

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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## Summary highlights



### Key trends in illicit economies and conflict in 2022.

Across West Africa, illicit economies are known to have a close relationship with conflict and instability dynamics. But which illicit economies are most important to consider when analyzing the impact of organized crime on conflict and instability? And what were the key trends in 2022? This article examines the development of three illicit economies that play a key role in instability dynamics, both armed and political, across the region. First, the geographic diffusion of kidnap for ransom is analyzed. Second, turning to the political landscape, we explore how the cocaine trade, which appears to be growing across the region, intersected with politics in 2022 and appears poised to continue this trajectory in 2023. Finally, we turn our attention to the illicit gold trade, focusing particularly on state responses to this illicit economy.



### With key shifts in dynamics entrenched in 2022, cattle rustling is set to remain a major threat in Nigeria and Mali in 2023.

In recent years, cattle rustling dynamics in Nigeria and Mali have undergone key shifts. While, in Nigeria, northern states remain the most affected by cattle rustling, an illicit economy that has long been a major source of financing for violent extremist organizations, armed bandits and ethnic militias, several states in the south of the country have experienced a growth in the number of cattle rustling incidents since 2018. Moreover, several risk factors associated with past cattle rustling surges in the north – namely, intensifying competition and tensions between herders and farming communities – are increasingly present in the south-west. Meanwhile, in central and northern Mali, cattle rustling has increased since the beginning of 2022, and there are clear indicators that it will remain a central element in the financing and governance strategies of armed groups throughout 2023.





### **JNIM consolidated its presence in the central Sahel in 2022, but 2023 will test its credibility as an alternative governance provider.**

Having consolidated its presence in most of the central Sahel, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has now firmly established itself as the dominant non-state armed actor in the regional conflict. Throughout 2022, JNIM continued to successfully exploit illicit economies as a means of garnering support from local communities. But despite notable advances into the northern areas of West Africa's littoral states, the group has not yet managed to replace the state as primary governance provider, which has increased its reliance on violence against civilians as a means of controlling the population. If JNIM is able to push state actors out of areas of Benin in 2023, it will be able to offer more tangible benefits to local residents, thus having a greater chance of establishing itself as a credible governance provider.



### **Russia's military, mercenary and criminal interests in West Africa grew in 2022 and look set to expand in 2023.**

The knock-on effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have reshaped its engagement in West Africa: Western sanctions have had a disruptive impact on Russian businesses on the continent, while, at the same time, engaging in Africa has become more strategically important for Russia in its newly politically and economically isolated state. The mercenary organization Wagner Group has rapidly become the most influential form of Russian engagement in Africa. In late January 2023, the US government announced they would be designating the Wagner Group as a 'transnational criminal organization'. As investigations into Wagner's activities show, the group is deeply, and allegedly increasingly, involved in illicit economies, particularly the smuggling of mineral resources such as gold. There are several countries in West and central Africa that could prove fertile ground for Wagner's potential expansion, both military and economic, in 2023.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

The year 2022 was a tumultuous one for West Africa and the Sahel. The region was hit by a major cost-of-living crisis caused in large part by the knock-on effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as mass protests in a number of West African countries in response to, among other things, said crisis. As citizens are hit by record levels of inflation, damaging formal economic opportunities, illicit economies remain crucial sources of livelihoods.

Conflict and violence have remained the predominant threats in several key states in the Sahel, with Burkina Faso and Mali still the epicentres. However, northern areas of several coastal states, such as Benin and Togo, have also become more affected, with a marked acceleration in attacks in both countries believed to be by violent extremist groups. As illicit economies continue to flourish in the region, there is an increasing overlap between conflict zones and areas of illicit activity, with conflict actors often playing an important role in some illicit activities.<sup>1</sup>

In this issue of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa's Risk Bulletin, we take a look at key trends shaping the relationship between illicit economies and armed conflict and instability across West Africa and the

Sahel. The first two articles focus on illicit economies that are particularly relevant when analyzing the impact of organized crime on conflict and instability in the region. Focusing specifically on key trends and the ways in which they evolved throughout 2022, we examine kidnap for ransom, notably its geographic diffusion; the cocaine trade, and how it intersected with politics in 2022, and appears poised to continue this trend in 2023; and finally, the illicit gold trade, looking particularly at state responses to the illicit economy.

The second story dives deeper into the issue of cattle rustling in Nigeria and Mali, where recent shifts in criminal dynamics solidified in 2022. In central and northern Mali, cattle rustling has increased since the beginning of 2022, and there are clear indicators that it will remain a central element in the financing and governance strategies of armed groups throughout 2023. In Nigeria, a country severely affected by armed bandits and increasing intercommunal violence, as well as by violent extremist groups, incidents of cattle rustling began to emerge more and more in several southern states. Furthermore, a number of risk factors associated with past cattle rustling surges in the north – namely, intensifying competition and tensions between herders

and farming communities – are increasingly present in the south-west. Given the complex intertwining of the illicit economy and ethnic tensions, armed groups and violence, in addition to cattle rustling's nature as an often-overlooked criminal phenomenon, this is our illicit market to watch for conflict in 2023.

We then shift our attention to some of the different actors involved in illicit economies in the context of conflict and violence. Across the region, violent extremist groups have remained a central element in conflict dynamics and growing players in a wide range of illicit economies. Having consolidated its presence in most of the central Sahel, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has now firmly established itself as the dominant non-state armed actor in the regional conflict. Throughout 2022, JNIM continued to successfully exploit illicit economies as a means of garnering support from local communities. Whether the group can replicate this strategy in new areas it seeks to control – namely, northern Benin – remains to be seen, and 2023 will test its credibility as an alternative governance provider there.

JNIM isn't the only actor that has sought, and will undoubtedly continue to seek, to expand its zone of influence and operations in West Africa. Foreign actors play an important role in the economic (both licit and

illicit), political and security landscapes in the region. Throughout 2022, perhaps the most important foreign actor involved in (and some would argue contributing to) the conflict in the Sahel is the Russian state and the Wagner Group, a private military company (and recently designated 'transnational criminal organization' by the US government') with strong links to Putin's regime, whose troops have been deployed in Mali for over a year. Mass protests in Mali and neighbouring Burkina Faso have shone a light on the anti-French sentiment that has been brewing, to a degree cultivated through a coordinated effort by Russian actors, for many years.

The mercenary organization has rapidly become the most influential form of Russian engagement in Africa. As investigations into Wagner's activities show, the group is deeply, and allegedly increasingly, involved in illicit economies, particularly the smuggling of mineral resources such as gold. There are several countries in West and central Africa that could prove fertile ground for Wagner's potential expansion, both military and economic, in 2023.

It is clear that illicit economies and conflict intersect in complex ways. As conflict continues to unfold throughout 2023, it is crucial to monitor trends in key illicit economies that could fuel further violence and instability.

## Notes

- 1 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, The number of civilian casualties is growing in West Africa as conflict areas increasingly overlap with illicit economies, Risk Bulletin – Issue 5,

GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-005/index.html>.

# Key trends in illicit economies and conflict in 2022.

Violence in the Sahel reached unprecedented levels in 2022, with citizens of Burkina Faso and Mali facing particularly extreme levels of violence at the hands of armed Islamist groups, vigilante self-defence groups and security forces, together with their international partners.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, armed conflict events have spilled over into the coastal states of West Africa, as violent extremist groups have sought to expand their spheres of influence.

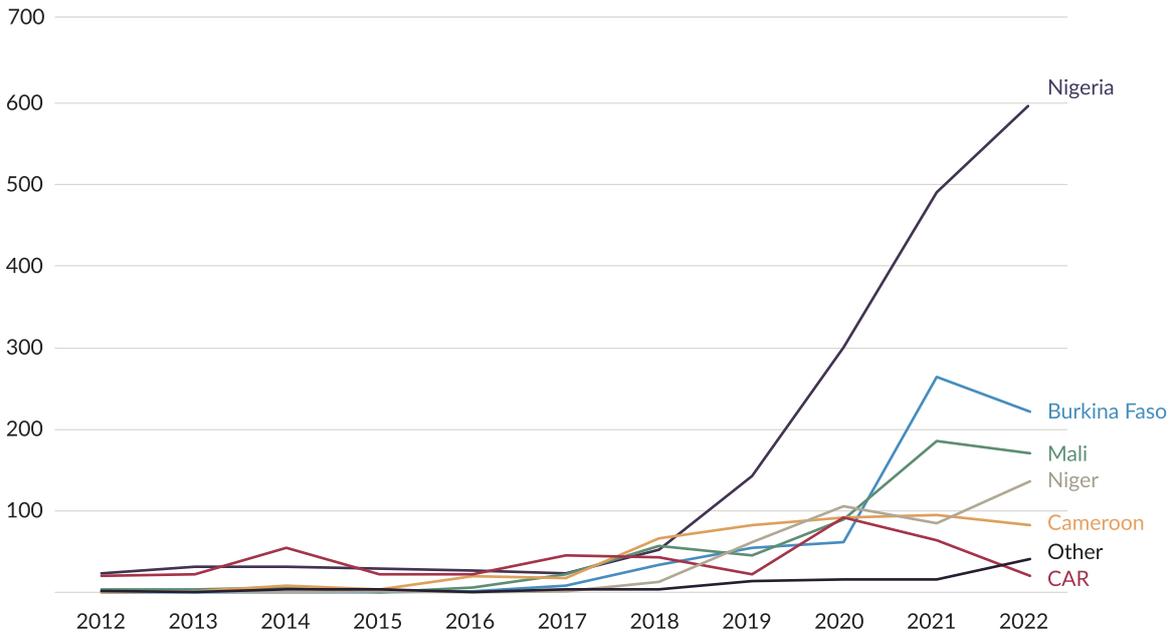
However, it is not just violent extremist groups that pose a threat to communities across West Africa and the stability of the region, more broadly. Armed bandits are rife in Nigeria (a country that also faces a considerable threat from jihadist groups, particularly in the north-east), engaging in a litany of criminal activities, from armed raids on villages, including for the purposes of cattle rustling, to kidnap for ransom and other acts of violence.

The findings of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC's) illicit hub mapping initiative highlight the role played by various illicit economies in fuelling and sustaining instability in the region, and illustrate the increasing geographic overlap between crime

and conflict zones.<sup>2</sup> But which illicit economies are the most important to consider when analyzing the impact of organized crime on conflict and instability? And what were the key trends in 2022?

In this article we consider developments in three illicit economies in 2022: two of these illicit economies are central to conflict dynamics and one has close ties to political volatility.

Across this issue, more broadly, we look at two 'accelerant' criminal markets – i.e. illicit economies identified as playing a particularly prominent role in fuelling conflict and violence – namely, cattle rustling and kidnap for ransom.<sup>3</sup> Both of these illicit markets experience low levels of legitimacy with the local communities in which they occur; they thus tend to fuel community tensions and exacerbate instability, driving more people to self-protect using weapons. Cattle rustling is considered in the article that follows, while kidnap for ransom – and the geographic diffusion of the practice in 2022 – is explored below.



**FIGURE 1** Number of kidnapping incidents in West Africa, 2012–2022.  
Source: ACLED

Turning to the political landscape, we explore how the cocaine trade, which appears to be growing across the region, intersected with politics in 2022, and how it seems poised to continue this trajectory in 2023.

