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Grievances, greed or tactics? The political ecology of jihadist expansion in West Africa's WAP complex[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The role of natural parks and protected areas in fostering peace or exacerbating conflict has gained increasing attention. While early scholarship emphasized their potential in post-conflict peacebuilding, political ecology has highlighted how the securitization of environmental concerns may clash with local resource management, fuelling hidden resistance or overt violence. Specific outcomes arguably depend on contextual features and eschew generalised answers, yet French-speaking West Africa remains underexplored in this debate. This article addresses that gap by focusing on the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) transboundary park complex across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin. Noting the expansion of jihadist groups in this area, this case selection further helps bridge the divide between conflict studies and political ecology literatures, including conservation amidst counterinsurgency.

The article explores three hypotheses to understand why jihadist groups have expanded in the WAP area: (H1) leveraging local grievances over environmental governance and restricted resource access to mobilize local populations against the states; (H2) exploitation of conflict economies like trafficking, poaching, and gold mining for greed and economic gain; and (H3) capitalize on the military potential of forested areas to provide safe havens.

Qualitative evidence – including interviews and surveys with local stakeholders and park rangers – is mobilized to assess the purchase of these hypotheses. Findings suggest that, contrary to earlier claims, the politicization of environmental grievances plays a limited role. Instead, jihadist presence in the WAP complex is more convincingly explained by economic motivations linked to illicit activities and, most critically, by military considerations, with protected forest areas offering strategic advantages.

1. Introduction: the central relevance of the WAP borderland

Straddling the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, the WAP is a complex of contiguous protected areas covering nearly 50,000 km² – that is, an area larger than Belgium or Denmark. Its main components are the three national parks whose acronym gives the complex its name: the W (named after the distinctive bend in the Niger River at the Niger–Benin border); the Arly in Burkina Faso; and the Pendjari in Benin. The WAP complex also includes other protected areas subject to different degrees of environmental restrictions, including total and partial natural reserves as well as hunting zones.

While the early nucleus of the complex was established almost a

century ago, in recent years the WAP has (re)gained prominence owing to the increasing pressure by jihadist¹ armed groups expanding across the Sahel region. Following a string of successful attacks against local states' security forces, including local ranger corps, security observers now fear that the WAP area may be evolving into a major regional hub of Sahelian jihadist groups – as important as central Mali's Macina and the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area – serving as a platform for jihadist groups' further expansion southward towards West Africa's coastal states (De Bruijne 2021; Pellerin 2022; ICG 2023).

The entrenchment of jihadist groups in the WAP complex questions the relevance of conservation policies to explain security dynamics. In other words, it interrogates whether and how environmental protection

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¹ The notion of "jihadism" is polysemic and contentious. In the context of this paper, it is used to designate armed groups embracing the political ideology of "jihadism" to legitimize their struggle, including the resort to violence against state officers and civilians. The author however acknowledges the much broader history and meaning of the term "jihad" within wider Islamic thought.

as well as related regulations and restrictions are a factor contributing to exacerbating or, alternatively, mitigating conflicts, of which the expansion of violent extremists such as Sahelian jihadist groups is a case in point.

While an extensive literature has engaged with this topic, divergent research results have left the issue unsettled. In the 2000s, the assumption that biodiversity conservation could also favour inter-community or even inter-state appeasement helped legitimise the proliferation of cross-border “peace parks”, particularly in southern Africa (Conca and Dabelko 2002; Ali, 2007; King 2010; for a recent retrospective assessment, see Ide et al. 2021). In the 2010s, though, in-depth ethnographic studies questioned this optimism, by convincingly demonstrating that (the politics of) nature conservation might also fuel violent escalations. Borrowing the lenses of political ecology, scholars have highlighted that the securitisation of environmental concerns (Duffy et al. 2019) and the projection of states’ control, norms and value extraction over peripheral areas framed as wild and ecologically fragile (Ramutsindela et al. 2019) can clash with local natural resources management schemes, fuelling hidden resistance and overt violence. These strands of research have thus focused on the spread of conflict trends dubbed “green violence” (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016), “green grabbing” (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Fairhead et al. 2012), “green colonialism” (Blanc 2020), “green wars” (Ybarra, 2018), “green militarisation” (Lunstrum 2014; Verweijen and Marijnen 2016) and the greening of counter-insurgency (Massé et al. 2017; Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). Such conflicts typically arise between armed actors tasked by local governments – often with the support of foreign partners and donors – with protecting the environment, and local communities whose livelihoods are said to depend on unconstrained access to natural resources framed as threatened and deserving protection.

In light of these contrasting findings, the question of whether environmental conservation efforts are more conducive to generate conflict or peace dividends defies generalization. Specific outcomes arguably depend on contextual features, such as for instance the particular regimes of natural resource governance and the legacy of state-community relations, that only context-based empirical studies can ascertain. Most of the available research however has focused on environmental protection and conflicts in Southern (Lunstrum 2014; Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016), Eastern (Neumann 2002; Blanc 2020) and Central (Lombard 2016; Verweijen and Marijnen 2018; Titeca et al. 2020) Africa. Much less attention has been devoted to French-speaking West Africa. Such a limited attention is surprising, especially when considering the Sahel’s growing centrality in international counterinsurgency doctrines (Charbonneau 2021), as well as its alleged relations with climate security concerns (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021; Charbonneau 2022; Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022). Addressing this research gap may then help bridge the divide between the expanding literature connecting conflict studies with political ecology (Le Billon and Duffy, 2018), including by focusing on conservation amidst counterinsurgency (Massé et al. 2017; Marijnen et al. 2021).

From this perspective, investigating the conflict dynamics in and around the WAP complex does not limit itself to complementing the existing political ecology literature by shedding light on just yet another case, no matter how empirically interesting. Instead, one could argue that this specific setting provides a quintessential case to investigate in depth the interlinkages between two of the globally most pressing transnational security concerns and related governance regimes – that is, climate change and environmental protection, on the one hand, and jihadist insurgencies and counter-insurgencies, on the other. Both issues, furthermore, highlight the growing significance of spaces previously seen as marginal and undesirable for mutually exclusive governance plans, thereby stressing the relevance of this specific case to the present special issue’s concern for changing framings of scarcity and conflicts over natural resources in Africa.

This research therefore investigates the conflict dynamics around the WAP complex to elucidate the interactions between environmental

protection, the governance of natural resources and the factors of jihadist mobilisation in the Sahel. It asks what explains the expansion of jihadist groups in the WAP complex, and it proceeds by delineating the main hypotheses and a methodology to test them. The ensuing empirical sections: first describe the regimes governing environmental protection in the WAP complex and their changes across time; then analyse the trajectories, discourses and practices underpinning the establishment of jihadist groups in the WAP complex area; and lastly explore the main conflict dynamics and security perceptions surrounding them.

