



Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science
International Security Studies

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**

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Table of Content

I. Research Background and Justification for the Selection of the Topic.....	1
II. The Methods Used.....	5
Research design and comparative case selection	5
Data sources and data collection	6
Data analysis	7
Methodological limitations and ethical considerations	8
III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation	9
Policy Implications.....	10
IV. References	11

I. Research Background and Justification for the Selection of the Topic

Armed non-state actors have become increasingly important to the study of security, governance, and political authority in Africa, particularly in regions where state authority is weak, uneven, or contested. Although such actors are predominantly approached through the language of terrorism, insurgency, violent extremism, and counterterrorism, scholarship on rebel and insurgent governance has demonstrated that armed groups may also perform governance functions and exercise forms of political authority over populations (Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2017). This is particularly significant in borderland environments, where the reach of formal state institutions is often uneven and where state, customary, religious, community, and transnational actors interact in shaping everyday political and social order (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Nugent, 2019). The governance activities of armed groups therefore raise questions that extend beyond the study of violence to include how authority is established, how populations are regulated, how legitimacy is sought or contested, and how communities navigate competing sources of authority.

These questions are particularly important in the Sahel and wider West Africa. Traditionally, the Sahel has been understood as a semi-arid ecological transition zone between the Sahara Desert and the Sudanian savannah, extending across a broad area of West and Central Africa and characterized historically by pastoral mobility, trans-Saharan trade, and extensive social and cultural interaction that predates contemporary state boundaries (OCDE/CSAO 2014; Walther & Rettaillé, 2021). Over time, however, the term has acquired a broader political and security meaning and is now widely used by governments, regional organizations, international institutions, development agencies, and security scholars to describe an interconnected space affected by conflict, governance challenges, cross-border mobility, and transnational insecurity (Lecocq et al., 2013; Walther, 2017; Thurston, 2020). West Africa similarly constitutes not only a geographical region but also a political and institutional space shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial state formation, regional integration, and shared economic and security concerns. The increasing interconnection between the Sahel and the northern parts of coastal West Africa has consequently made the relationship between these spaces important for understanding contemporary patterns of insecurity and political authority.

Borderlands occupy a particularly important position within this regional context. African borderland scholarship demonstrates that these areas are not simply geographical margins of states but spaces characterized by mobility, cross-border social and economic networks, uneven state presence, and overlapping forms of authority (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Nugent, 2019). Colonial territorial arrangements frequently divided pre-existing communities, kinship networks, trading systems, and pastoral routes across national boundaries, while postcolonial states have often experienced difficulties in extending administrative capacity and public services uniformly across peripheral areas (Herbst, 2000; Feyissa et al., 2010). Consequently, borderlands have remained spaces in which formal state authority operates alongside customary institutions, religious authorities, community structures, informal economies, and other forms of social and political regulation. Rather than being understood merely as peripheral spaces, they provide an important setting for examining how authority is negotiated and how competing forms of governance emerge and coexist (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010).

This question has also been reflected in the literature on so-called “ungoverned spaces.” The concept became particularly prominent within security and policy debates following the attacks of 11 September 2001, where territories characterized by limited state control were increasingly associated with opportunities for terrorist organizations, insurgents, and transnational criminal networks (Rabasa et al., 2007; Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010). However, subsequent scholarship has questioned the assumption that weak or limited state presence necessarily constitutes an absence of governance. Clunan and Trinkunas (2010), for example, draw attention to spaces where state authority is contested by alternative forms of political and social authority, while scholarship on the Sahel similarly demonstrates that areas characterized as “ungoverned” may contain complex systems of customary, informal, and non-state governance (Raleigh, Nsaibia & Dowd, 2021). African-centered scholarship further highlights the importance of examining who exercises authority, how that authority is negotiated, and how state and non-state institutions interact within these spaces (Lund, 2006; Hagmann & Péclard, 2010; Meagher, 2012). Thus, African borderlands are better approached as spaces of competing, overlapping, and negotiated authority than as governance vacuums.