Finally, we consider responses to an illicit economy important for regional conflict dynamics – namely, the illicit artisanal gold trade. We look at how, in 2022, fears of terrorist financing drove further crackdowns on goldfields, how Mauritania is doing things differently, and whether there may be growing policy space for deploying alternative approaches.

**Kidnap for ransom – geographic diffusion**

Kidnap for ransom has over the past decade developed into a major criminal industry in West Africa, not only as means of generating revenue, but also increasingly used by armed groups as an instrument of war, wielded for the purposes of intimidation, punishment and recruitment.<sup>4</sup> Not only did kidnapping incidents across West Africa increase in 2022, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

(ACLED), but more and more countries are being affected by this illicit economy.<sup>5</sup>

Although accurate and comprehensive data on kidnapping is extremely difficult to obtain, existing data indicates that, between 2012 and 2016, the number of kidnapping incidents across West Africa remained relatively constant, hovering at between 50 and 100 per year across the region.<sup>6</sup> However, between 2017 and 2021, incidents of abduction/forced disappearance, as described by ACLED, surged from 124 to 1 193, an increase of 862%.<sup>7</sup> Data for 2022 suggests that the industry shows no signs of slowing down. The number of kidnapping incidents in 2022 exceeded that of the previous year in Benin, Niger and Nigeria, among others.

Nigeria, the epicentre of the kidnap for ransom business in West Africa, made up almost half of all kidnapping events in the region in 2022, registering nearly as many incidents as the next four most-affected countries combined (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Cameroon). Every year since 2017, the number of separate



**Town hall of Malanville, a city in north-east Benin where three individuals were kidnapped by suspected jihadists in September 2022. Malanville is a transit, supply and redistribution area for a number of grey commodities, including contraband fuel.**

*Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

kidnapping incidents has registered year-on-year increases, according to ACLED data.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 17 Nigerian states experienced an increase in the number of kidnappings between 2021 and 2022.<sup>9</sup> Of most concern, however, is the apparent geographic spread of kidnapping within the country. Whereas in 2018, 14 of the country's 37 states experienced no (recorded) kidnapping incidents,<sup>10</sup> in 2022, only one state was able to avoid a single incident of kidnapping.<sup>11</sup> At the end of 2022, the Nigerian central bank introduced cash withdrawal limits in an effort to, among other things, reduce the number of kidnapping incidents.<sup>12</sup> Only time will tell whether this policy will have a material effect on the illicit economy.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, although the number of reported kidnappings in 2022 dipped slightly from the previous year, they remain twice and three times as high as 2020's figures, respectively.<sup>13</sup> But as the extremist violence that has afflicted the countries of the Sahel region has spread to surrounding countries, in particular southwards towards the littoral West African states, kidnapping incidents have mirrored this expansion.

In 2020, there were six kidnapping incidents in Benin, more than in the previous eight years combined. This figure surged in 2022, a year in which there were 25 separate incidents of kidnapping in the country. In September 2022, for example, suspected members of either JNIM or the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara kidnapped three people in a village in the commune of Malanville, in Benin's northernmost Alibori department, for allegedly collaborating with the government forces.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, kidnappings carried out by armed cattle rustlers are also reportedly on the rise in Benin, potentially pointing towards an 'increasing ethnicization of farmer-herder conflict in the country',<sup>15</sup> highlighting the multifaceted nature of the kidnapping threat.

In Côte d'Ivoire, another coastal state at increasing risk of violent extremism, local stakeholders noted that kidnapping incidents had increased in recent years, in parallel to the growing presence of armed groups.<sup>16</sup> However, it remains unclear whether armed groups are indeed the perpetrators, or whether kidnapping is instead more tied to longstanding intra-communal differences.<sup>17</sup>

The close ties between conflict and kidnapping for ransom make this an important illicit economy to track, with spikes in incidents offering insights into shifting tensions, the operations of armed groups and conflict dynamics.

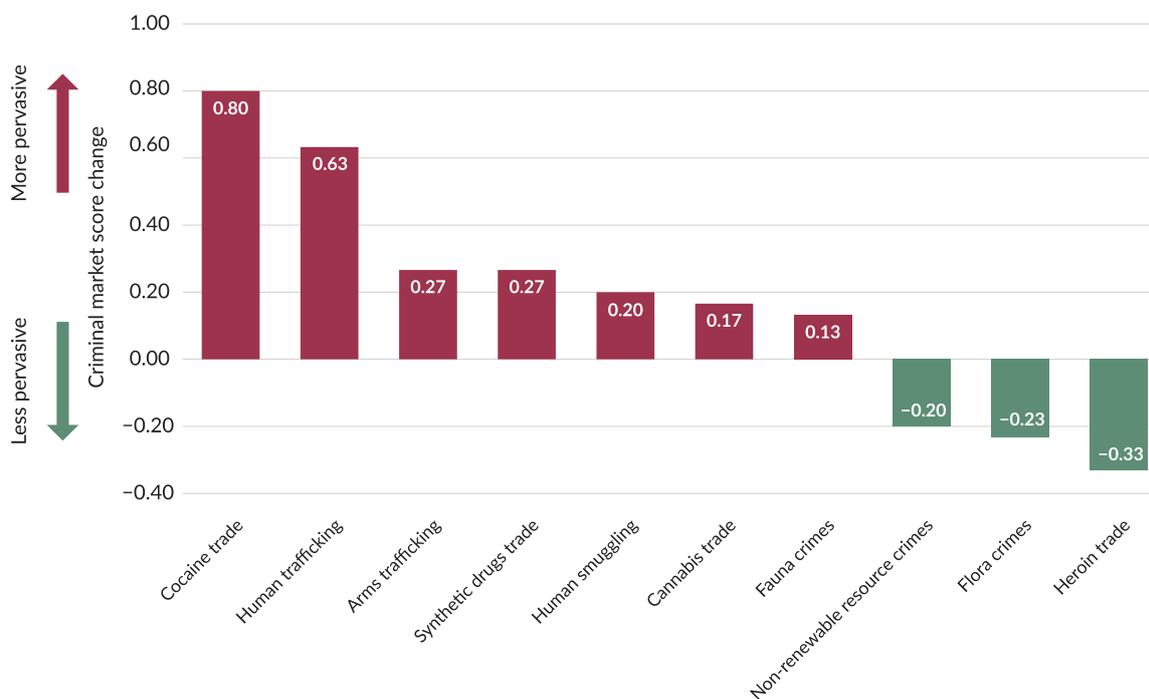
## Cocaine trade – financing elections?

The findings of the Africa Organised Crime Index 2021 showed that the cocaine trade was the criminal market that registered the greatest increase in pervasiveness across West Africa as a whole between 2019 and 2021.<sup>18</sup> In 2022, cocaine seizures were registered in Nigeria,<sup>19</sup> Gambia,<sup>20</sup> Liberia,<sup>21</sup> Burkina Faso<sup>22</sup> and Côte d'Ivoire,<sup>23</sup> among other states in the region. Some of these were country records. While seizures are more an indication of law enforcement efficacy than the volume of flows, other indicators also point to an increase in cocaine trafficking across West Africa.

In Colombia, the world's largest cocaine-producing country and a major source of cocaine flowing to West African states, coca cultivation rose to record levels in 2021.<sup>24</sup> In Europe, the main destination market for cocaine transiting West Africa, the cocaine market is expanding.<sup>25</sup> Mounting evidence suggests that the volume of cocaine moving through West Africa could be higher than ever.

The cocaine trade is key from the perspective of political dynamics. In line with other high-value transit commodities, cocaine typically engenders protection networks which reach into the highest levels of state.<sup>26</sup> In Guinea-Bissau, according to the authorities, cocaine was tied to the February 2022 alleged coup attempt, which, if it had been successful, would have brought the total number of coups in West Africa in 2021 and 2022 to eight.<sup>27</sup> High-value narcotics have repeatedly played a prominent role in electoral financing in Africa, with cocaine particularly central across West Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Events in Guinea-Bissau illustrate how cocaine is sometimes closely intertwined with important political developments, and point to the continued importance of cocaine in financing elections in the country. In June 2022, the Supreme Court acquitted Seidi Bá, the country's most high-profile cocaine trafficker, who was convicted in absentia in 2020. Bá was acquitted alongside fellow ringleader Mexican Colombian national Ricardo Monje.<sup>29</sup> Bissau-Guinean magistrates and legal experts labelled the procedural breaches and legal errors in the judgment 'astonishing'.<sup>30</sup>



**FIGURE 2 Criminal market changes, West Africa, 2019–2021.**

Source: ENACT, Africa Organised Crime Index 2021, <https://africa.ocindex.net>

The timing – one month after legislative elections were called and five months prior to their scheduled date – underscores the likely financial drivers for appeasing the acquitted ringleaders. Commenting on the acquittal, Rui Landim, a Bissau-Guinean civil society activist, noted that ‘everything is in place to adulterate the elections, to eradicate the rule of law. Today we are not facing the risk of interference by organized crime in the electoral process, today we are facing evidence of state capture by organized crime.’<sup>31</sup>

With legislative elections in Guinea-Bissau currently scheduled for March 2023, tracking the role of cocaine in financing electoral campaigning will be key.

#### **Illicit gold trade – moving towards formalization?**

Gold mining has long been associated with conflict, violent extremism and instability in West Africa, and for good reason. Armed groups have established control over several mining sites in the region, or else are benefiting through other mechanisms, such as the illicit taxation of gold mining and gold flows.<sup>32</sup> But the gold sector is also a critical source of livelihoods across the region. Although governments may seek to curb informal and illicit gold mining activity in order to deprive armed groups of revenue, crackdowns on artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) are often counterproductive,

‘resulting in a downward spiral of distrust, tension and violence’. The complex relationship between the gold sector, instability and violence in West Africa is explored in a recent GI-TOC report, ‘Beyond blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa.’<sup>33</sup>

Crackdowns on ASGM show no signs of abating. The ongoing crackdown on informal gold mining in Ghana continued into 2022. In September, for example, 164 miners engaged in the practice (known as ‘galamsey’) were arrested in the Ashanti region and their equipment seized.<sup>34</sup> In Burkina Faso, an escalation in tensions between artisanal miners and the authorities in the city of Houndé culminated in violence in May 2022, following government efforts to clear ASGM miners from a gold site for an industrial mining operation.<sup>35</sup> The clashes resulted in the deaths of two miners.<sup>36</sup>

In many West African countries, ASGM may be legal on paper, but in practice, formalization is difficult, and authorities have long viewed it with suspicion. This attitude towards ASGM continued into 2022, although it was accentuated by ever-growing fears of jihadist financing, which has spurred crackdowns in many areas.

Mauritania, however, stood out in contrast, with the government having made significant efforts to



**A gold site operated by Endeavour Mining Corporation in Houndé, Burkina Faso. In May, tensions between artisanal miners and the authorities in Houndé broke out in violence.**

*Photo: Reuters/Anne Mimault*

encourage formal artisanal gold mining, deploying an approach to regulation that is focused more on the regulation of processing plants, which are tightly controlled, than on the mine sites themselves. In 2022, authorities in Chad demonstrated willingness to move towards the formalization of gold mining by officially reopening northern Chad's largest goldfield and deploying the national mining company to regulate gold mining activities.<sup>37</sup> Niger, another major player in the region's gold sector, has already taken steps towards the

regularization of gold mining in recent years, and a number of authorized gold mining companies operate across the country, including in the north.