Anticipating the research main findings, the article undermines the credibility of the hypothesis suggesting that the primary reason explaining the encroachment of Sahelian jihadist groups into the WAP complex is the leveraging of existing grievances around the governance of natural resources, with a view to mobilizing local communities against incumbent states. Instead, findings highlight the greater explanatory purchase of alternative hypotheses, stressing that jihadist groups might be driven to the WAP complex owing to the greed of conflict economies’ exploitation, as well as, first and foremost, the military need of securing a tactical rear base.

2. Methodology: grievances, greed or tactics?

Based on a thorough literature review, this study undertakes to assess the relative merits of three main heuristic hypotheses about the expansion of jihadist groups in the WAP complex area – and possibly of the broader interactions between environmental protection and conflict dynamics in Africa’s “peripheral” spaces.

The first and foremost of these hypotheses (H1) emphasizes grievances related to restrictions on access to the WAP complex’s natural resources, which are protected by governments (and their international partners) but coveted by local communities. As the next section outlines, the WAP complex was in fact established to ensure the protection of a fragile ecosystem, endowed with rich yet threatened environmental resources including the last concentration of endangered mammals in West Africa, and their environment. The area of the WAP complex, however, sits amidst the poorest regions of some of the poorest countries on earth, whose population’s livelihoods largely depend on the access to the very same natural resources. As local observers put it, the abundance of the WAP complex flora and fauna “resembles a garnished dish surrounded by starving populations” (cited in ICG 2023, 5). The “scarcity” of natural resources is therefore less a natural fact than the outcome of a combination of anthropogenic factors, including climate change, demographic growth, unsustainable livelihoods, as well as regulatory regimes artificially restricting access to some users and uses. As a result, competition and contestations over the governance of natural resources have unsurprisingly punctuated the history of the WAP complex, at times souring the relations between resident communities and local states. From this perspective, jihadist groups operating in the Sahel might have leveraged social tensions and fuelled conflict radicalization around the governance of the WAP complex to mobilize marginalized populations against their respective states, with a view to mobilizing followers.

Observations supporting the plausibility of this hypothesis abound. As further detailed in next section, the governance of the WAP complex in fact exhibits many of the conflict-prone traits found in the natural parks of other African regions, including a militarized approach to conservation (Lunstrum 2014; Duffy et al. 2019), exercising the sovereign prerogatives of local states to antagonize local populations and their ways of living; as it is the case for East African parks (Neumann 1995), this is moreover grafted onto a colonial legacy, since the creation of the WAP complex stretches its roots to the French dominance of the region; militarization is further reinforced in the framework of the ongoing war on terror, which Duffy (2016) identified as a key driver of conflict escalation around environmental protection efforts in Africa. More recently, the management of the WAP complex experienced a neoliberal turn (Holmes 2012), focused on leveraging foreign expertise

(and funds) to attract international tourism; scholars however found how such tendencies contributed to alienating local communities and fuelling conflicts in the cases of South Africa (Massé and Lunstrum 2016) and Democratic Republic of Congo (Marijnen 2017). Part of this neoliberal governance shift entails outsourcing conservation efforts to private contractors specializing in paramilitary anti-poaching (Neumann 2004). These include in particular the African Parks Network (APN), whose deployment elsewhere in Africa has sparked discontent, including in Ethiopia (Servant 2020), Chad (Lombard and Tubiana 2020), and DR Congo (Titeca et al. 2020), and which in Benin coincides with the intensification of the jihadist threat around the WAP complex.

Drawing more or less explicitly on these insights, recent research has repeatedly evoked this hypothesis. Analysts and scholars (see for instance Carayol, 2021; Hubert 2021) have been holding the view that a key factor of jihadist groups' capacity to establish roots and mobilize support in the WAP complex area relates to the leveraging of grievances on the governance of natural resources, among which diverging views on the legitimacy of restrictive measures limiting access to natural resources, the marginalization of indigenous environmental regulations, the neglect of local communities' livelihoods, and namely pastoralism, and the neoliberal disruption of participatory and redistributive schemes favouring local populations.

Next to grievances about conservation governance and the resulting political potential for jihadist mobilization, another hypothesis (H2) explaining the establishment of jihadist groups in the WAP complex focuses on the latter's economic potential and the former's greed. In Central Africa, for instance, smuggling flows have been found to provide an enabling environment for jihadist insurgencies to thrive (Marijnen et al. 2021). The WAP complex, too, is criss-crossed by trafficking routes. The proximity of Nigeria, whose economic influence extends well beyond its borders, and Togo, whose port of Lomé is a major transit hub connecting the landlocked countries of the Sahel, shape an interdependent economic area built around five borders (De Bruijne 2022). This includes the village of Koalou, whose disputed sovereignty between Benin and Burkina Faso prevents the deployment of riparian states' officers, thereby enabling the development of illicit trades. Available reports (such as Assanvo et al. 2019) suggest that smuggled fuel, drugs and counterfeit medicines are exported from coastal states to the Sahel, while gold, raided cattle and stolen motorbikes take the opposite route. In addition, the area around the WAP complex is dotted with goldmining sites, most of which are artisanal and informal, while access to the protected natural resources themselves would enable engaging in the illicit trade of timber, ivory and other protected species (pangolin, lion skins, bushmeat, etc.). One could therefore argue – as Sampaio et al. (2023) have persuasively done – that the lure of conflict economies and protection rackets is one of the main drivers of jihadist expansion in the WAP complex area.

Lastly, one could hypothesise (H3) that what attracts jihadist groups to the WAP complex is neither (the political potential of) grievances nor (conflict economies') greed, but considerations of pure military tactics (see Brottem 2022). Unlike the Sahelian savannas, in fact, the thick forest of the WAP complex provides a valuable hiding place, offering protection against aerial detection, and access to food and water without logistical constraints. These characteristics would make of the WAP complex an ideal fallback base as well as a safe platform for the gradual expansion of the jihadist influence towards the Gulf of Guinea. After all, there is no shortage of indications that dense forests including national parks in the fringes of the Sahel region are increasingly being targeted by jihadist groups to take refuge, such as "Boko Haram" factions in Nigeria's Sambisa Forest, but also Mali's Wagadou forest and Baoulé national park (Khalfaoui 2023) as well as Ivory Coast's Comoé national park (Berger and Zran 2023).

These hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. They are nevertheless linked to different expectations, which the present study endeavours to empirically explore in order to ascertain their respective relevance and

thereby answer the research question. For instance, H1 entails the leveraging of existing grievances to mobilize local populations: one would therefore expect jihadists to pursue engagement, if not partnership, with communities living around the WAP complex area, and to openly chastise the states' governance of natural resources and conservancies in their discourses and practices, while putting forward alternative models. This is after all what jihadist groups did to gain a foothold elsewhere in the Sahel – including in central Mali Macina (Sangaré 2016) and the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area (Baldaro and Diall 2020). Jihadists' proactiveness in rectifying existing natural resources' governance according to their own doctrines, publicly fostering alternative models, and sanctioning infringers, would all amount to empirical findings consistent with expectations linked to H1, and arguably result in altering local communities' security perceptions in favour of jihadist groups and against local states and conservation authorities.

By contrast, H2 would gain credibility by empirical findings highlighting how jihadist groups are less intent on (at least pretending to be) implementing a new governance of natural resources, and boasting about it with local communities, than disrupting the existing one, with a view to extracting revenues for themselves. Indications of this would include the targeting border posts and goldmining sites, as well as detectable increases in logging, poaching, and/or ivory trafficking, which would arguably result in anomalies in the supply-and-demand structure of the smuggling economy in and around the WAP complex.

Lastly, H3 highlights jihadists' prioritization of military over political or economic ends. This is arguably linked to expectations of minimal engagement with surrounding populations, including a lesser emphasis on natural resources and their governance. Prioritising concerns of military protection over political mobilization would arguably result in more secrecy, less efforts to gain the trust of local communities, and possibly less reluctance in resorting to coercion, which one may expect to be reflected in local communities' security perceptions less inclined in favour of jihadist groups. At the same time, prioritising concerns of military protection over economic opportunism would possibly lead to foregoing potential profit-making when this contrasts with the jihadists' own security.

With a view to observing the empirical implications of the above-mentioned hypotheses and assess their heuristic purchase, a variety of data are collected and analysed. In particular, this study is based on approximately 90 semi-structured interviews targeting conservation officers and rangers (also based on Moreto et al. 2015; and Lombard and Tubiana 2020), security experts, international donors, national and local authorities, civil society leaders and economic stakeholders including farmers, pastoralists, miners, traders, hunters and poachers.² Interviews have taken place between late 2022 and early 2023 in WAP riparian countries' capitals Ouagadougou, Niamey and Cotonou, as well as in target communities living next to the WAP complex and exposed to the

² In the social environment of the WAP complex, hunting and poaching are distinct activities. Brotherhoods of hunters are very deep-rooted among certain ethnic groups, and benefit from considerable prestige, also linked to social and religious practices. By contrast, poaching is a modern practice, consisting of for-profit hunting that takes place in contravention of state regulations in protected areas.

influence of jihadist groups, such as Diapaga (Tapoa province of Burkina Faso); Pama (Kompienga province of Burkina Faso); Tamou (Say department of Niger); and Kandi (Alibori department of Benin). In addition, a small-scale survey featuring a 50-item close-ended questionnaire has been administered to 227 respondents balanced for target communities (Diapaga, Pama, Tamou and Kandi), gender and age groups.³ With no claim of being representative, the survey nevertheless provides valuable indications on local perceptions about natural resources governance, conservation and security. As methodological and ethical constraints prevent access to jihadist groups' intentions, local communities' security perceptions can provide a helpful proxy of social interactions underpinning jihadist groups expansion in the area, and thus help answer the research question. Overall, the combination of different methods helps ensure context adaptation and adequate triangulation of the findings.

Given the sensitivity of the topics investigated, data collection has abided by the best practices of safe and ethical research. All respondents have accepted to participate freely, while retaining the right to refuse to answer questions in whole or in part. No personal data have been collected in order to ensure the respondents' full anonymity and protection. Potentially traumatising questions have been avoided to do no harm.

3. The changing governance of the WAP complex

The first nucleus of the complex was created during the colonial era, in 1926 (Giraut et al. 2004). It therefore amounts to one of the oldest protected areas in Africa, the first ever national park on the Continent dating back to 1925 when the Parc Albert (now Virunga) was established in the Belgian Congo. Because of the prevalence of the tsetse fly, the low agricultural potential, and the legacy of the 19th century raid wars between Gourmantché and Fulani populations, the park's territory was then perceived as largely "empty and desert", and therefore more suitable for conservation than for production (Benoit 1999). This perception incidentally overlooked the presence of important Gourmantché cult sites in the area, whose access was of key value to local communities (Kaboré 2018).

Following the ratification of the 1933 London Convention Relative to the Preservation of Fauna and Flora in their Natural State among colonial powers, the 1935 forestry code of the French West African colonies created the *Agents des Eaux et des Forêts* (AEF), a local ranger corps tasked with protecting natural resources and supervising hunting tourism. In 1937, the WAP area became an integral wildlife reserve to protect the last concentrations of large mammals in West Africa, prompting the removal of local populations and the ban on harvesting natural resources. The W eventually became a national park in 1954.

The colonial approach to conservation outlived the 1960 s wave of independences in West Africa. The prohibition for local populations to access and use certain areas and their natural resources was maintained in the name of the states' overriding interest in safeguarding wildlife and promoting tourism, particularly hunting. Also dubbed "fortress conservation" (Brockington 2002), this approach contributed to shaping a

³ Data collection has been carried out by a research team of 8 (men and women) including WAP countries' nationals as well as the author of the present article. Target communities have been collectively selected, balancing considerations of relevance, comparability, and research access. The choice of targeting two communities in Burkina Faso accounts for the large country area which is subject to the WAP's environmental restrictions, with a view to enabling more nuanced analyses. The research underpinning this article has been facilitated by the NGO International Alert with the sponsorship of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation in the framework of the project "Protecting the planet and preventing conflict". The author wishes to express his gratitude for the generous support, while taking responsibility for the views herein conveyed.

lasting perception of protected areas in the Sahel as being "for whites only" (Hubert 2021). However, institutional fragmentation and resources limitation inhibited the ability of the new states to meet the emerging challenges. The catastrophic Sahelian droughts of the 1970 s and 1980 s, alongside accelerated population growth, exacerbated the pressure on (protected) natural resources beyond the capacities of local authorities. Left in a state of semi-abandonment, the W park then went through a rapid environmental decline (ICG 2023).

