

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

ISSUE **4** JUNE 2022

Summary highlights

1. Cattle rustling spikes in Mali amid increasing political isolation: Mopti region emerges as epicentre.

On 18 June 2022, suspected members of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara killed at least 20 civilians and seized cattle belonging to residents of Ebak village in Anchawadi commune, 35 kilometres north of Gao. Three months earlier, on 19 March, residents of Niougoun, a village in Segou region in central Mali, lost more than 200 heads of cattle to suspected jihadists. These incidents are merely two examples of many recent cattle-rustling incidents in central and northern Mali, an illicit activity that has continued to surge following a marked spike in 2021. Armed groups, including jihadists, are central players in the lucrative cattle-rustling economy, exerting significant control over the market in certain areas and exploiting existing community vulnerabilities. The 2021 uptick in cattle rustling has occurred in parallel with Mali's growing political isolation and linked shifts in the country's security tectonics. The restructuring of the political and security landscape in Mali has seemingly led to a greater

impunity for both non-state actors and state or state-affiliated actors linked to the cattle-rustling economy.

2. Banditry in northern Niger: geographic diffusion and multiplication of perpetrators.

A bandit attack on 8 April 2022 that left two Nigerien military officers dead illustrates two trends shaping armed banditry dynamics in northern Niger since late 2021. The first of these is the geographic diffusion of attacks, which have spread southwards from their original concentration in remote areas close to the Libyan border. The April attack occurred in a new hotspot – an area called Plaque 50, located just 300 kilometres north-east of Agadez. A second trend is the fragmentation of actors behind the attacks, with both Libyan and (particularly) Nigerien criminal groups becoming increasingly prominent. These operate differently from Chadian armed groups, who are long-standing perpetrators of banditry in the swathes of Nigerien desert hugging the Libyan border. This expansion in the constellation of armed groups preying on licit and illicit activities in northern Niger presents a marked deterioration in the regional security situation.



3. The strategic logic of kidnappings in Mali and Burkina Faso.

The international focus on the issue of kidnapping as a business in the Sahel has dropped dramatically, in large part due to a reduction in the number of Western nationals falling victim to it. However, the phenomenon has far from disappeared. On the contrary, the kidnapping industry in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso surged in 2021 and this trend shows no signs of slowing in 2022, with most victims being locals caught in the battle between the numerous armed groups operating in the region. Analysis of the targets of kidnapping in central Mali and northern and eastern Burkina Faso, two of the regions most affected, suggests that although kidnapping for ransom is a primary source of revenue for armed groups, abductions operate primarily as a war instrument, wielded for purposes of intimidation, punishment and recruitment, with profit often featuring only as a secondary motivation.

4. A surge in cybercrime in Oyo State, Nigeria, has triggered a spike in arrests and the involvement of anticrime group Amotekun, but alternative responses are needed.

In February 2022, a commander of Western Nigeria Security Network, codenamed 'Operation Amotekun', reported the group's focus on cracking down on cybercriminals, known locally as 'Yahoo Boys'. The commander labelled Yahoo Boys a 'menace' affecting the security of the south-western states. This came amid an upsurge in cybercrime in south-west Nigeria, despite escalating arrests. Law enforcement has scaled up responses in Oyo State, and particularly the state capital Ibadan, a cybercrime hub where Yahoo Boys are prominent. However, responses appear to be missing the mark. The inclusion of poorly regulated vigilante groups in responses to predominantly non-violent illicit markets risks escalating grievances and instability, which Nigeria can ill afford.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The fourth issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa focuses primarily on the Sahel region, an area suffering from high levels of violence, conflict and instability. This issue leads with a story on the surge in cattle rustling since 2021; in Mopti region (central Mali), the number of cattle stolen rose threefold, from an average annual figure of approximately 42 000 to almost 130 000 in 2021. The 2021 uptick in cattle rustling has occurred in parallel with Mali's growing political isolation and linked shifts in the country's security tectonics.

Across the border in neighbouring Niger, recent attacks illustrate two key trends shaping armed banditry dynamics in northern Niger since late 2021, namely the geographic diffusion of bandit attacks and the fragmentation of the actors responsible for them. This expansion in the constellation of armed groups preying on licit and illicit activities in northern Niger presents a marked deterioration in the regional security situation.

Across areas of the Sahel and in Nigeria, kidnap for ransom operates as a prominent illicit economy that

multiplies harms to communities, and in some contexts provides significant revenues to armed groups. The third story of this issue examines how the dynamics surrounding the kidnapping industry in Mali and Burkina Faso have changed over the past five years, culminating in a surge of incidents in 2021 and 2022 that target first and foremost local populations. While previously kidnap for ransom has predominantly been assessed through the lens of revenue flows to armed actors, this article explores how it is used as a tool in armed-group governance.

The final article explores the involvement of self-defence group Amotekun in responding to a surge in cybercrime in Nigeria's Oyo State, in a clear case of mission creep. Development responses are needed to complement already scaled up law enforcement responses – the inclusion of poorly regulated vigilante groups in responses to predominantly non-violent illicit markets risks escalating grievances and instability, rendering responses counterproductive.

1. Cattle rustling spikes in Mali amid increasing political isolation: Mopti region emerges as epicentre.

On 18 June 2022, suspected Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) jihadists killed at least 20 civilians and seized cattle belonging to residents of Ebak village in Anchawadi commune.¹ The gunmen arrived in Ebak, 35 kilometres north of Gao, on motorbikes. This attack was typical of the ISGS, which is known to operate in Mali's Gao region.²

Three months earlier, on 19 March 2022, residents of Niougoun, a village in Segou region in central Mali, lost more than 200 heads of cattle to suspected jihadists.³ After several futile missions to recover the cattle, traditional hunters known as the Dozo, who provide security in the area, instead unlawfully seized a handful of heads of cattle from a neighbouring village. This episode sparked a stand-off between the two communities and local police, with tensions rising as women and young people took to the streets to protest, demanding the release of the stolen cattle.

This incident in Segou is merely one of many currently fuelling tensions between different factions of communities, and with law enforcement, across central Mali and also in the north of the country. According to one village chief in northern Mali's Timbuktu region, 'cattle rustling is directly linked to the current armed conflict, as communities launch retaliatory attacks and counter attacks in Mali and in the border areas.'⁴

Although cattle rustling is not a new phenomenon, since 2017, armed-group involvement in the industry in central and northern Mali has vastly swollen the scale of the market, and its associated profits. According to official figures, the volume of cattle rustled in Gao, Ménaka, Mopti and Timbuktu regions in Mali in 2021 was unprecedented.

In Mopti region (central Mali), the number of cattle stolen rose threefold, from an average annual figure of approximately 42 000 to almost 130 000 in 2021.⁵ Community members and local officials interviewed in

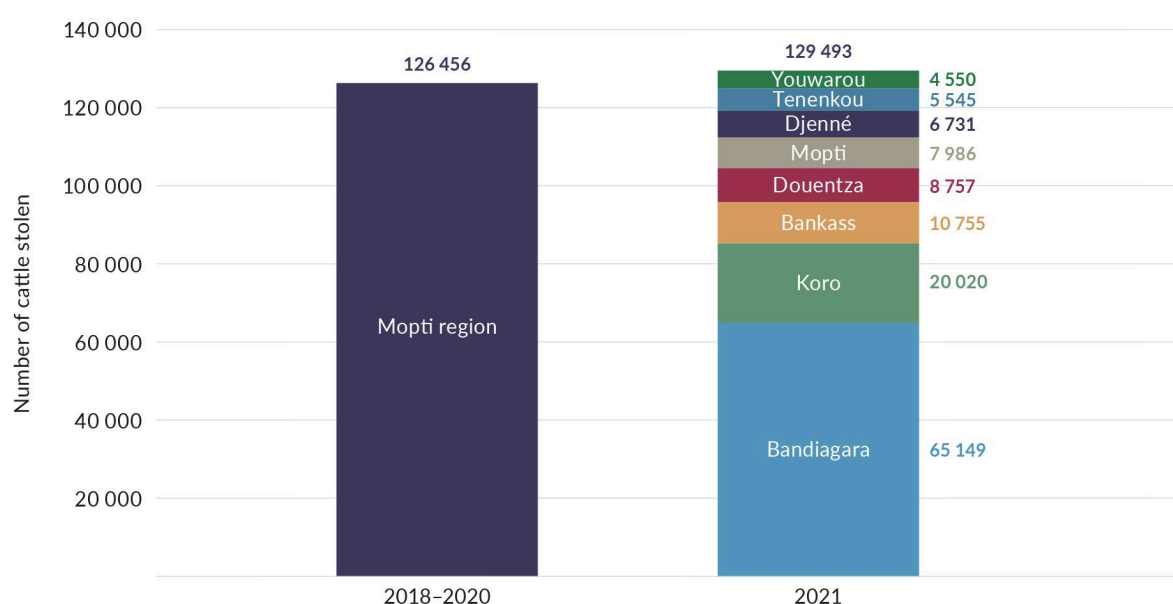


Figure 1 Cumulative number of cattle stolen in Mopti region, Mali, 2018–2020 versus 2021.

Office of the Governor of Mopti Region, Report of the regional conference on cattle theft in the Mopti region, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, 7 December 2021

Mopti, Gao, Ménaka and Timbuktu regions in March and April 2022 confirmed that cattle rustling has since continued to escalate across the first half of 2022.⁶

Yet, in parallel to this escalation, state responsiveness in many parts of these regions has reportedly decreased over the past year.⁷ According to one community leader in Timbuktu region, while 'jihadists go wherever they want on motorcycles, even in areas where bans on motorbikes and vehicles remain in force,'⁸ local administration and security officials of the Malian government have increasingly moved to nearby urban areas, and are less likely to act on cases of cattle rustling reported to them.⁹ Interviews with other community members in these regions confirmed these trends.¹⁰

The involvement of armed groups in cattle rustling, and the confinement of many state officials to urban centres in these regions in central and northern Mali, appears to have accelerated in the wake of the 2021 and 2022 withdrawals of French and other European forces in response to diplomatic and political fallout between Mali and its key Western partners.¹¹

Cattle rustling in mali escalates since 2021

Previously limited and occurring sporadically, cattle rustling has grown into a major threat since the onset of the Malian security crisis in 2012. According to the president of Bamako district's Regional Chamber of

Agriculture, 'it is no longer simple theft, but looting of herds. They gather hundreds or even thousands of cattle and sell them in neighbouring countries.'¹²

While prior to the present security crisis cattle rustling was largely considered a form of 'ordinary banditry', since 2017 it has evolved into a highly organized form of criminality, involving a wide range of different actors, including bandits and armed groups with or without ideological orientation, including extremist groups.¹³

Cattle rustling reached new volumes in 2021 (with over 170 000 heads of cattle reported stolen) and has reportedly continued to grow throughout the first half of 2022.¹⁴ The Mopti region – where over 125 000 cattle were reported stolen in 2021 – is the epicentre of cattle-rustling activity in the country, with Badiagara and Koro *cercles* particularly affected.¹⁵ According to official figures, the number of rustled herds in Mopti in 2021 rose to more than those recorded in 2018, 2019 and 2020 combined (see Figure 1).¹⁶