It is possible, therefore, that there may be cracks emerging in the de facto prohibitive approach to ASGM. Looking forwards, this potential shift would certainly be a good news story for the region, and stakeholders should seek to capitalize on the arguably increased political space for reform.

## Notes

- 1 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), 1 December 2022, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali>.
- 2 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, The number of civilian casualties is growing in West Africa as conflict areas increasingly overlap with illicit economies, Risk Bulletin – Issue 5, GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-005/index.html>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, The strategic logic of kidnappings in Mali and Burkina Faso, Risk Bulletin – Issue 4, GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-004/index.html>.
- 5 Four countries in West Africa, among which are Togo and Ghana, experienced kidnapping incidents in 2022 after registering none in 2021.
- 6 For the purposes of this Risk Bulletin, West Africa refers to the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, CAR, Chad, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
- 7 ACLED, <https://acleddata.com>.
- 8 ACLED, <https://acleddata.com>.
- 9 In some states, such as in Akwa Ibom, Plateau and Enugu, for example, the number of kidnapping incidents surged by between 240% and 350% in 2022. In Zamfara State, the epicentre of kidnapping in Nigeria, incidents of kidnapping doubled, from 36 to 72 incidents in 2022.

- 10 Including the Federal Capital Territory.
- 11 Although there is no recorded incident of kidnapping in the ACLED data, local media have reported several kidnapping incidents. See for example, Gombe police arrest 4 teenagers over alleged kidnapping, *Daily Trust*, 11 December 2022, <https://dailytrust.com/gombe-police-arrest-4-teenagers-over-alleged-kidnapping>; Chima Azubuike, 27 residents kidnapped every month, Gombe gov laments, *Punch*, 23 December 2022, <https://punchng.com/27-residents-kidnapped-every-month-gombe-gov-laments>.
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- 13 Data from ACLED shows that the number of kidnapping incidents in Burkina Faso decreased from 262 in 2021 to 219 in 2022; in Mali, there was a similar decline from 184 to 170 between 2021 and 2022. In 2020, the figures for the two countries were 62 and 89 respectively.
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- 15 Kars de Bruijne, Laws of attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover, Clingendael, June 2021, [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Laws-of-Attraction\\_webfinal82021.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Laws-of-Attraction_webfinal82021.pdf).
- 16 Interviews with civil society stakeholders in Bounkani region, Côte d'Ivoire, September 2022.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 ENACT, Organised Crime Index Africa 2021: Evolution of crime in a Covid world, A comparative analysis of organised crime in Africa, 2019–2021, [https://africa.ocindex.net/assets/downloads/enact\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://africa.ocindex.net/assets/downloads/enact_report_2021.pdf).
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- 22 Burkina Faso: 'record seizure' of more than 115 kg of cocaine, *Africanews*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.africanews.com/2022/05/25/burkina-faso-record-seizure-of-more-than-115-kg-of-cocaine>.
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- 26 Lucia Bird, Cocaine politics in West Africa: Guinea-Bissau's protection networks, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-politics-west-africa-guinea-bissau>.
- 27 Lucia Bird, 'A very strange coup attempt', GI-TOC, 4 February 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/coup-attempt-guinea-bissau>.
- 28 West Africa Commission on Drugs, Not just in transit: Drugs, the state and society in West Africa, June 2014, <https://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wacd/not-just-in-transit>.
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- 31 Interview with civil society activist, Bissau, July 2022.
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- 33 See Marcena Hunter, Beyond blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa, GI-TOC, November 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/gold-conflict-criminality-west-africa>.
- 34 Scores of illegal miners arrested in Ashanti region, The Signal Room, 19 September 2022. See also Operation Halt II: Soldiers seize 30 excavators from galamseyers - Lands Minister, 15 October 2022, GhanaWeb, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Operation-Halt-II-Soldiers-seize-30-excavators-from-galamseyers-Lands-Minister-1643072>.
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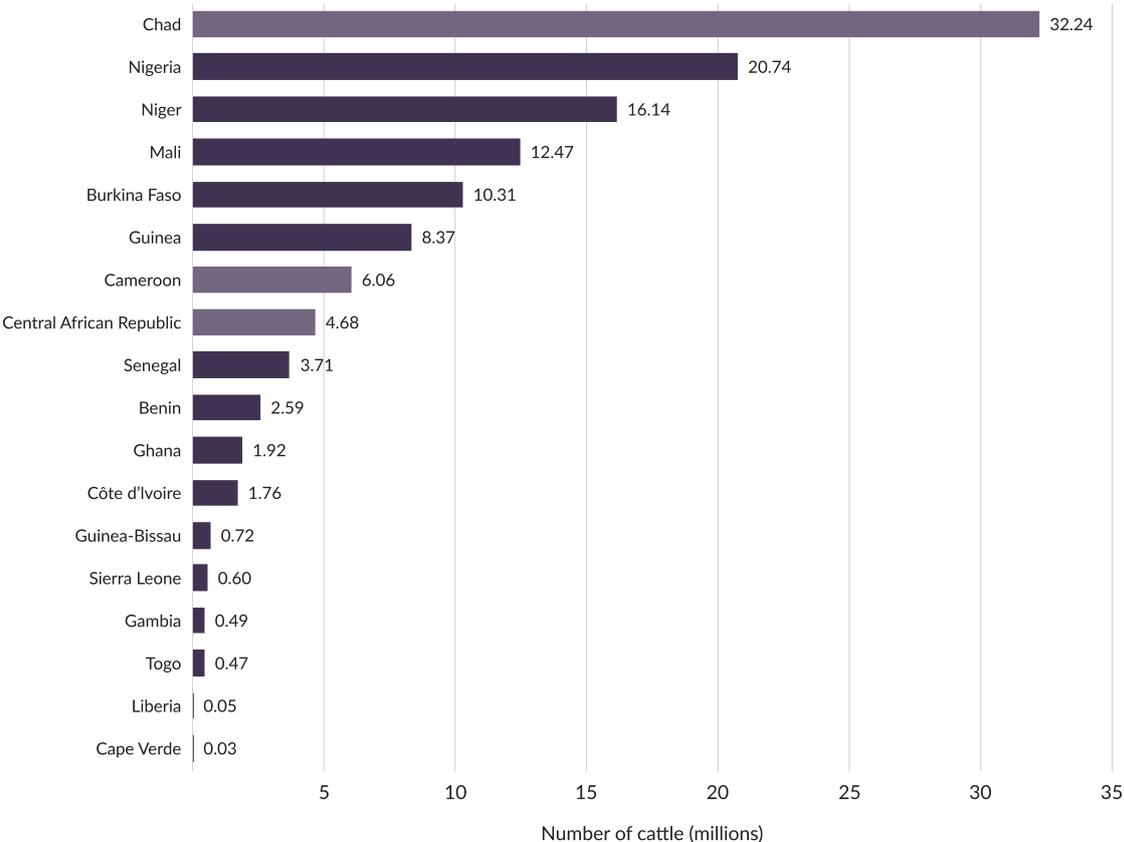
# With key shifts in dynamics entrenched in 2022, cattle rustling is set to remain a major threat in Nigeria and Mali in 2023.

Not only has cattle rustling caused thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement and destruction of livelihoods across West Africa and the Sahel, but it has also repeatedly operated as a significant source of financing for armed groups.<sup>1</sup> The practice is strongly interwoven with longstanding intercommunal tensions in the region, meaning that it acts as a conflict multiplier, triggering vicious cycles of reprisal attacks and swelling conflict.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, cattle rustling surged in northern and central Mali, causing a spike in violence, while in Nigeria concerns of southward diffusion grew.

Over the past decade, cattle rustling in the region has evolved from a relatively non-violent practice involving the theft of a small number of cattle into an organized

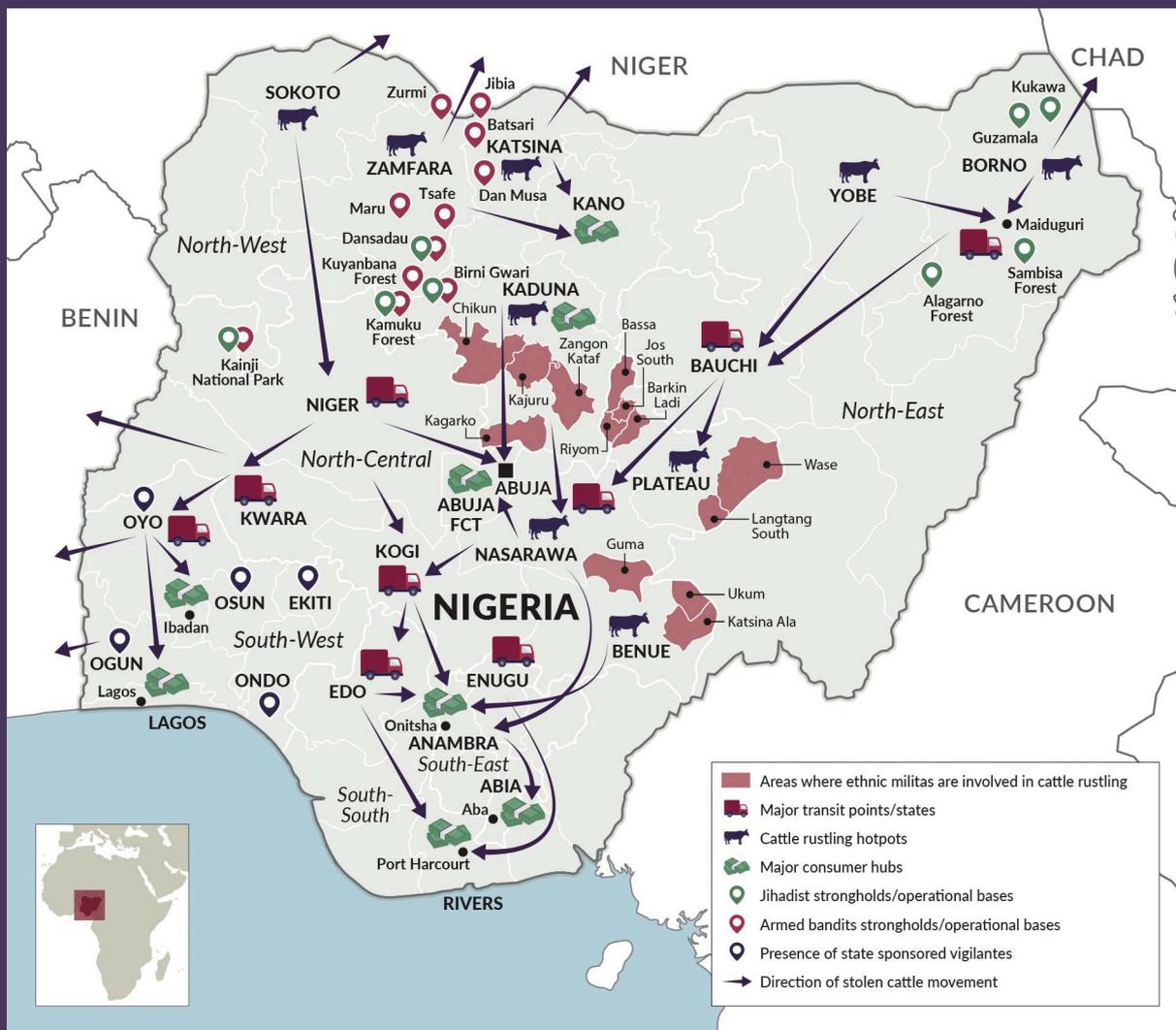
crime featuring high levels of lethal violence by armed groups and operating as a central element of the war economy in several countries. In recent years, cattle rustling dynamics have undergone key shifts in Nigeria and Mali, two of the largest cattle producers in West Africa (see Figure 1) and epicentres of cattle rustling, with the illicit economy now at a key point in its evolution.

