

ADDRESSING THE DOZO IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

“The dozo’s connection to many senior politicians and members of the armed forces has boosted their political gravitas.”

FAST FACTS

- The importance of the dozo to the government’s handle on power has made them difficult to disarm or hold accountable in the post-war period.
- One of the reasons behind the dozo existence and proliferation in remote areas is an absence of regular security and police forces, which allows the dozo to undertake government security roles with impunity.
- Encouraging cohesion and communication between communities in northern and western Côte d’Ivoire, where the dozo are omnipresent, would assist with reconciliation.

Context

Côte d’Ivoire is home to around 200,000 traditional hunters known as the dozo.¹ These traditional hunters are common throughout West Africa and have often filled gaps in state security provision in remote areas by settling local disputes and protecting residents from banditry and theft. In Côte d’Ivoire, the dozo traditionally hail from the north and are predominantly of Dioula ethnicity. They were heavily repressed under previous non-northern-led administrations who feared the power of the dozo as a pro-northern militia.² However, after supporting the current government

1 Youenn Gourlay, “Les Chasseurs Dozos, Gardiens Sacrés et Encombrants du Nord Ivoirien,” *Le Monde Afrique* November 14, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/14/les-chasseurs-dozos-gardiens-sacres-et-encombrants-du-nord-ivoirien_6019188_3212.html.

2 Rodrigue Koné, “La Confrérie des Chasseurs Traditionnels Dozo en Côte d’Ivoire : Enjeux Socioculturels et Dynamiques Sécuritaires,” *Centre Franco Paix* (June 2018): 30.

during a 2002-2011 war, which pitted the north against the south and ultimately saw northern leaders come to power, the dozo have grown in political status and strength.

The failure to fully disarm or demobilize the dozo after the end of the conflict and the government's decision not to hold them accountable for abuses they committed during or since the war have imbued them with impunity. Moreover, many senior dozo, who were accused of committing crimes during the war, have been promoted to positions in the armed forces and the government since 2011.³ The dozo's connection to many senior politicians and members of the armed forces has boosted their political gravitas.⁴ Further, because of their close ethnic ties to the current administration, their support for the president during the 2002-2011 conflict, and the government's lack of action to demobilize them, the dozo have been accused of acting almost as a parallel militia in favor of President Alassane Ouattara.⁵

Amid longstanding tensions over land ownership that remain unresolved in the aftermath of the 2002-2011 conflict, northern and cen-

Civil War

The nine-year civil war stemmed from longstanding tensions over access to land, national identity, and ethnic rivalries. Under the country's first President Felix Houphouet Boigny, northern people, including the dozo, had been encouraged to migrate to the southwest of the country to farm an abundance of cocoa plantations. But as the cocoa price plummeted in the 1980s and jobs became scarce, southwestern ethnic groups grew angry at the presence of foreigners on their land and sought to push them out. This sentiment was galvanized by numerous politicians in the years after Houphouet Boigny's death in 1993. Ethnic tensions mounted and eventually led to an attempted coup against President Laurent Gbagbo in 2002, triggering a civil war. When the mutinous troops failed to seize control of the presidency, they took control of the northern part of Cote d'Ivoire, dividing the country in half. The rebels, who became known as the Forces Nouvelles (FN) and were strongly supported by the dozo, claimed that northern populations had been heavily marginalized for decades and sought greater equality for northern people. The UN established a ceasefire line in the center of the country, reducing the propensity for violence and preventing the FN from marching on the capital. From 2002 onwards, the international community sought to mediate a peace agreement to end the conflict with little success. In 2010, Gbagbo finally agreed to hold a presidential election, long demanded by the FN. The poll pitted northern politician Alassane Ouattara and central former President Henri Konan Bedie against then-President Gbagbo, who hailed from the southwest. The electoral commission announced Ouattara the winner of the poll, though Gbagbo refused to step down, sparking some of the worst violence of the conflict in which more than 3,000 people died. Ouattara was eventually installed in the presidency with the assistance of UN and French troops, as well as the assistance of the FN.