Around the turn of the century, international organisations began to pay renewed attention to the protection of biodiversity in general, and the fate of the WAP complex in particular. In 1996, the W Park was included on UNESCO's World Heritage List, and in 2002 the entire WAP complex was included in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme. International donors such as the World Bank, the European Union, the UN Development Program and the German Cooperation GIZ contributed to the process by sponsoring the transition towards a neoliberal approach to the governance of natural resources and environmental protection (Giraut et al. 2004; Gautier and Benjaminsen, 2013). The WAP thus became the target of a plethora of projects aimed at strengthening coordination among its various components; improving conservation efforts; diversifying governance through the involvement of private sector and local communities; and introducing compensatory measures for local dwellers through redistributive schemes and income-generating activities in order to reduce anthropogenic pressure on protected areas.

Burkina Faso and Benin proved readier to embrace the new trend. Since the late 1990 s, both countries created participatory frameworks – respectively called *Zones Villageoises d'Intérêt Cynégétique* (ZOVIC) and *Associations villageoises de gestion des réserves de faune* (AVIGREF) – to involve residents in the governance of the WAP complex, return a share of ecotourism revenues to local communities, and relax the restrictions for cultural activities involving natural resources, such as initiation rites or traditional pharmacopeia. Niger, too, adopted a law to promote greater participation. Yet the jealousy of state actors for their own conservation mandate prevented the adoption of a formalized framework for consultation, while the limited trust by local customary leaders undermined informal cooperation avenues (Turner 1999). In addition, the rigid understanding of conservation and the priority given to the development of tourism contributed to cementing a regulation of human-wildlife conflicts that was often unfavourable to communities. This included the lack of compensations for damage caused by protected animals, which was and remains a very common occurrence in the case of hippopotamuses.⁴

In all the three countries, however, existing governance schemes of protected areas, be they more or less participatory, have often been blamed for their perceived lack of transparency, legitimacy and therefore effectiveness. Politicisation and biases in the selection of community representatives and local rangers have allegedly paved the way to widespread informal arrangements whereby activities that are officially prohibited in the protected areas – such as livestock rearing, farming, logging and poaching – are in fact tolerated in exchange for off-the-record fines which closely resemble protection rackets. These practices contribute to generating frustration and crystallizing discontent. Local observers report a wealth of examples illustrating this. In Burkina Faso, AEF are accused of protecting poachers in exchange for a share of their revenues.⁵ In Benin, "fishing in the [W] park was not regulated. The people involved paid a lump sum to the forestry administration, which authorized them to fish in the park with no limits".⁶ And in Niger, the lack of resources to adequately tackle the "illegal transhumance" of herds in the protected areas has often resulted in "friendly" settlements between pastoralists and AEF officers, with the latter turning a blind eye

⁴ Interviews with conservation officers in Niamey and Tamou.

⁵ Interview with local authority in Fada N'Gourma.

⁶ Interview with fisherman in Kandi.

in exchange for informal fines.⁷ The inherently unofficial nature of such arrangements, however, has easily led to abuses. The unstable mix of tolerance, connivance and intransigence has ended up eroding relations, particularly between pastoralist communities and AEF officers, leading to outbreaks of violence: in 2018, for example, a Nigerien ranger was reportedly killed by local herders.

Mismanagement allegations thus grew alongside environmental degradation, prompting national authorities and their international partners to reconsider the governance of protected areas in the WAP complex, and turn towards the so-called management delegation model. Benin led the way. In 2016, the doubling of (known) ivory trafficking from the country's parks coincided with a political change at the top of the state. In a display of neo-liberal managerialism, the newly elected President Talon entrusted the management of the Pendjari national park to Africa Parks Network (APN), a private conservation company based in South Africa and featuring European royals and controversial businessmen in its board (Servant 2020). Talon was reportedly inspired by Paul Kagame, who had made appeal to APN since 2010 to manage and relaunch Rwanda's Akagera national park. In October 2019, a positive assessment of the results obtained in the Pendjari prompted the government of Benin to explore the extension of APN delegation to (Benin's part of) the W national park. This was eventually contracted out one year later, with a view to improving the environmental protection and economic viability of the country's national parks.

The management delegation to APN has contributed to promoting an entrepreneurial rather than participative approach to the governance of (Benin's components of) the WAP complex, which put the financial markets at the forefront to leverage their resources while marginalising local communities. This approach has prioritised "law enforcement" by stepping up efforts towards the repression of illicit activities, including the massive recruitment of park rangers, their paramilitary training, and a mix of sticks and carrots to eradicate corruption. At the same time, it has promoted an extensive use of advanced technological devices such as GPS collars, camera traps, ultralight motorised aircraft (ULM) and drones to strengthen the surveillance of the wildlife heritage.⁸ This uncompromising approach has yielded ambivalent results. On the one hand, large-scale poaching in the Pendjari national park has been largely dismantled, allowing the endangered wildlife heritage to stabilise, or even increase. On the other hand, the sudden criminalisation of activities that had long been taken for granted has also exacerbated tensions with the local populations. Popular resentment erupted in 2018, when arrests and seizures against poachers and informal grazers triggered violent clashes (Brottem 2022).

Noteworthy, these episodes prompted APN to adopt a less intransigent approach. In order to build trust with local populations and ensure the social sustainability of environmental protection, the company started supporting local communities with income-generating opportunities such as gardening, bee-keeping, rabbit farming, and stepped-up local recruitment for parks' staff. APN also endeavoured to improve communication with local communities and engage in conflict resolution. Most importantly, it introduced forms of regulated authorisation – instead of outright prohibition – for economic activities to take place in (the periphery of) the protected areas, such as the marking of transhumance corridors and the definition of fishing periods and quotas. Attesting the change, it is reported that "APN has made many concessions to local residents by giving them space to grow their crops and graze their animals".⁹ As a result, most observers concede that APN's new approach has assuaged tensions and considerably improved the relations with local populations (Brottem 2022).

⁷ Interviews with conservation experts in Niamey and Tamou, and with pastoralists and customary authorities in Tamou.

⁸ Interviews with APN officers, as well as national and local authorities, in Cotonou and Kandi.

⁹ Interview with local hunter in Kandi.

At the same time, in the last few years concerned international donors such as the EU and the GIZ have been exploring ways of extending the management delegation to APN across the whole WAP complex. Preliminary steps to this end had been ongoing in both Burkina Faso and Niger since 2021, starting with the outsourcing of local rangers' trainings to APN facilities in Benin,¹⁰ yet the combination of security degradation and political instability has (provisionally?) halted these undertakings.

