forms of cooperation, as communities navigate insecurity and weakened state authority. Village elders, traders, and traditional leaders in southern Burkina Faso have at times negotiated non-aggression pacts with jihadist intermediaries—accepting limited taxation, dispute-resolution mechanisms, or moral codes in exchange for relative calm (The New Humanitarian, 2022; The Washington Post, 2025). Similarly, in Ghana’s border towns such as Paga, Kulungugu, and Hamile, traders have reported new forms of road fees and market levies resembling early zakat-style taxation in Burkina Faso (Aubyn, 2021; UNDP, 2023). While communities rarely embrace jihadist ideology, they often cooperated instrumentally with these arrangements as a means of ensuring survival, securing trade flows, or avoiding violence. Religious outreach further reinforced this dynamic: dawa activities such as Quranic lessons, Ramadan food distributions, and mosque repairs are tolerated by frontier communities that value the services, even while Ghanaian officials flag them as potential recruitment pathways (BBC, 2022; ACLED, 2023). Such accommodations illustrate how insurgents cultivate legitimacy through a combination of material incentives, symbolic gestures, and negotiated restraint.

5.3.2 Resistance and Local Contestation

Despite these accommodations, resistance remains a consistent undercurrent in community responses to insurgent governance. In some frontier areas, local populations have resisted taxation or refused to

cooperate with itinerant adjudicators, viewing such interventions as illegitimate and exploitative (Reuters, 2019). Traders often complained that insurgent-imposed levies undermine already fragile markets, and some community leaders explicitly reject *dawa* activities as veiled indoctrination attempts. Meanwhile, responses to paramilitary auxiliaries such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) revealed ambivalence: while some youth embraced participation for livelihoods and status, others resisted joining, fearing retribution from rival groups or being co-opted into insurgent–state proxy warfare (Clingendael Institute, 2024; Tisseron, 2021). These acts of resistance underscore that insurgent governance is far from absolute—its durability depends on a delicate balance of coercion, consent, and community compliance.

5.3.3 Avoidance and Strategic Non-Confrontation

A third set of responses involves avoidance and silent disengagement from paramilitary activities. In both Burkina Faso’s southern provinces and Ghana’s northern border regions, communities frequently choose to avoid direct confrontation, either by relocating to safer areas or by remaining silent in interactions with militants (International Crisis Group, 2023; UNDP, 2023). Some households have moved deeper into Ghana’s interior to escape the insecurity of porous border zones, while others maintained a posture of neutrality, neither openly resisting nor embracing militant actors. This avoidance reflects a logic of survival in ambiguous governance environments, where confrontation is too risky, but accommodation is not always acceptable. It also signals a broader reality: insurgent authority in the borderlands is often partial, negotiated, and fragile, revealing both the vulnerabilities of frontier populations and the limits of jihadist consolidation.

5.4 External influence : interactions with state and multilateral interventions

The Ghanaian state has historically adopted a preventive security posture in its northern frontier regions, particularly along the Ghana–Burkina Faso border, to mitigate potential spill over from the Sahelian insurgencies. Unlike the entrenched zones of the Liptako-Gourma, where state authority has largely receded, Ghana’s approach has emphasized a combination of security deployments, community surveillance mechanisms, multilateral cooperation, and symbolic assertions of state presence. This strategy reflects an understanding of the borderlands as “pre-emptive security zones,” where interventions are designed to forestall the consolidation of armed non-state actors rather than reclaim already lost territory (Clingendael Report, 2024).

Ghana's preventive posture, however, has developed within a wider regional security environment shaped by developments beyond its immediate territorial boundary. The expansion of JNIM and ISGS in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso, has generated concerns about the southward extension of insecurity into the coastal West African states. Cross-border population movements, trade, pastoral mobility, information flows, and the circulation of perceptions of insecurity further connect Ghana's northern frontier to developments in neighbouring Burkina Faso. Ghana's preventive approach therefore reflects not only an effort to protect its territorial jurisdiction but also an attempt to manage security pressures emerging from an interconnected regional environment. This broader context is important because JNIM and ISGS themselves operate through transnational organisational and ideological networks, meaning that the potential emergence of paramilitary influence in Ghana cannot be understood entirely through domestic conditions.

A visibly preventive footprint along the Upper East/Upper West frontier, using targeted deployments designed to deter spillover rather than retake lost ground is 'Operation Conquered Fist'. This is an internal, anti-terrorism/border security operation that has been used to surge forces to northern border districts to "combat transnational crimes and deter possible terrorist attacks." This deployment derives legal backing from the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, which mandates the Armed Forces to safeguard territorial integrity (Article 210) and authorizes the President to direct military operations in defence of the state. Furthermore, the National Security Strategy (2020) explicitly identifies violent extremism as an existential threat, mandating coordinated action by the Ghana Armed Forces, National Security Ministry, and allied agencies in northern border regions. By operating within these frameworks, Conquered Fist exemplifies the use of constitutional and statutory provisions to legitimize preventive force deployments (ACCORD, 2021; Government of Ghana, 2020; Christensen & Edu-Afful, 2019).

This posture has been operationalized during acute incidents. Reinforcement of border security infrastructure continues to be a central pillar of Ghana's approach. Following the deterioration of security in northern Burkina Faso after 2016, Ghana intensified the deployment of police, customs, and immigration officers, particularly at entry points in the Upper East and Upper West regions. The Ghana Armed Forces also established forward operating bases in border districts such as Paga, Hamile, and Bawku, designed to monitor militant movement across porous boundaries. Following lethal attacks around Bawku, government forces were rapidly deployed to stabilize the town and surrounding border communities, a move widely read by analysts as proactive deterrence at the frontier. Media monitoring

and subsequent reporting confirm these deployments and curfews as part of a forward defence against cross-border violence. (The Africa Report, 2021; Reuters, 2025, International Crises group, 2022).

Expert interviewee C additionally notes that,

These troops are not just there to stop militants from crossing. Their presence is also meant to send a clear message to communities and any paramilitary actors watching—showing that the state is alert and capable of acting if needed.

Complementing physical deployments, the Ghanaian state relied on community surveillance and early-warning architectures that aim to surface risks before they manifest as violence. Local chiefs, religious leaders, and community vigilance committees are mobilized to provide early warning on suspicious movement or recruitment activities (UNDP, 2021). Also, UNDP and the Upper West Regional Peace Council have trained border communities in early warning and response (UNDP, 2025); WANEP's regional outlook tracks rising incident pressures in the northern belts of the coastal states and underpins civil–security information sharing (UNDP, 2023; Eze & Frimpong, 2021) and donor-supported projects, with the National Peace Council (NPC) have strengthened rapid alert/response mechanisms in the five northern border regions (Coginta, 2024). These efforts embed prevention at the community level and help authorities calibrate deployments like Conquered Fist. Formal statements from the NPC and partners describe how these mechanisms feed alerts to security agencies, reinforcing a whole-of-society prevention model rather than a purely kinetic approach (UNDP, 2023).

Expert interviewee B remarks that,

In many towns along the border, chiefs act as intermediaries. They keep an eye on suspicious activity and report it directly to local security agencies, helping to bridge the gap between communities and the state.

Ghana's preventive security posture at the Burkina Faso frontier is embedded not only in military deployments but also in robust legal and policy frameworks. The Anti-Terrorism Act (2008, Act 762) provides a legal basis to criminalize recruitment, financing, and logistical support for terrorist groups, while complementary legislation such as the Anti-Money Laundering Act (Act 749, amended 2014) and the Organized Crime Act (2010) target the financial and organized crime dimensions of violent extremism. Most significantly, the 2019 National Framework for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NAFPCVET) operationalizes Ghana's approach through four mu-

tually reinforcing pillars—prevention, pre-emption, protection, and response. These pillars are particularly relevant for the northern frontier, where the emphasis is on building community resilience, preempting cross-border infiltration, and safeguarding vulnerable spaces before paramilitary actors can establish territorial or governance control (Bank of Ghana, 2022; UNDP, 2024).

