

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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## Summary highlights



**Drug distribution markets are key to the economic resilience of the Yandaba, perpetrators of significant political violence surrounding the 2023 elections in Kano, Nigeria.**

Significant violence during the 2023 electoral process in Kano underscores how violence – and the threat of violence – shape Nigeria’s elections, despite new legislation and increased security deployments. The key actors behind this violence – the Yandaba, who carry out acts of violence on behalf of politicians during election periods – are also key players in Kano’s criminal markets. Between election cycles, the Yandaba draw revenue from drug trafficking to sustain themselves; profits from domestic distribution of drugs are central to the Yandaba’s economic resilience. To protect democratic processes from being subverted by violence, responses must address Yandaba’s entrenched role in Kano’s politics by targeting their political sponsors and increasing the reputational cost to those who finance political violence.



**Decreasing tensions between peace agreement signatory groups in Mali may benefit trafficking flows.**

Recent developments indicate that the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement, made between the Malian government, the Plateforme des Mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d’Alger (Algiers Platform of 14 June 2014) and the Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements – CMA), may be on the verge of collapse. However, while tensions between the military government in Bamako and the CMA are at breaking point, signatory armed groups, which used to fight one another, have grown closer. With security, political and criminal interests intertwined in northern Mali, any shifts that take place in the political landscape are likely to influence illicit economies. Although it is too early to determine how the changing security landscape will affect illicit economies in northern Mali, preliminary analysis suggests the decreasing hostility between signatory groups may benefit trafficking flows.





### **Motorbike trafficking is critical to armed groups' mobility in the Sahel.**

Motorbike bans are a strategy frequently used by Sahelian states seeking to inhibit armed group activity, given armed groups' reliance on this form of transport. While the movement of armed groups is, to an extent, limited by such measures, the collateral damage caused to communities and their livelihoods is substantial. Motorbikes' centrality to Sahelian livelihoods makes them one of the most widely trafficked commodities in the Sahel, and one of the most understudied trafficking sectors in West Africa. We dive into the Sahel's motorbike trafficking trade, underscoring how it is central to resourcing armed groups, and highlighting the need for alternative approaches that would succeed in reducing the supply of motorbikes to armed groups while limiting the harm to communities.



### **ISWAP's extortion racket in northern Cameroon experiences growing backlash from communities.**

Since establishing themselves as the dominant faction of the group formerly known as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have tended to refrain from the levels of violence against civilians carried out by the other Boko Haram faction, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad. However, a reported increase in ISWAP violence directed at civilians may be linked to growing resistance to 'taxes' they impose among the communities they seek to control. In 2022, military responses to ISWAP heightened the group's need for additional resources, which they have sought by upping their tax rates on communities. However, as ISWAP's imposed system of taxation shifts from a consensual arrangement to one more akin to extortion, residents of Cameroon's Lake Chad region are increasingly reluctant to adhere to it, raising concerns of escalation in the targeting of civilians in the region. Any erosion of ISWAP's legitimacy could create entry points for debunking its hold on local criminal economies, and position as an alternative governance provider.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

In the wake of Nigeria's 2023 elections, a key theme of the seventh issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa explores how the intersection between politics and criminal economies shapes instability in Nigeria and looks across the region to Mali. We also trace armed group supply chains – scrutinizing the motorbike trafficking trade, which underpins armed group mobility in the Sahel – and how Islamic State West Africa Province's (ISWAP) mafia-style protection racket in northern Cameroon is engendering growing pushback from communities, with drastic impacts on violence meted out against civilians.

In the first quarter of 2023, despite new electoral legislation and the mobilization of security forces, violence, and the threat thereof, strongly influenced electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Political gangs – many with entrenched interests in criminal economies – were at the centre of much of this violence. The first article of this issue focuses on the role of Yandaba gangs in perpetrating electoral violence in Kano, underscoring how drugs trafficking operates as a

crucial element of the gang's economic resilience, illustrating a trend seen across the country.

In northern Mali, although tensions between the military government in Bamako and groups signatories to the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement are at breaking point, signatory armed groups are increasingly bound together in the face of a common threat – Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). The second article of this issue explores how, in a region where security, political and criminal interests intertwine, these recent shifts in the political landscape may influence illicit economies, potentially benefitting trafficking routes in northern Mali.

The third and fourth articles form part of a broader workstream focusing on armed groups' criminal behaviours and supply chains. First we investigate a vastly understudied yet critically important illicit economy – motorbike trafficking – exploring the purchasing habits of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and IS Sahel, and considering the questionable effectiveness of prevalent responses to the recognized

importance of motorbikes to armed groups – motorbike bans. Finally, we consider the consequences of growing extortion of communities in northern Cameroon by ISWAP – a central player in the area’s licit and illicit economies – with steep increases in taxation

engendering a spike in violence against civilians. Throughout the issue, we consider how these dynamics can inform responses, and explore the effectiveness of existing response frameworks.

# Drug distribution markets are key to the economic resilience of the Yandaba, perpetrators of significant political violence surrounding the 2023 elections in Kano, Nigeria.

On 25 February, Umar Ilya (not his real name) was among the first voters to arrive at the polling station in the Dala area in Kano Municipal, which has one of the largest voter populations in a state prone to electoral violence. Shortly after 9 a.m., just minutes after the voter accreditation process had started, local political gangs known as Yandaba stormed the polling station, threatening to harm anyone who refused to leave. No strangers to Yandaba violence, most voters stepped back, allowing the armed thugs to destroy ballot boxes and ballot papers. Ilya was among the few to resist. 'As we were protesting against the attack, the armed thugs charged at us and one of them injured me with a dagger. I was taken to hospital, where I remained until voting ended,' he said.<sup>1</sup> Ilya was one of many Nigerian citizens whose voting was determined by violent actors, with many commentators pointing to widespread irregularities during Nigeria's 2023 gubernatorial and state assembly elections. The Yandaba's resilience over time is in large part due to their ability to draw revenue from drug distribution, intertwining politics and crime in Kano.

In the run up to Nigeria's competitive February presidential and national assembly elections, fears of electoral violence were high. The electoral process itself, which resulted in Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) being declared winner by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), was marred by allegations of vote rigging, violence and intimidation, although unfolding events bucked expected trends in some regions. The governorship and state legislature elections, which took place on 18 March, were even more violent, with criminal gangs openly attacking voters and electoral officials and disrupting voting in many polling units across the country, particularly in Lagos, Rivers and Kano states.

Kano is northern Nigeria's most populous city and among the areas hardest hit by electoral violence since 1999.<sup>2</sup> Events surrounding the 2023 elections in Kano

illustrate how violence continues to deeply shape Nigeria's elections, despite new electoral legislation and increased security deployments. Furthermore, actual violent events are only a part of the picture. The mere threat (i.e., a community's perceived likelihood) of violence, a product of more than two decades of electoral cycles shaped by violence, has real effects. Though far more difficult to monitor and quantitatively assess, the pervasive sense of fear that characterizes election periods insidiously affects electoral dynamics.

The high degree of violence in Kano, in contrast to certain other areas such as Plateau State, is likely to be at least in part due to the deep entrenchment of Yandaba in Kano's politics. Criminal markets, particularly the drug trafficking market, have been central to the Yandaba's resilience, enabling the groups to survive periods of non-deployment, and be ready to mete out violence at the behest of politicians during the next election cycle.

## Evolution of gangs and electoral violence in Kano

The Yandaba gangs emerged in Kano in the 1970s as dominant political thugs, following the erosion of influence of the Yanbanga, previously the main criminal players in the political landscape.<sup>3</sup> Since 1999, Yandaba gangs have become increasingly entrenched in Kano's political landscape, playing a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of elections through violence and intimidation.<sup>4</sup>

Political actors have become increasingly reliant on the Yandaba, contributing to a considerable rise in violence in Kano State in the lead up to and during election cycles.<sup>5</sup> While the Yandaba are most visible during electoral cycles, their influence is not limited to these periods. As a reward for service, a number of Yandaba members have been appointed to government positions, where they represent gang interests.