Herds from Koro, Bandiagara and Bankass – the three *cercles* in Mopti region with the largest number of stolen cattle in 2021 – are transported to Burkina Faso and Niger via key transit nodes such as Sikasso, Bamako and Mopti, as well as to Mauritania through Ouroali and Tenenkou.¹⁷

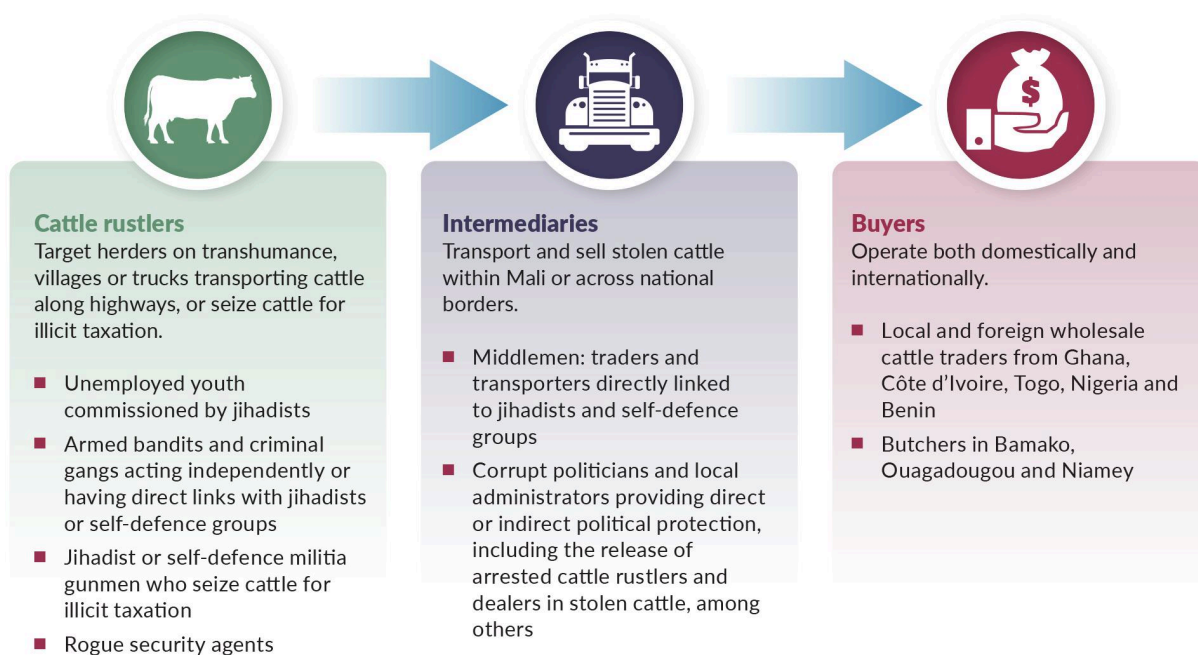


Figure 2 Stolen-cattle supply chain involving local and foreign actors.

The 2021 uptick in cattle rustling has occurred in parallel with Mali's growing political isolation, and linked shifts in the country's security tectonics. In Mopti region, since December 2021, the Malian military has intensified joint operations with the Wagner Group.¹⁸ At the same time, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has reportedly experienced increased access challenges.¹⁹ Concerns regarding human rights violations by military officers in Mopti escalated in the second quarter of 2022.²⁰ The February announcement of the withdrawal of French troops from Malian territory, and the May announcement of Mali's exit from the G5 Sahel, including the joint force aimed at combating armed groups in the region, signal further political isolation.²¹ Although MINUSMA's mandate is expected to be renewed on 30 June, it is likely that the UN peacekeeping mission will continue to face operational and security challenges, particularly in Mopti region, in

light of the increasing political isolation on the part of the Malian transitional authorities.

The central role of armed groups in cattle rustling

Armed groups in Burkina Faso and Mali, including jihadist groups, are central players in the lucrative cattle-rustling economy.²² Additional pivotal players include transporters, who drive trucks long distances to major cities within Mali and across the borders; traders who coordinate the sale of cattle at local and cross-border markets; and state-embedded actors, including corrupt individuals in the military, security forces, state administrators and politicians, who protect or turn a blind eye to the trade (see Figure 2).²³

Armed groups operating in Mopti region target cattle while they are grazing in fields, being herded on transhumance routes or transported in trucks along key roads.²⁴ In one instance, in Mopti region's Djenné cercle

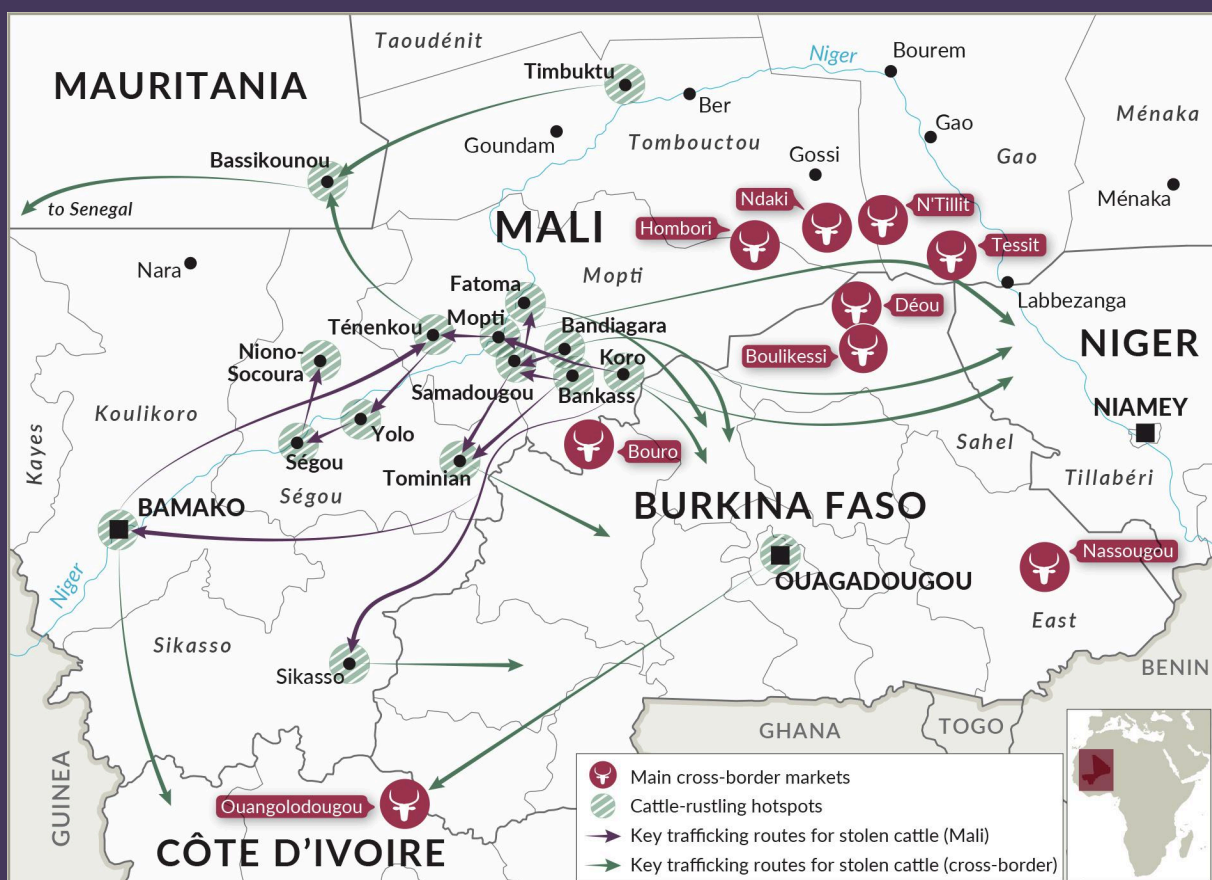


Figure 3 Cattle-rustling routes in the Liptako-Gourma area.

in October 2021, herders who had moved their cattle to pastures in nearby Méma Plains pasturelands²⁵ were robbed of their herds by bandits as they sought to return home. Herders who offered any resistance were kidnapped and their families forced to give cattle as ransom.²⁶ In some cases, trucks transporting already stolen cattle are themselves the target of attacks.

Armed-group tactics exploit existing community vulnerabilities. According to a herder in Timbuktu region, armed groups regularly engage groups of unemployed youth, arm them, instruct them to carry out cattle-rustling attacks on their behalf, and reap the majority of the proceeds.²⁷ This creates a cycle of vulnerability: a cattle owner in Timbuktu region noted, 'any youth in

Mali who saw their parents being robbed of herds by bandits, or lost their parents to bandits, jihadists or the military, have become easy prey for bandits and jihadists to recruit.'²⁸

In some areas of central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, extremist groups exert a significant degree of control over the cattle-rustling market, dictating prices and trading mechanics. For instance, in 2020, local criminal-gang leaders in northern Burkina Faso with direct links to al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) rescheduled previously regular market days so that they could sell stolen herds quickly on ad hoc days to beat spot-check patrols by French troops and spontaneous drone strikes by foreign forces.²⁹

SNAPSHOT: CATTLE-RUSTLING PROFITS REAPED BY ANSAR AL-ISLAM IN BURKINA FASO



Cattle in Koriomé village on the banks of Niger River.

Photo: Timbuktu Centre for Strategic Studies on the Sahel

Although the Mopti region is the epicentre of cattle-rustling activity in the Sahel, many other areas are severely affected by this illicit economy. A significant proportion of cattle rustled in Mali is transported across the border into neighbouring Burkina Faso, where major profits can be made through the sale of stolen livestock.

As in Mali, armed groups in Burkina Faso are intimately involved in the illicit economy. Between 2017 and 2021, the Islamic State-linked Ansar al-Islam group sold

millions of heads of cattle and other livestock across the country.³² Jihadist-linked traders receive between 80 and 100 heads of cattle each to sell at very low prices, ranging from FCFA175 000 to FCFA200 000 per head. One Burkinabe livestock trader close to Ansar al-Islam said: 'This is really profitable for small-scale traders in the area, where the price of a cow varies between FCFA250 000 and FCFA500 000. We make huge profits from the herds we buy from jihadists, even though we know it is illegal.'³³



Figure 4 Cattle-rustling hotspots and the presence of armed groups and international forces.

NOTE: *French armed forces' withdrawal from the military base in Gao is planned for the end of the summer.

In return for protection, jihadists also impose herd taxes on whole villages or larger areas under their control. This policy is enforced through the seizure of cattle from non-compliant villagers.³⁰ For example, since 2021, Youwarou *cercle* in Mopti region has been under significant control of the Katibat Macina (a constituent group of JNIM), which imposes *zakat* on the owners of herds. Katibat Macina gunmen demand a bull calf for every 30 heads of cattle and a heifer calf for every 40 heads of cattle. The jihadists sell the *zakat* cattle on the local markets and pocket half of the proceeds, distributing the other half to vulnerable members of the community.³¹

The unprecedented 2021 surge in levels of cattle rustling, particularly in Mopti region, has, according to community members and livestock traders interviewed, been continuing unabated in the first half of 2022. The intensification of cattle-rustling activity in central Mali and surrounding regions has occurred in parallel with shifting power dynamics between the armed groups responsible for the overwhelming majority of cattle-rustling incidents, Malian state forces and the international forces present in the country. The restructuring of the political and security landscape in Mali has seemingly led to greater impunity for both non-state actors and state or state-affiliated actors linked to the cattle-rustling economy in central Mali.