This broader understanding of governance provides an important basis for examining armed non-state actors. Scholarship on rebel governance has shown that armed groups may perform functions

commonly associated with governments, including the provision of security and justice, taxation, regulation of economic activity, and management of social relations (Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2017). Such practices may coexist with coercion and violence and may involve negotiation with existing community, customary, or religious institutions (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012). Importantly, governance by armed groups is not uniform and does not necessarily depend upon complete territorial control. It can range from relatively institutionalized systems of administration in areas of sustained territorial presence to more limited, symbolic, or exploratory forms of influence where territorial control remains contested or absent (Kasfir, 2015; Furlan, 2020).

This issue is particularly relevant to Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), two of the principal transnational jihadist actors shaping the contemporary security landscape of the Sahel. Both groups have developed governance practices that extend beyond their military activities, including taxation, dispute resolution, regulation of economic activity, enforcement of social and religious norms, and the exercise of coercive authority in areas where their influence has become established (Thurston, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2023a). At the same time, evidence of militant activity and influence towards the northern borders of coastal West Africa raises questions about how such groups seek to establish influence in environments where they do not possess comparable territorial control. This distinction between established and emerging forms of paramilitary influence is therefore important for understanding how governance may develop before and after territorial consolidation.

The selection of this topic is consequently grounded in a specific empirical and scholarly problem. Existing research has generated substantial knowledge about armed groups and insurgent governance in entrenched conflict environments, including the Liptako–Gourma region. However, comparatively less attention has been given to emerging frontier environments such as the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, where militant influence has been reported but consolidated territorial governance has not been established. Existing policy and security discussions have also frequently characterized coastal West African states as potential “spillover” zones of Sahelian insecurity rather than examining how armed groups may proactively cultivate influence, establish relationships, and develop early forms of governance in these environments (Aning & Danso, 2012; UNDP, 2023a). The study therefore addresses an important gap by examining governance

across different stages of paramilitary consolidation rather than focusing exclusively on established insurgent territories.

The choice of the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands follows directly from this research problem. Liptako–Gourma, encompassing parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represents an environment in which paramilitary governance has become comparatively entrenched through sustained territorial presence, regulation, taxation, dispute resolution, and other governance practices (International Crisis Group, 2021b; Thurston, 2020). The Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, by contrast, represent an emerging threat environment in which paramilitary influence remains more limited, fluid, and contested (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024; UNDP, 2023b). The two cases therefore provide contrasting contexts through which the study can examine how governance practices, legitimacy claims, community responses, and interactions with state and multilateral interventions vary according to the degree of paramilitary consolidation.

The comparative focus also responds to the limited attention given to variation in paramilitary governance across different borderland environments. Much existing research examines established insurgencies in core conflict theatres or preventive security responses in coastal West African states, while fewer studies systematically compare how the same transnational paramilitary networks establish, adapt, or extend governance across environments characterized by different levels of territorial consolidation and state presence. By examining JNIM and ISGS across an entrenched and an emerging borderland context, this dissertation brings together questions of governance, legitimacy, community responses, and state and multilateral interventions within a single comparative study.

Against this background, the dissertation examines paramilitary governance in West African borderlands through a comparative study of JNIM and ISGS in the Liptako–Gourma region and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The study is guided by four research questions concerning how these groups establish and exercise governance in entrenched areas; how they attempt to extend influence in emerging threat zones; how local communities perceive, negotiate, or resist their governance efforts; and how state and multilateral interventions interact with paramilitary governance strategies in the two contrasting environments.

The selection of the topic is therefore justified by its empirical, scholarly, and policy significance. Empirically, the study addresses an under-researched dimension of insecurity along the Ghana–Burkina Faso frontier while providing a comparative account of governance in an established Sahelian conflict environment. Scholarly, it contributes to debates on armed non-state governance and African borderland politics by examining paramilitary authority across different stages of consolidation. From a policy perspective, understanding how governance develops in both entrenched and emerging environments is important because responses to armed groups cannot be limited to military containment once governance structures have already become socially embedded. Examining the processes through which authority is established, contested, and adapted therefore provides a basis for understanding both the persistence of paramilitary governance in the Sahelian core and the possibilities for preventing its deeper consolidation in emerging frontier environments.