### Illicit economies as an economic resilience mechanism for Yandaba gangs

During the period of military rule that followed the 1983 coup in Nigeria, the services of Yandaba were no longer needed by the ousted politicians, which cut off the gangs' principal source of finance. The 1986 structural adjustment programme compounded this by further narrowing employment opportunities, making many young people vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs.<sup>6</sup>

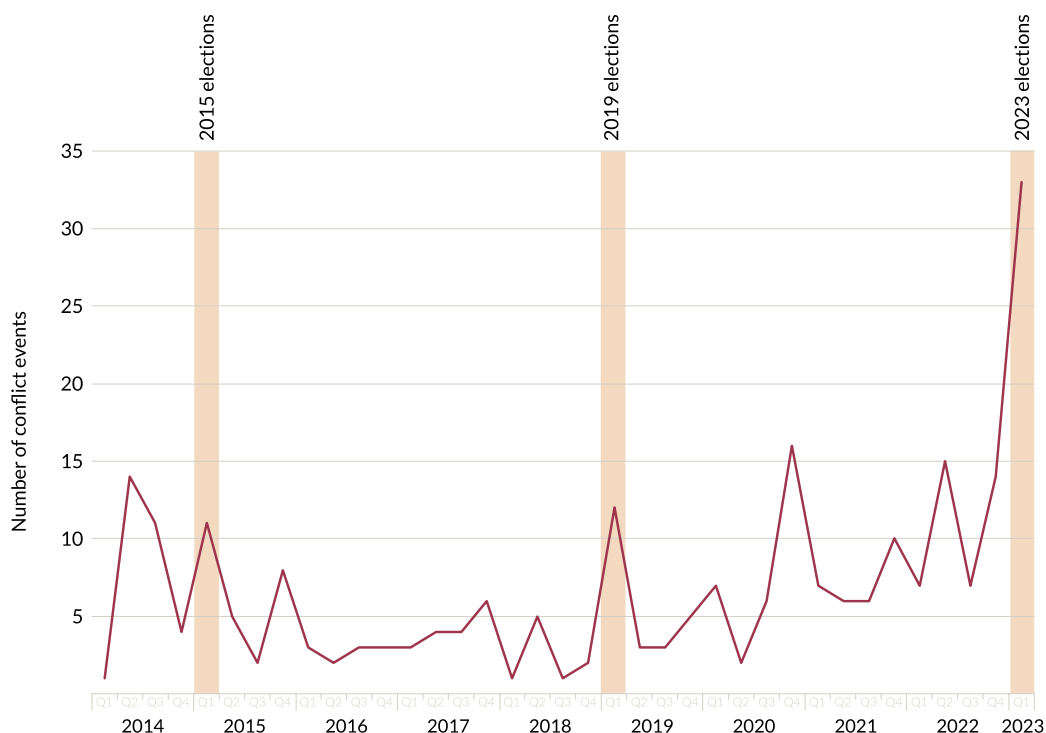
The Yandaba sought alternative funding streams, and Kano's growing drug market became a key source of income. Since the 1980s, the Yandaba have evolved from drug users to critical players in drug distribution, strategically positioning themselves as dealers of commonly abused drugs, including cannabis, diazepam and, from the early 2010s, tramadol.<sup>7</sup>

Analyses of gangs and drugs in Kano have portrayed Yandaba gang members primarily as drug users, largely ignoring the Yandaba's systemic role in drug distribution.<sup>8</sup> Whereas drug use is important for 'identity formation and demonstration of toughness',<sup>9</sup> drug

trafficking has arguably become the central source of financing for Yandaba outside election periods, when their services are not required by political actors. The drug market therefore underpins Yandaba's economic resilience, and consequent entrenchment into the political structures of Kano.

Yandaba have diversified across drug supply chains over the years, supplying cannabis and Rohypnol since the 1980s, and codeine and tramadol as well as other pharmaceuticals since the initial years of the 2000s.<sup>10</sup> While Yandaba are central to distribution feeding Kano's significant local consumption market, they are not key players in the transit trade of drugs moving through Kano from southern maritime entry points to northern regions of Nigeria, or across the border to Niger and onwards to Mali and Libya.<sup>11</sup>

Law enforcement actors have repeatedly tracked a surge in supply of drugs to Kano in the run up to electoral cycles. Drugs are key during mobilization and are usually supplied before the gang members are deployed during electoral periods. A gang leader explained that his gang



**FIGURE 1** Number of conflict events in Kano State, 2014–2023.

Note: Observers in Kano State agreed that figures are likely to be a significant under-representation of political violence events. While these figures provide some insights into trends, they do not show a holistic picture.

Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

of about 70 members consume codeine, tramadol and cannabis worth N500 000 before carrying out an operation.<sup>12</sup> 'That is why during politicking, there is a lot of influx of these substances, and that is also when we make a lot of arrests and seizures,' revealed a drug law enforcement officer.<sup>13</sup>

The Yandaba's funding streams operate in cycles. In the lead-up to elections, their primary source of income comes from political actors. However, it is their involvement in illicit economies, most notably the illicit trade in drugs and pharmaceuticals, that sustains the Yandaba outside of election periods when politicians no longer need their services. This enables the gangs to survive and be ready to operate during the next political cycle. The Yandaba's central role in Kano's political processes intrinsically binds political and criminal interests, baking criminal agendas into political decision making, as politicians are bound to repay services commissioned during electoral cycles.

### **Political violence in Kano's 2023 elections**

Yandaba carry out different types of electoral violence, including physical attacks on political opponents and their supporters or electoral officials; theft of voting materials, such as ballot boxes and papers, for vote rigging; the outright destruction of voting materials; and other means of directly disrupting voting processes. Yandaba also prevent supporters of political opponents from voting through threats and intimidation.

Yandaba gangs choose the type of violence to deploy strategically depending on the end goal. For example, the destruction of voting materials and intimidation of voters are deployed in areas where a political opponent is popular and is likely to emerge victorious.

In the run up to the 2023 elections in Kano, the ruling APC and its main challenger, the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), traded accusations of plots to use Yandaba to disrupt the polls. The parties accused each other of recruiting thugs from outside the state and some neighbouring countries.<sup>14</sup> State police command warned of a similar plot.<sup>15</sup> These warnings, together with open calls to violence by some political party members, fostered an atmosphere of fear in the state.<sup>16</sup>

Fears crystallized on 25 February, the day of presidential elections. In line with previous electoral trends, violence reached new heights on the day of the governorship elections on 18 March. Voters were

chased away from polling units, and ballot papers and boxes destroyed in various parts of Kano state, including in Dala, Filin Chiranchi, Kabuga, Kankarofi and Gawuna. In Layin Maiunguwa, an inner-city location of Dala local government area (LGA), police used tear gas to disperse a violent Yandaba gang that was attacking and injuring voters.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, Kano residents pointed to violence playing a significant role in the 2023 electoral process, correlating with ACLED data. There have been shifts in the kinds of violence perpetrated: while the theft of ballot boxes and ballot papers has been a central element of Yandaba electoral violence since 1999, in the 2023 elections, violence was directed at intimidating and attacking voters and electoral officials and destroying voting materials. This shift was in part due to the introduction of a new electronic voting system, known as the Bimodal Voter Registration System, which made ballot box theft redundant. In contrast to previous elections, Yandaba members also distributed food, clothing and other items at polling stations to curry favour with voters, playing a more complex role in influencing outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

### **Political violence events as the tip of the iceberg**

In Kano, and more broadly across Nigerian states that have suffered repeated cycles of electoral violence, fear of gang violence around elections has become deeply entrenched.<sup>19</sup> This fear shapes residents' voting decisions and means that many potential voters do not come out to vote, with important implications for electoral outcomes. Consequently, Yandaba gangs do not necessarily need to engage in direct acts of violence to influence election outcomes, and the metrics of violent incidents in Kano and beyond are likely to under-represent the importance of the threat of political violence in determining democratic processes. An elderly mother who had voted in most of Nigeria's previous elections since the 1980s did not vote in the 2023 elections, noting: 'I was afraid of violence, so I didn't go out or allow my daughters to go and vote [...]. Even while I remained at home, I kept praying that nobody should fight.'<sup>20</sup>

While recent measures against electoral violence in Nigeria, particularly the new electoral legislation and increase in security deployments, have reduced incidents of ballot box theft, they have not resulted in an overall reduction in violence.