Notes

1. Mariam Coulibaly, *Mali: une vingtaine de civils tués dans une attaque au nord de Gao, de nombreux déplacés*, L'Infodrome, 20 June 2022, <https://www.linodrome.com/afrique-monde/78234-mali-une-vingtaine-de-civils-tues-dans-une-attaque-au-nord-de-gao-de-nombreux-deplaces>.
2. Agence France-Presse, *Au moins 20 civils et un Casque bleu tués par des hommes armés*, La Presse, 19 June 2022, <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/afrique/2022-06-19/mali-au-moins-20-civils-et-un-casque-bleu-tues-par-des-hommes-armes.php>.
3. Demba Konte, *Dougabougou, Cercle de Segou: Vive tension entre forces de l'ordre et la population à Niougoun suite à la disparition de plus de deux cent têtes de bétails*, Le Nouvel Horizon, 29 March 2022.
4. GI-TOC cattle rustling research interview with a village chief in Diré, Timbuktu region, 18 March 2022.
5. Office of the Governor of Mopti Region, Report of the Regional Conference on Cattle Theft in the Mopti Region, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, 7 December 2021.
6. Interview with an official of the Bamako Regional Chamber of Agriculture, 20 March; the official said: 'Mali has to enhance its security, its policing of borders with and work with neighbouring countries in order to regulate the movement of livestock. Otherwise the current situation can only escalate going forward'; interview with commander of a former rebel group in Timbuktu region, 23 March 2022, who said: 'Herders have to watch their cattle rustled every year in a situation that keeps worsening, as terrorist groups and rebels in collusion with traditional leaders, traders and transporters organize themselves further to rustle cattle in northern and central Mali in order sell them in Bamako.'
7. The 7 December 2021 report of the Office of the Governor of Mopti Region, cited above, gives the example of Bankass town, where security forces were concentrated leaving the rest of the cercle at the mercy of armed groups that attack villages with impunity. Media reports in late May 2022 suggested that the task of fighting jihadists in Ménaka region had been left to a former rebel group allied to the government. See China.org.cn, *Mali: le MSA annonce avoir tué une trentaine de terroristes (communiqué)*, 28 May 2022, http://french.china.org.cn/foreign/txt/2022-05/28/content_78241485.htm. In the 28 May 2022 report, the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) urged the Malian and Nigerien governments to do everything in their powers to stop the spate of ongoing mass crimes through which populations are being wiped out and the destruction of the local economy through cattle rustling.
8. Interview with a community leader in northern Mali's Ménaka region, 18 March 2022. The ban on motorbikes and other vehicles was introduced as part of a counter-terrorism operation code-named Dambé.
9. The two key jihadist umbrella groups are al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the establishment of a new cell called the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The key self-defence militias are Alliance for Security in the Sahel (ASS) and the Dogon militia group Dan Na Ambassagou ('Hunters Dedicated to God'). Former rebel groups include Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA), the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL).
10. Interview with the president of Bamako district's Regional Chamber of Agriculture, 17 March 2022; interview with a community leader in Ménaka region, 18 March 2022; interview with a village chief in Diré, Timbuktu region, 18 March 2022.
11. Counter Extremism Project, Mali: Extremism and Terrorism, 2022, <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/mali/report>.
12. Interview with the president of Bamako district's Regional Chamber of Agriculture, 17 March 2022.
13. William Assanvo, et al., Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, December 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.
14. Figures provided by the Malian Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries show that the more than 125 000 heads of cattle stolen in Mopti region was more than two thirds of the total number (over 170 000 heads of cattle) stolen in all the regions most affected by cattle rustling (Mopti, Gao, Ménaka, Segou and Timbuktu) put together.
15. The most affected communes in the Badiagara and Koro cercles (second-level administrative units) are Séguéiré, Métoumou, Diamnati, Wadouba and Kéndié.
16. Office of the Governor of Mopti Region, Report of the Regional Conference on Cattle Theft in the Mopti Region, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, 7 December 2021.
17. The main destination markets are located along the Mali-Burkina Faso border, including Bouro in Soum, Deou in Oudalan, and Nassougou in Fada N'Gourma (capital of Burkina Faso's East region and Gourma province).
18. Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, 2 June 2022.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. AFP, Mali junta breaks off from defence accords with France, France24, 3 May 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220502-mali-junta-breaks-off-from-defence-accords-with-france>; AFP, Mali withdraws from G5 Sahel regional anti-jihadist force, France24, 16 May 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220515-mali-withdraws-from-g5-sahel-regional-anti-jihadist-force>
22. Notable armed groups include Ansar al-Islam, Serma Katiba, Volontaires de la défense de la patrie (Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland, VDP) and self-defence group Koglweogo in Burkina Faso, as well as Katibat Macina (the Macina Liberation Front), GATIA, HCUA, MNLA, and Dan Na Ambassagou in Mali.
23. Interview with an armed-group leader in Timbuktu region, 23 March 2022; interview with a community leader in Ménaka town, 18 March 2022.
24. For instance, in Koro, Bandiagara and Douentza, armed groups rustle herds in villages and engage in highway robbery, targeting trucks transporting stolen and rustled herds. Office of the Governor of Mopti Region, Report of the Regional Conference on Cattle Theft in the Mopti Region, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, 7 December 2021.
25. The Méma is land rich in alluvial deposits, situated north of Massina, south-west of the Lakes Region, and west of Lake Debo and the Inner Niger Delta.
26. Interviews with various stakeholders in Koro, 8 April 2022.
27. Interview with a herder in Timbuktu region, 24 March 2022.
28. Interview with a cattle owner in Timbuktu region, 24 March 2022.
29. Interviews with residents of northern Burkina Faso's Gorom-Gorom town, September 2021.
30. Interviews with various stakeholders in Koro, 8 April 2022.

31. Interviews with various stakeholders in central Mali, 30 March to 3 April 2022.
32. Interviews with Burkinabe traders in Gorom-Gorom town, September 2021, including detailed account by Burkinabe livestock trader close to Ansar al-Islam.
33. Interview with a Burkinabe livestock trader close to Ansar al-Islam, September 2021.

2. Banditry in northern Niger: geographic diffusion and multiplication of perpetrators.

On 8 April 2022, two members of the Nigerien military were killed in a bandit attack near Plaque 50, an area close to the main road, 300 kilometres north-east of Agadez.¹ The group of off-duty military personnel were travelling to Agadez in a rented vehicle when they were attacked by the armed bandits, who are likely to have mistaken them for civilians.²

This incident highlights two trends shaping armed banditry dynamics in northern Niger since late 2021: the geographic diffusion of attacks, which have spread southwards from their original concentration in remote areas close to the Libyan border; and the fragmentation of actors behind the attacks, with both Libyan and particularly Nigerien criminal groups becoming increasingly prominent. These groups operate differently from Chadian armed groups, who are long-standing perpetrators of banditry in the swathes of Nigerien desert hugging the Libyan border.

Although armed banditry is not a new phenomenon in northern Niger, since 2016 it has grown as livelihood options have declined. The criminalization of human smuggling, which dealt a significant blow to local livelihood options, is one factor behind the growing intensity of banditry.³ Another is the increased smuggling of high-value commodities – such as drugs and vehicles – through north and north-west Niger, which is also rich in gold, making banditry there more lucrative.⁴

A further increase in banditry since July 2020 correlates with the growing presence of former Chadian mercenaries in southern Libya, as employment for Chadian fighters as mercenaries in the Libyan war has dwindled. Chadian mercenaries are particularly present at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, which straddles the Chad–Libya border, from where they engage in predatory activities across northern Niger.



FACT – Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (Front for change and concord in Chad)

The FACT is a political and military organization created by SG Mahamat Mahdi Ali in March 2016 in Tanua, in the north of Chad. FACT is mostly composed of Daza Goran.



CCMSR – Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la république (Council of military command for the salvation of the republic)

Founded in 2016, the CCMSR currently operates in the border regions of northern Chad, southern Libya, eastern Niger and western Sudan. The CCMSR recruit among Kreda Goran (northern Chad) and Arabs.



UFDD – Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development)

The UFDD is the largest group of Chadian rebel forces opposed to former President Idriss Déby. It was formed in October 2006 under the leadership of Mahamat Nouri. The UFDD mostly consists of Goran Anakaza.

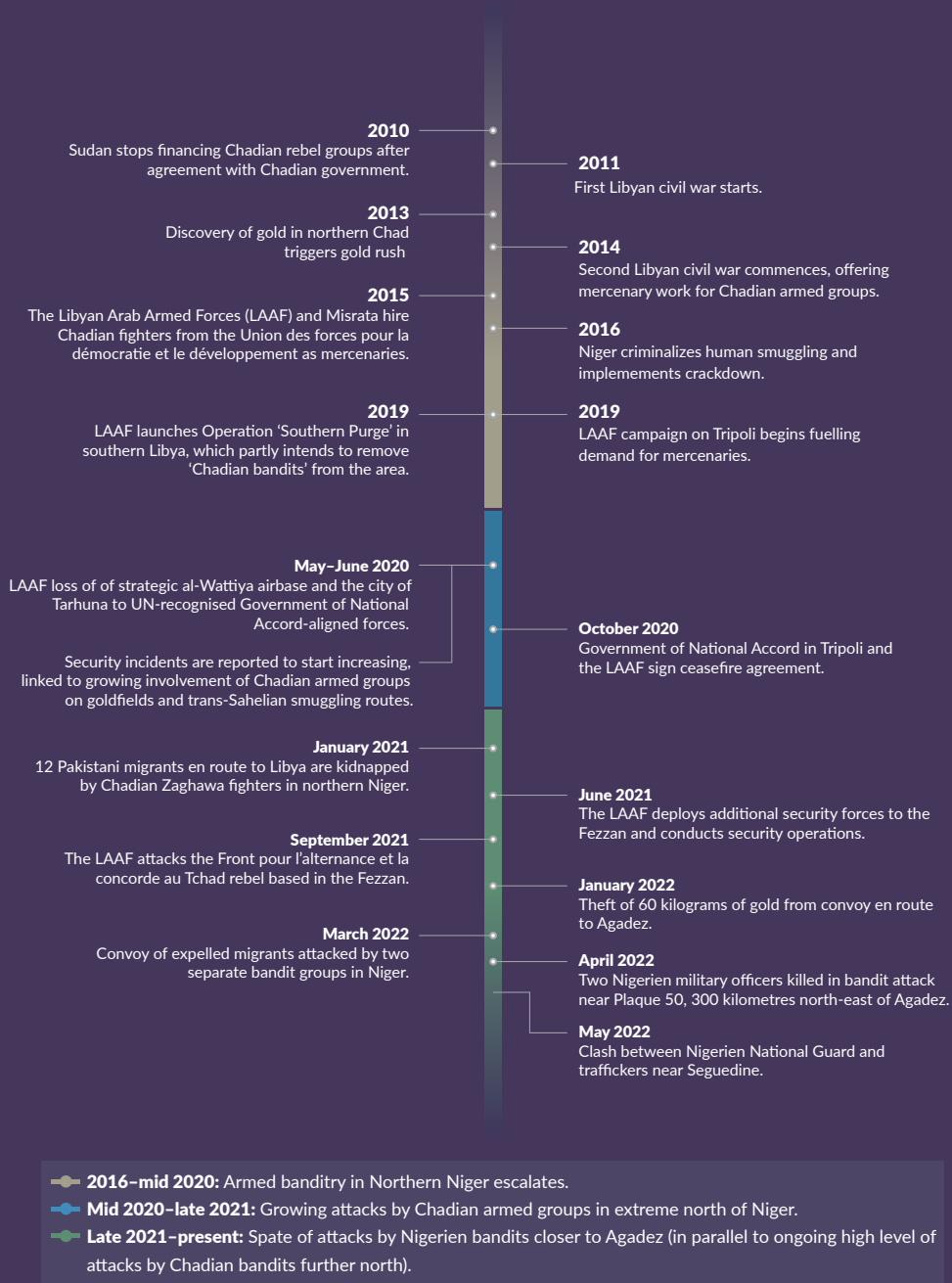


UFR – the Union des forces de la résistance (Union of resistance forces)