Ghana's preventive stance is further amplified through multilateral cooperation, especially under the 'Accra Initiative' established in 2017, which facilitates intelligence sharing, joint operations, and cross-border coordination with Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo to manage Sahel spillover. The Clingendael Institute's recent assessment of Ghana's border policy explicitly notes a "multi-faceted approach to border security, including joint operations under the Accra Initiative," while EU leaders have publicly framed the Initiative as the key operational platform for coastal prevention. This diplomatic–security layer sits alongside external support (e.g., U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability in Coastal West Africa) and broader regional threat assessments (Africa Center for Strategic Studies) that validate Ghana's emphasis on pre-emption, coordination, and resilience in lieu of large-scale combat operations (Clingendael Report, 2024; The Africa Report, 2025). Expert Interview C complements Ghana's preventive stance by noting that,

Ghana sees its role in these initiatives as being a kind of buffer state, keeping the insurgent violence of the Sahel from spilling across its borders. At the same time, the country supports ECOWAS counterterrorism efforts and shares intelligence informally with the G5 Sahel, even though it isn't officially a member.

Meanwhile, since 2018, Burkina Faso's response has been overwhelmingly military-led with a mix of auxiliary mobilizations. Though with more uneven outcomes, the government extended security operations southward to protect key towns such as Pô, Gaoua, and Bobo-Dioulasso, which are gateways to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Following the surge in militant activity after 2019, Ouagadougou increasingly deployed both the FDS (Forces de Défense et de Sécurité) and local auxiliaries into southern provinces (Tapoa, Comoé, and Nounbiel). This expansion reflects the state's recognition that the southern frontier, once considered a buffer zone, is now an active front in the fight against JNIM and ISGS (International Crises Group, 2023).

In 2020, faced with resource constraints, Burkina Faso formalized the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP) as a civilian auxiliary force, legally empowered to support counterterrorism operations

(Law 003-2020/AN). The VDPs have since been deployed not only in the north but also in border provinces of the south, where they act as community defence militias, conducting patrols, manning checkpoints, and providing intelligence on suspicious movements. However, reports suggested their presence has sometimes fuelled ethnic targeting, abuse, and reprisals, exacerbating local mistrust and potentially creating fertile ground for insurgent infiltration (Human Right Watch 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). Unlike Ghana's preventive legal frameworks, Burkina Faso's response has been marked by reactive emergency decrees and reliance on exceptional security measures. Following the coups in 2022, the junta's emphasis shifted to total war against insurgents, with limited attention to governance or civilian protection in the south. The absence of a comprehensive national CVE (countering violent extremism) policy means that southern border communities—though increasingly targeted by militants—lack systematic resilience programs (Congressional Research Service, 2022) comparable to Ghana's NAFPCVET. This institutional vacuum weakens state legitimacy and leaves populations vulnerable to insurgent parallel governance structures.

Burkina Faso has engaged in joint border operations with Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Benin under the Accra Initiative, but political instability and strained relations with ECOWAS have limited their effectiveness. The withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2024 further complicates regional coordination, weakening southern defense mechanisms and exposing the Burkina–Ghana frontier to increased militant mobility and logistical flows (International Security Studies, 2025).

Despite their shared interest in preventing militant expansion, Ghana and Burkina Faso's strategies within the Ghana Burkina Faso frontier diverge significantly in orientation and outcome. Ghana's approach is largely preventive and symbolic, seeking to maintain deterrence through forward deployments, community intelligence, and visible demonstrations of state presence before insurgent groups can establish themselves. Burkina Faso's strategy, by contrast, has been reactive and militarized, involving repeated large-scale counterinsurgency operations and the mobilization of civilian auxiliaries, reflecting the reality of already entrenched militant activity within its territory. These differences also set the stage for understanding how legitimacy is constructed and contested in the borderlands. While Ghana projects authority through deterrence and reassurance, Burkina Faso faces the challenge of reconciling militarized repression with community trust. The following section (5.5) examines how these dynamics contribute to the emerging narratives of legitimacy in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

5.5 Emerging narratives of legitimacy in the Ghana – Burkina Faso Borderlands

Legitimacy in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands emerges from the interplay between state authority, community perceptions, and the shadow presence of paramilitary actors. Although militant governance structures have not been fully entrenched in this area, the narratives through which legitimacy is constructed already reflect tension between reassurance, suspicion, and pragmatic adaptation. From the Ghanaian perspective, legitimacy is closely tied to the state’s ability to demonstrate presence and prevent infiltration. Local communities in the Upper East and North East regions of Ghana often expressed a sense of reassurance from the visibility of security patrols and intelligence outreach initiatives. Expert interviewee C noted,

The government has been careful to show border communities that it is in control. This isn’t just through soldiers on patrol, but also through chiefs and district authorities who constantly remind people that the state is watching.

At the same time, documented reports highlight how developments across the border in Burkina Faso influence local perceptions of legitimacy in northern Ghana. International Crisis Group (2021) observed that the collapse of state authority in parts of northern and eastern Burkina Faso—marked by jihadist taxation systems, assassinations of local leaders, and routine patrols by armed groups—has reinforced fears among Ghanaian border communities of similar outcomes. Research by Lyammouri (2020) and Pérouse de Montclos (2021) further documents how mobility across porous borders enables the spread of such insecurity, creating a sense of vulnerability among Ghanaian populations who see Burkina Faso as an immediate cautionary example. Interview insights also suggest that Ghana’s preventive governance measures gain credibility from their alignment with traditional and religious authority structures. Expert Interviewee C explained that,

villagers in northern Ghana know what has happened just across the border; they hear stories from relatives of killings, forced taxation, and jihadist patrols. So they are more willing to cooperate with state security now because they fear the alternative.

This fear-based comparison fosters a moral narrative: Ghanaian security actors are viewed as comparatively just and protective when contrasted with accounts of jihadist coercion in Burkina Faso. Scholarly accounts emphasize that such perceptions of “relative justice” often form the basis of legitimacy in fragile peripheries, where populations evaluate authority not in absolute but comparative terms (Brinkerhoff et. al., 2012). Against this backdrop, Ghana’s preventive measures are understood locally not only in terms of what the state delivers, but also in comparison to the governance vacuum across the frontier.

On the Burkina Faso side of the border, legitimacy is more fragmented. Communities oscillate between recognition of state authority and accommodation of paramilitary actors, depending on who offers greater protection in a given moment. Here, legitimacy is conditional and fluid, with villagers often navigating multiple authorities simultaneously. The symbolic dimension of state legitimacy also features prominently. Ghanaian officials, for instance, frame their cross-border security efforts as part of a broader national narrative of territorial integrity and resilience. By contrast, Burkinabè authorities have struggled to maintain symbolic legitimacy in the face of recurrent coups and military setbacks, leading to a perception of fragility even when soldiers are present in the field.

These narratives highlight how emerging legitimacy is negotiated not only through coercion or material benefits, but also through imagery, discourse, and regional comparison. In Ghana, legitimacy is reinforced by prevention and distinction, while in Burkina Faso it is challenged by fragmented authority and the visible contestation of control. This dynamic provides the foundation for the next section, which synthesizes how community responses and social adaptation contribute to the shaping of governance in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter revisits the analytical framing and the conceptual foundations established in Chapter 1 and 2 and presents the comparative analysis of paramilitary governance in West African borderlands. This discussion treats Liptako–Gourma as a site of entrenched paramilitary governance—where ISGS has institutionalized coercive and administrative authority—and the Ghana–Burkina Faso border as a case of emerging governance, where JNIM’s presence is fluid, negotiated, and socially embedded. Unlike the preceding chapters, which were primarily descriptive in nature, this chapter engages directly with the conceptual framework developed earlier in the thesis, applying its analytical categories—rationalities of governance, governance strategies, legitimacy dynamics, and external influence (interactions with state and multilateral interventions) factors—to interpret the empirical findings. The objective is to move beyond narration and provide a systematic comparison of how Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) construct and contest authority across different security environments. The chapter is structured around three main lines of inquiry. First, it examines the rationalities of governance—the religious, political, security, and economic logics that underpin paramilitary claims to authority. Second, it analyses the strategies of governance employed by JNIM and ISGS, ranging from coercive enforcement and economic regulation to justice provision and symbolic authority. Third, it considers the legitimacy dynamics that emerge from these rationalities and strategies, assessing how authority is accepted, negotiated, or resisted by local populations. These dimensions are further understood within a context of external factors, including state and multilateral interventions, community responses, and transnational linkages.