## CRIMINAL GANGS AND ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN KANO STATE, NIGERIA



Crucially, the new measures do not address the fear that many years of electoral violence have instilled, which keeps people from coming out to vote for their preferred candidates. Neither do these measures tackle the financial sponsors of the Yandaba and other perpetrators of political violence. To effectively protect democratic processes from being subverted through violence, response strategies must recognize and address the entrenchment of Yandaba in Kano's politics, targeting their political sponsors and enhancing the reputational cost of financing political violence. Supporting

investigations – by state financial investigative units and journalists alike – to track and publicize political financing of Yandaba would be an important step towards achieving this.



**Voters queue to cast their ballots at a polling station in Kano during Nigeria's presidential and general election, February 2023.**

Photo: Kola Sulaimon/AFP via Getty Images

## Notes

- 1 Interview with a victim of electoral violence, Kano, March–April 2023.
- 2 Oboh Eromonsele Samuel, Flashpoints to watch ahead of 2023 elections, *Daily Trust*, 19 December 2022, <https://dailytrust.com/potential-flashpoints-to-watch-ahead-of-2023-elections/Potential>.
- 3 Usman Da'u Aliyu, Behaviour problem: The case of 'Yandaba' in Kano, Nigeria, *Sokoto Educational Review*, 15, 2 (2014), 69–80.
- 4 Interview with a former member of a Yanbanga gang, Kano, 26 December 2022.
- 5 Interview with a political party official, 24 December 2022; see also ACLED, <https://acleddata.com>.
- 6 Yunusa Zakari Ya'u, The youth, economic crisis and identity transformation: The case of the Yandaba in Kano, in Attahiru Jega (ed), *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet (Uppsala) and the Centre for Research and Documentation (Kano), 2000, pp 161–180.
- 7 Interview with a former member of a Yanbanga gang, Kano, 26 December 2022; Interview with a journalist, radio anchor and coordinator of an anti-Yandaba awareness programme, Kano, 13 December 2022.
- 8 Tajudeen Suleiman, In Kano, politicians, thuggery fuel addiction, *Sahara Reporters*, 12 February 2019, <https://saharareporters.com/2019/02/04/kano-politicians-thuggery-fuel-addiction>; Abeeb Olufemi Salaam, Street life involvement and substance abuse among 'Yandaba' in Kano, Nigeria, *African Journal of Drug and Alcohol Studies*, 10, 2 (2011), 119–129.
- 9 Cannabis is typically the drug of choice. Abeeb Olufemi Salaam, Street life involvement and substance abuse among 'Yandaba' in Kano, Nigeria, *African Journal of Drug and Alcohol Studies*, 10, 2 (2011), 119–129.
- 10 Although cocaine and heroin are known to be consumed by some leaders of the Yandaba, there is no evidence that Yandaba are involved in their distribution. Interviews with Yandaba gang members, November 2022.
- 11 Interview with an National Drug Law Enforcement Agency officer, Kano, 28 November 2023.
- 12 Interview with a Yandaba leader, Kano, 21 November 2022.
- 13 Interview with an National Drug Law Enforcement Agency officer, Kano, 28 November 2023.
- 14 Abubakar Ahmadu Maishanu, Elections: Tension in Kano as police, political parties allege importation of foreign thugs, *Premium Times*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/586664-election-tension-in-kano-as-police-political-parties-allege-importation-of-foreign-thugs.html>.
- 15 They did not specify the responsible parties or politicians. Ifeoluwa Akinola, Guber election: Police warn of election violence plots in Kano, *Tribune Online*, 6 March 2023, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/guber-election-police-warns-of-election-violence-plots-in-kano>.
- 16 Segun Adewole, DSS arrest 2 for inciting violence in Kano, *Punch*, 16 March 2023, <https://punchng.com/dss-arrests-two-for-inciting-violence-in-kano>.
- 17 Interviews with residents, law enforcement and civil society, Kano, 18 March 2023.



18 Openly engaging in voter inducement can be grounds for opponents to challenge the outcome of the polls in the courts, as such practice is considered electoral fraud in Nigeria, and the Yandaba therefore resisted attempts to record these activities. As a result, a journalist working with a local radio station was attacked by a group of Yandaba who accused him of filming them handing out food items to voters. Abdulmumin Murtala, NUJ condemns attack on journalist covering elections in Kano,

*Vanguard*, 21 March 2023, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/03/nuj-condemns-attack-on-journalist-covering-election-in-kano>.

19 Interviews with members of civil society, voters and journalists, Kano, March 2023.

20 Interview with a voter, Kano, April 2023.

# Decreasing tensions between peace agreement signatory groups in Mali may benefit trafficking flows.

In a leaked confidential letter sent from Malian transitional authorities to the head of the international mediation team on 24 February 2023, the government accused the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements – CMA, an alliance of rebel groups) of behaving in a way that is 'an obstacle to peace'.<sup>1</sup> The letter claimed there had been 11 violations of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement (among them a series of securitization operations, such as the reopening of checkpoints and conducting of patrols in Mali's northern regions of Kidal, Gao, Ménaka and Timbuktu) and broadly alleged that there was growing collusion between the CMA and terrorist groups.<sup>2</sup>

The letter also questioned the credibility of the international mediation team,<sup>3</sup> and concluded that 'the government, while remaining committed to the intelligent implementation of the agreement, will automatically reject any accusation that it is responsible for the possible consequences of its violation'.<sup>4</sup> This has been interpreted by some, including members of the CMA, to be a 'not so well-hidden threat'.<sup>5</sup>

This letter comes within a broader context of increasing tensions between signatory armed groups and the military government, including the December 2022 decision of the CMA and Plateforme des Mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger (Algiers Platform of 14 June 2014 – 'Plateforme', a coalition of pro-government armed groups from northern Mali) to suspend their participation in the peace agreement's monitoring committee, citing the lack of political will on the part of the transitional authorities.<sup>6</sup>

Some, including a member of the national transitional council, the legislative organ during Mali's transition, believe that the resumption of hostilities is inevitable.<sup>7</sup> Elements within the CMA are increasingly frustrated, with one member interviewed in Gao saying that they 'are not afraid of these threats and we are just waiting for them [the Malian military forces] on the battlefield'.<sup>8</sup> After almost eight years of frustration with the slow implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, the CMA member has concluded that 'enough is enough'.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to these growing tensions, signatory groups in northern Mali are increasingly aligned. We consider how these important shifts in relationships – between the military government and within distinct signatory groups – affect northern Mali's trafficking dynamics, in which signatory armed groups play a major role.

## **How politics, peace processes and illicit interests intertwine in northern Mali**

Illicit economies, armed conflict and state interests have long been intimately linked in northern Mali. Since the 1990s, when hashish began transiting the region, long-standing informal trading patterns have become overlaid with routes for trafficking higher value commodities, including cocaine (since the initial years of the 2000s) and gold (from about 2011).<sup>10</sup> More structured networks have evolved around these commodities, with higher profits starting to penetrate the political infrastructure of the Malian state.