The UFR is an alliance of eight Chadian rebel movements founded in December 2008 by Timan Erdimi, nephew of former President Idriss Déby. The UFR is largely composed of Bideyat Zaghawa (eastern Chad).

Figure 5 Prominent Chadian armed groups.

PHASES OF THE ARMED BANDITRY ECONOMY OF NORTHERN NIGER



The spate of attacks on convoys and groups near main roads closer to Agadez since late 2021, and the growing prominence of Nigerien groups, marks a further evolution of the region's armed banditry economy, and further raises the protection risks faced by migrants

transiting the region, most commonly through the services of human-smuggling networks.

Since the start of the second Libyan civil war in 2014, and particularly following the 2019-2020 LAAF Tripoli

campaign, Chadian fighters have been key actors operating as mercenaries for both sides. As a relatively inexpensive yet experienced and expendable source of front-line fighters, Chadian mercenaries became valuable assets in the conflict. The 23 October 2020 ceasefire agreement signed between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli and the LAAF marked a de-escalation of conflict.

One of the key features of the ceasefire agreement was, in the words of the acting head of the UN mission in Libya, 'the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from the entirety of Libya's territory'.⁵ While international attention focused predominantly on the departure of Russian- and Turkish-backed Syrian mercenary forces – seen as instrumental to achieving peace, given their support for opposing Libyan factions in the war – this decree similarly applied to Chadian fighters.

Although the agreement has not been fully implemented, the demand for mercenaries has waned, and many Chadian mercenaries have been demobilized and returned to bases in the desert south of Murzuq and close to the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield.⁶ Faced with dwindling revenue from mercenary engagement, Chadian fighters have consolidated their positions in Sahelian criminal economies, seeking to find new revenue streams and solidify existing ones.⁷

Chadian actors have therefore become increasingly involved in coordinating, providing protection for or attacking licit and illicit networks coordinating the transport, smuggling and trafficking of people, gold, vehicles, goods (including foodstuffs) and high-value drugs (such as cannabis resin and cocaine). The proceeds of such activities are significant. Chadian fighters escorting drug traffickers through northern Niger, northern Chad and southern Libya can earn up to around €5 000 per journey, while hijacking such convoys can earn up to six times that amount through sale of the seized goods.⁸

Since mid-2020, as growing numbers of Chadian former mercenaries turned to illicit markets for revenue, attacks on licit and illicit networks in northern Niger and Chad have spiked.⁹ Victims typically identify the armed groups responsible as Chadian, composed of members of the Zaghawa community from eastern Chad. These Chadian groups leverage their substantial combat experience from fighting in Libya's internal conflicts, as well as ample hardware and vehicles acquired from the conflict,

to operate across vast areas between northern Chad, northern Niger and southern Libya, and target well-armed criminal networks.

Groups move fluidly between transporting, protecting and preying on licit and illicit convoys. On 21 May, a member of the Nigerien National Guard on patrol near Seguedine, a town in the middle of the Sahara Desert in central eastern Niger, was killed while in a pursuit of suspected *passeurs* (smugglers), who are typically a source of revenue for the guards.¹⁰ Instead, the quarry turned out to be well-armed traffickers, who retaliated in face of pursuit, shooting at the guards' vehicle and killing one. According to an actor familiar with the incident, the group 'were Tebu traffickers of tramadol. They were not conducting a banditry operation at that time. But they could also turn to banditry on their next mission, after their trafficking operation'.¹¹

Nigerien and Chadian security forces have been unable to contain their threat in the Chad–Libya–Niger tri-border area,¹² which has spurred the creation of local armed self-defence groups to protect the ability of such pre-existing groups' to participate in regional illicit economies. For example, in April 2021, around 60 Tebu *passeurs* created a 'self-defence' committee tasked with deterring bandit attacks in the tri-border area.¹³ While representatives of the committee reportedly tracked 'a sharp reduction in attacks in the area' in the months following the establishment of the self-defence committee, this decrease proved temporary, although the committee continues to mobilize on an ad hoc basis.¹⁴

Late 2021 to present: geographic diffusion and actor fragmentation

Since late 2021, GI-TOC monitoring has tracked a tangible increase in attacks by Nigerien criminal groups on the main roads connecting Agadez and Dirkou, particularly concentrated around Plaque 50, the site of the April 2022 attack on Nigerien military officers.

These attacks are distinguishable from those typically perpetrated by Chadian armed groups, who predominantly operate in the vast desert areas in the extreme north of Niger and Chad, and on remote routes rather than close to main thoroughfares. Nigerien networks typically seek to steal fuel, vehicles and goods rather than the high-value commodities transiting the far northern areas, which are typically the target of Chadian armed groups. It is likely that these local bandits lack the operational capacity and combat experience of Chadian bandits.

A growing number of such attacks target human-smuggling convoys, presenting an escalating threat to migrants transiting the region.¹⁵ On 4 March, a convoy of circa 190 migrants expelled from Libya into Niger by Libya's Desert Patrol Company was attacked twice by armed bandits: first, by Chadian bandits, immediately upon entering Nigerien territory; and second, by a different group of Nigerien nationals, far closer to Agadez, in the Plaque 50 area.¹⁶ According to one migrant travelling on the convoy, in the second attack: 'The bandits came on the road, some guys came on motorbikes and robbed us; they did not kill anybody, but they carried guns, and the robbers were from Agadez.'¹⁷

Bandits have also targeted convoys carrying gold shipments from the Djado goldfields towards Agadez. For example, in January 2022, 60 kilograms of gold were stolen from a convoy protected by the National Guard.¹⁸

Stakeholders based in the region posit that an overall deterioration of economic opportunities is likely to be driving more actors to rely on banditry as an alternative livelihood. Further, the impunity enjoyed by

the vast majority of attackers to date may have encouraged additional actors to seek a share of banditry proceeds.¹⁹

According to several contacts, the bandits appear undeterred by the presence of military personnel, and regularly target vehicles travelling with the military convoy between Agadez and Dirkou.²⁰ The Nigerien military is ill-equipped to respond to banditry, and has on occasion been said to avoid crossing paths with heavily armed bandits.²¹

Implications

Armed banditry is a growing threat across expanding areas of Niger, as alternative livelihoods dwindle and conflicts in the country's neighbouring states have cross-border implications. Although a long-standing phenomenon in northern Niger, banditry has intensified since late 2021, including between Agadez and Dirkou, south of the remote north-east already afflicted by Chadian attacks.²²



Union des forces de la résistance vehicles, undated.

Photo: Social media

The poor reintegration prospects faced by members of Chadian armed groups mean that they are likely to continue being prominent players in armed banditry. The Chadian government has a poor track record with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes, discouraging Chadian fighters from surrendering to government forces. As the Libyan ceasefire holds and Chadian fighters face dwindling revenues from mercenary work, they are likely to continue seeking revenue from the criminal economy of the central Sahara.²³ While the 'national dialogue' promised by the Transitional Military Council as a stepping stone to elections raised hopes that some fighters would be able to return home,²⁴ its repeated postponement has dashed these. On 2 May, authorities announced the indefinite postponement of the dialogue, originally intended to occur in December 2021, pointing to a drawn-out period

of political stalemate with few concrete attempts to re-engage with current and former rebels.

Nigerien's lucrative banditry economy is swelling: new players are attracted as alternative livelihoods become scarcer, while long-standing players face limited exit prospects. Banditry erodes existing livelihoods, raising costs for both licit and illicit operators in the region, and compounding existing economic strain. As Africa is buffeted by spiralling global inflation rates and economic woes look set to grow, banditry appears set to become an ever-greater problem in Niger.

In northern Niger, according to a contact close to the Seguedine 'self-defence committee': 'The best way to effectively fight against banditry activities is through collaboration between the civilian population of the