For the past decade, cattle rustling has been a major source of financing for jihadists, armed bandits and ethnic militias in northern and central Nigeria. Since 2018, however, it has been spreading southwards, fuelling tensions between farmers and herders across a growing area. In Mali, not only is cattle rustling a key source of revenue for non-state armed groups, but it



**FIGURE 1** Number of cattle by country, 2020.

Source: UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), accessed via Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cattle-livestock-count-heads>



**FIGURE 2** Cattle rustling dynamics in Nigeria, 2022.

Source: Kingsley L Madueke, Driving destruction: Cattle rustling and instability in Nigeria, GI-TOC, January 2023

plays a major role as a mechanism for intimidation and criminal governance. In 2022, there was a surge in the number of incidents of violence associated with cattle rustling in Mali.

In both countries the point of entry of armed groups into the cattle rustling market has driven a surge in associated violence, catalyzed a sharp evolution into a more destructive and large-scale manifestation of rustling, and fuelled a wholesale expansion of the market. Similarly, geographic diffusion of intense cattle rustling has characterized Nigeria and Mali, with

epicentres of cattle rustling broadly mirroring the areas experiencing the highest levels of violence. The close relationship between cattle rustling and kidnapping, with armed groups switching between the two as primary sources of funding, and arms trafficking also track across the two countries.

In Nigeria, as in Mali, cattle rustling is most entrenched as a form of governance in areas in which armed groups exert a relatively consolidated control over territory. This can be seen in north-east Nigeria, where Islamic State West Africa Province is strongest and is thus able to

collect *zakat* on cattle. In Mali, in areas where JNIM-affiliated Katibat Macina is the primary governance provider, the use of *zakat* is similarly systematic.

As the illicit economy continues to drive and exacerbate violence, strengthening armed groups, it is now more important than ever to prioritize tackling the issue. Tracking key 2022 trends at the two regional epicentres of cattle rustling – Mali and Nigeria – underscores the urgency dictating the application of a wider toolkit of responses.

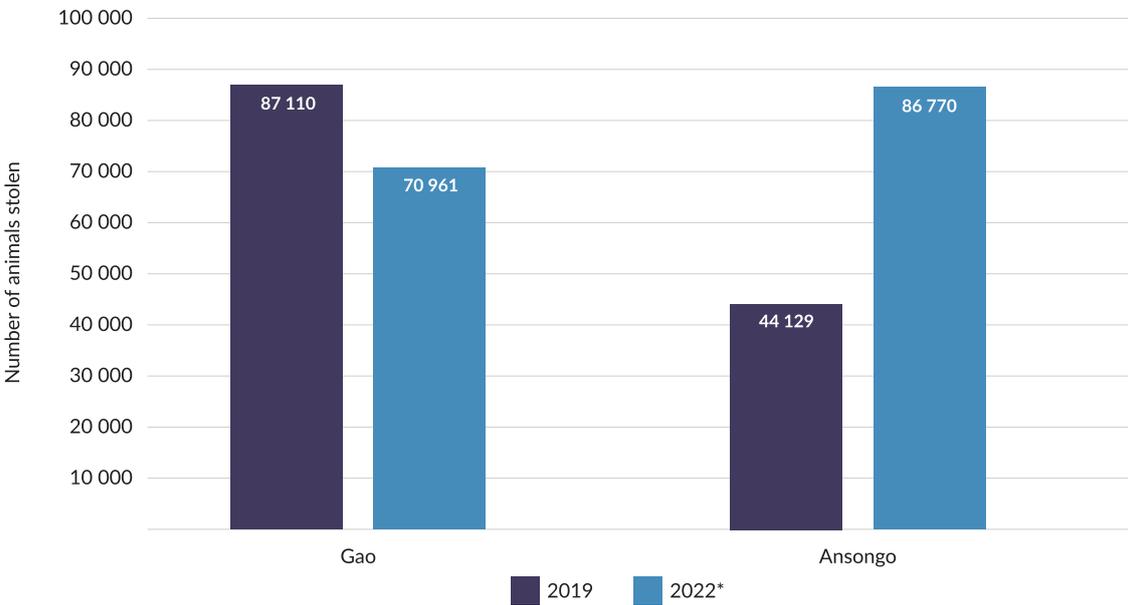
**Cattle rustling moves southwards in Nigeria**

An under-analyzed phenomenon, rampant cattle rustling in Nigeria’s North-West and North-Central regions has not only deeply exacerbated intercommunal conflicts, but has now started to move southwards, driven in large part by desertification and, crucially, rampant insecurity in the north. Cattle rustling has now spread towards Niger, Benue and Kogi states, penetrating the South-West through Kwara and Oyo, where violence between farmers and herders has increased since 2018, and where it experienced a further spike in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, the South-West only sees pockets of cattle theft, which are rarer and typically associated with lower

levels of violence than in the north. ‘They usually come at night. They steal cows when we are fast asleep,’ according to a community leader in Ogbomosho, Oyo State.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the prevalence of cattle rustling in the south-west has increased since 2018.<sup>5</sup> Although currently mostly non-violent, rustling incidents could feed into existing grievances and lead to a cycle of reprisal attacks.

Many of the risk factors that preceded the surge in cattle rustling witnessed in the north (in particular, in Zamfara State) are increasingly present in the South-West – namely, intensifying competition over natural resources, including as cattle herds are displaced southwards, and tensions between herders and farming communities. Since 2018, the South-West has experienced a surge in violence between Yoruba farmers and Fulani pastoralists,<sup>6</sup> a key risk factor linked to the emergence of large-scale cattle rustling in the North-West and North-Central regions.<sup>7</sup> Cattle rustling is interwoven with longstanding tensions between ethnicities, amplifying these and catalyzing further conflict. It is therefore paramount that the widespread farmer-herder tensions that occurred in northern Nigeria is avoided in the south.



**FIGURE 3 Livestock theft in Gao and Ansongo districts, 2019 and 2022.**

Note: Data includes cattle, camels, sheep, goats and donkeys. \*Data includes January to October.

Source: Mali - réponse conjointe 2020: Soutenir les activités agricoles et pastorales des ménages touchés par la crise dans les régions de Kayes et de Mopti, FAO, 2020, <https://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/CA8125FR>; Direction régionale des productions et des industries animales – Gao

### Cattle-related violence spirals in Mali

The year 2021 marked a pivot point in terms of the scale of cattle rustling in both central and northern Mali. Cattle rustling as we know it today has undergone several key phases and changes in its evolution, as explored in a forthcoming GI-TOC research report.<sup>8</sup> The main dynamics that have been developing since 2012 – i.e. growth in levels of violence, degree of weaponization, close link with kidnappings, shifts in the types of cattle rustling (from rustling to looting) – have not only continued in recent years, but have accelerated, becoming more entrenched. In 2021, levels of violence and cattle rustling significantly surpassed those of previous years, and official data from the last quarter of 2022 indicates thefts are likely to have exceeded 2021 numbers.<sup>9</sup>

Locations experiencing an increase in cattle rustling also witnessed a rise in levels of violence, the epicentres being Mopti region in central Mali and the Malian side of the Liptako-Gourma area (covering parts of Gao and Ménaka regions). As attacks against communities and villages grew in number and intensity, cattle rustling – a systemic element of these incidents – intensified in parallel (for example, in Ansongo – see Figure 3). In

north-eastern Mali, a higher rate of attacks and accelerating geographic expansion, especially by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, which has capitalized on the void left by France's troop withdrawal in August 2022, has led to a greater demand for resources. Livestock – abundant in the region and easily sold thanks to existing networks specialized in selling or laundering the animals – is a key resource used for buying weapons, motorbikes, fuel and food.

Interviews have indicated that, in central Mali, the increased operations of the Malian armed forces (FAMA), pro-government self-defence militias and, since the beginning of the year, their Russian partners through the Wagner Group have been partly behind the increase in cattle rustling incidents.<sup>10</sup> The trend of looting livestock and other belongings by these three actors operating together worsened in the last quarter of 2022.<sup>11</sup> In one village in Bandiagara district (Mopti region), more than 1 000 cattle were stolen in a single incident.<sup>12</sup> While several other incidents have been reported by numerous sources, assessing the true extent of these tri-partite operations is extremely difficult given the notoriously



**Bandiagara, a small town and commune in Mali's Mopti region, in which over 1 000 cattle were stolen in a single incident in 2022.**

*Photo: Andrea Borgarello/Getty Images*



**Along the Niger River between Niafunke and Youwarou, Mali. Levels of cattle rustling are far lower in Youwarou than in other nearby districts due in large part to the consolidated presence and control of Katibat Macina.**

*Photo: agefotostock/Alamy Stock Photo*

low levels of transparency surrounding FAMA and Wagner activity.

Importantly, however, although some districts of Mopti region have experienced an increase in violence and cattle rustling, others have seen a decrease. Districts under consolidated control of a specific armed group have tended to experience far lower levels of rustling than those under contestation.

For example, in Youwarou, a district under the significant influence of Katibat Macina, levels of cattle rustling are far lower than in nearby areas. While the group has been active in Youwarou since 2017, in the last few years they have consolidated their presence and influence in the area.

Cattle rustling carried out by Katibat Macina is driven by considerations beyond profit. The group has a governance and legitimation strategy that includes providing a number of basic services, including resolving conflicts between and within communities (among which are tensions around cattle rustling and access to land) and providing security.<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean that Katibat Macina does not engage in cattle rustling, but rather that it does so in a way that can be justified and hence is presented as legitimate (or legitimized). This includes the imposition of *zakat* or looting of cattle from communities or individual cattle owners that are enemies and working with the state.

By contrast, neighbouring Bandiagara, a contested territory in which numerous state and non-state armed groups operate, is by far the district most affected by cattle looting, with more than 65 000 cattle stolen in 2021 – almost 15 times more than in Youwarou district.<sup>14</sup> According to one cattle owner in Bandiagara, this high level of violence and generalized insecurity leads to ‘everyone feeling like they can steal whatever they want to take’.<sup>15</sup>

### **Outlook**

Cattle rustling will remain a major security threat and a significant source of instability in both Nigeria and Mali in 2023. Although cattle rustling has declined in northern Nigeria since 2018, it is still a key source of financing for armed bandits and violent extremist groups there, and there is a tangible risk that incidents of cattle rustling in

the south-west may feed into existing tensions and fuel further violence, particularly if the prevalence of the illicit economy rises. In central and northern Mali, cattle rustling has increased since the beginning of 2022, and there are clear indicators that it will remain a central element in the financing and governance strategies of armed groups throughout 2023. Although cattle rustling persists as a major challenge in countries such as Burkina Faso and Benin, as well as other parts of West Africa and the Sahel, Nigeria and Mali are the main regional cattle rustling hotspots to look out for over the course of the year.