4. Jihadist groups' encroachment in the WAP complex

The initial traces of jihadist presence in the WAP territory date back to 2014–15, when militants coming from the Liptako-Gourma area were first spotted undertaking reconnaissance missions. However, it was not until 2018 that a sustained strategy for establishing a permanent foothold emerged.¹¹ The gradual infiltration of Sahelian jihadist groups into the WAP complex territory reportedly followed the forest routes and nearby goldmining sites along the Burkina Faso-Niger border, taking advantage of a rarefied state presence. Pre-existing radicalised milieus and preachers known for lambasting states' and communities' immorality also helped jihadist groups' encroachment with logistical and human resources. The first known jihadist cell took root near Pama, a village in Burkina Faso near the Benin border, interestingly combining dense forest cover, gold mining sites, and a hub of radical Salafi preaching connected to Mali.¹²

Militant guerrilla operations ensued, with growing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and ambushes against local state forces to contend territorial control. In May 2019, the abduction of two French tourists in the Pendjari national park and the killing of their guide marked the first jihadist attack on Beninese soil. A few months later, in November 2019, a large-scale attack targeted a convoy of the goldmining company Semafo near Diapaga. Jihadists' pressure further escalated in March and December 2020, when sophisticated attacks against AEF checkpoints in Niger's W allowed the assailants to breach into the national park, establish a foothold, and quickly chase the contenders. Additional clashes occurred in early 2021 targeting Benin's AEF and APN rangers in the W and Pendjari national parks. Later that year, jihadist groups intensified their operations along the Benin-Burkina Faso border, culminating in the assault on the Porga border checkpoint in December.¹³ In subsequent years, while in Benin's northern borderlands attacks and ambushes continued to target AEF and APN park rangers as well as state defence and security forces,¹⁴ in Burkina Faso and Niger AEF park rangers withdrew to safe nearby towns, leaving the militaries only in the frontline.

With rivals pushed out, jihadists reportedly established numerous concealed camps within the WAP complex, which are described as shelters temporarily housing small groups of male combatants without families, women, or livestock.¹⁵ They are especially prevalent in the Arly national park and the Nigerien sector of W park, where state control is weaker. Local observers report that jihadist militants occasionally leave their forest shelters to preach in surrounding villages. They present themselves as defenders of Islam, yet only seldom openly identify as

¹⁰ Interviews with conservation experts and international donors in Ouagadougou and Niamey.

¹¹ Interviews with security experts and conservation officers in Niamey and Cotonou.

¹² Interviews with security experts in Ouagadougou and Diapaga. See also Hubert (2021) and ICG (2023).

¹³ Interviews with security experts and conservation officers in Niamey, Tamou and Cotonou. See also Pellerin (2022) and De Bruijne (2022).

¹⁴ Interviews with security experts and conservation officers in Cotonou and Kandi.

¹⁵ Interviews with security experts and conservation officers in Niamey, Cotonou, Say, Kandi, Pama.

jihadists or mujahideen associated with specific groups. While existing reports suggest a prevalent linkage to JNIM (ICG 2023; Sampaio et al. 2023), local communities' general lack of knowledge of the ties and hierarchies of the jihadist groups operating in the area arguably indicates a certain segregation between militants and people living near the WAP complex. Preaches reportedly stress the adherence to strict Salafist norms and the rejection of "infidel" states and related practices, including French-based schooling. Local pastoralists – who would arguably amount to the key target of jihadist groups' propaganda and mobilization efforts according to HI – report that "their [jihadists'] message to the local population focus on the strict application of Islamic law", "they stress the obligation to pay the zakat¹⁶ and the prohibition to smoke tobacco"; and "demand the population to wear short trousers and long beards (for men) and the burqa (for women)".¹⁷ Poachers too, whom one would expect to represent a valuable audience of jihadists' messages leveraging the discontent for the WAP complex environmental restrictions, similarly insist that "terrorist groups demand the conversion to Islam, the refusal to support state forces, the rejection of whites' schools and the wearing of short trousers".¹⁸

Instead, it is noteworthy that jihadists operating in the WAP complex area only seldom appear to explicitly address issues related to the governance of natural resource. This contrasts sharply with observations made elsewhere across the Sahel, where natural resources governance has proved key in jihadist groups' strategies of outreach and legitimation (Sangaré 2016; Raineri 2018; Baldaro and Diall 2020).

Rather than making of natural resources' governance the cornerstone of their strategies of mobilization and entrenchment, jihadist groups established in the WAP complex appear to endorse a sort of laissez-faire policy, intervening only when their interests are threatened. They seem to uphold – or at least not prohibit – cattle access to grazing land within protected areas. This is sometimes accompanied by an explicit discourse favouring pastoralists in land-related conflicts. In Tamou, for example, jihadists have reportedly advocated for an end to land-grabbing practices benefitting allegedly corrupted elites – both administrative and customary – and the re-enactment of traditional pasturelands. In exchange for their support, jihadists require herders to conform to religious norms, stop cooperating with the state, and provide logistical and financial assistance. Local authorities thus report that "the jihadists do not attack the herders, but the latter give them the zakat deducted from the animals"; "they give free rein to farmers who give them zakat in return".¹⁹

Jihadist groups also appear to champion the lifting of restrictions on artisanal goldmining in the WAP complex area. Since their arrival in 2018, they have advocated for local communities' right to access and exploit mineral resources, and threatened private goldmining companies accused of colluding with national and international corrupt elites (Hubert 2021). Jihadists' growing grip has displaced state regulation by AES, law enforcement and local authorities. Noteworthy, however, the informal (corrupt?) practices of the latter had in any case failed to curb the spread of artisanal goldmining, despite it being theoretically banned in protected areas. As a result, jihadist groups have managed to establish a sort of remote control on existing artisanal goldmining sites around Pama, Diapaga, and Tamou exercised via local informants. In contrast to the poor governance of state authorities, jihadists' governance of goldmining emphasizes law and order, entailing a religious ban on alcohol and prostitution, conflict management and racket mitigation. In exchange for a modest fee, artisanal goldminers from nearby communities are reportedly allowed to operate freely and

unconcerned by environmental restrictions. Jihadists are also believed to tolerate, if not encourage, cross-border gold smuggling.²⁰