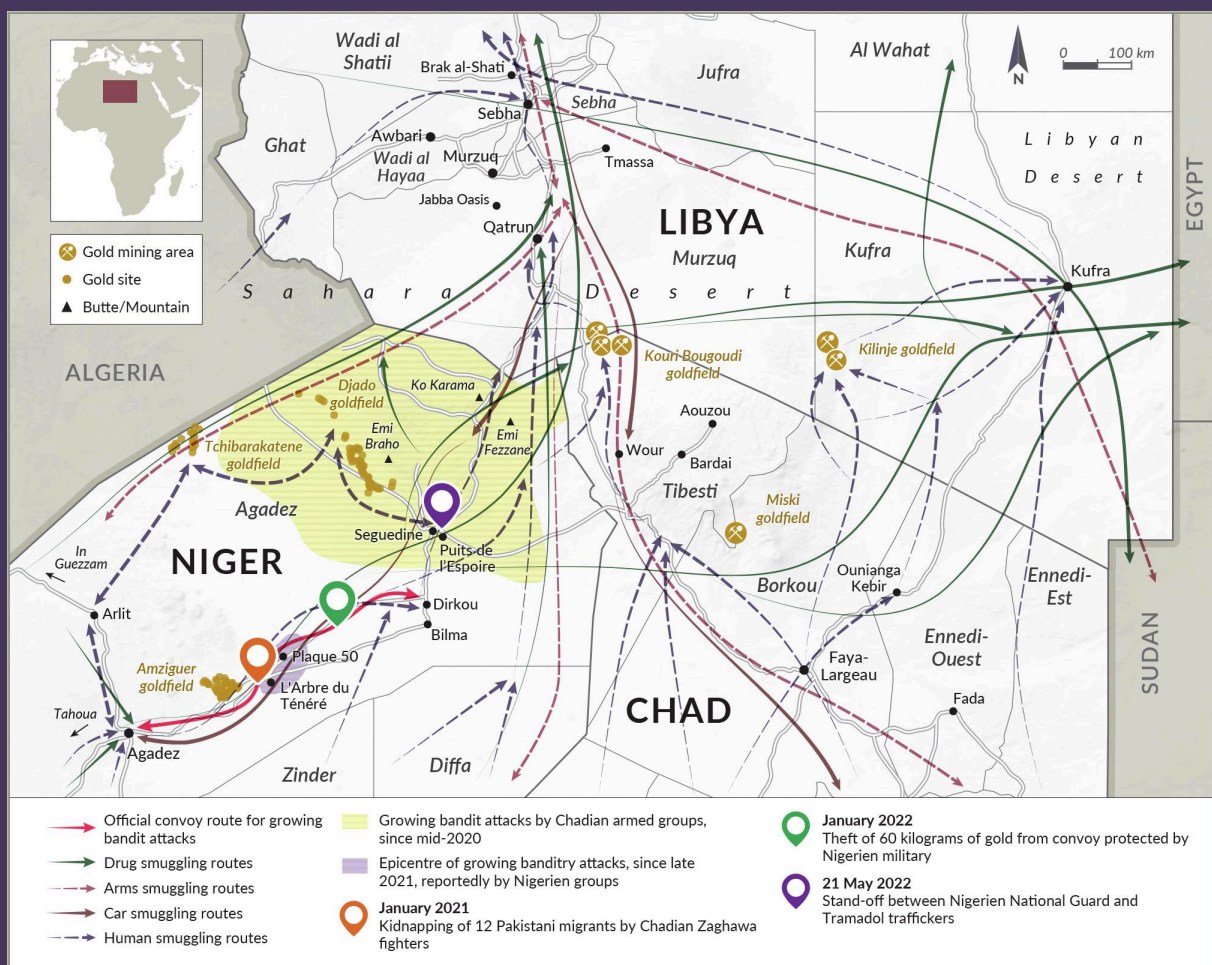


Figure 6 Areas of intensifying bandit attacks in northern Niger.

area with the Nigerien army, and that [the latter carries out more official actions against bandits].’ Given the Nigerien army’s limited resources, particularly

considering the vast terrain under their mandate, such steps appear distant. As the contact concluded, ‘this phenomenon is far from over.’²⁵

Notes

1. Ibrahim Diallo, *Axe Agadez-Bilma: une attaque de bandits armés fait deux morts et quatre blessés parmi les militaires nigériens*, Airinfo Agadez, 9 April 2022, <https://airinfoagadez.com/2022/04/09/axe-agadez-bilma-une-attaque-de-bandits-armes-fait-deux-morts-et-quatre-blesses-parmi-les-militaires-nigeriens>.
2. The number of casualties among the bandits is unknown, but they were reportedly able to escape.
3. Human-smuggling convoys have been more vulnerable to bandit attacks since the criminalization of the transport of migrants in 2016, and particularly since the closure of Niger’s land borders in March 2020, as migrant smugglers have increasingly adopted remote routes for fear of being arrested by security forces. These routes coincide with those used by the traffickers of drugs and arms, exposing migrant smugglers to banditry. Nigerien authorities recognize that an increase in banditry since 2016 can be attributed to the enforcement of Law 2015-036. See J Tubiana, C Warin, and GM Saeneen, *Multilateral Damage – The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes*, September 2018, Clingendael Institute, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/multilateral-damage.pdf>.
4. One particular bandit group, operating around the Djado plateau, has frequently targeted drug traffickers and artisanal miners travelling between Djado and the Tchibarakatene goldfield since 2017.
5. European Union External Action, *Libya: Joint Statement by the Quartet*, 20 April 2022, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/96947/libya-joint-statement-quartet_en.
6. These bases are ideally positioned for preying upon high-value drug convoys running through the Salvador Pass and east of the Toummo crossing.
7. This process started since the LAAF loss in May 2020 of the strategic al-Wattiya airbase, and in June 2020 the city of Tarhouna, which paved the way for the ceasefire.
8. Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, *Lost in trans-nation: Tubu and other armed groups and smugglers along Libya’s southern border*, Small Arms Survey, December 2018, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-Report-Lost-in-Trans-nation.pdf>.
9. For example, on 6 November 2021, two drug-trafficking groups clashed around the Salvador Pass. Chadian Goran Anakaza traffickers based in Qatrun were transporting cannabis resin when they were attacked by Chadian Zaghawa traffickers. Interview with Chadian Goran drug trafficker based in Qatrun, autumn 2021, remote.
10. Air-Info Agadez, Facebook, 23 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/PAirInfoAgadez/photos/a.1065483263536968/5127991147286139>.
11. Interview with Nigerien contact familiar with the incident, spring 2022.
12. Several arrests have taken place – Nigerien forces reportedly arrested at least 10 suspected bandits near Dirkou in September 2020, and a group of over 20 armed men were apprehended in November 2020 in the Madama area. GI-TOC interviews with multiple contacts in northern Niger suggest that these arrests are insufficient to address the long-term threat presented by armed banditry in Niger. See also Tadress24info, Facebook, 20 September 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tadress.info/posts/1452576208283830>; and Tadress24info, Facebook, 27 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tadress.info/posts/1516354988572618>.
13. Contacts close to the committee claim that the move was necessary in the absence of any credible and effective efforts by the Nigerien military to curb the rise of banditry in the area. The committee draws on the support of the Tebu community in Niger, Libya and Chad. Its formation is illustrative of the strategic importance of community solidarity for Tebu *passseurs* and the vital need to safeguard smuggling activities for local Tebu livelihoods.
14. Interview with contact close to the self-defence committee, spring 2021.
15. In January 2021, a group of 12 Pakistani migrants were kidnapped by Chadian bandits while travelling via the Kouri Kantana route. See Alexandre Bish, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Future of Chadian Fighters after the Libyan Ceasefire*, GI-TOC, December 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/chadian-fighters-libyan-ceasefire>.
16. Victims reported that the perpetrators of the first attack intended to kidnap women, but instead the attackers took only cash. It is unclear why the kidnapping did not occur. Information gleaned from GI-TOC monitoring in the region.
17. Interview with a migrant expelled from Libya, spring 2022.
18. Air-Info Agadez, Facebook, 30 January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/PAirInfoAgadez/photos/a.1065483263536968/4801167979968459/>.
19. Information from ongoing GI-TOC monitoring of North Africa and the Sahel.
20. With dozens of vehicles joining the convoy each week, bandits are able to enter the convoy discreetly and force drivers to stop in order to either hijack the vehicle or steal its contents and cash.
21. For example, in the 21 May incident outlined above, the officers of the National Guard allegedly broke off pursuit as soon as it became clear that their quarry were traffickers. Interview with Nigerien stakeholder close to the incident, spring 2022; interviews with multiple contacts in spring 2021.
22. Since 2017, the Maradi region in Niger’s southern borderlands has also been increasingly afflicted by armed banditry spilling over from Nigeria’s north-western regions. See Institute for Security Studies, *Organised banditry is destroying livelihoods in Niger’s borderlands*, 16 May 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/organised-banditry-is-destroying-livelihoods-in-nigers-borderlands>.
23. See Alexandre Bish, *Soldiers of fortune: The future of Chadian Fighters after the Libyan ceasefire*, GI-TOC, December 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/chadian-fighters-libyan-ceasefire>.
24. These hopes were further stoked by the amnesty granted to 296 rebels and political dissidents by the government in November 2021.
25. Interview with contact close to ‘Self-defence committee of Seguedine Smugglers’, spring 2021.

3. The strategic logic of kidnappings in Mali and Burkina Faso.

The international focus on the issue of kidnapping as a business in the Sahel has dropped dramatically, in large part due to a reduction in the number of Western nationals falling victim to it.¹ However, the phenomenon has far from disappeared. The kidnapping industry in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso continues to swell, with most victims being locals caught in the crossfire between the numerous armed groups operating in the region.

On 5 May 2022, 31 women were kidnapped in Femaye commune, Djenné *cercle*, in the central region of Mopti, Mali. According to the Dozo hunters (traditional hunters often carrying out the role of community protectors, operating across central Mali and other countries in West Africa) and government sources, as soon as the hunters heard gunshots, they began a search for the women, leading the jihadists to abandon their kidnap attempt and flee.² However, according to a source with local knowledge of the incident, the version of events relayed by the Dozo hunters was an attempt to conceal a far less flattering truth.

In reality, the jihadist group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) had kidnapped the women and released them several hours later. They ordered them

to go to the nearby town of Djenné, 5 kilometres away, and stay there overnight before returning home. The women then returned to their village on 6 May. No violence was used, no sexual abuse took place and no money was stolen or requested as ransom. Instead, the motive of this kidnapping was to humiliate the Dozo hunters, illustrating to them and the whole community their inability to protect their women.³

This incident, one among the daily reports of kidnappings in conflict-affected areas of Mali and Burkina Faso, underscores the threat that kidnapping poses to communities caught in the crossfire between several armed groups across swathes of both countries. The incident also illustrates some key characteristics of the kidnapping economy in central Mali and Burkina Faso: punishment of enemies, intimidation of communities and recruitment appear to be prominent motivations, while profit (by way of ransom) often appears a secondary driver.

From the early 2000s until around 2012, kidnappings were located mostly in northern Mali, which is where the conflict originated. Westerners were an important – albeit not exclusive – target, and their kidnapping represented the main source of revenue for al-Qaeda in

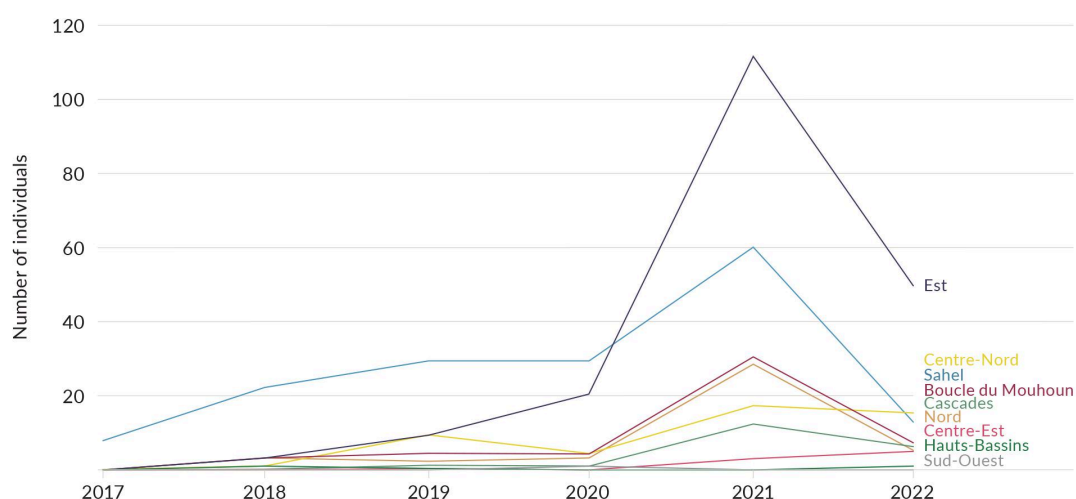


Figure 7 Number of individuals kidnapped in Burkina Faso, per region, 2017–2022.