High levels of cattle rustling should be of concern because it is an accelerant illicit economy, playing a significant role in fuelling instability, weaponizing existing conflicts and multiplying armed actors. Across Nigeria, Mali and other parts of West Africa and the Sahel, one important characteristic of cattle rustling, central to its close relationship with instability, is how the practice feeds into deeply entrenched group grievances. Additionally, the evolution of cattle rustling from sustainable to destructive

has positioned it as a key phenomenon undermining livelihoods, already made scarce in a context of growing unemployment and poverty levels, as well as intensifying competition over dwindling resources.

Integrating cattle rustling key as a consideration for early-warning stabilization operations, prioritizing addressing farmer–herder conflicts, targeting the whole of supply chains and working closely with communities (most importantly, Fulani pastoralists) in order to restore public trust in state actors are a few of the many important actions that need to be taken. Military responses, and those focused on shutting key nodes in the supply chain – such as closing livestock markets, a practice repeatedly mandated in Nigeria<sup>16</sup> – have failed to engender long-term success. Not only is a wider toolkit of responses required, but, crucially, the protection of civilians needs to be placed at the core of all security initiatives, including patrols and counter-terrorism operations in Mali, where these are conducted by FAMA (and other law enforcement agencies) or their international partners.

## Notes

- 1 The terms cattle and livestock are often incorrectly used interchangeably. Whereas livestock includes animals such as sheep, goats, donkeys and other farm animals, cattle refers exclusively to cows and bulls.
- 2 Alexandre Bish et al., The crime paradox: Illicit markets, violence and instability in Nigeria, GI-TOC, April 2022, [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GI-TOC-Nigeria\\_The-crime-paradox-web.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GI-TOC-Nigeria_The-crime-paradox-web.pdf).
- 3 According to Nigeria Watch data, deaths related to cattle grazing – a key factor in fuelling farmer–herder clashes – spiked from two deaths in 2017 to 15 deaths in 2018. This was followed by a major decline in 2019 and a sharp increase from four deaths in 2020 to 48 deaths in 2021. See Nigeria Watch, Cattle grazing related deaths in Oyo State, 2015–2021, <https://www.nigeriawatch.org/index.php?urlaction=evtStat>.
- 4 GI-TOC interview with community leader in Ogbomoso, 23 April 2022.
- 5 There were several incidents of cattle rustling across south-west Nigeria in 2022. In January, the police arrested a man they described as ‘a cattle rustling kingpin’ who led a gang that engaged in cattle rustling in different communities of Ipokia local government area (LGA) of Ogun State. In August 2022, 13 heads of cattle were rustled in Obafemi Owode LGA of Ogun State. In Ekiti State, the police arrested two individuals in May 2022 and, more recently, four others in October for rustling 52 heads of cattle.
- 6 Leo Sobechi, Strange schemes in Southwest, Fulani herders’ conflict, *The Guardian*, 21 January 2021, <https://guardian.ng/politics/strange-schemes-in-southwest-fulani-herders-conflict>.
- 7 As in other parts of the country, cattle straying onto farms and destroying crops is a major source of intergroup rancour between local farmers and pastoralist Fulani. Before criminals overrun the South-West, *Punch*, 19 January 2022, <https://punchng.com/before-criminals-overrun-the-south-west>.
- 8 GI-TOC, Cattle rustling: A criminal market at the heart of Mali’s instability, forthcoming 2023.
- 9 Office of the governor of Mopti region, Report of the regional conference on cattle theft in Mopti region, December 2021. 2022 numbers report from the Direction régionale des productions et des industries animales – Gao. Interviews with key stakeholders in central and northern Mali, March and October/November 2022.
- 10 These actors, while patrolling together, have also been accused of an increased number of exactions in central Mali, including the deadliest incident in the history of the conflict, with 300 civilians killed in the town of Moura, Djenné district, Mopti region. Interview with a security expert in Mopti, November 2022, by phone.
- 11 Interview with a security expert, an NGO worker and a journalist, November 2022, by phone. See also *Mali, soldats maliens, russes et chasseurs dozos accusés de vols massifs de bétail*, RFI, 24 November 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20221124-mali-soldats-maliens-russes-et-chasseurs-dozos-accus%C3%A9s-de-vols-massifs-de-b%C3%A9tail>.
- 12 Interview with a security expert in Mopti, November 2022, by phone.
- 13 Interview with an expert on central Mali conflict dynamics and Katibat Macina, September 2022.
- 14 Bureau du Gouverneur de la Région de Mopti, *Rapport conférence régionale sur le vol/enlèvement de bétail dans la région de Mopti*, December 2021.
- 15 Interview with a cattle owner in central Mali, April 2022.
- 16 Shehu Umar, Zamfara govt closes 12 cattle markets to tame rustling, *Daily Trust*, 14 December 2018, <https://dailytrust.com/zamfara-govt-closes-12-cattle-markets-to-tame-rustling>.

# JNIM consolidated its presence in the central Sahel in 2022, but 2023 will test its credibility as an alternative governance provider.

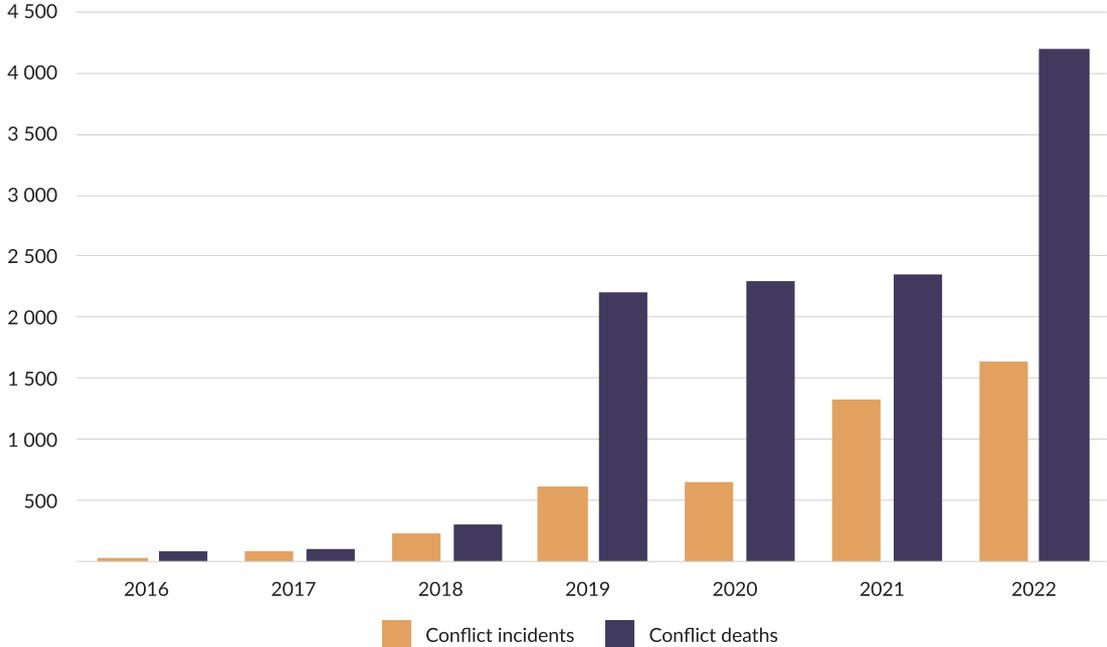
In 2022, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) consolidated its presence in most of the central Sahel, and has now firmly established itself as the dominant non-state armed actor in the central Sahel conflict. During its spread through Burkina Faso between 2016 and 2022, JNIM proved itself capable of engaging strategically with illicit economies, more as a vector for building relationships than as a source of revenue.

By facilitating local populations' involvement in illicit or informal economies (such as smuggling or gold mining), JNIM has been able to win substantial local support. However, in order to fulfil its side of the bargain, the group has needed to push the state out of the areas in question. While JNIM's expansion into northern edges of the West African coastal states has been marked in 2022, its efforts to build relations with civilians in these

areas have been hampered by remnant challenges from government forces and national park rangers.

JNIM has also faced substantial challenges to its governance as a result of the resurgence of the so-called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) under its new leader Abu al-Bara al-Sahrawi. ISGS registered a number of victories in north-eastern Mali against JNIM in 2022.<sup>1</sup> Since these challenges, JNIM has come under significant pressure and has been pushed back from a number of areas in the Liptako-Gourma region.

These setbacks notwithstanding, JNIM does not have to fear being outnumbered by the ISGS. Estimating the number of JNIM fighters is challenging, but some estimates put them at about 5 000, while ISGS members number fewer than half of that.<sup>2</sup> In areas where JNIM still has the upper hand, it appears determined to avoid



**FIGURE 1 Conflict incidents and conflict-related deaths in Burkina Faso, 2016–2022.**

Source: ACLED, adapted from Eleanor Beevor, JNIM in Burkina Faso: A strategic criminal actor, GI-TOC, August 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/jnim-burkina-faso>.

any challenge to its authority in places where it wishes to consolidate its presence.

**A facilitator of illicit economies**

JNIM has three key objectives. First, to expand territorially, particularly into the littoral states of West Africa, as well as eastwards into Niger.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, to govern the residents of the places it occupies, ideally with a degree of local consent and support. Thirdly, to fund these objectives through a variety of activities. Illicit and criminal economies play a role in all of these objectives.<sup>4</sup>

Across the central Sahel, JNIM units have consistently shown a distinct restraint when participating in illicit activities. Rather than attempting to monopolize an illicit sector, they will often open up these resources to local people who had previously been unable to profit from them, a move that can rapidly gain them support. Analyzing how JNIM engages with illicit economies for governance purposes is consequently as important as understanding how these operate as mechanisms for raising revenue, which has traditionally received greater focus.

This approach is evident in JNIM’s liberalization of peoples’ access to natural resources. For instance, by chasing industrial concessionaires out of gold mines, or by ousting armed groups such as the Dozo who had been hired by mine owners to control sites, JNIM has repeatedly opened up new, largely unrestricted sites to artisanal miners. In exchange for occasional contributions, which are viewed by many of the miners as relatively fair, JNIM ensures that the previous controllers of the mine, or the state, do not return to the area. This happened in the Dida Forest on the border between Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire in mid-2021, and the arrangement appears to have endured.<sup>5</sup>

Another core aspect of JNIM’s engagement with illicit economies is the relationships it builds with smugglers. These are often residents of border communities who are able to source important commodities such as fuel, and thus an important community to win over. Supportive border communities can help JNIM’s integration along the borders of countries they want to expand into, while smugglers can assist them in obtaining necessary supplies. In exchange for the



**A gold-mining camp in Burkina Faso. Across West Africa, JNIM has been opening up new, largely unrestricted sites to artisanal gold miners.**

*Photo: Joerg Boethling/Alamy Stock Photo*

smugglers' help, JNIM facilitates their work by forcing state actors and customs agents out of their posts.

This is the case in the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) complex, a protected area in the triborder region of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. Widespread fuel smuggling in the WAP complex allows JNIM to obtain fuel from smugglers.<sup>6</sup> The park is an attractive smuggling route for small-scale fuel traders, who buy subsidized Nigerian fuel from Benin (where it has been smuggled in) and then bring it back over the border into Burkina Faso in jerry cans. Smugglers supply JNIM with fuel in exchange for the group's occasional help – for instance, protecting a convoy – as well as for keeping state forces out of the area, which significantly facilitates smugglers' work.<sup>7</sup>

**Illicit taxation dynamics**

JNIM – and particularly one of its component groups, the Saharan wing of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – has garnered a reputation in security and media circles for profiting from crime, particularly through trafficking and taxing trafficked goods.<sup>8</sup> In reality, JNIM's revenue

collection from illicit economies is patchy. In northern Mali, where JNIM's territorial control is more absolute and the situation therefore less volatile, JNIM is known to tax smugglers at checkpoints placed along smuggling routes to and from Algeria. Taxation efforts on illicit economies further south, however, are more limited and less fixed. Thus far in Burkina Faso, JNIM has focused on levying religious taxes (*zakat*) on civilians as a key means of raising revenue. Herders are commonly subjected to *zakat* taxes in the form of cattle, and sometimes these taxes are perceived as excessive.