II. The Methods Used

The study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how transnational paramilitary groups exercise governance across contrasting West African borderland environments. The methodological approach was informed by a critical constructivist realist orientation, combining the ontological assumptions of critical realism with the interpretive insights of constructivism. This approach was appropriate to the study because paramilitary governance involves both material dimensions—such as territorial control, coercive capacity, taxation, and security provision—and socially constructed dimensions, including legitimacy, perceptions of authority, norms, and community responses (Bhaskar, 2008; Archer, 1995; Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The methodological orientation therefore enabled the study to examine governance as both a set of observable practices and a socially contested process.

Research design and comparative case selection

A comparative case study approach was selected because the research seeks to understand a complex sociopolitical phenomenon in depth while examining how it varies across different contexts. Case study research is particularly appropriate where the objective is to generate context-rich understanding of complex political phenomena rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017). Comparative case studies further permit systematic examination of

similarities, differences, and context-specific variations across cases (George & Bennett, 2005; Goodrick, 2014).

The study compares two West African borderland contexts: the Liptako–Gourma region, encompassing parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands. The cases were selected purposively and on theoretical grounds because they represent contrasting stages of paramilitary governance. Liptako–Gourma represents an entrenched governance environment, in which JNIM and ISGS have developed sustained and comparatively institutionalized forms of authority. The Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands represent an emerging governance environment, where paramilitary influence remains more limited, fluid, and contested.

The comparison does not follow a strict Most Similar Systems Design or Most Different Systems Design. Instead, the study uses a thematic comparative framework, examining both cases through common analytical dimensions while retaining their contextual differences. Governance rationalities and strategies, legitimacy, community responses, and interactions with state and multilateral interventions provide the principal comparative themes. This approach allows the study to identify patterns across the cases without treating their different historical, political, and security environments as analytically identical (Hantrais, 2008; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Ragin, 2014).

The cases were selected through purposive, theory-driven sampling. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the selection prioritized cases offering analytical leverage for addressing the research questions and examining variation between entrenched and emerging forms of paramilitary governance (Yin, 2018; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The study therefore prioritizes depth and contextual understanding. This approach also acknowledges a principal limitation of case study research: findings cannot be generalized statistically to all African borderlands or all armed groups. The intended contribution is instead analytical and contextually grounded, with cautious attention to the extent to which findings may illuminate broader patterns.

Data sources and data collection

The research employed a multi-source qualitative strategy to address the four research questions. Evidence was drawn from academic literature, policy and grey literature, media reports, conflict-

event data, and semi-structured expert interviews. This combination was necessary because evidence concerning paramilitary governance is dispersed across different types of sources, while direct access to conflict-affected communities and armed actors is highly constrained.

The study used ACLED event data to identify and contextualize patterns of conflict and paramilitary activity within the selected cases. The dataset was filtered according to the relevant geographical areas and actors and was used primarily for descriptive purposes rather than as the basis for statistical causal inference. Academic, policy, and grey literature provided evidence concerning governance practices, political and security developments, state responses, and community dynamics. Relevant media reporting was also examined to establish event chronology and capture developments that were not consistently documented in academic or policy sources.

Primary qualitative evidence was obtained through three semi-structured expert interviews conducted remotely. The interviews provided contextual and interpretive insights from individuals with relevant professional or field experience concerning security, governance, and developments in the study regions. Because of the security conditions surrounding the research sites, direct fieldwork and community-level interviews were not feasible. The interview material therefore complemented rather than replaced the documentary and conflict-event evidence. The three interviews consisted of one verbatim transcript and two detailed sets of interview notes, with all respondents anonymized.

Data analysis

The study combined qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify and compare patterns across the different sources (Schreier, 2012; Guest et al., 2011). The analytical framework was linked directly to the four research questions. The principal deductive themes concerned: (1) governance rationalities and strategies in entrenched contexts; (2) modes of influence in emerging contexts; (3) community perceptions, negotiation, and resistance; and (4) interactions between paramilitary governance and state or multilateral interventions.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive coding. Deductive categories were derived from the research questions and relevant theoretical and conceptual literature, while inductive coding allowed additional themes to emerge from the empirical material. Textual materials were

systematically coded using NVivo 14, while ACLED data were descriptively coded and organized using Microsoft Excel. Comparative coding matrices were subsequently developed to align evidence across the two cases and across different sources.