Jihadists' approach vis-à-vis logging and poaching, however, exhibits a much less liberal attitude. Despite the strict ban on logging in WAP protected areas, wood is an essential resource for the way of life of local communities, whose livelihoods largely rely on it. Acknowledging this, state authorities around the WAP complex had proved eager to implement quite a permissive informal governance relaxing logging restrictions and related penalties.²¹ By contrast, jihadist groups in the WAP complex view trees as a strategic asset enabling them to hide under the green canopy and escape aerial detection, and therefore tend to enforce a strict prohibition on logging and deforestation. While implementation is unsystematic and margins of tolerance remain permitted, particularly in the outskirts of protected areas, examples from Tamou illustrate jihadists' determination to resort to violence against unauthorised loggers. According to local observers "the jihadists have banned logging in areas they occupy. To this end, they have whipped woodcutters and threatened to burn the vehicles used to transport wood".²² As a consequence, local observers report that interdicting informal logging has prompted a considerable rise in charcoal prices in the Tamou area: "While the jihadists allow the herders access to the park, they prohibit cutting trees, which they use as a hiding place for their security. It follows that they do not tolerate the presence of woodcutters in the area. As a result, a bag of charcoal that used to sell for 2,000 francs now costs up to 6,000 francs".²³

Regarding poaching, jihadists' approach is more ambivalent. Jihadists hidden in the WAP complex are very likely to rely on hunting, if only because game provides a reliable and unconstrained supply of food for militants. In this regard, environmental protection experts in the region believe that "so far we are not aware of them [jihadists] engaging in poaching. [...] They do it incidentally for consumption, but not for trade".²⁴ Poaching by others, by contrast, appears to be less tolerated, although at varying degrees. In Tamou and Pama, most observers report a harsh crackdown against poachers, arguably aimed at deterring other armed actors from accessing jihadist-controlled territories. As local hunters put it: "since hunters use firearms in their activities, jihadist groups see them as threats to their security and do not hesitate to fight and kill them"²⁵; "poaching is declining as jihadist groups have removed poachers' guns and, in some cases, even tied up and whipped poachers".²⁶ In Diapaga, instead, cases of partnerships have been reported between jihadist groups and traditional hunters. In Benin, rising insecurity due to jihadists' activities has hindered anti-poaching activities, including by APN; at the same time, however, limited territorial control by jihadist groups has failed to inhibit a resurgence in poaching in Pendjari and W national parks.²⁷ In spite of these variations, there is so far limited evidence of a surge in elephant killings and ivory trafficking in the WAP complex. Further urging caution against alarmism, there is now a wealth of available studies debunking past claims of links between African terrorist groups and ivory trafficking (White 2014; Duffy 2016; Pennaz et al. 2018; Titeca and Edmond 2019).

Overall, the trajectories, discourses and practices accompanying jihadist groups' encroachment in the WAP complex exhibit considerable variations across time and place, and hardly support unambiguous

¹⁶ This refers to the Islamic obligation of sharing part of one's revenues for charity, that jihadist groups in Africa manipulate to raise funds, enforce protection rackets and mark the subjugation of local communities.

¹⁷ Interview with pastoralists in Tamou and Pama.

¹⁸ Interview with poacher in Pama.

¹⁹ Interviews with state authorities in Tamou.

²⁰ Interviews with miners and security experts in Pama, Diapaga and Tamou.

²¹ Interviews with conservation officers and local authorities in Tamou (done in Say) and Pama.

²² Interview with state authority in Tamou.

²³ Interview with pastoralist in Tamou.

²⁴ Interview with conservation officer in Kandi.

²⁵ Interview with poacher in Tamou.

²⁶ Interview with hunter in Pama.

²⁷ Interviews with conservation officers and local hunters in Diapaga and Kandi.

interpretations. It is for instance unclear whether the exploitation of natural resources in the area primarily amounts to a means of survival in a difficult environment, or to a goal in itself driven by the greed for conflict economies. In either case, however, one could argue that the revenues thus generated, whether in cash or in kind, contribute to enhancing the autonomy of jihadist groups, and thereby insulating the latter from the need to constructively engage with local communities (Weinstein 2007).

This might also contribute to illuminating the variations observed in jihadist groups' behaviour vis-à-vis civilian communities dwelling in the vicinity of the WAP complex. The degree of economic and logistic independence here appears to interact with that of territorial control: when the latter is not firmly established, jihadist groups tend to show sensitivity to local grievances and use (per-)suasion to mobilize accordingly. However, once they secure control and remove contenders, a much more coercive approach prevails, and cooperation between jihadists and local communities has tended to shift from voluntary to compulsory. On the one hand, the payment of zakat has increasingly become systematised and mandatory as jihadists' presence takes hold, such as in Pama, Diapaga and Tamou.²⁸ On the other hand, persuasion and incentives have been replaced by threats and punishments in case of non-compliance with jihadist rules.

There is no shortage of examples illustrating this. In Pama, for instance, discourses claiming unimpeded access to local forest and mineral resources accompanied the jihadists' implantation since 2018 (Hubert 2021). Yet recent observations suggest that this rhetoric subsequently subdued and gave place to a much more stringent approach, marked by intimidations, brutality, looting, forced displacements, frequent cattle thefts, and embargoes on uncompliant villages. Local observers report "there have been threats, villages have been evicted, livestock have been taken away, and people have been forced to leave their homes"; "they [jihadists] threaten people by giving them ultimatums to leave their localities before carrying out barbaric acts. Looting and pillages against civilians are recurrent in Pama".²⁹ For their part, jihadists in Benin's north, while generally emphasising more the fight against corruption than the governance of natural resources, have sometimes advocated for unrestricted access to protected lands long barred by the state.³⁰ Their repertoire of engagement with local communities, however, is not limited to preaching, but increasingly resorts to intimidations, attacks on villages and kidnappings, too.

5. Community perceptions of governance, conservation and security

Conflicts for access to natural resources have long existed around the protected areas of the WAP complex, prompting grievances about environmental restrictions alleged to hinder peoples' livelihoods. Nevertheless, small-scale perception surveys suggest that communities living in the region tend to express overall positive views of existing efforts towards environmental protection. Positive or very-positive opinions largely predominate among respondents in the sample regarding the impact of the WAP complex on environmental and biodiversity conservation (96 %), but also community life and well-being (76 %) and local culture (68 %; in this case however 57 % of Pama respondents expressed negative views, possibly as a result of restrictions imposed on access to Gourmantché sacred sites, see Kaboré 2018).

When asked about specific measures of environmental protection, respondents generally see them as legitimate yet often ineffective. The

large majority of the respondents held positive or very positive opinions about the legitimacy of the existing restrictions to hunting (85 %), wood-cutting (84 %) and using chemicals (78 %). However, in all cases almost half of the sample sees the related penalties for offenders as too harsh, thereby highlighting the tension between conservation and livelihood needs. Survey results furthermore attest the considerable social legitimacy of artisanal goldmining, which is largely considered as "a normal activity, a way of life" (48 %) or at least a "resilience strategy in times of need" (45 %), while only very few respondents view it as "a criminal activity" (4 %) or a "security threat" (3 %).