There have been more structured efforts in Burkina Faso by JNIM to tax smugglers. For example, in late 2021 JNIM established checkpoints along certain key roads in eastern Burkina Faso, specifically the Pama-Nadiagou-Koualou and Pama-Kompienga roads. These checkpoints aimed to collect revenue from fuel smugglers, as well as to keep watch of who was passing along the road through Koualou/Kourou. Most of the road users in these areas are carrying smuggled goods, and JNIM reportedly began demanding taxes from them. However, in December



**The W-Arly-Pendjari complex, in the triborder area between Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, serves as a strategic sanctuary for armed groups operating predominantly in Burkina Faso.**

*Photo: Matthias Kunert/DPNP*

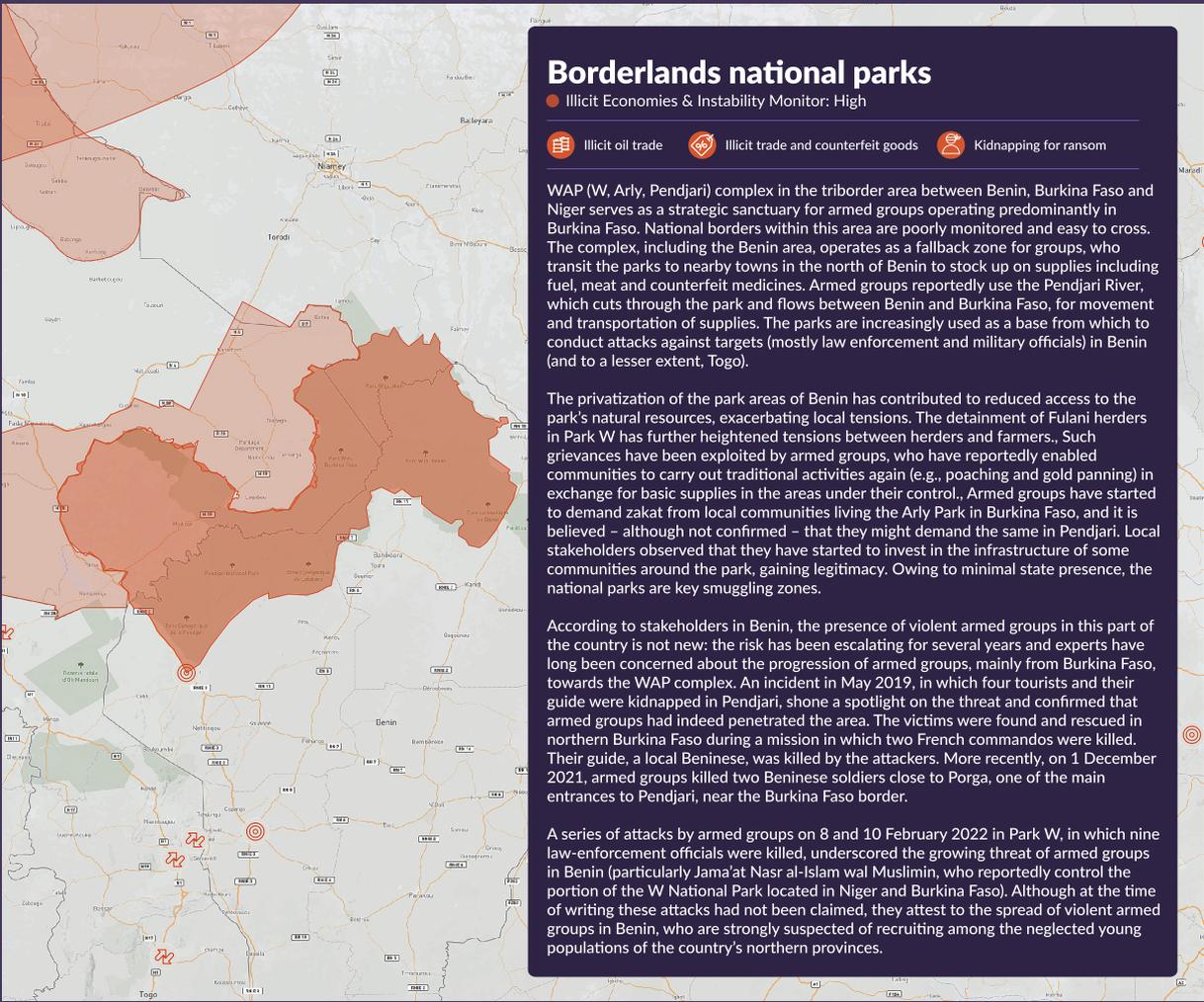
2021, the Beninois army enforced their presence on the Koualou/Kourou road on the Benin side, and closed the border crossing. JNIM checkpoints on the Burkina Faso side have since been much sparser, or non-existent, since there is far less traffic on the road.<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of systematic road checkpoints represented an attempted formalization of JNIM's relationship with smugglers in Burkina Faso, which, in the earlier phase of their presence, was more informal and based on an ad hoc exchange of goods and services. However, it appears that the presence of both JNIM on the Burkina side and Beninois forces on the Benin side has discouraged the use of this road. Much of the

smuggling that used to pass through the disputed town of Koalou/Kourou on the Burkina-Beninois border has therefore been diverted towards Cinkansé in Burkina Faso,<sup>10</sup> a town bordering northern Togo that acts as a principal transit point for a myriad of illicit commodities both entering and exiting the country.<sup>11</sup> JNIM has made use of checkpoints in other parts of Burkina Faso and Niger, although these are often focused on controlling road traffic, and do not always attempt to extract payments from road users.

**JNIM's southward spillover**

JNIM's build-up and escalation in Benin was especially concerning in 2022, with the group having taken almost



**FIGURE 2** Borderlands national parks as an illicit hub.

Source: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>.

complete control of the Beninois portion of W Park in the third quarter of 2022. JNIM has not yet been able to make as much headway into the Pendjari Park, however, nor displace rangers from the African Parks Network organization stationed there.

In Benin, JNIM has at times been unusually violent towards the civilian communities it would normally attempt to win over. The group has made widespread use of threats towards local communities, and in the department of Atacora, in the second quarter of 2022, JNIM engaged in forced recruitment.<sup>12</sup> There are many factors behind this, but a key dynamic is that JNIM has not yet convinced communities in the area that it is a plausible alternative governor. Unlike in parts of Burkina Faso, JNIM has not been able to fully push state forces or park rangers out of Pendjari Park and therefore cannot offer civilians unrestricted access to the park to exploit its natural resources, nor can they offer complete protection to smugglers from government oversight. Civilians accordingly seem less keen to cooperate with JNIM, meaning that the latter has resorted to more coercive behaviour.

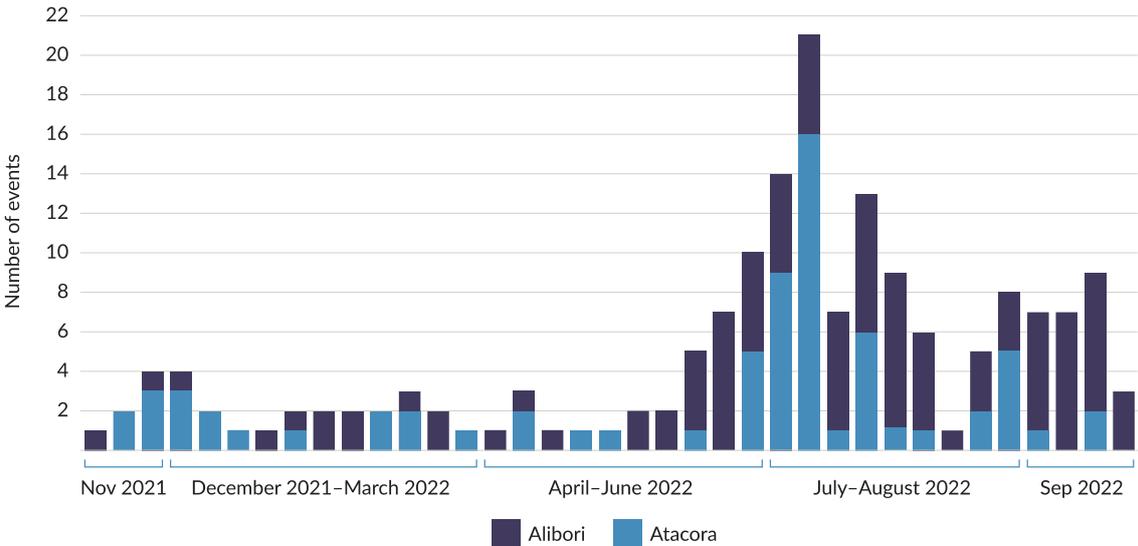
JNIM is increasingly concentrating its efforts in Alibori province in north-eastern Benin. One possible reason for this could be the attacks that ISGS has claimed in the area. ISGS is not thought to be heavily present in Benin, and observers described its presence as comprising

small, mobile units with a limited number of temporary bases.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, one interpretation of the recent rise in violence in Alibori is that JNIM is not willing to risk ISGS establishing a firmer hold in northern Benin, from which it could challenge JNIM expansion.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the trajectory for 2023, JNIM will no doubt be leveraging the foothold it has gained in northern Benin to try and violently push all state actors out of the national park complex in the north. National parks serve as an ideal rear base for armed groups, given their remoteness and natural cover.<sup>15</sup> If JNIM is able to clear the complex of state forces and rangers, it will be able to offer communities tangible benefits, which may help the group win the local support it would normally seek to cultivate.

However, JNIM will continue to face sustained pressure from ISGS, particularly in the triborder zone, although possibly with some competition in Alibori too. Similarly, it will continue to contend with a variety of armed opponents. Self-defence groups are being mobilized across Burkina Faso by the state, while in Benin, it is likely that Rwandan troops are helping to sustain their army's resistance to JNIM. These factors could have important implications for JNIM's relationships with civilians.

JNIM tends to limit violence against civilians to those it suspects of collaborating with the state or opposing armed groups. Larger presences of armed opponents will,



**FIGURE 3 Conflict-related events in northern Benin, November 2021 to September 2022.**

Source: ACLED and supplemental data (supplemental data added from June 2022 onwards), from Kars de Bruijne, Conflict in the Penta-border area, Clingendael, December 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/conflict-penta-border-area>.

however, increase its fear of collaborators, and could result in more widespread violence towards civilians. Furthermore, pressure from ISGS may inhibit JNIM's ability to provide order, security and access to illicit economies that are the basis of its relationship with civilians. In north-eastern Mali, JNIM's ability to organize and protect

transhumance routes has been diminished by ISGS offensives against it, which is likely to have a negative impact on its relationships with the civilians who depend on these routes. The year 2023 will thus be a test of JNIM's credibility as an alternative governance provider.