The 2012 crisis – when Tuareg rebel groups took up arms against the government, with the support of violent extremist groups – forced these networks to widen their allegiances.<sup>11</sup> Profits from illicit economies fed into the insurgency, and networks later allied themselves with powerful armed groups, including signatory groups (CMA and Plateforme).<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the connection between trafficking and the separatist uprising in the 2010s, one former smuggler in Gao noted: 'Trafficking drugs became a real mindset in that period and a strategic asset to support or oppose the Azawad liberation'.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of the signing of the peace agreement in 2015, clashes continued between signatory groups, including over access to and control of trafficking routes.<sup>14</sup>

Despite trafficking being a clear source of instability in northern Mali, and posing a broader threat due to the vested interests of state elements in the revenues stemming from illicit economies,<sup>15</sup> the topic was deliberately avoided during the negotiation of the 2015 peace agreement.<sup>16</sup> The topic was deemed too sensitive, including for the mediation team, which could

not openly address it.<sup>17</sup> This is partly because, according to the UN, many negotiating parties themselves had trafficking interests.<sup>18</sup> While the stalemate of the peace agreement almost eight years after its signing is the result of several factors, one important obstacle to its implementation is that parties to the agreement may benefit financially (whether directly or indirectly) from revenues derived from illicit economies. Therefore, in the words of a UN diplomat in Bamako, 'no one wants to let it go'.<sup>19</sup>

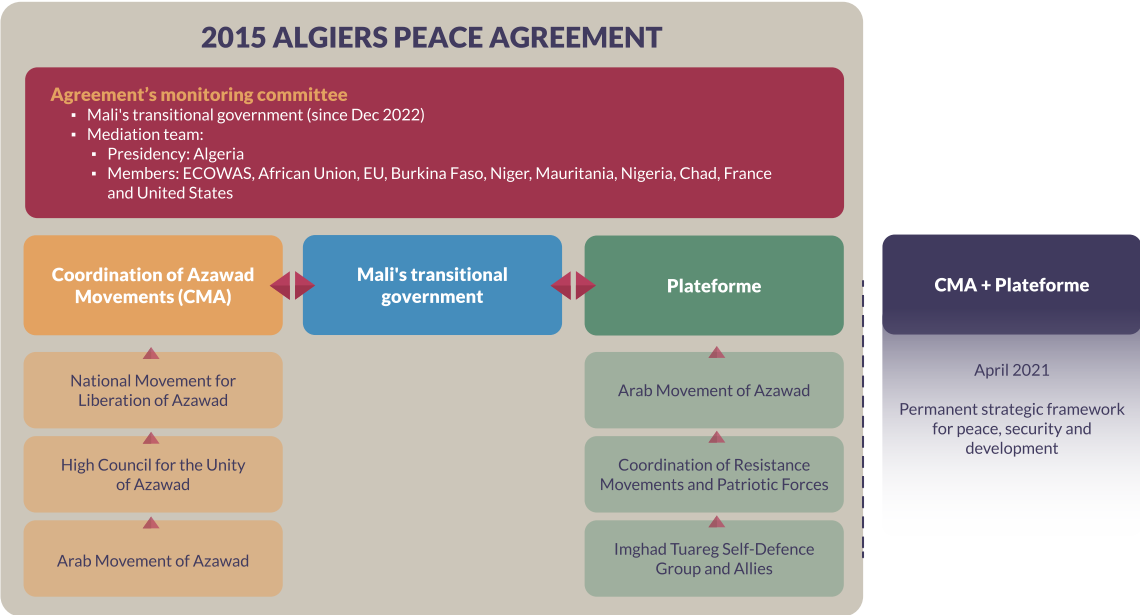
While the subject of illicit economies was taboo during the Algiers peace negotiation, the insecurity and violence stemming from trafficking was of concern to signatory groups. 'Too many weapons means too much tension ... means too much violence. All of this is bad for business and, ultimately, everyone loses,' noted a drug smuggler from Tabankort.<sup>20</sup> Tensions resulting from trafficking led the signatory groups to engage in the Anéfis talks, a series of three pacts signed in October 2015, October 2017 and January 2021 – each time following clashes between the two signatory groups (CMA and Plateforme) for control of strategic locations or checkpoints along vital smuggling routes.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the peace agreement, the Anéfis pacts were a series of non-aggression agreements between northern Mali's political, security and economic elites, negotiated without the government or the international community (although the latter did discreetly provide logistical support for the organization of the discussions).<sup>22</sup> The Anéfis pacts are among the few local

instruments to have helped reduce the intensity and severity of clashes directly or indirectly linked to trafficking in the region – with the pacts directly affecting trafficking flows and who controls them.<sup>23</sup> As local agreements tend to influence illicit economies, the fusion of the CMA and the group's greater cooperation with the Plateforme (within the CSP-PSD) may have a similar effect, reducing tensions and positively impacting trafficking.

Although the number of documented clashes related to illicit economies seems to have decreased in the last two years, this does not suggest that trafficking is in decline, or even that signatory groups are no longer involved in trafficking schemes. Paradoxically, the current situation in north-eastern Mali, marked by violent clashes between Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and signatory groups and the end of the French presence, has in some cases meant greater convergence between signatory groups and, to some extent, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).<sup>24</sup> While clashes used to regularly take place between JNIM and signatory groups, since 2021, they have agreed to a détente. This means that they do not directly attack each other, and that the CMA does not collaborate with international forces.<sup>25</sup>

**Strengthened alliances amid growing tensions**

Since the second coup in May 2021, relations between previously conflicting signatory armed groups have warmed in parallel to growing tensions between the military government in Bamako and the CMA, calling



**FIGURE 1** Key actors in the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement.

## EVOLUTION OF THE 2015 ALGIERS PEACE AGREEMENT



into question the future of the peace agreement. The CMA and the Plateforme have joined to form the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (Permanent strategic framework for peace, security and development – CSP-PSD). The CSP-PSD is a coalition with the official goals of coordinating efforts to implement the agreement, protecting the population through a joint security mechanism, and enhancing economic and social cooperation in the north.

The growing alliances between signatory groups operating in the north and JNIM throughout 2022 has in large part been driven by a common threat – IS Sahel. IS Sahel has intensified its operations in the Gao and Ménaka regions, benefiting, among other things, from the withdrawal of French troops by the end of August 2022. The Malian armed forces are broadly perceived not to have responded to this growing threat (apart from conducting a small number of airstrikes).<sup>26</sup>

Stepping into the security gap, in February 2023, the CSP-PSD conducted a large-scale securitization operation in the south of Kidal, mobilizing over 2 500 people. For many, this demonstrated that both coalitions (rebel and pro-government groups) are the main players

in protecting communities against threats in Mali's northern territories.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the CMA announced the merger of its three components in February, unifying its armed forces under a single command to better respond to increased insecurity in northern Mali.<sup>28</sup>

While both developments suggest a strengthening of the CMA and the Plateforme, it is too early to conclusively determine how the shifting security landscape will impact illicit economies in northern Mali. However, preliminary analysis suggests that decreasing tensions between signatory groups may benefit trafficking flows. This is line with trends over the past decade, in which episodes of political turmoil in Bamako (such as coups) have had a more limited impact on illicit economies in northern Mali, while relationships between signatory groups and levels of violence in northern Mali and along trafficking routes are key factors affecting trafficking flows.<sup>29</sup>

### Looking forward: Impacts on illicit economies

It is not yet clear what effect the fusion of the CMA, and the coordination of large-scale securitization operations by the CSP-PSD, will have on illicit economies in northern Mali. However, interviews conducted in

February and March 2023 with members of signatory armed groups, transporters and smugglers indicate that all these stakeholders expect that growing collaboration will be good for the business of smugglers and traffickers, bringing greater cohesiveness to checkpoints and lowering risks of attack by rival groups.<sup>30</sup> The more [signatory groups] pool their resources together, the less incentive there will be for clashes,' noted a senior member of the negotiation team.<sup>31</sup>

For example, since late 2021, the CSP-PSD has been controlling N'tahaka mine – the largest artisanal gold mining site in Gao region – establishing checkpoints nearby and conducting patrols. Before the CSP-PSD takeover, no armed group was controlling the mine, and the site was regularly infiltrated by several unidentified groups, as well as bandits and IS Sahel.<sup>32</sup> The arrival of the CSP-PSD resulted in decreased insecurity and banditry events, such as armed robberies,<sup>33</sup> though the group was not able to fully protect the mine and the workers, according to a CSP member.<sup>34</sup> In the confidential 24 February letter, the government denounced the securitization of the N'thaka mine (and others in northern Kidal, without naming them) as

violating the peace agreement, as the mine site is considered illegal by the authorities. Meanwhile, most of the people working on the mine see the arrival of the CSP-PSD as a positive development, and feel more secure coming to work.<sup>35</sup>

The enhanced coordination of groups within the CMA, and within the CSP-PSD, is expected to decrease tensions over smuggling routes and especially the taxation of these routes. Taxing the passage of licit or illicit goods (such as fuel or weapons) and human smuggling flows is a main source of financing for armed groups. A member of the CMA explained that 40% of the taxation at a given checkpoint goes to the general funds of the group, 40% to vehicles (logistics, maintenance and refuelling of vehicles at the checkpoint) and 20% to the members of the group manning the checkpoint.<sup>36</sup> The more autonomy and freedom to operate checkpoints and to allow for the movement of goods and people, the better.