3 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 43.

4 Many of those rebels who fought with the dozo during the 2002-2011 conflict are now in power, providing the dozo with extensive connections to politicians and members of the armed forces. Notably, Zakaria Kone and Ousmane Cherif, senior dozos who were both rebel commanders during the conflict, took up high-level positions in the armed forces after the conflict ended.

5 Richard Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit': Violence et Politique en Côte d'Ivoire," *Les dossiers du CERI* (October 2012): 6.

tral populations have increasingly joined dozo self-defense forces in an effort to protect their land from seizures by southwestern ethnic groups.⁶ This has bolstered the dozo's strength in numbers; they are now significantly more numerous than the Ivoirian police force and military, respectively.⁷ In addition to their traditional base in the north, the dozo are now present in Abidjan and have become stronger in the west. The dozo migrated to that part of the country as part of a mass migration of northerners to the arable farmlands in the 1960s-1970s but since the 1990s had been repressed by non-northern-led governments, who protected the southwestern ethnic groups.⁸ However, they have been allowed to operate relatively uninhibited in the west since Ouattara's accession to power in 2011.

Since the end of the conflict in 2011, external policy advisors have encouraged Côte d'Ivoire to depoliticize, demobilize, and disarm the dozo once embroiled in the 2002-2011 conflict and urge them to return to their traditional hunter roles.⁹ In 2012, the Ivoirian government seemingly complied, introducing several laws forbidding the dozo from establishing roadblocks or carrying unauthorized weaponry or munitions.¹⁰ That year, the defense minister also arranged a meeting of clarification with the dozo, thanking them for their support during the conflict and urging them to scale back their role in security provision.¹¹

These moves rarely had much of an impact. Law enforcement does not arrest the dozo for violating the laws, and the number of traditional hunters has continued to grow in the years since the conflict ended.¹² The dozo continue to play security roles without a mandate. They persistently mount roadblocks, especially in the southwestern part of the country, underscoring the significant strength of the community-based armed group outside of their traditional northern strongholds. Moreover, many dozoes allege that they still work closely with the security forces. The government strongly denies this claim, though reinserting several senior dozo into the military at the end of the conflict suggests that at least some connections remain between the community-based armed group and the security forces.¹³

Banegas argues that the government's reluctance to eliminate the dozo as a parallel security force may be a result of its fear of another conflict. Should this conflict occur, the government may decide to utilize the dozo again if the Ivoirian military choose to side with prominent politicians against the administration.¹⁴ The new regime relied on the dozo following the 2002-2011 conflict to maintain power during an unstable political transition and continued to depend on them to bolster security in a heavily politicized post-conflict period. Moreover, the traditional hunters have often claimed that they deserve compensation for their support to the government during the civil war and therefore cannot be demobilized.¹⁵ Marginalizing the dozo from the formal security

6 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34.

7 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34. ; Gourlay, "Les Chasseurs Dozos."

8 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 26.

9 United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), "Rapport Sur les Abus des Droits de l'Homme Commis par des Dozos en République de Côte d'Ivoire," *United Nations* (June 2013): 1-28.

10 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 23-25.

11 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 24.

12 Gourlay, "Les Chasseurs Dozos;" UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 26.

13 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus", 24.

14 Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit'," 6.

15 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 13.

system, therefore, may be a security risk in itself.¹⁶

Relevance to Policy and Practice

At least partly because of the impunity they have been granted, much of the population in Côte d'Ivoire fear and mistrust the dozo, particularly in the west of the country where the Guere and Bete people have often clashed with the dozo, who generally do not belong to these local ethnic groups.¹⁷ Civilians in the west have accused the traditional hunters of involvement in massacres during the civil war, as well as land seizures and persistent banditry, executions, and extortion after it ended.¹⁸ Despite this, and the few efforts the government claims it has made to disarm them and prevent them playing a security role for which they do not have the mandate, it continues to enable them.¹⁹