The comparative approach is central to this chapter. While both entrenched and emerging zones experience governance by armed non-state actors, the intensity, durability, and modalities of this governance differ. In entrenched areas such as Liptako–Gourma, governance arrangements have become deeply institutionalized, whereas in emerging zones like northern Ghana, the presence of armed groups is still tentative and contested. By juxtaposing these two contexts, the chapter allows for an assessment not only of continuities in paramilitary governance logics but also of divergences in intensity, durability, and legitimacy across different security environments and fragile borderlands.

Taken together, the analysis highlights the fluidity of governance by armed groups - authority is not static but shaped through a dynamic interplay of coercion, service provision, symbolic authority, and community negotiation. While the analysis is structured thematically around rationalities, strategies, and legitimacy, one of the insights that emerges across cases is the sense of a continuum of governance

— from tentative or ‘proto-governance’ in emerging zones to more entrenched, routinized forms in consolidated strongholds. This continuum will be revisited in the conclusion as a way of synthesizing the comparative patterns.”

6.1 Governance Rationalities and Strategies Analysis and Discussion

6.1.1 Historical Trajectories and Pathways of Governance

The historical development of paramilitary governance in West African borderlands illustrates how violent actors exploit pre-existing structural vulnerabilities to institutionalize authority. From a theoretical perspective, this reflects what historical institutionalists call path dependency, whereby early disruptions—such as the Libyan crisis of 2011 and the Malian rebellion of 2012—created enduring legacies of insecurity that shaped subsequent governance possibilities (Pierson, 2000). In fragile borderlands, these disruptions are not isolated shocks but formative junctures that reconfigured political order. The trajectories of JNIM and ISGS in the Liptako-Gourma region cannot be understood without situating them within the historical weakening of state authority. It is essential to recall the pivotal moments that directly shaped governance practices, legitimacy claims, and community response—the three pillars of this study’s conceptual framework.

In Liptako–Gourma, the collapse of Malian state authority in 2012 opened a governance vacuum that was quickly occupied by paramilitary groups. Over time, groups like MUJAO, Al-Mourabitoun, JNIM, and ISGS embedded themselves by transforming insurgent practices into sustained governance projects. This evolution resonates with Hagmann and Péclard’s (2010) notion of the negotiated state, where authority in weak or contested spaces is produced not through stable state institutions, but through ongoing struggles among armed actors, local elites, and fragmented state representatives. The endurance of JNIM and ISGS as governing actors is thus not merely a product of military strength but of historically embedded opportunities for alternative orders in ungoverned zones.

By contrast, in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, the historical trajectory has been shaped less by collapse and more by anticipatory statecraft. While Ghana has not experienced the same level of paramilitary group penetration, its northern border communities have been profoundly affected by the symbolic proximity of the Sahelian crisis. Here, as mentioned by the expert interviewee A,

historical memory functions as a preventive rationality - the state mobilizes narratives of resilience (“Ghana is not Mali”) and deploys security patrols to signal capacity before governance vacuums can crystallize.

This trajectory illustrates what Lund (2006) terms the twilight institutions of governance, where state and non-state structures coexist, but in Ghana’s case the state has actively sought to prevent insurgent actors from institutionalizing themselves as legitimate rulers.

Comparatively, entrenched zones (Liptako–Gourma) embody trajectories of governance through collapse, insurgent adaptation, and institutionalization, while emerging zones (Ghana–Burkina Faso) reflect trajectories of prevention, where state authority works to block the consolidation of paramilitary rule. Taken together, these historical pathways underscore Foucault’s (2007) argument that governance is always contingent, relational, and tied to the ways crises open or close possibilities for new political orders.

6.1.2 Rationalities of paramilitary governance

The rationalities of governance articulated by paramilitary actors in West African borderlands demonstrate how armed groups mobilize distinct yet overlapping logics to assert authority. Drawing on Dean’s (2009, p.11) conception of governmentality as the “mentalities of rule,” these rationalities can be understood not simply as ideological justifications, but as modes of problematizing disorder, articulating alternative orders, and legitimizing interventions in everyday life. Understanding the rationalities behind paramilitary group governance requires examining the narratives through which JNIM and ISGS seek to justify their authority. Both groups frame their presence not only as military resistance but as a moral and political project, designed to provide order, justice, and an alternative form of governance where the state is absent or delegitimized. Yet their rationalities diverge in emphasis and manifest differently across entrenched and emerging frontier contexts. The contrast between JNIM and ISGS reveals two distinct governance rationalities:

- JNIM emphasizes *moral authority, justice, and protection*, producing pragmatic legitimacy where states are absent.
- ISGS emphasizes *purist doctrine and coercion*, creating compliance through fear and exclusivity.

In Liptako–Gourma, both JNIM and ISGS rely heavily on religious rationalities, but with important distinctions. JNIM situates its authority within localized Islamic traditions, presenting itself as a defender of Muslim communities against corruption and violence by state forces. This reflects what Rose (1999, pp.84-88) describes as the “ethical” dimension of rule, where legitimacy is sought by aligning governance with moral and cultural values. ISGS, however, pursues a transnational rationality, explicitly rejecting state borders as illegitimate colonial constructs and invoking a global jihadist identity Rose (1999, pp.99-102). This universalist framing resonates with Foucault’s insight that rationalities of governance are not bound to territorial states but may articulate “counter-conducts” that redefine political space (Foucault, 2007, p.196). The divergence highlights how the same religious frame can be deployed differently: one embedded in local moral orders (JNIM), the other projecting a de-territorialized Islamic polity (ISGS) (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen 2020; Thurston, 2020). Following the concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2009), JNIM and ISGS deploy governance logics that frame coercion as moral obligation and order as divine mandate.

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, rationalities are more tentative and anticipatory. Instead of structured governance claims, paramilitary actors communicate symbolic warnings and ideological discourses, often via propaganda and sporadic incursions. Here, rationalities are shaped less by coercive practices and more by discursive positioning—what Dean (2009, p.20) terms “fields of visibility” through which actors seek to render themselves thinkable as alternatives. For instance, JNIM’s governance in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands remains tentative and discursive. Here, rationalities of rule revolve around persuasion and moral authority rather than fixed bureaucracy. Drawing from Arjona’s (2017) concept of proto-rebelocracy, JNIM’s authority is relational—negotiated through religious discourse, local mediation, and symbolic presence. This aligns with Mampilly’s (2012) argument that insurgent governance is sustained when coercion is supplemented by ideological appeal and social service provision. Yet these rationalities remain constrained by Ghana’s relatively resilient state presence and preventive governance initiatives, which reinforce the perception that the state—not armed actors—retains ultimate authority

Comparatively, entrenched zones (Liptako–Gourma) reveal how rationalities evolve into institutionalized mentalities of rule, shaping justice, taxation, and security provision as coherent governance projects. In emerging zones (Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands), rationalities function primarily as incipient discourses—warnings and ideological signals that remain external to daily governance. This difference demonstrates the analytical value of governmentality studies in fragile contexts: rationalities

do not simply reflect ideology, but constitute active projects of world-making whose durability depends on the depth of state absence and the receptivity of local communities. Across both cases, the rationalities of governance reveal adaptive calculations: ISGS institutionalizes domination to sustain its order, while JNIM experiments with governance rationalities that remain socially contingent and context-specific. In both situations, paramilitary actors reinterpret state functions through what Foucault (1991) calls the conduct of conduct, translating governance into a form of rule that disciplines populations through both fear and faith.

6.1.3 Governance strategies and technologies of control

Governance by armed non-state actors operates not only through rationalities of rule but also through the strategies they deploy to materialize authority in everyday life. As outlined in Chapter 2, governance strategies refer to the techniques and practices through which non-state actors operationalize control. Dean (2009, p.41) conceptualizes these as technologies of government—the administrative and moral tools that render populations governable. Also, drawing from Arjona’s (2017, p.7) framework of rebelocracy vs. aliocracy, these strategies can be understood along a spectrum: some armed groups seek deep penetration into community affairs, while others establish more limited, coercive arrangements. The comparative trajectories of JNIM and ISGS in Liptako–Gourma, and the preventive responses in the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, illustrate divergent but interconnected logics of strategic governance.