NOTE: 2022 data as of 26 May. Regions with no kidnapping incidents since 2017 are not included.

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data

the Islamic Maghreb, so much so that it was called the *industrie de l'enlèvement* (kidnapping industry).⁴ As kidnappings of Westerners sharply declined, largely due to the fact that the number of potential victims became more limited as Westerners became more rare in the area, the targeting of locals became the central feature of the kidnapping industry in Mali. Around 97% of the targets of kidnappings in Mali since 2012 have been local citizens.⁵

The kidnapping economy in Mali and Burkina Faso is swelling:⁶ in Mali, the number of individuals kidnapped rose eight-fold between 2017 and 2021, from 22 to 184 (the majority of victims across this time period were abducted in the country's central regions), while in Burkina Faso, kidnappings increased more than 30-fold, from eight in 2017 to 258 in 2021.⁷ This trend shows no signs of slowing in 2022 – kidnappings in Burkina Faso as of 26 May showed a 10% increase from the same period in 2021.⁸

The epicentres of the kidnapping economy broadly overlap with the areas most affected by conflict in the two countries.⁹ As the conflict has geographically expanded – with Burkina Faso replacing Mali as the epicentre – so have the areas most heavily affected by kidnapping.

The new strategic logic of kidnapping in central Mali and Burkina Faso?

Analysis of the targets of kidnapping in central Mali and northern and eastern Burkina Faso, the regions most affected by conflict and where kidnappings are currently concentrated, suggests that abductions operate primarily as a war instrument, wielded for purposes of intimidation, punishment and recruitment, with profit often featuring only as a secondary motivation.

The majority of kidnapping victims are communities caught between various groups fighting to expand their reach, often along ethnic lines, especially in Mali's central regions.¹⁰ Many families of victims do not have the capacity to pay ransom. The Macina Liberation Front (Katibat Macina) in central Mali regularly abducts civilians, including those with a social or religious status within the community; however, often no ransom request is received. Instead, after a couple of days or weeks, the body is found at the entrance of the village.¹¹

In both countries, all parties to the conflict are known to resort to kidnapping, including state actors (see Figure 10). The targets typically vary depending on the primary motivation of the kidnap. In Mali and Burkina Faso, victim typologies suggest three forms of motivation are most common.

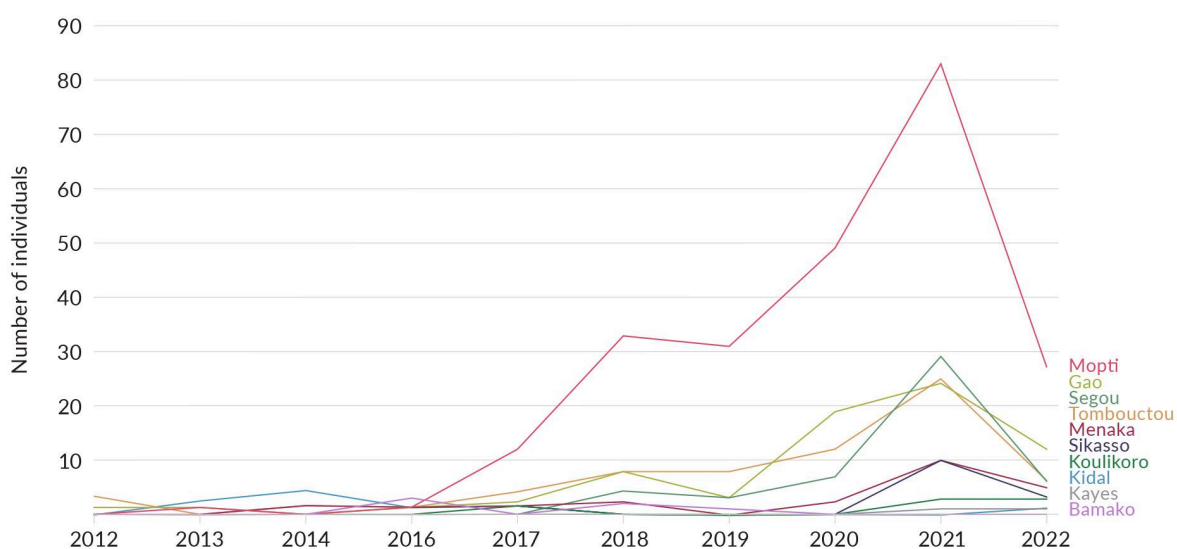


Figure 8 Number of individuals kidnapped in Mali, per region, 2012–2022.

NOTE: 2022 data as of 26 May.

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First, kidnappings are carried out to punish anyone perceived as the 'enemy' because of their leadership position and ability to influence the community, or because they represent the national authorities that armed groups are aiming to eliminate. These include administrative authorities (such as mayors and local law enforcement) and traditional authorities (religious leaders and village heads). Targeting these groups has a clear goal of further weakening central authorities and disrupting traditional norms to prevent pushbacks for their own model. In addition to authority figures, however, anyone who is deemed to be a traitor or a collaborator may also be targeted. For example, local staff at NGOs operating in conflict hotspots in Mali and Burkina Faso are arrested and abducted by armed groups on a weekly basis.¹² In such areas, according to an interviewee involved in the security of NGOs, 'being seen talking to the enemy is enough to be kidnapped.'¹³

Secondly, and linked to the first typology of kidnappings, abductions are used by armed groups as an instrument to terrorize and intimidate local populations to deter anyone from opposing them, or from joining or even sympathizing with another group. The primary targets of such kidnappings are the local population living in areas

under the influence or control of armed groups. The 5 May kidnapping of 31 women is a prime example of this, as the motivation was to intimidate the community living under Dozo hunters' 'protection'. The JNIM has now threatened this protection, showing that they can reach into territory typically under Dozo influence. Similarly, kidnappings are leveraged as a form of enforcing governance rules imposed by armed groups. For example, in central Mali, there have been cases where the village chief, or any other villager, refuses to pay the *zakat* on livestock or on their harvest and, as a regional expert said, 'if you refuse, they will kidnap you and release you when money has been paid.'¹⁴

Thirdly, forced recruitment by armed groups from local populations can also be understood as a form of kidnapping (notwithstanding the fact that such abductions can also constitute human trafficking). Local communities are asked to contribute to the war effort and children are abducted to join the ranks of armed groups. Following the Moura incident in late March, in which the Malian armed forces and 'associated foreign soldiers' allegedly executed an estimated 300 civilians in a purported counter-terrorism operation,¹⁵ Katibat Macina went house by

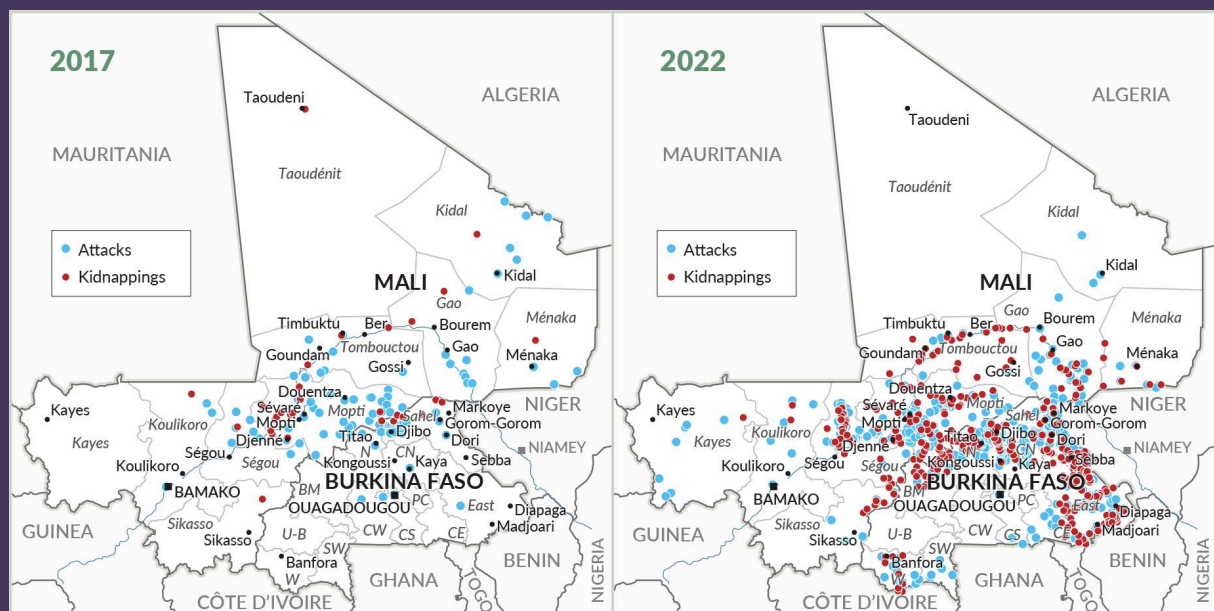


Figure 9 Violent incidents in Mali and Burkina Faso, 2017 versus 2022.

NOTE: 2022 data as of 26 May.

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house in several villages of Djenné *cercle*, telling people that they had to contribute to the war effort.¹⁶

When one father refused to hand over his son, they killed one of his nephews. Upon the return of the Katibat Macina militants several days later, the father had little choice but to hand over one of his sons.¹⁷ In the same operation, the Katibat Macina also abducted several people, including officials, who were accused of having given names of their members to the security forces before the operation.¹⁸

Kidnappings as a money-making venture?

Although profit does not always appear to be the driving force behind the kidnapping economy of central Mali and Burkina Faso, armed groups do ask for ransom in many cases. For example, the Dogon militia Dan Na Ambassagou, the main self-defence militia in central Mali, kidnapped six people in Bandiagara on 22 May 2022 and allegedly demanded ransom.¹⁹ Since 2017, kidnapping for ransom has been an important source of revenue for the militia, alongside cattle theft and protection rackets.²⁰ The ransom paid for each individual kidnapping is significantly lower than what armed groups would receive for a Western national, but, according to an expert on local kidnappings, 'the scale is very different, so eventually that amounts to a

substantial sum.'²¹ Most sources report that ransom prices vary from FCFA1 million to FCFA5 million and can go higher for a high-level state representative or member of the armed forces.