## Notes

- 1 Manon Laplace, *Mali: Le JNIM et Les Combattants Touaregs, Côte à Côte Face à l'EIGS?*, *Jeune Afrique*, 1 November 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1389689/politique/mali-le-jnim-et-les-combattants-touaregs-cote-a-cote-face-a-leigs>.
- 2 Manon Laplace, *Sahel: entre Iyad Ag Ghali et Abu al-Bara al-Sahraoui, la guerre des (chefs) jihadistes*, *Jeune Afrique*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1385803/politique/sahel-entre-iyad-ag-ghali-et-abu-al-bara-al-sahraoui-la-guerre-des-chefs-jihadistes>.
- 3 Caleb Weiss, AQIM's imperial playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's expansion into West Africa, Combating Terrorism Center, April 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/aqims-imperial-playbook-understanding-al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-expansion-into-west-africa>.
- 4 Eleanor Beevor, JNIM in Burkina Faso: A strategic criminal actor, GI-TOC, August 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/jnim-burkina-faso>.
- 5 Interview with a mining security manager who has regular contact with miners in the Dida Forest area, Ouagadougou, 14 July 2022; Interview with NGO worker based in Bobo Dioulasso, 7 December 2022, by phone.
- 6 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>.
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- 11 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>.
- 12 Conference call with researcher covering northern Benin, 9 November 2022; conference call with Beninois researcher studying national parks, 30 November 2022.
- 13 Conference call with researcher covering northern Benin, 9 November 2022.
- 14 Kars de Bruijne, Conflict in the Penta-border area, Clingendael, December 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/conflict-penta-border-area>.
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# Russia’s military, mercenary and criminal interests in West Africa grew in 2022 and look set to expand in 2023.

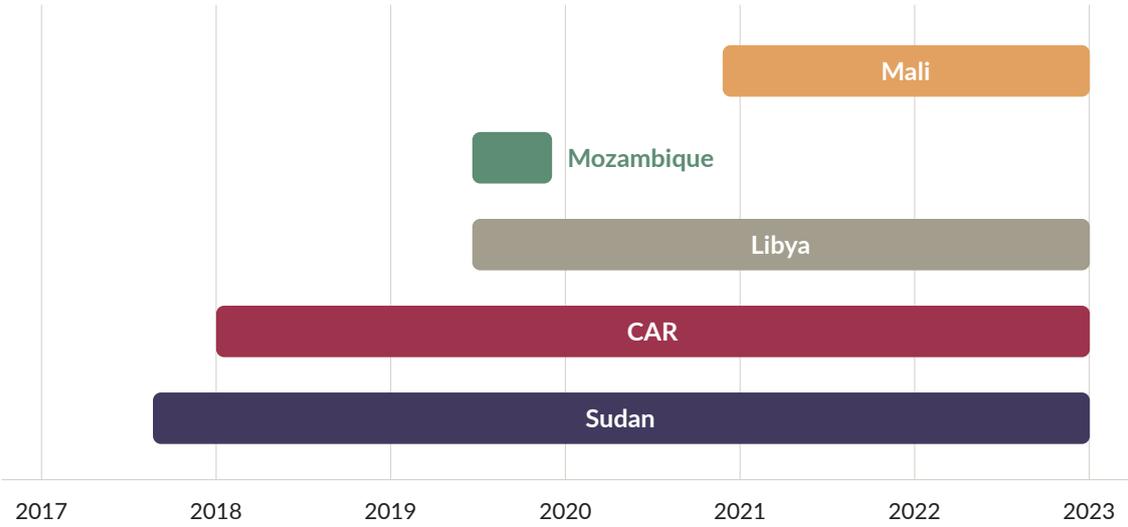
The fallout of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has had major consequences for Russia’s engagement around the world in 2022. West Africa is no exception. Russia has sought to increase its political involvement in Africa since the 2014 invasion of Crimea.<sup>1</sup> But as Russia has become more economically and politically isolated under the increasing weight of Western sanctions, the importance of Africa as a strategically significant region for Russia to engage in, both to facilitate business opportunities (to shore up its ailing domestic economy) and to court political allies, has escalated.

At the same time, Western sanctions – which prevent targeted entities from accessing much of the global banking system and globalized supply chains – have had a disruptive effect on the business interests of Russian oligarchs in West Africa.<sup>2</sup> For example, Russian gold producer Nordgold – which has been placed under sanctions along with its former major shareholder, oligarch Alexey Mordashov – has had to find new routes to export gold from its mines in Guinea and Burkina Faso

(where it recently received a new mining licence),<sup>3</sup> reportedly via Dubai.<sup>4</sup>

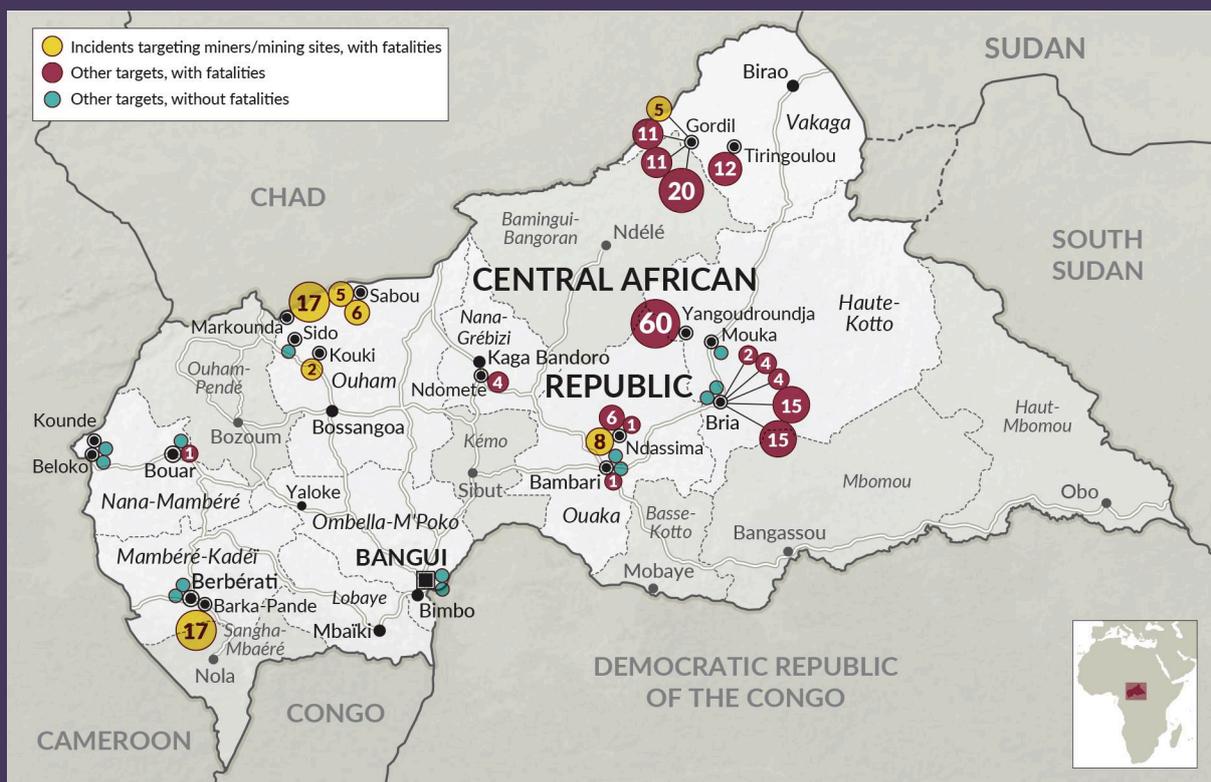
Illicit economies (and the ambiguous legal ‘grey zones’ through which criminal actors and sanctioned entities seek to publicly present themselves as legitimate) also play a significant part in this geopolitical wrangling. As described in the March 2022 issue of this bulletin, sanctioned Russian entities in Africa – which are primarily concentrated in the mining sector – may be turning to illicit means of transporting goods, minerals and money to fly under the radar of international sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

The mercenary organization Wagner Group often appears to work as a proxy for the Russian state in Africa, seeking to pursue Russian state interests and disrupt Western influence on the continent.<sup>6</sup> In late January 2023, the US government took the unusual step of designating Wagner as a ‘transnational criminal organization’ – a move that signals a new approach in defining and levying sanctions on Wagner and its enablers. The group is reportedly involved in illicit



**FIGURE 1** Timeline of Wagner Group presence in Africa.

Note: Indicative dates only  
Source: GI-TOC



**FIGURE 2** Wagner violence against civilians in the Central African Republic, 2022.

Source: ACLED

economies, such as industrial-scale smuggling of natural resources (particularly gold), which enables it, and probably indirectly the Russian state, to evade sanctions.<sup>7</sup> These activities are more fully documented in an upcoming in-depth report by the GI-TOC, 'The grey zone: Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa'.

But the Wagner Group is also responsible for grotesque violence against civilians in several African countries. In Mali, for example, Wagner troops were reportedly involved in a joint operation with the Malian armed forces in January 2022, in which an elderly woman was burned to death inside her home after a soldier began looting and setting buildings on fire.<sup>8</sup> So while Wagner involvement in illicit economies is important in and of itself, the group's entrenchment in African countries – primarily authoritarian regimes – facilitated by its illicit activities, simply extends its window of opportunity to carry out apparent human rights abuses against civilians.

### Wagner Group – entrenching its role in illicit economies?

Controlled by a close ally of Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner Group appears to offer a package of services designed to appeal to autocratic leaders: mercenary troops who can help ensure territorial control; and political strategists who can manipulate and shape public debate using social media and, at times, disinformation.<sup>9</sup> In return, as various reported examples show, Wagner seeks commercial gain, not just in cash but in access to natural resources, particularly in mining, which it exploits through a complex network of linked companies.

The group has expanded rapidly across Africa following its first documented military engagement on the continent, when around 500 troops were deployed to Sudan in late 2017.<sup>10</sup> In 2022, Wagner troops were deployed in the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Libya and Sudan. Meanwhile, Wagner's political

influence operations have been active in several other African countries.

Wagner has been accused of using whatever means necessary – including criminal activity on a vast scale – to achieve its apparent aims of commercial gain and furthering Russian influence.<sup>11</sup> International NGOs, independent and UN experts and the media have all levelled accusations at the group: from the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians in its military engagements to disinformation campaigns and election-rigging, to industrial-scale smuggling of natural resources.<sup>12</sup>

For example, Wagner’s gold mining operations in Sudan and its proximity to the country’s military leaders are being used to carry out gold smuggling on an extensive scale.<sup>13</sup> This has allegedly intensified since the start of the war with Ukraine, to bolster Russia’s gold reserves and counter Western sanctions.<sup>14</sup>

**Central African Republic – diluting presence but retaining influence**

CAR is the most well-developed example of the Wagner business model in Africa. Wagner has provided President Faustin-Archange Touadéra with military and political

strategy support. This has proven pivotal in sustaining Touadéra’s embattled presidency against an onslaught of rebel groups and has led to Wagner taking a leading role in CAR’s security apparatus. Clashes between Wagner personnel and rebel groups continued into 2022. In March 2022, at least seven people were killed after Wagner troops were ambushed by militants from the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic rebel group.<sup>15</sup> Two months earlier, the Russians had allegedly been responsible for the massacre of more than 30 civilians in what was purportedly a targeted operation against the Union for Peace rebel group.<sup>16</sup> The mercenaries have, in fact, been accused of the killing and torture of civilians on several occasions.<sup>17</sup>

In exchange for their services, the Wagner Group appears to have developed a large footprint in CAR’s economy, with access to natural resources, such as gold, diamonds and timber. Wagner-linked companies have been granted access to natural resources by the CAR government, often expropriating existing rights granted to other companies.