The impasse of the implementation of the peace agreement appears to have had little impact on illicit economies in northern Mali. However, while clashes



**Bilal Agh Cherif, secretary general of the Coordination of Azawad Movements, signs a preliminary peace agreement in Algiers, 14 May 2015.**

*Photo: Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo*

between the signatory groups seem unlikely, the possibility of resumption of hostilities between the government and the signatory groups is not to be discounted. If this

happens, armed confrontation is likely to curb trafficking flows, but illicit economies will remain central to resourcing the operations of signatory armed groups.

## Notes

- 1 Letter from the Malian transitional authorities, signed by Colonel Major Ismael Wague, minister for reconciliation, peace and social cohesion (the ministry in charge of the implementation of the peace agreement), to the head of the international mediation team, dated 24 February 2023.
- 2 Ibid.
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# Motorbike trafficking is critical to armed groups' mobility in the Sahel.

On 13 February 2023, Beninois authorities implemented temporary motorbike bans in municipalities affected by violent extremist armed groups. Cobly and Matéri municipalities in the country's north-western Atakora department banned circulation on motorbikes between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. until further notice, and on 17 February, Tanguiéta municipality followed suit.<sup>1</sup> The strategy of banning motorbikes has been frequently used by Sahelian states trying to inhibit armed group activity, given their reliance on this form of transport. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all used bans or curfews at various points in the armed conflict taking place in the Sahel over the past decade, as have neighbouring states affected by violence, such as Nigeria and, most recently, Benin.<sup>2</sup>

The widespread use of this strategy reflects the importance of motorbikes to violent extremist groups in the Sahel, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), as shown in Figure 1. Motorbikes are the prevalent form of transport for Sahelian non-state combatants, given their multiple advantages for the terrain they operate in. Yet motorbikes are also immensely important to a huge majority of Sahelian residents, meaning responses tackling motorbike use engender significant collateral damage. Motorbikes are cheaper than cars, much more fuel-efficient, manoeuvrable on poor road conditions, fast and repairable. Heavy motorbikes are especially important to navigate areas that are sandy, hilly or present poor road conditions.

Motorbikes' centrality to Sahelian livelihoods makes them one of the most widely trafficked commodities in the Sahel, and one of the most understudied trafficking sectors in West Africa. This article, and a forthcoming GI-TOC research report, dive into the Sahel's motorbike trafficking trade, underscoring how it is central to resourcing armed groups, and highlighting the need for alternative response frameworks.

## Illicit motorbike supply chains

It is worth considering what alternative approaches could limit armed groups' ability to move on motorbikes. The bans on motorbikes have shown limited success, but numerous disadvantages. Bans have seriously restricted

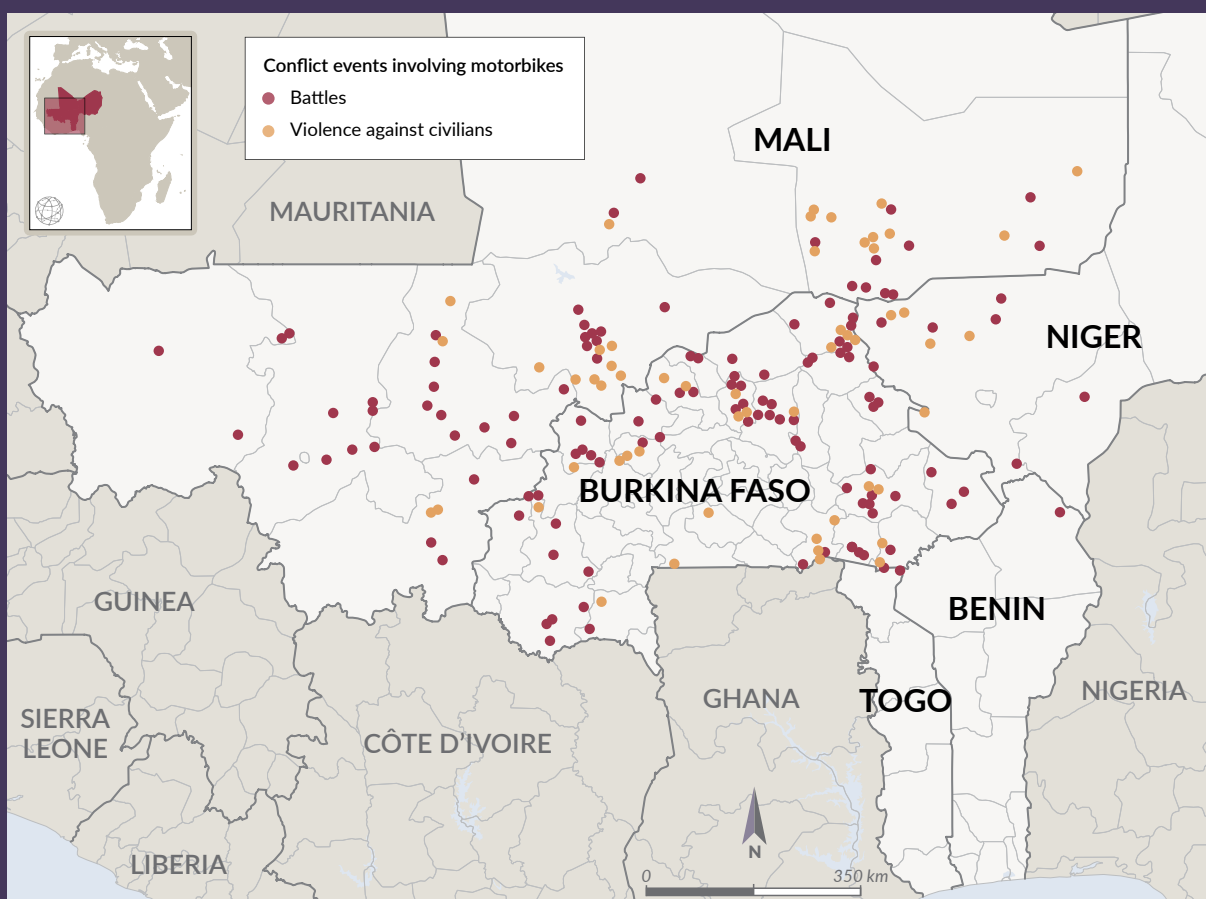
the mobility of residents in the affected areas, and have severely impacted local economies, schooling and many other aspects of daily life. Other parts of West Africa where motorbike bans have been used to counter armed groups have cautionary tales for the Sahel. Nigeria has experimented with motorbike bans to halt the violence perpetrated by armed groups and bandits, and reduce clashes between farmers and herders. In Zamfara State, commercial motorbike operators have been the principal victims of the policy.<sup>3</sup> In the Diffa region of Niger, the motorbike ban may have increased youths' attraction to Boko Haram, since the armed group offered them motorbikes they could no longer obtain.<sup>4</sup>

Could Sahelian armed groups instead be prevented from obtaining motorbikes in the first place? The dispersed nature of motorbike trafficking, the lack of regulation and the limited capacity of law enforcement services to address vehicle crime pose challenges to this. Motorbikes may be one of the most widely trafficked commodities in the Sahel, even if they do not attract the same level of policymakers' attention as other illicit commodities.<sup>5</sup> Obtaining data on the numbers of motorbikes illegally imported from coastal states is particularly difficult, but demand for them is extremely strong and Sahelian armed groups alone appear to be obtaining new motorbikes in the thousands each year.<sup>6</sup>

GI-TOC research has found that armed groups typically buy new motorbikes rather than second-hand ones.<sup>7</sup> There is an extensive trade in second-hand motorbikes in the Sahel and a widespread problem of motorbike theft – a crime that is often extremely violent. These stolen motorbikes are often broken down to sell as spare parts or are altered by mechanics to be resold.<sup>8</sup> However, it appears that armed groups prioritize the reliability of new motorbikes over the lower cost of used ones, owing to the rugged terrain they operate on and the high-risk operations they engage in.