It is clear that individuals known to have a degree of wealth are also being targeted; this appears to be particularly prominent in cases where kidnappings are linked to other illicit economies, such as cattle rustling, a prominent illicit market in central Mali, as explored in the first article of this issue.²² One regional expert noted that 'in areas where there is a lot of cattle rustling, there are also a lot of kidnappings, and the two dynamics reinforce each other.'²³ When armed groups steal the cattle, they often kidnap the herder or the owner of the cattle, because they know that 'the owner of the cattle, or his family, has money and will pay extra to get him back.'²⁴

In the main cities of northern Mali, and especially in Gao, the dynamics are slightly different, with profit more clearly a shaping motivation. The contrast underscores the differences in the nature of the kidnapping industry between central Mali, currently the epicentre of conflict, and northern Mali, where violence is currently lower. In Gao, and other major urban hubs in the north of Mali, so-called 'bandits' are strategic in their targets – they

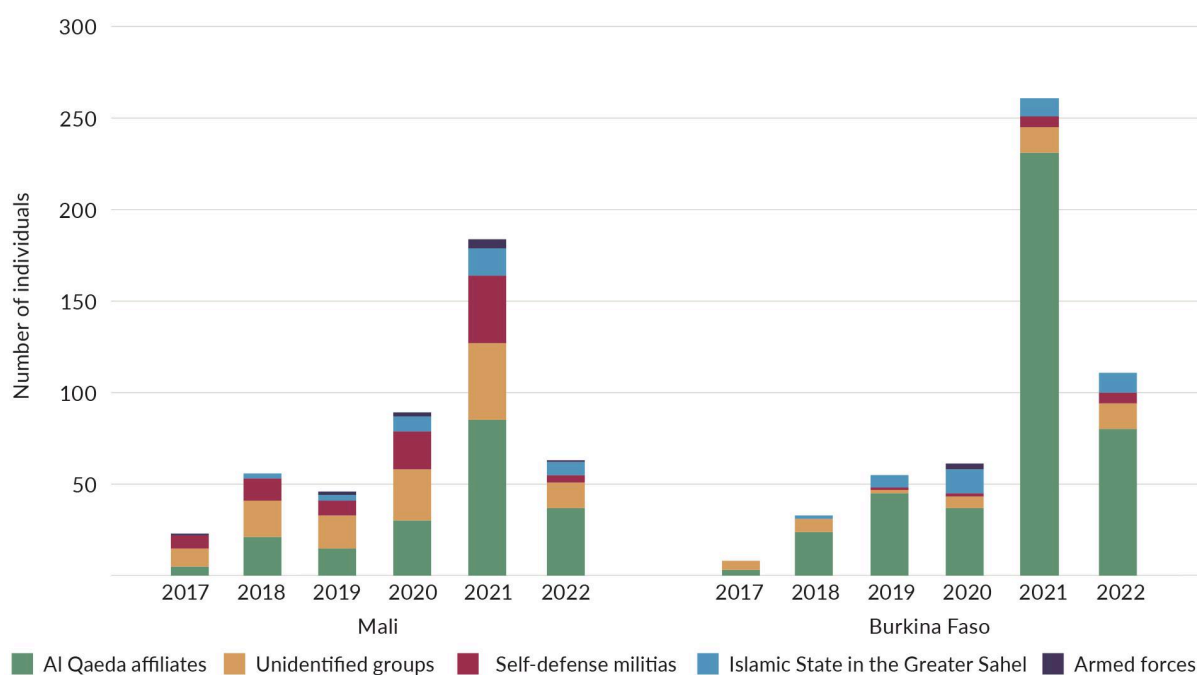


Figure 10 Number of individuals kidnapped in Mali and Burkina Faso, per perpetrator, 2017–2022.

NOTE: 2022 data as of 26 May.

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data

typically abduct businessmen (*opérateurs économiques*), hotel managers and members of rich families, as well as high-level officials and their family members. Armed groups target a family that they know has money and pay bandits (known as *petites mains* – small hands) to observe and gather intelligence on their whereabouts and their habits. According to an aid worker with knowledge of incidents in Gao, ‘if they can get the head of the family, they will. Otherwise, they will try to take another member of the family, like one daughter.’²⁵ On 12 May 2022, for example, the daughter of an important businessman in Gao was abducted and subsequently released following a ransom payment.

While the kidnapping of foreign nationals generally has a limited impact on local stakeholders and communities, the kidnapping of local residents multiplies the harms experienced by communities. Kidnapping for ransom continues to be a source of some funding for jihadist groups; however, perhaps even more important in the context of the security

crisis in the region is the role that the illicit economy plays in damaging local communities, and constituting a tool in armed-group governance.

The kidnapping of individuals with strategic leadership roles heavily undermines both local and national security institutions, as figures that are traditionally or administratively responsible for maintaining social, religious and legal norms are directly targeted. Moreover, it also drives bottom-up grievances towards the state, as the communities that suffer from violence (in the form of threats, abduction and murder) perpetrated by all sides of conflict parties do not feel protected by the national authorities. This, in turn, allows for greater entrenchment of both non-state armed groups and organized criminal groups in the region, further eroding the already weak local governance.²⁶ To compound the issue, data on the phenomenon is scarce, inhibiting a fuller grasp of the scale of the problem for the purpose of informing policy responses.

Notes

1. Five Westerners were kidnapped in a recent surge in Mali and Burkina Faso in April and May. It is clear that armed groups in the region have not renounced kidnapping for ransom as a source of financing.
2. Issa Diallo, *Djenné: 32 femmes libérées quelques heures après leur enlèvement par des djihadistes*, Mali-Online, 11 May 2022, <https://mali-online.net/djenne-32-femmes-liberees-quelques-heures-apres-leur-enlevement-par-des-djihadistes>.
3. Interview with an expert having local knowledge of the incident, 17 May 2022.
4. Between 2003 and 2010, at least 77 Westerners were kidnapped in the Sahel (Mali, Niger, Algeria and Mauritania), whereas in the 2015–2022 period, approximately 17 were abducted, including nine in Burkina Faso.
5. Ornella Moderan, Jose Luengo Cabrera and Boubacar Diallo, *Abductions: the hidden face of Mali’s crisis*, Institute for Security Studies, 8 September 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/abductions-the-hidden-face-of-malis-crisis>.
6. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data: 1 315 events in 2021, a twofold increase from 2020. In 2021, 2 354 fatalities, exceeding that of Mali for the second time in the last three years. See <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>. See also Mucahid Durmaz, *How Burkina Faso became the epicentre of conflict in the Sahel*, Al Jazeera, 11 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/3/11/how-burkina-faso-became-the-new-epicentre-of-sahelian>.
7. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.
8. Some 101 kidnappings were recorded in Burkina Faso between 1 January and 26 May 2022.
9. In Mali, the areas most affected by violence are in the central regions of Mopti and Ségou, including primarily the Bandiagara, Bankass, Djenné, Koro, Mopti and Ségou districts. The north of the country also sees regular upticks in violence, as seen since early March 2022, especially in Gao and Ménaka regions, along the border with Niger. ISGS and MSA-D/Gatia have been fighting in Ménaka and Gao regions since early March. At least 264 civilians have been killed and 23 000 displaced. See RFI, *Mali: la détresse des habitants de la région de Ménaka*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220531-mali-la-detresse-des-habitants-de-la-region-de-menaka>. In Burkina Faso, which has replaced Mali as the epicentre of the conflict, the level of violence has exploded in the past three years. Fatalities increased from 117 in 2017 to more than 2 354 in 2021, exceeding the number of fatalities recorded in Mali. In Burkina Faso, the most affected regions are located in the north and east of the country, with the Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord, Boucle du Mouhoun and Est regions being the most affected.
10. International Federation for Human Rights, *Dans le centre du Mali, les populations prises au piège du terrorisme et contre-terrorisme*, November 2018, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fidh_centre_du_mali_les_populations_prises_au_pie_ge_du_terrorisme_et_contre_terrorisme.pdf.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview with a source involved in security of NGOs in Mali and Burkina Faso, 23 May 2022.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with a Malian expert on central Mali, 19 May 2022.
15. Human Rights Watch, *Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.
16. Interview with a Malian journalist in Bamako, 23 May 2022.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Confidential security briefing from UN sources, 25 May.
20. Interview with an expert on self-defence militias in central Mali, 28 May 2022.

21. Interview with an expert on kidnappings of locals in Mali and Burkina Faso, 17 May 2022.
22. The relationship between kidnap-for-ransom and cattle rustling is also borne out by the findings of the GI-TOC's illicit-hub mapping initiative (forthcoming), as part of the project titled 'Promoting Stabilization Through Crime Sensitive Interventions in West Africa', funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
23. Interview with a Malian expert on central Mali, 19 May 2022.
24. Ibid.
25. Interview with non-governmental organization representatives active in Gao, 21 May.
26. Mark Micallef, et al., After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali, 2019, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/After_the_storm_GI-TOC.pdf.

4. A surge in cybercrime in Oyo State, Nigeria, has triggered a spike in arrests and the involvement of anti-crime group Amotekun, but alternative responses are needed.

In February 2022, the Chairman of Nigeria's Council of Amotekun Commanders in the South West, the state-created regional anti-crime outfit, announced the group's focus on tackling cybercriminals, popularly known as 'Yahoo Boys'. The commander linked Yahoo Boys to a spate of 'ritual killings', labelled by the press as an 'emerging insecurity menace in the South West'.¹

Amotekun's increased focus on Yahoo Boys appears to fall outside of the group's central mandate of fighting

violent crimes (such as kidnapping), particularly in rural areas.² This may be linked to emphasis by domestic press on the connections between so-called Yahoo Plus, the allegedly more violent iteration of Yahoo Boys that emerged in 2020, and ritual violence in the south-west. Yet incorporating poorly regulated vigilantes into responding to illicit markets with tenuous links to violence and instability may be counter-productive, escalating rather than mitigating the consequences of these criminal economies.

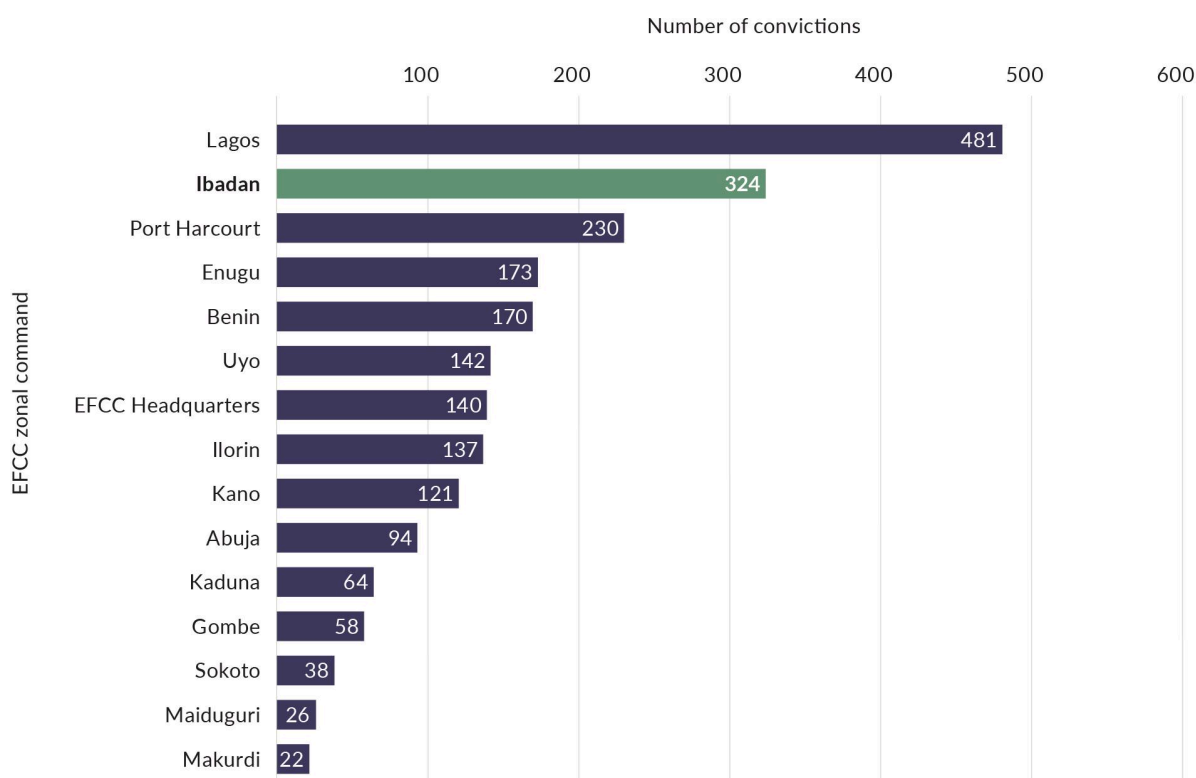


Figure 11 Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission convictions, 2021.