In Liptako–Gourma, JNIM’s governance strategies are marked by a blend of coercion and negotiation, which enables the group to entrench itself within communities. This resonates with the literature on hybrid political orders (Boege et al., 2009), where paramilitary groups embed themselves through co-optation of chiefs, the provision of dispute resolution mechanisms, and selective violence. As expert interviewee C observed,

JNIM deliberately mixes fear with flexibility; they punish when necessary, but they also mediate disputes in ways that state actors often cannot.

This duality—force coupled with service provision—contributes to the group’s resilience and ability to manage inter-communal tensions. By contrast, ISGS in the tri-border area relies more heavily on coercive domination. ISGS has institutionalized taxation, justice provision, and surveillance mechanisms that transform coercive power into routinized authority. Reports of standardized tax collection, market regulation, and qāḍī-based judicial systems indicate the emergence of what Mampilly (2012, p.74) describes as a rebel bureaucracy. Its governance strategy has been described as “rule through

violence and predation” (Bencherif & Campana, 2018, p.1016), characterized by targeted assassinations, brutal reprisals, and extractive taxation. The group’s attempt to monopolize authority fits into Mampilly’s (2015) notion of insurgent governance as coercive hegemony, where legitimacy is less about consent and more about enforced compliance. Interview evidence reinforces this dynamic: expert interviewee A explained that,

ISGS presents itself as the only sovereign authority, and that comes with brutal enforcement of its rules”. This strategy, while effective in the short term, makes ISGS’s governance model prone to erosion over time, as communities seek escape routes or alternative allegiances (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015).

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, strategies differ fundamentally - the state is engaged in preemptive governance to prevent the institutionalization of paramilitary authority. Ghana has strategically leveraged symbolic authority—including community policing, collaboration with traditional chiefs, and proactive patrols—to signal vigilance. This aligns with the concept of performative statehood (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010), where the visibility of security forces and rhetorical distinctions reinforce the perception of state control even before insurgents arrive. As expert interviewee C emphasized, “the point is not that soldiers are everywhere, but that communities know the state is watching. For instance, JNIM’s strategies along the Ghana–Burkina Faso border are characterized by mobility and subtlety rather than permanence. Its justice mechanisms—mobile dispute resolution, itinerant preaching, and *dawa* campaigns—serve as embryonic governance technologies aimed at embedding the group within community life. These actions correspond to what Arjona (2017, p.9) terms the social regulation phase of insurgent governance, where informal authority precedes territorial control.

Both groups employ coercion selectively. ISGS enforces order through exemplified punishment and taxation, corresponding to Weber’s (1978, p.215) notion of coercive legitimacy grounded in effective domination. JNIM, on the other hand, applies what Rose (1999, p. 176) would call pastoral power—a governance logic that seeks to guide conduct through persuasion, moral instruction, and charitable provision. In this sense, the two groups illustrate contrasting technologies of rule under the broader governmentality framework: one coercive-bureaucratic, the other moral-relational. Comparatively JNIM’s blended governance, ISGS’s coercive domination, and Ghana’s preventive statecraft reveal three distinct strategic models. They highlight the adaptability of governance in fragile borderlands: from negotiation and service delivery, to violent imposition, to anticipatory measures. Importantly, these models demonstrate that governance strategies are not static but evolve in response to local vulnerabilities, inter-communal dynamics, and competing claims of authority.

6.1.4 Paramilitary governance and frontier statehood

The findings from Liptako–Gourma and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands contribute directly to the expanding literature on insurgent governance. Scholars such as Mampilly (2012), Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (2015), and Thurston (2020) have shown that armed groups frequently govern by providing justice, security, and economic regulation, combining coercion with selective service delivery. The analysis confirms these dynamics in the entrenched frontier of Liptako–Gourma, where JNIM and ISGS operate parallel systems of courts, taxation, and policing that substitute for absent or predatory state institutions. Governance becomes institutionalized, with routinized courts, taxation, and policing.

At the same time, the Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier illustrates an underexplored dimension of paramilitary governance - symbolic and proto-governance practices in emerging zones. Here, governance is not yet institutionalized but expressed through subtle religious outreach, discursive claims of justice, and selective mediation. This demonstrates that paramilitary governance is not confined to contexts of territorial control. Instead, it unfolds along a continuum—from narrative penetration, to exploratory practices, to entrenched parallel institutions. Recognizing this continuum extends existing theories, which have tended to privilege fully consolidated rebel governance (e.g., Arjona, 2017; Kasfir, 2015).

The cases also highlight the importance of viewing insurgent governance through the lens of frontier statehood. Consistent with borderland studies' framing of border regions as sites of partial and episodic state authority (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Nugent, 2019). Borderlands such as Liptako–Gourma and Ghana–Burkina Faso are not marginal backwaters but zones of negotiation, where state, paramilitary groups, and customary authorities overlap. This aligns with scholarship on hybrid governance and frontier politics, which emphasizes that authority in peripheries is plural, contested, and continuously renegotiated (Lund, 2006; Boege et al., 2009). By showing how paramilitary groups engage with pastoral networks, chiefs, and informal markets, the findings reinforce the idea that paramilitary governance is embedded in longer histories of borderland authority rather than imposed from outside.

This continuum challenges and extends the conventional tendency in the armed group governance literature to focus on consolidated rebel administrations (e.g., Arjona, 2017; Mampilly, 2012). They confirm that governance functions—justice, taxation, security—are central to armed group authority. But they extend this by showing that symbolic governance in emerging frontiers is an integral part of the governance repertoire, shaping community perceptions and laying the groundwork for possible future

entrenchment. It highlights the importance of recognizing proto-governance—early, symbolic practices that lay the groundwork for potential institutionalization unfolding across space and time.

6.2 Legitimacy Dynamics Analysis and Discussion

6.2.1 Comparative legitimacy dynamics

Legitimacy, as conceptualized in Chapter 2, represents the social recognition of authority and the consent that sustains governance beyond coercion. Legitimacy is central to governance, determining the extent to which authority is perceived, accepted, or resisted. In line with Weber's (1978) typology and Gilley's (2009) adaptation of pragmatic, moral, and coercive legitimacy, both JNIM and ISGS employ distinct yet overlapping strategies to justify their rule. Therefore, a comparative assessment of JNIM and ISGS in Liptako–Gourma, and Ghana's preventive governance measures along the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, illustrates distinct yet overlapping trajectories of legitimacy formation.

In Liptako–Gourma, JNIM derives pragmatic legitimacy by positioning itself as a provider of security and dispute resolution in spaces abandoned by the state. This echoes Arjona's (2017) analysis of insurgent service delivery as a source of community acceptance. JNIM further claims moral legitimacy through its framing as an Islamic movement defending marginalized Muslim populations, a narrative reinforced by its ideological ties to Al-Qaeda (Eizenga & Williams, 2020). Yet, JNIM also enforces coercive legitimacy, as communities comply under the threat of violence, even when their consent is partial or conditional (Bencherif & Campana, 2018). This combination of negotiation and coercion reflects a hybrid legitimacy that is adaptive but fragile. ISGS on the other hand, relies heavily on coercive legitimacy, compelling obedience through targeted violence, punitive taxation, and intimidation. Expert interviewee A noted: "ISGS presents itself as the sovereign authority, but its acceptance comes from fear, not trust". While ISGS invokes moral legitimacy through appeals to the Islamic State's global jihadist narrative, its excessive brutality and extractive practices undermine long-term acceptance (International Crisis Group, 2021). Unlike JNIM, which blends negotiation with force, ISGS's legitimacy is narrow and prone to erosion, particularly as communities seek escape or covertly align with alternative authorities (Chauzal & Van Damme 2015). Both cases illustrate Foucault's (1991, p. 95) principle that power becomes stable only when internalized through accepted norms of conduct. ISGS achieves this through routine governance and enforcement, while JNIM attempts to moralize governance through persuasion and religious discourse. Communities accept their authority

as a trade-off for predictability, corresponding to Mampilly's (2011, 64) and Arjona's (2017, p.76) argument that insurgent legitimacy emerges when groups meet basic social needs.