This persistent tension between the Guere and Bete ethnic groups and the dozo, particularly in the southwest, is problematic. This dynamic prevents reconciliation between the government and traditionally pro-government northern populations and western ethnic groups, who perceive the ongoing strength of the dozo as an existential threat and an indication of the government's pro-northern, or even pro-Dioula, stance.²⁰ Moreover, the longstanding friction between the dozo and other communities, especially the Guere and the Bete, poses a risk in the context of a potential incursion by Islamist extremist groups, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Neighboring countries, notably Mali and Burkina Faso, who are already struggling with vast insurgencies by both JNIM and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have found that tensions between citizens and community-based-armed groups like the dozo can exacerbate the militant threat.²¹ In those countries, jihadist insurgents have mobilized longstanding grievances against dozo-like organizations to facilitate recruitment and encourage violence.²²

In turn, vigilante groups in Burkina Faso and Mali have sought to tackle the expansion of violent extremists themselves—sometimes with the backing of the government, which lacks resources and reach in more remote areas of their country.²³ Côte d'Ivoire may be tempted to mobilize and arm its dozo in a similar fashion, should it have to deal with sustained extremist violence. The Ivorian government has allegedly already used the dozo in a similar manner in 2016, deploying

16 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 47.

17 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 11; Author interviews with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Bolequin, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018.

18 Author interview with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Bolequin, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018; UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 16-23.

19 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 23-25.

20 Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflict'," 6; The New Humanitarian, "Dozo as Protector, Dozo as Assailant," August 1, 2011, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/259696>; UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," ۲۳-۱۶.

21 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation of Communal Violence in Mali," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/analysis-jihadist-exploitation-of-communal-violence-in-mali.php>; Laurence-Aida Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel," *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies*, February 26, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/how-violent-extremist-groups-exploit-intercommunal-conflicts-in-the-sahel/>

22 Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation."; Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups."

23 Reuters, "Burkina Faso Approves State Backing," January 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-security/burkina-faso-approves-state-backing-for-vigilantes-fighting-jihadists-idUSKBN1ZL1UT>

the dozo to assist with the aftermath of the Grand Bassam attack by al-Mourabitoun.²⁴

Government cooptation can boost the availability of fighters and provide invaluable local intelligence in the short term. However, these efforts are misguided. Poorly trained and ill-equipped traditional hunters often end up targeting entire communities thought to be associated with Islamist insurgents and massacring and torturing civilians.²⁵ Such actions are rarely brought to justice and drive wedges between communities, exacerbating local grievances and thus furthering a potent recruitment tool for extremists. Neither in Mali, nor in Burkina Faso has the cooptation of community-based armed groups been effective in halting the expansion of Islamist extremist violence. An alternative approach to the militia is therefore necessary in Côte d'Ivoire.

Recommendations

Among many Ivoirian communities, particularly in the west, the dozo are unpopular, opening the prospect for Islamist extremist groups to use them in the same way as in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali to encourage intercommunal violence and facilitate recruitment. What can be done to encourage the government to address this challenge, given the government's close alliance with the dozo?

Reframe the challenge of the proliferation of the dozo as a counter-terrorism issue

The importance of the dozo to the government's hold on power has made them difficult to disarm or hold accountable in the post-war period. However, reframing this challenge as a key factor in the government's counter-terrorism response would change the dynamic of the dozo predicament and assist in depoliticizing the issue. The dozo's role in the country becomes a question of national security rather than party politics. Reframing also makes the problem more pertinent and urgent to the government, which has been preoccupied with the danger posed by the expansion of Islamist extremism from the Sahel into coastal West Africa. Côte d'Ivoire witnessed an Islamist extremist attack in 2016 and foiled a series of further planned assaults in Abidjan in 2019.²⁶ The government must see that unless an appropriate security strategy is adopted vis-à-vis the traditional hunters, the group will potentially exacerbate jihadist violence, as evidenced in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali.