NOTE: The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) is a Nigerian law enforcement agency that investigates financial crimes. Although the 2021 data does not include a breakdown of convictions by crime type, the vast majority of the EFCC's past convictions have been cyber-related.

Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, via <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/504409-efcc-se-cured-2220-convictions-in-2021-spokesperson.html>.

The Amotekun commander lamented the 'upsurge in the involvement of young people in fraudulent activities',³ an increase confirmed by law-enforcement officials interviewed by the GI-TOC in Oyo State. According to the Zonal Head of Nigeria's antigraft agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Oyo State has the highest rate of cybercrime in the south-west region.⁴

The surge in cybercriminal activity is claiming a growing proportion of law-enforcement resources in Nigeria; of the 978 convictions recorded by the EFCC in 2021, 80% were related to cybercrime,⁵ many occurring in the south-west.⁶ EFCC officers confirmed a further uptick in counter-cybercrime operations in Oyo state in 2022.⁷

Yet the surge in arrests appears to be having limited impact on the growth of the market. One resident of Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State, lamented the spike in cybercrime, attributing it 'to the stifling of the economy and the high rate of unemployment and the recession, [meaning] a lot of ambitious youths have seen cybercrime as a form of escape.'⁸

While the growth of cybercrime in the face of law-enforcement action appears to have encouraged Amotekun to include cybercrime within its priority areas, this appears to be a case of gradually expanding objectives.

Overlapping mandates risk fuelling competition with yet more police forces, which may deepen federal agency mistrust, and create rivalry between security providers, thus hampering anti-crime efforts.⁹

Drivers of the cybercrime surge in oyo state

The upsurge in cybercrime in Oyo State reflects regional and international trends. According to the general manager of IBM's Africa Growth Markets, cybercrime in Nigeria and other parts of the globe was at an all-time high in the second quarter of 2022.¹⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic is one factor behind the major increase in cybercrime across Nigeria since early 2020.¹¹ The drive to remote work in the context of the pandemic, and the increased vulnerability of corporate networks accessed from home, contributed to a sharp increase in cyber-attacks.¹²

An EFCC officer working in Ibadan noted that cyber-criminals used 'unemployment benefits and relief grants'

introduced to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19 as avenues for phishing and hacking 'unsuspecting victims'.¹³

For many young Nigerians, cybercrime presents an escape route from a life of economic hardship and perpetual unemployment, particularly as economic stresses have swollen in the wake of the pandemic and in a period of high inflation.¹⁴ Echoing the statements of other interviewees, a Yahoo Boy in Ibadan described unemployment as the major reason for his decade-long involvement:

That's the major reason, unemployment. There are no jobs. It is the major cause and maybe the environment is not enabling enough [...], you can't even run a successful business without hitches and loopholes. The environment is not good, you are out of school, there are no job [prospects], so what are you going to do? You have to hustle your way [...] everyone needs money now.¹⁵

The prominence of Yahoo Boy culture in Ibadan, characterized by money, night clubs and designer clothes, may also be playing a role in drawing in new recruits. It is hard to miss the white SUVs, and young men with flashy jewellery and clothes driving around the city. One long-standing player in Ibadan's cybercrime scene described his key motivation as follows:

It has always been about the money, also those flashy lifestyles [...] it has always been the motivation and all the night clubs [...] you want to chill with the 'big boys' you want to 'bambam', you want to wear the latest designers.¹⁶

A state law-enforcement officer similarly outlined the primary motivation for involvement in cybercrime as 'the "get rich or die trying" mentality [...] everybody wants to get rich'.¹⁷ Some analysts attribute this mindset, and trappings of affluence associated with cybercrime, to the flamboyant lifestyle of politicians who loot public funds.¹⁸ The law-enforcement officer supported this, noting: 'Politicians are flaunting their wealth and young people are watching and want to be like them. It is not only about cybercrime, but also the leadership we have now; people who place emphasis on money. Until we get our leadership right, we are not ready to get [combating cyber-crime] right anytime soon.'¹⁹

Responses: a mismatch to drivers?

In response to the increase in cybercrime, EFCC officers have reported an intensification in the force's efforts against cybercriminals. Between January and March 2022, the EFCC arrested at least 281 cybercrime suspects in 13 separate crackdowns and sting operations in the south-west.²⁰

But according to Ibadan law-enforcement officers, upticks in arrests are not slowing the growth of the market. One agent who has been involved in several operations against cybercriminals stated:

It is true that security agencies have stepped up the fight against cybercriminals [...] [and] made a large number of arrests, [...] prosecutions and successful convictions. [But] [...] cybercrime [...] remains a major security concern as more and more young people become involved.²¹

Some state law-enforcement officers attribute this partly to the minor penalties that cybercrime attracts in Nigeria, typically a small fine (between 250 000 and 300 000 naira) or imprisonment of between three months and one year.²² A prison officer explained that the punishment for cybercrime is usually light because 'many of them do [a] plea bargain; [...] they don't give them more than 6 months [...]. Most of the time, they don't really give them heavy punishment.'²³

But higher sentences are unlikely to address the underlying economic factors, and the draw of affluent lifestyles on display by Ibadan's Yahoo Boys.

Amotekun steps in: cybercrime and violence?

Since late 2021, the security outfit Amotekun has included Yahoo Boys in its operations.²⁴ Amotekun, established in 2020 by governors in the country's south-western states as a response to rising insecurity in the country, was originally mandated to fight violent crimes, including kidnapping and armed robbery incidents that had plagued the region.²⁵

The operational inclusion of cybercrime in its activities was underscored by February 2022 statements by the Chairman of the Amotekun Commanders of the South West, Chief Adetunji Adeleye, confirming that disrupting Yahoo Boy activities was a priority in the region.²⁶ In the same statements, Adeleye noted that 'some of the internet fraudsters had graduated to using human parts for rituals to make money, known as "Yahoo plus"', suggesting this alleged link to violence could be the motivation for Amotekun including cybercrime as a focus.²⁷

Although the alleged evolution of Yahoo Boys over the past two years into its more violent iteration, Yahoo Plus, has been heavily covered by the press,²⁸ a cross section of Yahoo Boys and security agents interviewed questioned the reported relationship between cybercrime and ritual killings.

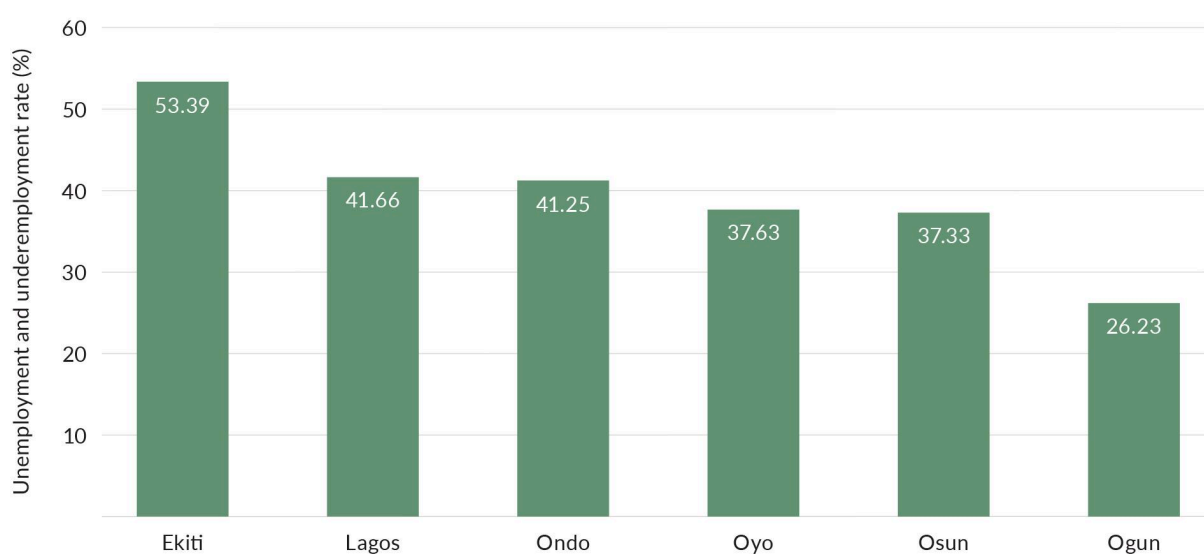


Figure 12 Unemployment and underemployment in south-western Nigeria.

BudgIT, State of States Report, 2021

One Yahoo Boy stated: 'I don't think cybercrime has anything to do with ritual killing';²⁹ another also felt that 'there is no correlation between ritual killings and cybercrime'.³⁰ A prison officer who works with many imprisoned cybercriminals similarly argued that 'there is no link between the two'.³¹

The operational focus of Amotekun on Yahoo Boys would therefore appear to be signs of a gradually expanding mandate, rather than an accurate assessment of a need to respond to violence within the region's cybercrime economy. The dangers of including Amotekun, and other similarly poorly regulated vigilante groups, in state responses to illicit markets that are not strong drivers of violence are likely to outweigh the benefits.³²

Cybercrime is growing in Oyo state despite strong law-enforcement responses. The involvement of Amotekun in further multiplying arrests is unlikely to shift the tide. Instead, Amotekun's increasing prominence in responding to illicit economies such as cybercrime – which do not appear to operate as significant drivers of violence – risks engendering grievances and increasing the instability associated with these markets. The governance of vigilante groups may vary between organizations, but, overall, vigilante members receive significantly less training than federal security forces, and human-rights abuses mar the record of many such groups, including Amotekun.³³ While arguably a necessity in some contexts where the state is struggling to address violent crime and where instability is spiralling,³⁴ vigilante groups are not the answer to non-violent illicit markets. Querying assertions that specific illicit markets are driving violence – as with claims

regarding Yahoo Plus – require thorough testing in order to tailor appropriate responses and avoid escalating violence.



Seyi Makinde, Governor of Oyo State, at the passing-out ceremony of the Amotekun Corps in Oyo Town.

Photo: Seyi Makinde via Twitter



Ibadan city in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Photo: Supplied

Notes

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This Risk Bulletin is an output of a GI-TOC project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. The views expressed in this Bulletin are not necessarily those of the Federal Foreign Office.

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