The study relied on triangulation to strengthen the credibility of its findings. Evidence from academic and policy literature, media reporting, ACLED data, and expert interviews was cross-checked rather than treated as equally or independently conclusive. Expert interviews were used primarily to provide contextual depth and interpretive insight into patterns identified through documentary and event-based evidence. The analysis also recorded coding decisions and revisions and considered disconfirming evidence in order to reduce the risk of confirmation bias.

Methodological limitations and ethical considerations

The principal methodological limitation was the inability to conduct direct fieldwork in the conflict-affected research areas. Security conditions and practical constraints meant that community-level perspectives were obtained primarily through secondary sources rather than direct interviews with affected populations. The small number of expert interviews also limits the breadth of primary perspectives available to the study. These limitations were addressed through the use of multiple documentary sources, ACLED data, and triangulation across evidence types.

The study also recognizes the limitations associated with purposive case selection and a two-case comparative design. The cases were deliberately selected for their analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness; consequently, the findings should not be generalized mechanically to other conflict environments. Similarly, the rapidly changing nature of insecurity in the Sahel and northern Ghana means that the findings should be understood in relation to the period examined rather than as fixed descriptions of paramilitary governance.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the research, ethical precautions were taken to protect participants. Interviewees were anonymized, and information capable of exposing respondents to potential retaliation was treated confidentially. The study also recognized researcher positionality and the potential for source bias, particularly in government and media reporting. These risks were addressed through source comparison and triangulation.

Overall, the methodological design combined comparative case study depth, multi-source qualitative evidence, targeted expert testimony, ACLED event data, and systematic thematic analysis. This combination enabled the dissertation to examine paramilitary governance across two contrasting borderland environments while remaining sensitive to the security, evidentiary, and ethical constraints associated with researching armed actors and conflict-affected populations.

III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation

The comparative analysis yields the following principal scientific results (thesis points):

T1. Paramilitary governance operates along an entrenched–emerging continuum rather than as a binary condition. In Liptako–Gourma, governance is institutionalized through taxation, dispute resolution, and market regulation. In the Ghana–Burkina Faso borderlands, governance remains largely symbolic and exploratory, expressed through religious outreach, selective mediation, and discursive claims to justice, indicating that governance-building begins well before territorial consolidation is achieved.

T2. Legitimacy among paramilitary actors is plural and conditional rather than fixed. JNIM constructs legitimacy predominantly through pragmatic and moral appeals – positioning itself as a protective and just authority – while ISGS relies more heavily on coercive legitimacy enforced through fear and doctrinal exclusivity. Community recognition of either actor, or of the state, shifts according to which authority offers the greatest security with the least predation at a given time.

T3. Community responses to paramilitary governance follow ambivalent, rational survival strategies rather than uniform accommodation or resistance. Communities variously accommodate paramilitary demands to preserve livelihoods, resist through customary structures or self-defense groups, or adopt displacement as strategic withdrawal – a pattern of ambivalence that itself functions as an adaptive mechanism within fragmented and unstable frontier authority structures.

T4. External security interventions produce paradoxical, context-dependent effects on paramilitary governance. Predominantly militarized responses in the central Sahel have tended to reinforce insurgent legitimacy by creating governance vacuums and generating civilian grievances, whereas Ghana’s preventive buffer strategy – combining military patrols with community engagement – has so far constrained opportunities for insurgent governance consolidation,

underscoring the comparative value of prevention-oriented approaches over reactive militarization.

T5. The dissertation advances a “frontier governance” framework that reconceptualizes paramilitary authority in fragile borderlands as adaptive, relational, and contingent – shaped jointly by the degree of state fragility, the intensity of local socio-political dynamics, and the transnational networks sustaining armed groups – extending governmentality-inspired and rebel-governance scholarship (Foucault, 1991; Arjona, 2017; Mampilly, 2015) beyond consolidated rebel administrations to incorporate proto-governance in emerging frontiers.

Policy Implications

The findings indicate that effective responses to paramilitary governance require integrating security operations with governance-strengthening, development, and community-centered approaches that address the structural conditions enabling non-state authority, rather than relying on militarization alone. The Ghanaian preventive experience offers a transferable model for coastal West African states seeking to pre-empt the entrenchment of paramilitary governance observed in the Sahelian core.

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