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, legitimacy functions differently, as it emerges not from entrenched paramilitary governance but from preventive statecraft. Here, legitimacy is largely symbolic: the visibility of state patrols, collaboration with chiefs, and public messaging reassure citizens that Ghana remains in control. Expert interviewee C observed, “people believe the state is present because chiefs, imams, and police keep repeating that message”. This echoes Hagmann and Péclard's (2010, p.547) notion of performative statehood, where legitimacy is tied as much to symbols of control as to material provision. At the same time, negative examples from across the border reinforce Ghana's legitimacy.

Across both groups and regions, a consistent theme is that legitimacy is conditional and fluid. Communities recognize paramilitary authority when it delivers security, swift justice, or economic regulation with minimal predation, but they withdraw support when governance becomes too exploitative or when alternative authorities (chiefs, militias, or state patrols) are stronger. This fluidity reflects the “everyday politics of survival” that scholars such as Lund (2006, p. 689) and Assanvo et al. (2019) highlight in frontier contexts. Together, these cases illustrate how legitimacy in fragile borderlands is relational, contingent, and deeply embedded in local perceptions of order, security, and moral alignment.

6.2.2 Rethinking legitimacy in paramilitary governance

Legitimacy lies at the heart of the governance practices analyzed in this thesis. Traditional political theory associates legitimacy with consent to state authority, rooted in legality, democratic mandate, or performance (Weber, 1978). Yet the evidence from Liptako–Gourma and Ghana–Burkina Faso shows that legitimacy in frontier contexts is plural, contested, and conditional. Armed groups like JNIM and ISGS do not simply impose rule; they actively seek to justify it, while communities selectively recognize or resist their claims depending on circumstances.

Contribution to Legitimacy Debates

These findings suggest three refinements to existing debates:

1. Legitimacy is plural — different forms (moral, pragmatic, coercive) coexist and compete.

2. Legitimacy is symbolic as well as material — discursive claims matter, even before institutionalization.
3. Legitimacy is negotiated and conditional — it shifts with context, actors, and performance, rather than being a fixed attribute.

By reframing legitimacy in these ways, the thesis extends the study of armed governance beyond the state-centric paradigm and offers a framework for analyzing how authority is constructed in fragile frontiers.

6.3 Community Adaptation and Resistance patterns

6.3.1 Comparative community responses

Community responses to paramilitary governance are neither uniform nor static. Instead, they reflect adaptive strategies shaped by local histories, security needs, and perceptions of authority. As noted by Lund (2006), communities in fragile borderlands often oscillate between different power centers, seeking protection and minimizing risks rather than demonstrating exclusive loyalty. This fluidity underscores the negotiated character of governance in conflict zones.

In Liptako–Gourma, communities under JNIM have displayed a combination of passive acceptance, negotiated cooperation, and limited resistance. JNIM’s relatively flexible approach—offering dispute resolution and embedding itself through religious leaders—has enabled some villagers to engage pragmatically with its authority. Expert interviewee A noted that people turn to JNIM courts not because they fully support them, but because they are faster and less corrupt than the state system.

This aligns with Arjona’s (2017, p. 9) finding that civilian compliance often reflects strategic adaptation rather than ideological alignment. Yet, compliance is not absolute; in some cases, communities quietly cooperate with state forces or rival militias, balancing survival needs against insurgent demands (Thurston, 2020, p. 142).

Responses to ISGS, however, reveal a more constrained environment. ISGS’s heavy reliance on coercion has limited the space for negotiation, pushing communities into compliance out of fear or into displacement. Expert interviewee B observed,

villagers in Tillabéri and Oudalan don't see ISGS as protectors—they see them as a threat, but resisting is impossible without risking their lives.

Studies confirm that ISGS's brutality has often led to large-scale displacements and shifting migration routes as pastoralist groups adapt mobility patterns to evade forced recruitment or extortion (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015). Over time, this coercive environment erodes the possibility of pragmatic co-operation and weakens ISGS's social embedding (Bencherif & Campana, 2018).

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, community responses differ significantly because paramilitary governance is not entrenched. Here, responses are shaped by preventive state presence and collective memory of neighboring collapse. Local populations tend to cooperate with Ghanaian security agencies and chiefs, seeing them as guarantors of stability. Expert interviewee C highlighted that,

communities report suspicious activity because they have seen what happens in Burkina and don't want that replicated here.

This suggests a form of anticipatory cooperation, rooted in fear of the Burkinabè experience rather than direct paramilitary pressure. At the same time, field research reports highlights moments of skepticism—particularly around heavy-handed security practices, which some fear could alienate border communities (Christensen & Edu-Afful, 2019).

Comparatively, community responses are shaped by the governance strategies employed: in JNIM-held zones, responses are adaptive and negotiated; under ISGS, they are constrained and survivalist; and in Ghana's borderlands, they are anticipatory and cooperative, influenced by lessons from Burkina Faso's collapse. These findings underscore Pérouse de Montclos (2021, p.14) point that community allegiance in fragile zones is conditional, oscillating between power centers that appear least predatory at any given time.

6.3.2 Community ambivalence as a mechanism of governance and survival Politics

One of the clearest findings from the comparative analysis is the role of community ambivalence - that communities are not passive subjects of paramilitary rule. Instead, they exercise agency by adopting fluid, pragmatic strategies to survive amid competing authorities. Communities accommodate, resist, or withdraw based on shifting security guarantees and levels of predation. In entrenched zones, this produces cycles of cooperation and displacement; in emerging zones, it results in cautious tolerance

without outright allegiance. This ambivalence—oscillating between accommodation, resistance, and withdrawal—illustrates the concept of survival politics, where communities continuously renegotiate their position in response to shifting risks and opportunities.

These findings contribute to theories of hybrid governance and borderland politics in three ways:

1. They show that ambivalence is not a weakness but a rational strategy of survival, reflecting communities' capacity to navigate competing authorities.
2. They highlight that frontiers are sites of negotiation, where authority is plural and overlapping (Lund, 2006; Boege et al., 2009).
3. They extend the literature by showing how ambivalence differs across contexts: deeply entangled in entrenched zones, more preventive and cautious in emerging ones.

Thus, community responses are not simply reactions to paramilitary governance but are constitutive of it. Governance in frontier zones is a co-production between armed groups, state actors, and local populations, mediated by the politics of survival.

6.4 External influence : interactions with state and multilateral interventions

6.4.1 The role of the state and multilateral organisations' interventions

State and multilateral responses are central external factors shaping paramilitary governance in West African borderlands. In contexts where state authority is fragile, the effectiveness of state and international interventions directly influences the space available to groups such as JNIM and ISGS. As Hagmann and Péclard (2010, p. 545) emphasize, statehood in such contexts should be understood as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed attribute; external actors—from multilateral missions to neighboring states—further complicate this governance landscape. However, external influence extends beyond state and multilateral interventions. The paramilitary actors themselves are embedded within transnational organisational and ideological networks that shape the resources, strategic repertoires, and political imaginaries through which they operate. External influence in these borderlands is therefore multidirectional: states and international organisations seek to constrain paramilitary authority, while transnational non-state networks can sustain and reinforce the capacity of armed groups to adapt to such pressures.

In Liptako–Gourma, Malian, Burkinabè, and Nigerien state forces have often been characterized by a combination of military repression and strategic withdrawal. Counterinsurgency campaigns—frequently supported by France’s Operation Barkhane until 2022 and MINUSMA (UN)—temporarily dislodged insurgent groups but also created governance vacuums when troops withdrew (Pérouse de Montclos, 2021). Expert interviewee A observed, “after joint operations, JNIM or ISGS returned quickly because the state had no permanent presence”. This reflects the structural weakness of states in maintaining enduring authority in peripheral zones. For JNIM, this cycle of repression and withdrawal paradoxically enhanced its ability to present itself as a more predictable authority. By contrast, ISGS faced harsher targeting, particularly after its international designation as a major terrorist threat in 2017 (Eizenga & Williams, 2020). Yet, ISGS demonstrated resilience, often dispersing into rural areas and re-emerging after state offensives (ICG, 2021). The fragmented and reactive nature of state responses thus contributed to the perpetuation of insurgent governance structures rather than their elimination. Multilateral interventions also shaped these dynamics. While Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA were initially designed to bolster local state capacity, they increasingly came to be viewed with skepticism by local populations. Regional frameworks, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, attempted to coordinate cross-border security but faced chronic logistical, financial, and political challenges, limiting their effectiveness.