Perceptions of the impact of WAP's environmental protection measures on local economic activities are mixed, though generally more positive (45 %) than negative (36 %). When asked which economic sectors have benefited or suffered most from the existence of these protected areas, responses reveal some unexpected trends. Pastoralism is seen as the primary beneficiary by a relative majority (39 %), followed by tourism (14 %), while agriculture is viewed as the main loser by most respondents (52 %). Results however are markedly different in the case of Kandi, whose respondents see the public administration (39 %) and tourism (27 %) as the main beneficiaries of protected areas, and pastoralists as the main losers (53 %). Interview data help interpret these somewhat surprising results and their variations. As mentioned above, in fact, local observers in both Niger and Burkina Faso report that informal arrangements have often resulted in the tolerance of grazing within protected areas, sometimes under the guise of a loose protection racket. As put by a customary leader from Tamou, himself of pastoralist origin, "pastoralists have most benefited from the WAP complex, since they could often bring their cattle to the park despite the restrictions".³¹ The expansion of fixed agricultural settlement, however, has arguably proved harder to turn a blind-eye on, and therefore to authorise. In Benin's Kandi, by contrast, APN's stricter approach to conservation and law enforcement has prompted the expulsion of livestock from protected areas, a move that the weaker social influence of the Fulani in Benin could not prevent. As local observers contended, "park rangers formerly engaged in transactions and negotiations. APN's stricter approach has put an end to these behaviours"³²; "the pastoralists are the main losers in these restrictions [on access to natural resources in the WAP complex]. They are fined and imprisoned, while their animals are arrested, impounded, and slaughtered. But the farmers are never caught. These frustrations provide a fertile ground for violent extremism".³³

Security perceptions appear to by and large corroborate this interpretation. Unexpectedly, most respondents hold a mildly positive view of AEF and rangers, considered as actors who "leave people in peace" (38 %) or even help them (21 %) or protect them (20 %). Only a minority sees them as racketeers (13 %), a constraint (4 %) or a threat (1 %). Responses' variations are limited across ethnic and socio-professional divides, thereby questioning the (pre-?)conception that AEF forces systematically stigmatize pastoralists. Geographic variations are more telling. In Tamou, for instance, many more are those who view AEF as racketeers (37 %), as opposed to helpers (3 %) or protectors (5 %), although the relative majority still considers them as actors who "leave people in peace" (47 %). One may argue that such findings further highlight the significance of informal governance of natural resources, including protection rackets enforced by conservation officers, in shaping local perceptions. In Pama, instead, while survey data confirm that the sampled population sees the AEF as protectors (61 %) or helpers (25 %), the latter hold less positive views of the former, stressing that "the local population thinks that AEF agents are merely barring the exploitation of protected areas, prompting a visible breakdown in trust" whereby residents "resist security operations".³⁴

²⁸ Interviews with pastoralists and local authorities in several localities around the WAP complex.

²⁹ Interviews with state authorities in Pama.

³⁰ Interviews with security experts, conservation officers and local authorities in Cotonou and Kandi.

³¹ Interview with customary leader in Tamou.

³² Interview with former ranger in Kandi.

³³ Interview with pastoralist in Kandi.

³⁴ Interview with AEF officers in Pama.

Lastly, security perceptions attest that communities living around the WAP complex generally hold a (very) negative opinion of jihadist groups.³⁵ When asked about the main sources of security threat and protection, the almost totality of the respondents points at, respectively, jihadist groups (91 %) and states' security and defence forces (97 %). These findings are not obvious, given the contrasting results of similar studies focusing on other regions in the Sahel (Sangaré 2016; Raineri 2018). In particular, approximately three-quarters of the sample (74 %) view the jihadists as aggressors, and 7 % as racketeers. Only a small minority considers the jihadists as actors who "leave people in peace" (8 %), help them (1 %), or protect them (0.4 %; that is, one respondent only). Comparing these results with those about the AEF highlights the widespread preference of WAP residents for the latter, even if they are the frontline representatives of state governance and of the related restrictions to access natural resources. Furthermore, such perceptions are broadly consistent across ethnic, socio-professional, and community divides, suggesting that jihadist groups operating in and around the WAP complex have failed to leverage existing social cleavages or build solid alliances by mobilizing the grievances of any specific group.

6. Conclusion: Military tactics prime over political or economic goals

Progressing from southeastern Burkina Faso since 2018, the gradual expansion of jihadist groups in and around the WAP complex has prompted the expulsion of local security forces, including AEF personnel, and the establishment of numerous jihadist camps within the protected areas. Puzzled by these developments, this article has questioned why Sahelian jihadist groups have targeted the WAP complex, and explored the heuristic purchase of three research hypotheses in this regard.

The main hypothesis (H1) lays emphasis on protected areas' governance of natural resources and related conflicts, arguing that jihadists aim to leverage existing grievances on resource access restrictions to mobilize local populations against their states.

While previous research (Carayol, 2021; Hubert 2021) tended to corroborate this hypothesis, the findings herein outlined are only partly compatible with it. Newly available evidence does not confirm widespread hostility among local communities toward protected areas' governance and related restrictions on access to natural resources. By and large, people (claim to) agree with environmental protection goals. Although grievances do exist, several mechanisms have been introduced to address and assuage them, be they community consultation frameworks, informal arrangements and outreach efforts. The recent trend of delegating management to private actors like APN – which Benin has pioneered and international donors like the EU and GIZ were ready to extend to Burkina Faso and Niger – sparked concerns that local communities might feel further dispossessed and alienated. Initial resistance however prompted APN to mitigate its rigid conservationist stance by offering income-generating opportunities as well as concessions to local communities and stakeholders' livelihoods. As a result, opposition to the management delegation model seems to have largely subdued, while tensions between local communities on the one hand, and AEF and ranger corps, on the other, seem less heightened than previously believed.