The motorbikes that armed groups purchase follow many of the stages of the journey taken by motorbikes for the licit markets. Most of the motorbikes imported by Sahelian nationals come from China, and they are shipped to major ports in the coastal states of Togo, Nigeria, Benin and Ghana.<sup>9</sup> From there, licit traders





**FIGURE 1** Conflict events involving motorbikes in the Sahel, 2019 to 2023.

Note: Includes all battles and violence against civilians involving motorbike use by JNIM and IS Sahel.

Source: ACLED

importing motorbikes into Burkina Faso or Niger must declare them at the border for customs duties. JNIM and IS Sahel, however, are instead believed to be in contact with illicit motorbike traders. These traffickers may use a variety of methods, such as bribery or concealing motorbikes in containers of other goods when moving them over Sahelian borders.<sup>10</sup> Another common approach is to employ young drivers (referred to as *passeurs*) to drive the motorbikes over unguarded parts of the border or through crossings known to be favourable to smugglers.<sup>11</sup>

JNIM and IS Sahel are far from the only buyers of smuggled motorbikes. However, it appears that particular traffickers can become regular suppliers for armed groups. A Nigerien mediator who had dealt with

armed groups said that around 2017, elements of JNIM and IS Sahel in Tillabéri shared a motorbike supplier until the supplier attempted to pass off the motorbikes he delivered as a different brand, at which point the relationship ended.<sup>12</sup>

Although dealings with particular traffickers can be advantageous, and likely to form part of their present supply chain, the market for smuggled motorbikes is diffuse and they can be obtained in other ways. Small regional towns host regular markets to which a motorbike seller may bring dozens of bikes.<sup>13</sup> Armed groups have reportedly sent local youths to buy the motorbikes for them and deliver them to their bases.



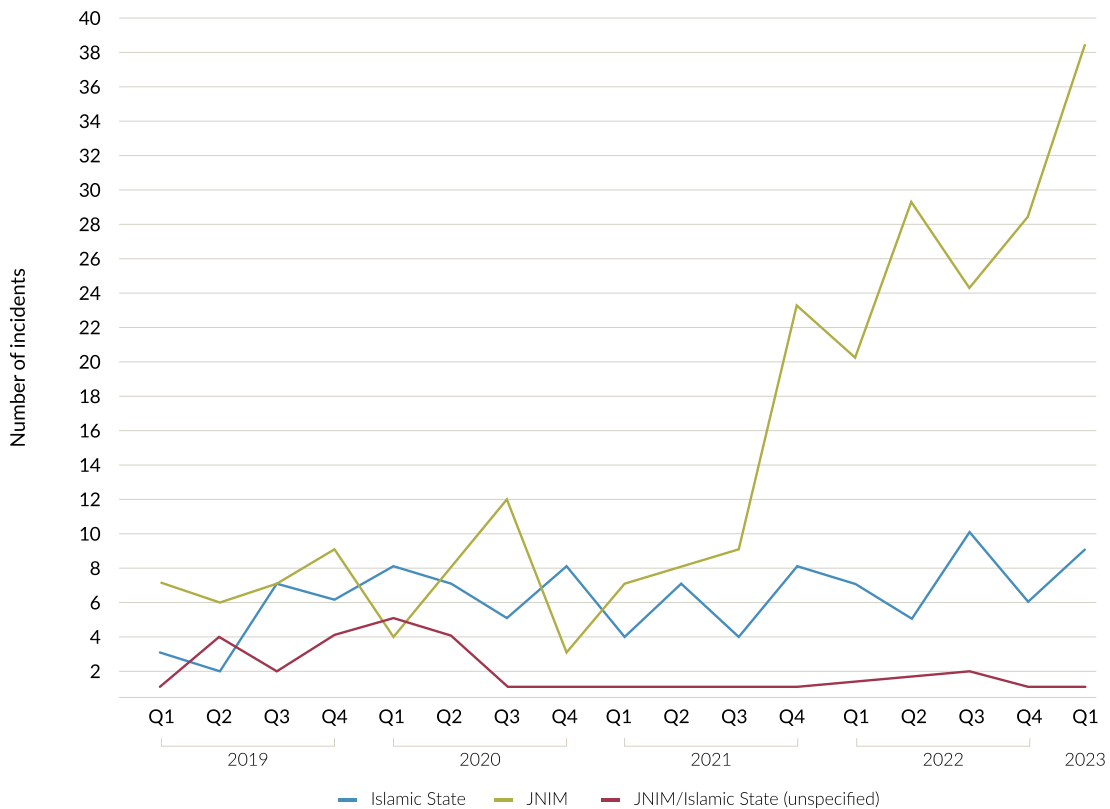
**Motorbikes and engines concealed in a truck containing bags of rice, seized near Ayourou, north-western Niger.**

Photo: Tillabéri police department

### Armed groups: A prolific customer base

What is striking is the large numbers of motorbikes armed groups appear to be buying.<sup>14</sup> A researcher in the Malian Gourma area estimates that each *markaz* (pl. *marakiz*, a command structure of local units) will order from several dozen to a hundred new motorbikes per month.<sup>15</sup> *Marakiz* vary substantially in size, with smaller ones numbering around a hundred fighters and the largest numbering several hundred fighters. Therefore, it is not possible to extrapolate exact totals from this data. However, the number of conflict events involving motorbikes has increased in recent years, as shown in Figure 2.

Data provided by the police department of Tillabéry, Niger, indicates comparable numbers. According to data provided by community members to the police, JNIM fighters in Tamou (Niger) and neighbouring Boutou (Burkina Faso) received 68 new motorbikes in three separate deliveries by local youth between May and July 2022.<sup>16</sup> Tamou is a well-known smuggling hub and it is likely that motorbikes are distributed to other JNIM units



**FIGURE 2 Conflict events involving motorbikes since 2019.**

Note: Includes all battles and violence against civilians involving motorbike use by JNIM and IS Sahel.

Source: ACLED

further afield from this area. Nevertheless, this means that dozens of motorbikes are being delivered monthly to JNIM in one location. Given how widespread motorbike smuggling is, it must be assumed that numerous other JNIM units are receiving similar numbers of new motorbikes every month and that the group therefore obtains several hundred new motorbikes every year, if not thousands.

This is a significant expenditure for JNIM and IS Sahel, and motorbike prices appear to be rising. Armed groups presently pay between CFA600 000 and CFA800 000 (approximately €915 to €1 200) per motorbike. Motorbike prices in the Sahel have risen substantially in recent years, with motorbike sellers and users saying that the average price was CFA450 000 to CFA550 000 for similar motorbikes (approximately €680 to €840) before 2019.<sup>17</sup> In addition to a rise in demand, the price increase is largely a result of the heightened insecurity in Burkina Faso, the primary transit country in the motorbike supply chain, which has made moving motorbikes through the country increasingly difficult.<sup>18</sup>

It also makes for a lucrative trade for the suppliers of armed groups, although their participation in the trade

may not be entirely voluntary. A motorbike dealer who admitted having sold motorbikes to Ansar ul-Islam combatants in Est Province, Burkina Faso, and to IS Sahel combatants said that although he would have been obliged to sell to the armed groups when they asked him to, he still appreciated their custom since they did not attempt to haggle, they paid upfront and would even lend him money to obtain larger consignments of motorbikes.<sup>19</sup> Elements of armed groups pre-financing motorbike purchases supports perceptions that these actors are building longstanding supplier relationships.