In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, the contrast is stark. Ghana has pursued a preventive security posture, deploying the “Operation Conquered Fist” task force to monitor border movements while integrating traditional chiefs and community structures into intelligence-sharing systems (Eze & Frimpong, 2021). Expert interviewee C emphasized, “Ghana has tried to show a consistent state presence in its northern borders, not just soldiers, but police and civil administrators too”. This approach has so far limited the operational space available to paramilitary actors, while simultaneously fostering symbolic legitimacy for the state.

Burkina Faso, by contrast, has experienced repeated coups and institutional fragmentation, undermining both state and multilateral responses. Despite reliance on volunteer militias such as the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP), widespread reports of human rights abuse and lack of coordination with international actors have further alienated local communities (Demuyne & Coleman, 2022). This has reinforced jihadist narratives portraying the Burkinabè state as both predatory and incapable of protecting its citizens.

The influence of external actors, however, is not limited to interventions directed against paramilitary groups. JNIM and ISGS are themselves embedded in wider transnational jihadist networks that extend beyond the immediate territories in which they exercise authority. JNIM emerged through the consolidation of Sahelian jihadist formations with established links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), while ISGS developed through its affiliation with the wider Islamic State project. These linkages have provided broader ideological and organisational frameworks through which local armed actors interpret political order, authority, and territorial boundaries. They also connect local insurgent activity to wider patterns of mobility, organisational learning, and strategic adaptation. Consequently, the governance practices observed in Liptako–Gourma cannot be attributed solely to local state weakness or the internal strategies of JNIM and ISGS; they are also conditioned by the transnational environments in which these organisations operate.

Overall, the comparative picture illustrates how state and multilateral interventions can either constrain or inadvertently enable paramilitary governance. In Liptako–Gourma, fragmented and transient interventions created openings for JNIM and ISGS to consolidate. In Ghana, preventive and community-integrated measures have so far preserved state legitimacy and deterred militant encroachment. In Burkina Faso, weak and abusive responses have eroded legitimacy, creating fertile ground for further insurgent expansion. These dynamics underline the importance of viewing state and multilateral interventions not as external correctives to governance crises, but as integral components of the contested governance landscape in fragile borderlands.

6.4.2 External Interventions and the Paradox of Security

The analysis revealed that external interventions—whether by national militaries, regional alliances, or international forces—have profoundly shaped the dynamics of paramilitary governance. Yet rather than simply weakening insurgent authority, these interventions often generate paradoxical effects, disrupting militant networks in the short term while reinforcing their legitimacy narratives in the long run.

Militarized Counterterrorism in the Sahel

State responses in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have relied heavily on military campaigns, emergency decrees, and territorial sweeps. While these efforts occasionally degrade insurgent capacity, they often do so at the cost of widespread civilian harm—including extrajudicial killings, ethnic profiling, and collective punishments (Human Rights Watch, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2019). These

abuses feed directly into jihadist propaganda, enabling groups like JNIM to present themselves as protectors against predatory states.

The French-led Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel Joint Force also illustrate the paradox. Their decapitation strategies—targeting commanders—produced tactical successes but failed to undermine insurgent governance functions. As Charbonneau (2021, p.112) argues, the endurance of jihadist authority lies less in its military leadership than in its embedded governance structures, which were left intact. Similarly, MINUSMA’s stabilization role was hampered by operating in silos, prioritizing security deployments without addressing local governance needs (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020). In this vacuum, paramilitary groups reconstituted authority through local legitimacy networks, turning international operations into cycles of disruption and re-entrenchment.

Ghana’s Preventive Buffer Strategy

By contrast, Ghana has pursued a preventive approach, positioning itself as a “buffer state” against the Sahelian insurgencies. Military patrols and surveillance in northern border regions are designed not only to deter infiltration but also to signal visible state presence in communities often neglected by central government (Aning & Danso, 2022). Chiefs and district authorities are integrated into this strategy, serving as intermediaries who both gather intelligence and reinforce the message that the state is attentive to peripheral populations. Regionally, Ghana has aligned itself with ECOWAS counterterrorism frameworks and collaborated informally with the G5 Sahel, despite not being a formal member. This reflects an effort to combine deterrence with diplomacy, and to address the threat pre-emptively rather than reactively.

The Paradox of Security

Taken together, these cases underscore a central paradox: military force alone often strengthens rather than weakens insurgent legitimacy. In the Sahel, abusive or short-lived interventions deepen governance vacuums that jihadists exploit, presenting themselves as more consistent providers of order. In Ghana, however, a more measured approach—emphasizing presence, prevention, and community engagement—has so far constrained jihadist expansion. Theoretically, this suggests that counterinsurgency strategies must be evaluated not only in terms of battlefield success but in terms of their impact on legitimacy networks and governance vacuums. Security-first approaches risk reinforcing the very governance claims they aim to dismantle, unless paired with efforts to protect civilians and strengthen local governance.

Table 4: Summary of findings: JNIM vs. ISGS in Liptako–Gourma, strategic profiles.

<i>Feature</i>	<i>JNIM</i>	<i>ISGS</i>
<i>Governance rationality</i>	Locally embedded Islamist framing; “pro-tector–arbiter” posture	Transnational purist project; border-denial narrative; exclusivist sovereignty
<i>Modality of rule</i>	Blend of negotiation + calibrated coercion; dispute resolution	Predominantly coercive domination; punitive taxation/violence
<i>Justice & mediation</i>	Quicker, less corrupt than state courts (perceived); mobilizes religious leaders	Harsh, exemplary punishments; predictable but fear-based compliance
<i>Economic regulation</i>	Selective taxation/market oversight to fund rule and signal order	Extractive levies; control via intimidation of trade/pastoral routes
<i>Social embedding</i>	Co-opts chiefs/imams; manages inter-communal tensions pragmatically	Limited embedding; acceptance mostly survival-driven
<i>Durability risks</i>	Vulnerable to state re-entry and loss of “fairness” reputation	Prone to erosion from brutality/predation; communities seek exit routes

Table 5: Summary of findings: Comparative Governance in Entrenched vs. Emerging Zones.

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Entrenched Zone: Liptako–Gourma</i>	<i>Emerging Zone: Ghana–Burkina Faso Borderlands</i>
<i>Historical trajectory</i>	Collapse → insurgent adaptation → institutionalized parallel governance	Prevention and deterrence → “performative” presence to avoid governance vacuums
<i>Dominant rationalities of armed actors</i>	Religious–political project to replace/discipline weak state; competing AQ/IS idioms	Proto-claims and ideological signaling constrained by state presence
<i>Core strategies</i>	Security provision, justice forums, taxation, symbolic order; (JNIM: blend of negotiation/coercion; ISGS: coercive domination)	Preventive statecraft, patrols, intelligence outreach, integration of chiefs/imams, public messaging (“Ghana is not Mali”)

<i>Legitimacy pattern</i>	Hybrid/conditional: pragmatic (services), moral (religious idioms), coercive (threat)	Primarily symbolic/preventive state legitimacy; credibility by contrast with Burkinabè collapse
<i>Community responses</i>	Oscillation between accommodation, quiet resistance, exit; mobility as survival politics	Anticipatory cooperation with state; caution shaped by cross-border examples
<i>External factors</i>	Episodic state offensives + withdrawals; fragmented multilateral ops → re-entrenchment space	Whole-of-state visibility + community networks; regional coordination via ECOWAS
<i>Net effect</i>	Durable but fragile parallel orders that persist despite kinetic pressure	Constrained proto-governance; state retains initiative if abuses are avoided

The comparative findings may also be viewed in relation to Furlan's (2020) multidimensional typology of insurgent governance, which emphasizes that governance by armed groups varies according to dimensions such as institutional organization, bureaucratization, treatment of civilians, and mechanisms of compliance. Although this study does not adopt Furlan's typology as its primary analytical framework, the findings broadly support his argument that insurgent governance is neither uniform nor static. In particular, the comparison between ISGS in the Liptako–Gourma region and JNIM along the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands illustrate how governance practices vary according to both organizational characteristics and contextual conditions. While ISGS demonstrates more institutionalized governance practices associated with entrenched territorial control, JNIM exhibits a more adaptive and negotiated approach characteristic of an emerging governance environment. These findings suggest that, beyond organizational variation, the maturity of governance and the dynamics of borderland environments also shape the form and intensity of insurgent governance.