Moreover, the analysis of the trajectories, discourses and practices of jihadist groups operating in the WAP complex area poorly aligns with expectations linked to H1. Unlike elsewhere in the Sahel, these groups

³⁵ It is acknowledged that far-from-ideal security conditions might have affected respondents' behaviour and therefore introduced a bias in survey data collection. To mitigate this risk, the ethical approach to research has been strictly observed and emphasised with all respondents, while safety considerations have guided the selection of target communities, thereby increasing the confidence in the survey results.

do not appear to systematically leverage grievances related to the governance of natural resource in their rhetoric nor to integrate them into their agendas. Such issues are sometimes evoked in the early stages of the jihadist groups' establishment in the WAP complex region, as observed in Burkina Faso's Pama in 2018 and later in northern Benin, arguably to gain local sympathy and trust. As their control consolidates, however, jihadist groups tend to change approach, becoming more coercive and disregarding local communities' demands. At best, they may endorse a permissive policy vis-à-vis artisanal goldmining and grazing, which is however relevant to the entire Sahelian region, and is only partly linked to the proximity and governance of the WAP protected areas. Overall, jihadists in the WAP complex appear to devote limited efforts to engage with local communities, uphold their demands and win their trust; in fact, sometimes they even antagonize them. And in return, local communities largely view jihadists as threats, and their opponents, including local states' security forces, as protectors.

These observations cast doubts on the validity of H1 as a relevant answer to this article's research question on the reasons explaining the expansion of Sahelian jihadist groups towards the WAP complex. They suggest that the primary motivation for the jihadist groups' establishment in the area may not stem from the political potential of exploiting local grievances over natural resource governance in protected areas, nor from the jihadists' capacity to mobilize supporters and militants against the state.

Another hypothesis (H2) explored in this article posits that Sahelian jihadist groups may have targeted the WAP complex less for its political potential – to leverage grievances on natural resource governance for mobilization purposes – than for its economic opportunities – to meet jihadists' greed by leveraging conflict economies, and namely the exploitation of illicit activities such as artisanal goldmining, poaching, and cross-border trafficking of fuel, drugs, and other goods.

Several observations about jihadist groups' practices lend support to this hypothesis. Jihadists groups have ostensibly targeted goldmining sites in the region, which provided them with entry points, enrichment opportunities, and bases to extend their influence in and around the WAP complex area. Furthermore, several jihadist attacks targeted border control posts near key regional trafficking hubs such as Koalou, Porga, and Malanville. And while northern Benin long served as a supply corridor for jihadist cells, it is noteworthy that it was only after the Beninese government began cracking down on informal trafficking that jihadists launched military operations against Beninese forces and territory. The ensuing weakening of states' capacity to control the WAP borderlands prompted a remarked increase in smuggling flows in the area. The lack of evidence of jihadist interference in such traffics suggests at least a certain tolerance of, if not active complicity with, these activities by jihadists forces.

These observations highlight the plausibility of H2 and underscore the relevance of economic interests among the motivations driving Sahelian jihadist groups to invest in the WAP complex area. They may as well contribute to further undermining the explanatory purchase of H1, since leveraging conflict economies has been demonstrated to reduce the incentives for armed groups to engage constructively with surrounding communities and seek their support (Weinstein 2007).

Jihadists' attitude, though, looks more ambivalent regarding poaching and logging: data presented in this study do not conclusively indicate – in the former case – and actually dispute – in the latter – that jihadist groups are involved in expanding, protecting, or exploiting these illicit economies. This arguably suggests that security considerations take precedence over economic opportunism in the hierarchy of factors explaining jihadist settlement in the WAP territory.

This observation points at the specific relevance of the third and last hypothesis (H3) possibly explaining jihadist groups' establishment in the WAP complex area. According to H3, jihadist groups focus on the WAP complex less for its political potential for mobilization or its economic potential for tapping into informal trades, than for its military potential to provide a safe haven. From this perspective, the WAP

complex is valued predominantly because it offers protection, isolation, discretion and logistical autonomy, thereby providing an ideal rear base as well as a launching pad for the further expansion of jihadist activities in Sahel's neighbouring countries towards the Gulf of Guinea.

Not only most interviewees seem to concur with this hypothesis, but also several empirical observations support its validity. Indeed, the modalities of jihadist groups' settlement within the WAP complex suggest that tactical and military considerations of self-protection outweigh efforts to build "good neighbour" relations with surrounding communities. Militants tend to withdraw into inaccessible shelters in the forest, away from local populations. Their organization, leadership, affiliation and even objectives are largely unknown to the local communities. In some emblematic cases, they prioritize security precautions even at the expense of frustrating community expectations for more permissive governance of natural resources. Illustrating this, the strict prohibition of logging and poaching, are hardly compatible with H1 and H2, but align with H3 expectations. Even the few attacks on AEF officers seem to be motivated more by military goals of territorial control and access denial than by political goals to gain popular legitimacy by deterring "public enemies". Unlike elsewhere in the Sahel, in fact, one does not detect a systematic pattern of targeting AEF personnel and rangers around the WAP.

Overall, the considerations herein exposed and discussed call into question the explanatory relevance of the main research hypothesis (H1) in relation to the alternative hypotheses (H2 and H3). Among the reasons why Sahelian jihadist groups have moved into WAP territory in recent years, political interest in mobilising communities around natural resource governance issues seems less important than economic interest in exploiting conflict economies – particularly artisanal goldmining and cross-border traffics – and military interest in establishing a safe haven. In particular, the plausibility of H3 stands out, leading to the conclusion that, more than greed or grievances, the pure military need for a tactical rear base likely represents one of the primary explanations of why jihadist groups have been drawn to the WAP complex.

These findings arguably contribute to complementing and expanding the existing political ecology literature asking whether conservation policies are more likely to boost or inhibit conflict dynamics. Looking at the neglected case of West Africa's WAP complex, this study suggests that conservation efforts and insurgency are not bound to fuel each other, even when specific contextual features make this outcome very likely. While grievances for the access to natural resources have been existing for decades in the WAP complex, the recent expansion of Sahelian jihadist groups in the area is only partly linked to them. Instead, geography and environmental conditions appear to matter more: jihadist groups target West African forests – be they the WAP complex, Nigeria's Sambisa, or Mali's National Parks – irrespective of their protection status. In this case, then, conflict dynamics are hardly imputable to allegedly inadequate conservation policies.

In fact, the opposite might be true. The discussion above suggests that, throughout the years, donors' pressure and grassroots struggles have concurred to making the governance of the WAP complex more inclusive and its rules more acceptable to local communities. This might help explain why the latter (claim to) by and large support conservation aims and actors today. One should not rule out, then, the possibility that well-designed conservation policies – including awareness-raising, community outreach and inclusive governance – might have eventually contributed to local people's resilience *against* the expansion of violent extremism.

In conclusion, this observation calls for greater epistemological flexibility in political ecology scholarship. Accommodating alternative theories of action that – beyond a narrow focus on interest-based rational choice – give room to normative commitments, struggles and change, can help avoid reifying or overdetermining peoples' decision-making and action drivers when faced with competing claims for the access to natural resources.

CREdiT authorship contribution statement

Luca Raineri: Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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