Workshops or strategy meetings focusing on counterterrorism responses with senior government officials in advisory roles or overseeing security sector reform initiatives could be a tool for reframing the issue. These meetings could raise the role of the dozo in the security response to the growing Islamist extremist threat, while also highlighting the problems this has posed in neighboring countries and the need for a different approach. The case studies of Burkina Faso and Mali could be a springboard for alternative ideas to address the intersectional threat posed

24 On 13 March 2016 al-Mourabitoun militants from Mali attacked the beach resort of Grand Bassam, around 40 km from Abidjan. The attack left at least 16 people dead.; Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 45.

25 Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups."

26 Africa Intelligence, "Alassane Ouattara Does Battle with Katiba Macina in Abidjan," June 12, 2019, <https://www.africa-intelligence.com/central-and-west-africa-politics/2019/06/12/alassane-ouattara-does-battle-with-katiba-macina-in-abidjan,108361003-art>

by community-based armed groups and Islamist extremists while reducing the security role of the dozo.

Respond to security shortfalls incorporating the dozo and civil society where possible

One of the reasons behind the dozo existence and proliferation in remote areas is an absence of regular security and police forces, which allows the dozo to undertake government security roles with impunity. The most obvious way to combat this security gap is to expand statutory security forces into these rural areas, correcting the security shortfalls the dozo respond to. The government should make a concerted effort to increase troops and police in these more remote reaches of the country, particularly in the north, where the dozo are prominent and Islamist extremists are most likely to enter the country.

This does not mean that the dozo should be entirely dismantled, nor that they should no longer play any security roles. As security forces expand their presence into rural areas, they should seek to formalize links with select senior dozoes and encourage them to play a role in intelligence provision while discouraging their role as armed security providers. Regulating the relationship between the dozo and security forces would help hold the dozo accountable for their actions and enable the government to monitor them more carefully. Unlike in Burkina Faso, this should not involve the provision of weaponry or training that emboldens these community-based armed groups to continue to behave like a militia.

The expansion of security forces in the north and the incorporation of the dozo would be a delicate change in the security dynamic, which would need to be handled carefully. It would be necessary to consult community members and dozo groups in the north before slowly moving statutory forces into the area. To a certain extent, such conversations could be facilitated by the continued presence of senior dozo in the armed forces, who should be able to establish and oversee the discussions between the state and the self-defense groups. The dozo would likely be willing to cooperate on some level, given their patriotism and desire to protect Cote d'Ivoire from Islamist insurgents.²⁷

Such a dialogue would be incredibly useful not just to ensure security forces were not immediately rejected by the local population and the dozo, but also for fomenting better longer-term relationships between the dozo, civil society, and the armed forces: three parts of society that are vital for generating an appropriate security response and that have traditionally turbulent relations. Such conversations would be beneficial exercises in and of themselves, providing security services with much needed access to local intelligence and building their currently weak relationships with civilians.

Local forums would also go some way to uniting communities against the jihadist threat. Ivoirians are typically highly patriotic and, in the north in particular, are deeply concerned about Islamist extremists encroaching over the northern Ivoirian border from Burkina Faso or Mali.²⁸ Working together to prevent this threat could bring these divergent groups closer. Both the dozo and

27 Author interviews with dozo Man, Bouake, Duekoue, Bolequin, Guiglo, Korhogo, October 2017-October 2018.

28 Author interviews with civilians and ex-combatants, Korhogo, October 2017-October 2018.

security forces have poor reputations among civilians in parts of the north, but more notably the west.²⁹ Thus, they should work to be regarded by communities as less of a threat and more of a partner in tackling an emerging danger.

Regular meetings between these groups would also allow for the emergence of locally owned strategies to preventing the encroachment of Islamist extremists onto Ivoirian territory. Strategizing meetings would be a platform that empowers the dozo to continue to play a role in community protection and security in a way they long sought to do but without the use of force. Civil society could also be emboldened through such a dialogue. In particular, civil society actors who are already engaged in local resource governance, the expansion of women's or young people's rights and political participation could be mobilized. This would likely contribute to creating a more cohesive civil society, thereby generating positive externalities for development projects as well.