6.5 Policy Implications

The comparative analysis of paramilitary governance in Liptako–Gourma and along the Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier carries important implications for counterterrorism, state-building, and regional security. Three policy lessons stand out. Firstly, the policy shift of rethinking counterterrorism beyond kinetic approaches. The Liptako–Gourma region experience demonstrates that military-first strategies are insufficient and often counterproductive. Extrajudicial killings, ethnic profiling, and indiscriminate violence by security forces have repeatedly served as recruitment drivers for JNIM and ISGS (Human Rights Watch, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2019). International interventions such as Barkhane

and MINUSMA have disrupted jihadist networks but failed to dismantle their governance functions. Counterterrorism must prioritize civilian protection, accountability, and integration of governance support alongside kinetic operations. States and partners should avoid short-term “decapitation” strategies that leave governance vacuums jihadists quickly reoccupy.

Secondly, the policies regarding supporting local governance and customary authority in the discussions concerning paramilitary governance. The analysis shows that chiefs, imams, and community leaders play decisive roles in shaping responses to jihadist encroachment. Where these institutions are resilient, as in northern Ghana, communities are more likely to resist or report infiltration. Where they are fragmented or delegitimized, as in parts of Burkina Faso, paramilitary groups step in as arbiters of justice. Therefore, government and donors should strengthen customary and local governance structures as bulwarks against insurgent authority. This includes empowering chiefs with resources for mediation, supporting community policing, and embedding them in early-warning networks.

Thirdly, there is a need to address borderland vulnerabilities. Frontier zones are characterized by poverty, weak state services, and cross-border informal economies, all of which jihadists exploit. In Ghana–Burkina Faso, radical preachers gain traction partly because state justice and services are perceived as distant and unresponsive. In Liptako–Gourma, control of cattle markets and artisanal mining underpins insurgent governance. Counterterrorism must be paired with development interventions targeted at borderlands. Investment in justice access, rural infrastructure, and livelihood security reduces the space in which paramilitary proto-governance can thrive.

Meanwhile it must be noted that, the cases highlight both the limits of fragmented interventions and the potential of preventive strategies. While Sahelian states and multilateral actors often operate in silos, Ghana’s buffer-state strategy integrates military patrols with community engagement and regional cooperation through ECOWAS. ECOWAS, AU, and international partners should prioritize coordination and preventive security frameworks over isolated military campaigns. Regional intelligence-sharing, harmonized border management, and cross-border development initiatives are essential to preventing the southward spread of insurgency. Effective responses to paramilitary governance require a shift from reactive militarization to preventive governance-building. Strengthening local institutions, protecting civilians, and addressing structural vulnerabilities in frontier zones are not peripheral but central to undermining insurgent legitimacy.

6.6 Summary

This chapter has situated the empirical findings within broader theoretical, conceptual and policy debates on insurgent governance, legitimacy, community politics, and frontier statehood. The evidence from Liptako–Gourma and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands demonstrates that paramilitary governance is adaptive, relational, and context-dependent: institutionalized in entrenched zones, symbolic in emerging ones, and continuously negotiated through community ambivalence and external interventions.

Three contributions stand out. First, the thesis extends the literature on insurgent governance by conceptualizing it as a continuum ranging from proto-governance to entrenched parallel authority. Second, it reframes legitimacy as plural, symbolic, and conditional, showing how moral, pragmatic, and coercive forms coexist and shift. Third, it highlights community ambivalence as a central mechanism of governance endurance and fragility alike, emphasizing survival politics as a key lens for understanding frontier authority.

The discussion also underscored the paradox of external interventions—while intended to weaken paramilitary groups, heavy-handed military campaigns in the Sahel often reinforced their legitimacy, whereas Ghana’s preventive buffer strategy has so far constrained paramilitary group penetration. These insights carry critical policy implications, calling for a shift from reactive militarization toward preventive governance-building and community resilience.

By linking empirical analysis with conceptual debates, the chapter consolidates the thesis’s scholarly contribution: a frontier governance framework for understanding how armed non-state groups claim, practice, and contest authority in fragile borderlands. The next and final chapter turns to the overall conclusion, drawing together the thesis’s main contributions, reflecting on its limitations, and outlining directions for future research.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how transnational paramilitary groups, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), exercise governance in fragile borderlands of West Africa. Specifically, it focused on two cases: the Liptako–Gourma tri-border region, where paramilitary governance is entrenched, and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, where governance is still emergent. While much scholarship on armed non-state actor groups in West Africa has emphasized violence, ideology, and counterterrorism, less attention has been paid to their governance strategies and the ways in which communities and states respond to them. Guided by four research questions, the study examined how JNIM and ISGS establish and exercise governance across contrasting borderland environments, how communities perceive and respond to these governance practices, and how state and multilateral interventions interact with paramilitary governance. By combining secondary literature with expert interviews, the research analysed governance not merely as a set of coercive practices but as a contested process through which authority, legitimacy, and social order are negotiated in fragile frontier regions. The conclusion now returns to these questions in order to demonstrate how the findings advance understanding of paramilitary governance in West African borderlands.

The analysis revealed four major findings. First, paramilitary governance operates along a continuum. In Liptako–Gourma, governance has become institutionalized through taxation, dispute resolution, and market regulation. In Ghana–Burkina Faso, by contrast, paramilitary governance remains largely symbolic and exploratory, expressed through religious outreach, selective mediation, and discursive claims of justice. Second, legitimacy is plural and conditional. JNIM secures legitimacy through pragmatic and moral appeals—framing itself as a just and protective authority—while ISGS relies primarily on coercive legitimacy, enforcing compliance through fear and doctrinal exclusivity. Across both cases, community recognition shifts depending on which actor—state, insurgent, or customary—offers the most security with the least predation. Third, communities navigate insurgent authority through ambivalent survival strategies. Some accommodate paramilitary demands to safeguard livelihoods, others resist through customary structures or militias, and many opt for displacement as a form of withdrawal. This ambivalence is not passive but a rational adaptation to life in frontier zones where authority is fragmented and unstable. Finally, external interventions produce paradoxical effects. Militarized campaigns in the Sahel often reinforce jihadist legitimacy by leaving governance vacuums or committing abuses. Ghana's preventive buffer strategy—integrating military patrols with community engagement—has so far constrained insurgent expansion, underscoring the value of preventive approaches.

Revisiting the research questions

The first research question asked how do JNIM and ISGS establish and exercise governance in entrenched areas like Liptako-Gourma, and what rationalities underpin their governance strategies? The findings demonstrate that both JNIM and ISGS establish governance through a combination of coercive authority, administrative regulation, and legitimacy-building practices. In the Liptako–Gourma region, governance extends beyond military domination to include taxation, dispute resolution, regulation of markets and mobility, enforcement of religious and social norms, and the selective provision of justice and security. However, the governance rationalities underpinning these practices differ. JNIM predominantly combines pragmatic engagement with local communities and customary institutions with religious legitimacy, whereas ISGS relies more heavily on coercive authority, doctrinal exclusivity, and centralized territorial control. These differences illustrate that governance is shaped not only by organizational objectives but also by distinct understandings of how authority should be exercised and maintained.

The second research question examined how in emerging threat zones such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso border, JNIM and ISGS attempt to exert influence or extend governance despite limited territorial control. The comparative analysis shows that governance in emerging threat environments differs fundamentally from governance in entrenched contexts. Rather than exercising comprehensive territorial administration, paramilitary groups rely on symbolic and adaptive forms of governance that seek to establish influence before territorial consolidation occurs. These practices include religious outreach, mediation of local disputes, engagement with marginalized communities, strategic exploitation of local grievances, and the cultivation of legitimacy through selective service provision and narratives of justice and protection. The findings therefore demonstrate that governance begins long before territorial dominance is achieved and develops incrementally through processes of social and political engagement.