Outside of the mining concessions that Wagner has been able to gain control over, the group has also been accused



**Gold miners at Ndassima gold mine, 40 kilometres from Bambari, in the eastern part of the Central African Republic.**

*Photo: Thierry Bresillon/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

of looting and smuggling diamonds and gold. In Lobaye, as far back as 2019, Wagner has reportedly been covertly buying diamonds from local collectors.<sup>18</sup> The group has also allegedly purchased gold and diamonds directly from rebel groups.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere in the country, Wagner troops have attacked artisanal mining communities and confiscated diamonds and gold.<sup>20</sup> For example, they were recently accused of taking over a local diamond sector in a conflict-affected area of CAR by force, via a diamond company the group is alleged to control.<sup>21</sup>

In the first half of 2022 alone, Wagner reportedly carried out attacks on mines in at least six different locations in CAR – attacks that appear to be ‘more like raids for plunder’, as opposed to strategic attempts to secure and extract resources in the medium to short term.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, there have been reports of Russian nationals manning customs points, including at the border entering Garoua-Boulāi in Cameroon, a key transit point which plays an important role in gold flows, allegedly with the consent of the CAR government.<sup>23</sup>

In light of stretched resources resulting from military needs in Ukraine, Wagner is seemingly seeking to extract rents from as many informal and illicit economies as possible. According to a UN source, the group is reportedly looking to exploit the annual cattle migration into CAR from neighbouring Cameroon and Chad, which takes place each year between November and April. Armed groups are known to draw substantial resources from this, either by engaging in cattle theft directly or by providing protection to herders.<sup>24</sup>

### **Mali – the latest theatre for Wagner’s operations**

Since the first Wagner troops arrived in Bamako in November 2021, at least 1 000 Wagner officers have been deployed in Mali, primarily across the central regions but also further afield.<sup>25</sup> The relationship between the Malian military and France, Mali’s former main international partner, worsened to the extent that Paris put an end to Operation Barkhane, its counterterrorism mission in Mali in mid-August 2022.<sup>26</sup> Russia has been sowing anti-French and pro-Russian sentiment in Mali for over five years, cultivated via a sophisticated use of soft power and social media.<sup>27</sup> But the end of Operation Barkhane opened a window of opportunity for even greater Russian military engagement in Mali.<sup>28</sup>

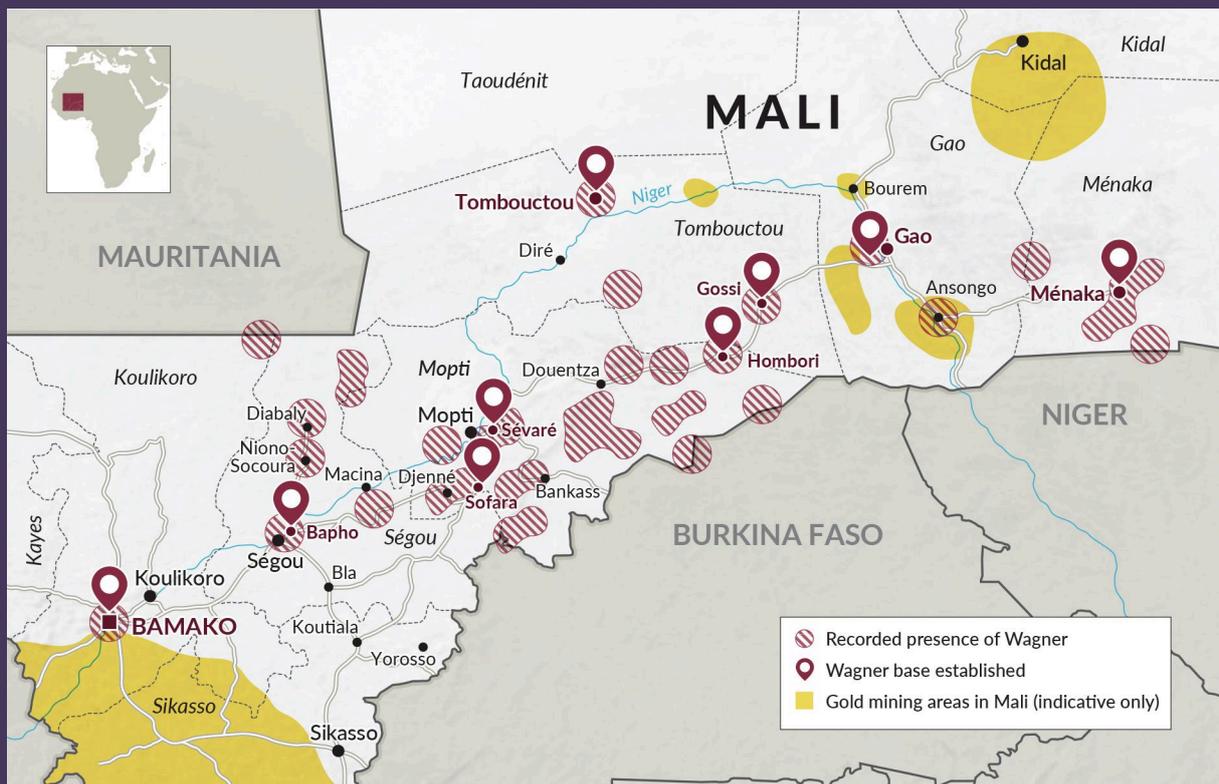
The Wagner Group do not carry out operations alone, instead carrying out patrols alongside the Malian armed

forces and self-defence militias. Since their arrival in Mali, the Russian mercenaries have been repeatedly implicated in operations that have targeted and killed civilians. In March 2022, several hundred civilians were killed in the village of Moura in an attack allegedly involving the Wagner Group; in October, the group was once again accused of a civilian massacre in the same central region of Mopti.<sup>29</sup> Islamist armed groups across the Sahel regularly exploit intercommunal tensions and grievances against the government, and the fact that the victims of the latest massacre in which the Russian mercenaries are implicated all belonged to the Fulani community is likely to simply exacerbate such grievances.<sup>30</sup> As JNIM continues its recruitment approach of winning ‘hearts and minds’, Wagner activity has simply ‘created more fertile ground for such outreach efforts’.<sup>31</sup>

Wagner may have Mali’s gold mining sector in its sights. Obtaining payment through mining concessions is part of a clear Wagner playbook adopted by the group across a range of its engagements in Africa; were similar strategies to be underway in Mali, it is likely that such entry points are already being exploited.<sup>32</sup> A lack of public information on how Wagner has been paid by Mali’s junta has spurred speculation that Wagner may be given access to mining concessions in the future, as an alternative form of payment. While some media investigations have claimed that Wagner has established gold mining companies in Mali,<sup>33</sup> our research has not been able to independently verify these claims. It remains to be seen in future whether, as international observers expect, Wagner will develop the same mechanisms for exploiting mining resources and smuggling in Mali as they have in Sudan and CAR.<sup>34</sup>

### **Where will Wagner go in 2023?**

As the war in Ukraine has not turned into the quick victory that Putin expected, some Wagner troops have been withdrawn from deployment in Africa to redirect forces towards Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> Unofficial estimates from local observers, UN and diplomatic staff in CAR, for example, suggest that the number of Wagner troops in the country has more than halved.<sup>36</sup> However, the vulnerability of the CAR government to rebel forces means that the mercenaries remain a powerful influence in CAR’s security apparatus. In addition, the situation in Ukraine has not prevented Wagner from deploying troops in new environments such as Mali.



**FIGURE 3** Wagner Group areas of operation in Mali.

Source: GI-TOC, ACLED and MENASTREAM, adapted from Jules Duhamel, Areas of operation – Wagner Group (Mali), 24 July 2022, <https://julesduhamel.wordpress.com/2022/07/24/areas-of-operation-wagner-group-mali-2>.

In fact, some evidence suggests that Wagner may be aiming to expand into new territories. In Burkina Faso, events surrounding coups in January and September 2022 have fuelled Western fears that Wagner will begin operating there. Following the January coup, another Russian private military company – the Officers Union for International Security (COSI)<sup>37</sup> – publicly offered the new Burkinabé government Russian military ‘instructors’. COSI represents the Russian military ‘instructors’ in CAR.<sup>38</sup>

The question of whether Burkina Faso would align itself with France (its former colonial power) or with Russia became a central part of the country’s political turmoil. In their announcement of the September coup on state TV, the latest coup leaders declared their wish to seek ‘other [international] partners ready to help us in our fight against terrorism’.<sup>39</sup> In late January 2023, a spokesman for the Burkinabé government announced that they were giving all French special forces soldiers

one month to depart the country.<sup>40</sup> This came shortly after French authorities announced they had received a letter demanding the departure of its ambassador to Burkina Faso.<sup>41</sup>

The latest coup saw hundreds of protestors in Ouagadougou waving Russian flags, attacking a French embassy and cultural centre,<sup>42</sup> and holding Russian flags atop UN armoured vehicles.<sup>43</sup> This was an escalation of other pro-Russia protests seen in the wake of the January coup and the months since.

Prigozhin made several supportive statements following both coups.<sup>44</sup> The September coup could, according to certain analysts, mark the first instance of Russia directly instigating a coup, rather than simply capitalizing on it.<sup>45</sup> Others, however, strongly disagree. According to a Burkinabé security analyst, for example, claims of Russian involvement in initiating the coup in

September are ‘completely false – the coup was the direct result of [former interim president] Damiba’s leadership, who was more interested in playing politics and restoring the old regime.’<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Burkina Faso’s Minister of Foreign affairs has recently denied any link between the government and Wagner, arguing that state soldiers and members of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, a self-defence armed group, are ‘the Wagner of Burkina Faso’,<sup>47</sup> in a statement appearing to suggest they have no intention of seeking the support of Wagner troops.

While most focus has been on Burkina Faso, increasingly close military ties between Russia and other countries in the region, such as Cameroon, with whom Russia signed a military deal in April 2022, have also raised concerns among Western players.<sup>48</sup> It is not just international actors showing concern about possible Wagner involvement in the region. The president of Ghana publicly alleged that Burkina Faso had already entered into an agreement with the mercenaries, offering them a mine in exchange for their services – claims that, however, are not supported by any evidence thus far and has been denied by the Burkinabé authorities.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, given the resources required to finance and man the ongoing war in Ukraine, and significant investment in Mali, Wagner may be spread too thin to expand operations into new territories, such as Burkina Faso, even if invited to do so. Reports of Wagner recruiting from prisons in Russia since mid-2022 highlight the extent of their stretched human resources.<sup>50</sup> Where Wagner will source their manpower will therefore be an important question going forward.

From a strategic point of view, we can also expect Wagner to deepen its economic footprint in West Africa and CAR in 2023, particularly in high-value sectors such as gold and diamonds. As Russia continues to be economically isolated by sanctions, maintaining flows of gold into Russia – obtained through Prigozhin’s network of companies or smuggled by Wagner troops – secures an economic lifeline.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Russian presence in several West African countries continues to contribute, indirectly and in some cases directly, to growing instability across the region.

This article draws on research from an upcoming GI-TOC report entitled ‘The grey zone: Russia’s military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa’, written

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