Finally, this dialogue could establish an appropriate means of incentivizing the dozo in their collaborative role, which would likely require some payment, possibly in the form of development projects, such as schools or medical facilities in the communities of the dozo who collaborate effectively in intelligence provision. This type of exchange has been attempted for disarmament programs already in Cote d'Ivoire.³⁰ Regular and external evaluations would be needed to assess the distribution of these projects and the effectiveness of collaboration to reduce the potential for corruption.

Mitigate grievances between communities and the dozo

One of the most significant challenges that community-based armed groups faced in Burkina Faso and Mali is Islamist extremist organizations' ability to mobilize grievances against traditional hunters to intensify violence and facilitate recruitment.³¹ Improving relations between the dozo and communities in Côte d'Ivoire could preempt this, should Islamist insurgent groups gain a foothold. Encouraging cohesion and communication between communities in northern and western Côte d'Ivoire, where the dozo are omnipresent, would assist with reconciliation. Focus groups involving objective arbiters, wherein communities could raise concerns with the dozo's security role in the area, would enable both sides to air grievances, many of which have not been addressed since the conflict. There is little precedent for such pre-emptive intercommunal dialogue in the region. Involving legitimate mediators from civil society and customary chiefs who tend to be responsible for local cohesion would probably be vital pre-requisites for success.

Additionally, more concerted government attempts to tackle obvious causes of tension, including pervasive roadblocks and land seizures by the dozo would be beneficial, particularly in the west e.g. in Duekoue, Gagnoa, Man, and Tai, and in northern towns such as Ouangolo and Ferkessedougou. Reducing the dozo roadblocks in these areas and clearly delineating land ownership could significantly diminish tensions between western communities and the dozo. The government's efforts to address the land question to-date involve the expensive and time-

29 Author interview with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Bolequin, Guiglo, Korhogo, October 2017-October 2018.

30 Author interviews with COMNAT employees Duekoue, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018; COMNAT ALPC, "Poursuite des actions de sécurisation communautaire," *Ivoirian Government*, accessed April 28, 2020, http://comnat-alpc.org/zoom/article.php?ID_ACTUZ=167

31 Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation."

consuming acquisition of land titles.³² Programs that made acquiring a land title much simpler and affordable for communities in the west, such as easily accessible sites in rural areas where titles could be acquired in a matter of hours, would go some way to resolving this issue.

Conclusion

Côte d'Ivoire does not yet have a serious problem with Islamist insurgents. It does, however, have an enormous dozo population. Constructing a more strategic way of mobilizing traditional hunters in the fight against Islamist extremists is essential for prevention and preparedness for a potential violent extremist incursion. There is a need to frame the dozo issue in terms of counterterrorism to encourage the government to take action, while urging more effective efforts to rebuild poor relationships between the dozo and local communities to facilitate a more robust local security response, should extremists gain a foothold in Côte d'Ivoire.

Difficulties persist, however, and will require further research. The depoliticization of the dozo and the armed forces requires greater understanding, especially in the context of countering violent extremism. Given that the threat of Islamist extremism is imminent and there is scant possibility of totally disarming and demobilizing the dozo, the strategies suggested here involve closer cooperation between the government, state security forces, and the dozo in counterterrorism efforts.

Yet, in building stronger ties with state officials, the dozo might grow closer to former warlords and politicians they fought with in the civil war and who are already in the armed forces. Should a political crisis occur during the October presidential election, a strengthened relationship between state actors and traditional hunters might allow pro-government actors to more rapidly remobilize the dozo for their own ends. Strategies aimed at depoliticizing the dozo, while simultaneously encouraging greater cooperation with the government and political figures, will be important to consider in future research.

32 Human Rights Watch, "That land is my family's wealth," October 9, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/10/09/land-my-family-wealth/addressing-land-dispossession-after-cote-divoires-post>; Author interviews with civilians Toulepleu, Bolequin, Duekoue, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018.

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About the Note

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