**Targeted interventions: A balancing act**

The fact that numerous local dealers and traffickers regularly work with armed groups makes the smuggled motorbike trade a dispersed one that is difficult to counter. Attempts to trace smuggling routes for motorbikes are less fruitful than for other commodities since residents all over the Sahel have a need for them.

Countering motorbike trafficking would require a number of resource-intensive efforts and needs to be done without penalizing people who own motorbikes informally. One of the reasons motorbike theft is commonplace is that many owners do not formally



**Countering motorbike trafficking needs to be done without penalizing people who own motorbikes informally.**

*Photo: Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo*

register their ownership of them or obtain formal documents since the process is perceived as expensive and time-consuming. Likewise, many owners who buy their motorbikes second-hand do not update the existing registration.

Simplifying the registration process and ensuring that bribes cannot be solicited during it would help to encourage registration. This may go some way in helping traceability, but the ease with which motorbikes can be broken down, or with which licence plates or vehicle

identification numbers can be removed or altered, means that registration alone may have a limited impact.

Likewise, law enforcement does not usually have the capacity to respond to vehicle crime. A better approach may be intelligence gathering on individuals supplying armed groups with large quantities of motorbikes on a regular basis and interrupting their supply chains. However, it will be necessary to ensure that these efforts do not have similar effects to the motorbike bans when it comes to impacting civilian livelihoods.

## Notes

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# ISWAP's extortion racket in northern Cameroon experiences growing backlash from communities.

In November 2022, two prominent fish traders on Lake Chad's Kanouma-Bargaram peninsula in Cameroon's Extrême-Nord region were killed by militants, reportedly elements of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>1</sup> The killings were reportedly carried out by the violent extremist group as punishment for refusing to pay the taxes ISWAP impose on individuals and communities in the region. This meting out of violence in response to increased resistance to imposed rules appears to be part of a growing trend. In March 2023, across the border in Nigeria, ISWAP fighters killed at least 32 fishermen outside Dikwa, a village in the north-eastern state of Borno. According to a volunteer security official, the men were killed for fishing in a river that ISWAP militants had forbidden residents from fishing in.<sup>2</sup>

This rise in violence is a consequence of ISWAP's increasing extortion of local residents. Whereas previously residents viewed some of ISWAP's systemic taxation as legitimate, it appears that the rise in ISWAP's tax demands broke that basis of legitimacy. In response, ISWAP has unleashed uncharacteristic levels of threats and acts of violence.

Since establishing themselves as the dominant faction of the group formerly known as Boko Haram, especially since the death of rival commander Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, ISWAP has tended to refrain from the levels of violence against civilians as carried out by the other Boko Haram faction, Jama'at Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, JAS).<sup>3</sup> ISWAP has consolidated a considerable degree of governance capacity over the communities it controls in the northernmost part of Cameroon's Extrême-Nord region – in and around the Lake Chad Basin – centred primarily on a taxation system, of both licit and illicit flows.

However, military interventions throughout 2022 inflicted considerable human and material losses on ISWAP in their strongholds of north-east Nigeria and northern Cameroon.<sup>4</sup> In order to regroup and replenish, the group has increased taxes on communities.<sup>5</sup>

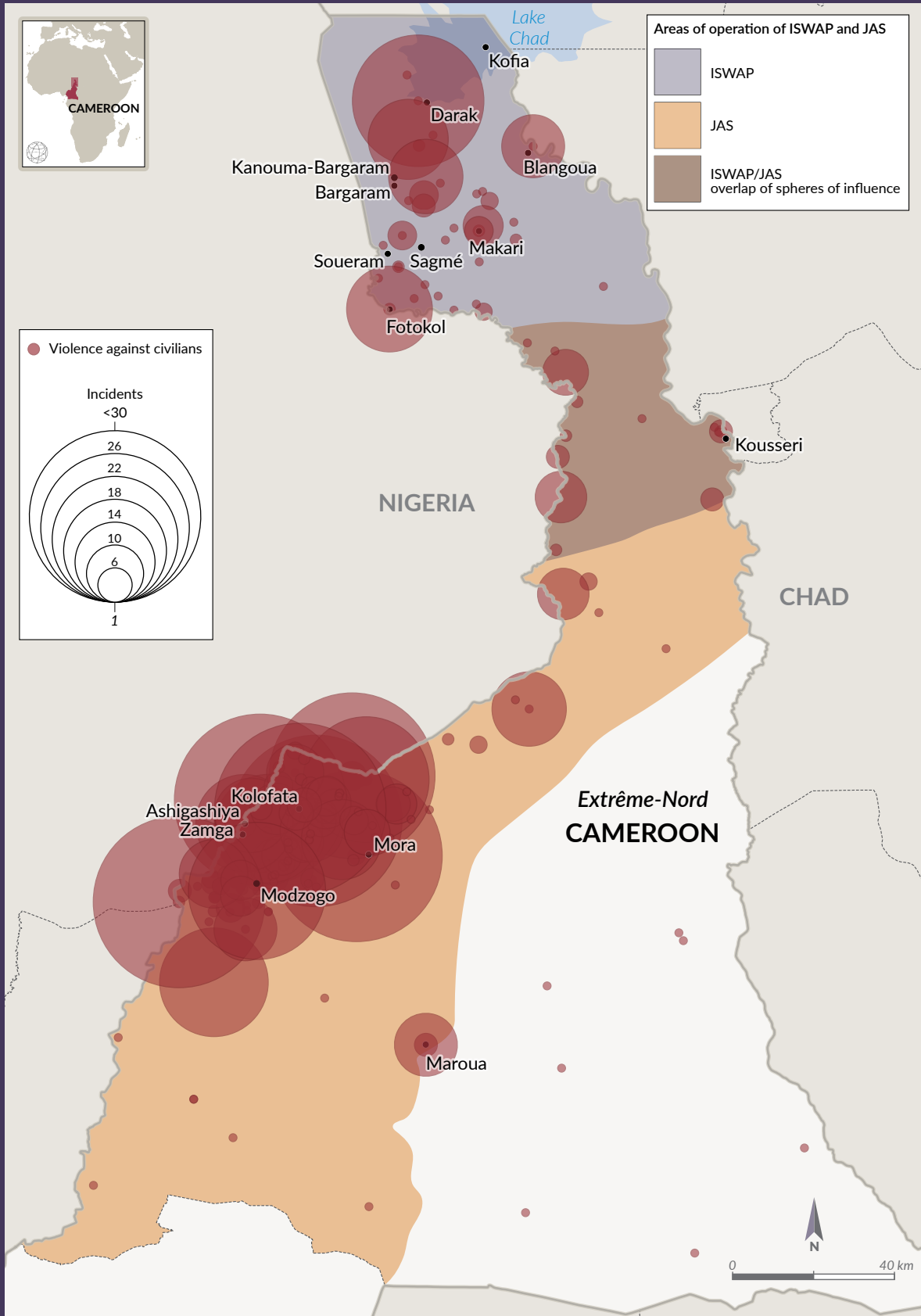
Although the taxation system had generally been a consensual relationship between ISWAP and communities, since April 2022 many communities have turned against the arrangement, arguing that taxes have risen to exorbitant levels.