The third research question explored how local communities perceive, negotiate, or resist the governance efforts of JNIM and ISGS across entrenched and emerging contexts. The findings reveal that community responses are neither uniformly supportive nor uniformly resistant. Instead, communities employ pragmatic strategies shaped by insecurity, livelihood considerations, and the relative performance of competing authorities. Across both case studies, some communities accommodated paramilitary governance to secure protection or preserve livelihoods, others resisted through customary authorities, self-defense groups, or cooperation with state institutions, while many adopted displacement

or strategic neutrality as survival mechanisms. These responses demonstrate that legitimacy is conditional, negotiated, and continually re-evaluated rather than permanently secured.

The fourth research question examined how multilateral and state security interventions interact with paramilitary governance strategies in these two contrasting environments. The study demonstrates that security interventions influence paramilitary governance in both intended and unintended ways. In the central Sahel, predominantly militarized responses have often reinforced insurgent legitimacy by creating governance vacuums, weakening public trust in state institutions, or contributing to civilian grievances. Conversely, Ghana's preventive strategy, combining security deployment with community engagement and local resilience initiatives, has so far constrained opportunities for governance consolidation by armed groups. The findings therefore suggest that effective responses require integrating security operations with governance, development, and community-centered approaches that address the structural conditions enabling paramilitary governance.

The thesis therefore makes significant contributions to the study of armed non-state governance and border politics. This thesis contributes to governmentality studies by showing how governance in fragile borderlands cannot be reduced to state sovereignty. Instead, authority is dispersed among multiple actors—paramilitary groups, traditional leaders, and state representatives—who negotiate overlapping claims to rule. It extends the concept of rebel governance beyond consolidated rebel administrations to include proto-governance in emerging frontiers, as well as context-specific governance. This supports a more nuanced understanding of rebel governance, moving beyond binary views of “ungoverned spaces” to recognize how governance evolves dynamically. Additionally, it reframes legitimacy as plural, symbolic, and conditional, showing that it cannot be reduced to binary categories of consent or coercion. It highlights community ambivalence as a central mechanism of governance endurance, contributing to debates on hybrid authority in African borderlands. The conceptual innovation of this thesis lies in framing paramilitary governance as a continuum, shaped by the degree of state fragility, the intensity of local dynamics, and the transnational networks sustaining armed groups. Together, these insights advance a frontier governance framework, which conceptualizes insurgent governance as adaptive, relational, and contingent upon both community strategies and state interventions.

Empirically, the study sheds light on the under-researched Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier, challenging the tendency to view it merely as a spillover zone. It shows that symbolic governance practices and early legitimacy claims already shape community perceptions, making prevention as critical as response. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of a paired case study comparison for

capturing governance variation across space and time. While fieldwork was limited by security constraints, the integration of expert interviews with extensive secondary sources ensured a credible triangulation of data. Interviews offered valuable insights into local perceptions and security dynamics, even if their number was modest. The reliance on experts with prior field experience ensured the reliability of the primary evidence. Nonetheless, limitations remain - the fast-changing nature of security in the Sahel and northern Ghana means that findings reflect a particular historical moment rather than fixed outcomes.

For policy, the findings underscore the need to move beyond militarization. Protecting civilians, strengthening local governance, and addressing borderland vulnerabilities are central to undermining paramilitary authority. The Ghanaian experience suggests that preventive, community-centered approaches may offer a viable alternative to the reactive militarization that has failed in the Sahelian core.

The study is not without limitations. The reliance on three expert interviews—necessitated by access and security constraints—means that community-level perspectives are largely drawn from secondary literature rather than direct fieldwork. Moreover, the focus on JNIM and ISGS excludes other actors (local militias, bandits, vigilantes) who also shape governance landscapes. Finally, the comparative scope is limited to two frontier contexts, meaning findings should be generalized cautiously. Future studies could address these limitations in three ways:

1. Community-centered fieldwork: micro-level ethnographic research within affected communities could deepen understanding of how legitimacy is negotiated in everyday life.
2. Comparative frontier studies: Extending the framework to other African or global frontiers (Somalia, eastern DRC, Afghanistan) would test its wider applicability.
3. Longitudinal analysis: Tracing how proto-governance evolves into institutionalized governance—or collapses—would clarify the temporal dynamics of insurgent authority.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that paramilitary governance in West Africa borderlands is not simply imposed by force but must be understood as relational, adaptive, and contested. Armed groups do not simply undermine the state; they reconfigure the very meaning of governance by blending coercion, service provision, and symbolic authority. Communities are not passive recipients of violence or protection but active navigators of competing authorities. States and international partners, meanwhile, risk reinforcing paramilitary legitimacy if they treat governance as irrelevant to counterterror-

ism. By foregrounding governance, legitimacy, and state fragility, this study contributes both empirically and theoretically to understanding insurgency in Africa's borderlands. It calls for a shift in research and policy alike - from viewing armed groups as mere spoilers to analyzing them as political actors whose authority is contested, co-produced, and deeply embedded in frontier life.

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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this research is to examine how transnational paramilitary groups establish and exercise governance in West African borderlands, with particular reference to Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The study compares governance dynamics in the entrenched governance environment of the Liptako–Gourma region with the emerging governance context of the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands.

The interview seeks to draw on your professional and/or academic expertise regarding governance, legitimacy, community responses, and security interventions in these borderland environments. There are no right or wrong answers. Your responses will be treated confidentially and anonymized in accordance with ethical research standards.

The interview is expected to last approximately 45–60 minutes.

Section A: Professional Background

1. Could you briefly describe your professional background and your experience working on security, governance, or borderland issues in West Africa?
2. What has been your level of engagement with the Sahel and/or the Ghana–Burkina Faso border region?

Section B: Governance by JNIM and ISGS

3. From your experience, how would you describe the forms of governance exercised by JNIM and ISGS in areas under their influence? (Prompts: justice provision, taxation, security, regulation of markets, dispute resolution, social services, religious authority)
4. Beyond the use of violence, what mechanisms do these groups employ to establish and maintain authority?
5. In your view, what factors explain differences in governance approaches between JNIM and ISGS?

Section C: Governance in Emerging Borderland Contexts

6. Based on available evidence, how do these groups attempt to expand their influence into emerging frontier areas such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands? (Prompts: religious outreach, recruitment, local grievances, mediation, community engagement, strategic alliances)
7. In your opinion, what distinguishes governance in emerging environments from governance in areas where insurgent control has become more established?

Section D: Community Responses and Legitimacy

8. How do local communities generally perceive governance by JNIM and ISGS?
9. What factors influence whether communities cooperate with, accommodate, negotiate with, or resist these groups?
10. How important are customary leaders, religious authorities, and local social structures in shaping community responses?
11. Would you describe legitimacy in these contexts as primarily based on coercion, voluntary acceptance, or a combination of both? Please explain.

Section E: State and Multilateral Responses

12. How have national governments responded to paramilitary governance in these borderland regions?
13. How effective have regional and international interventions been in limiting insurgent governance? (Prompts: ECOWAS, G5 Sahel, AU, UN, bilateral partners)
14. In your opinion, have military interventions unintentionally strengthened or weakened insurgent governance? Please explain.
15. What lessons, if any, can Ghana learn from developments in the central Sahel?

Section F: Governance and Borderlands

16. How do characteristics of borderlands influence the ability of armed groups to govern?
17. What role do cross-border mobility, informal economies, and local social networks play in sustaining paramilitary governance?
18. How does weak or uneven state presence affect governance dynamics in these regions?

Section G: Future Outlook

19. Looking ahead, how do you see governance by JNIM and ISGS evolving over the next five to ten years?
20. Is there anything else that you believe is important for understanding governance by armed groups in West African borderlands that we have not discussed?

Closing

Thank you very much for your time and valuable insights. Your contribution is greatly appreciated and will contribute significantly to advancing understanding of governance dynamics in fragile borderland regions.