In June 2022, many Buduma people, an ethnic group comprising predominantly fishermen and cattle herders inhabiting the Lake Chad area, fled their homes on the island of Kofia to avoid the taxes and violence.<sup>6</sup> ISWAP's increased financial needs, compounded by disruptions caused by the Nigerian naira (N) currency crisis toward the end of 2022 and consequent growth in taxation, appear to be damaging their relationships with communities. This may potentially impact ISWAP's control over these areas and may have disastrous implications for levels of violence against civilians, which already appear to be on the rise.

## **ISWAP as alternative governance providers in the Lake Chad Basin**

Since Boko Haram split into two rival factions, ISWAP has established itself as the most powerful of the two in northern Cameroon (as well as in rural areas on the Nigerian side of the border), repositioning itself in a strategically and economically advantageous location in villages around, and islets on, Lake Chad. While initially targeting more remote villages in the region, ISWAP then consolidated their hold over them and gradually expanded into new territories.

Lake Chad is a significant economic hub at the entrance to the Sahel region. Fishing, livestock and agriculture thrive on and around the lake, as do a vast array of illicit trades that have long operated in the region, predominantly premised on smuggling commodities – licit and illicit – between Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. Cumulatively, licit and illicit trade around the lake is worth billions of naira, attracting a number of traders and criminal actors to the area.<sup>7</sup>



**FIGURE 1** ISWAP and JAS areas of operation in northern Cameroon.

Source: ACLED

The towns of Sagramé, Soueram, Darak, Kofia and Kanouma-Bargaram are among the most strategically important localities, given their positioning as key connectors of the four Lake Chad Basin countries – Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad and Niger. Maintaining a presence in these areas is crucial for the armed group to control their own supply chains as well as other trafficking flows such as fuel, tramadol, arms and fish.<sup>8</sup> Boko Haram's growing operations from 2014 initially disrupted pre-existing contraband networks. However, the group – and now primarily the ISWAP faction – then forged relationships with a range of smuggling and trafficking networks, taxing flows in exchange for protection (largely from their own violence).<sup>9</sup>

ISWAP has traditionally sought to maintain legitimacy among local populations while extracting revenue.<sup>10</sup> A key pillar of this strategy is the provision of services, which began as soon as the group moved into Cameroonian territory around 2013. Offering protection to fishermen, herders and farmers – from the threat of violence often perpetrated by ISWAP militants themselves – is a core element of their governance strategy. 'Services' provided also included the instalment of water wells and boreholes, as well as the provision of medicine, in many towns and villages in the Lake Chad area, including Kanouma-Bargaram, Soueram, Sagramé and Kofia.<sup>11</sup>

Among the measures taken by ISWAP that were most beneficial to local communities was their financial support to the local economies. Between 2016 and 2020, fishermen were supplied with motorized canoes and other equipment to improve profitability, and farmers were given tractors and other agricultural input.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most importantly for many, ISWAP members ushered in a new era of justice, replacing traditional judgements from official authorities (perceived by communities as arbitrary) with a justice system based on Islamic (sharia) law. This move was welcomed by residents, who have described the militants as 'angels straight from heaven'.<sup>13</sup>

From 2018 onwards, having entrenched themselves in villages throughout the region, ISWAP began implementing a system to allow them to profit from the economic activity they had partly contributed to developing. Reportedly with the population's consent – crucial for their ability to govern effectively and sustainably – ISWAP claimed the exclusive right to purchase certain flagship agricultural products. Dried chilli is the most valuable, given its ubiquity in local cuisine.

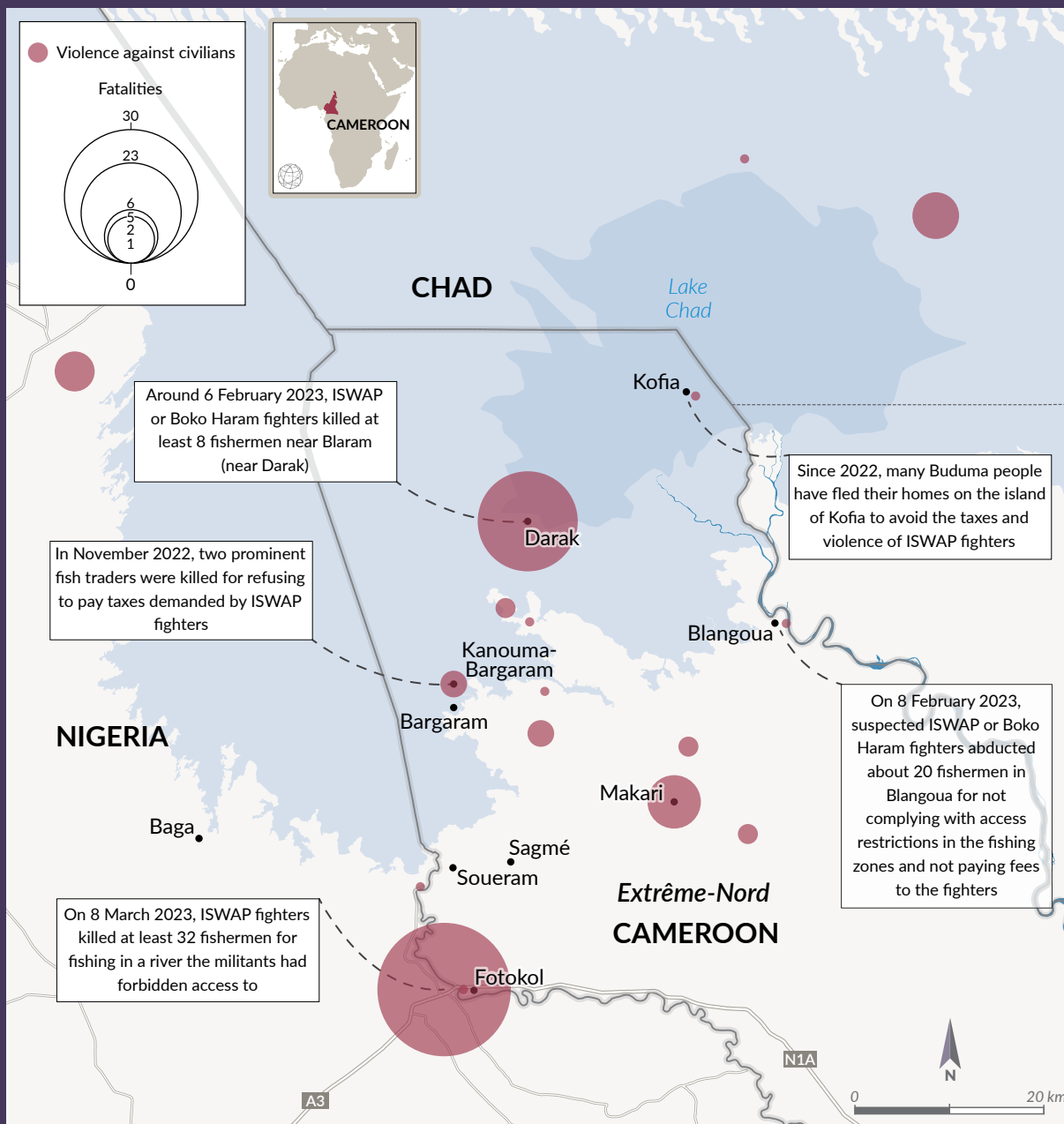
Once the chillies have been harvested and prepared, ISWAP elements purchase them from the farmers (who are forbidden from selling to anybody else) at 1 000 naira per kilogram (approximately US\$2.17). Until mid-2022, 25% (N250 [US\$0.54] in the case of dried chilli), however, was withheld by ISWAP as *zakat* (almsgiving), leaving the farmers with only 7 500 Naira, 75% of the total value. Since ISWAP's financial difficulties commenced, however, this rate – applied to many agricultural products – was doubled to 50%.<sup>14</sup>

These products, including dried chilli but also other staple goods such as peanuts, white beans and fish, are then sold by ISWAP, mostly but not always through intermediaries, to wholesalers across Cameroon, as well as in neighbouring countries including Nigeria, Niger and Chad. In doing so, they have assumed control of key agricultural industries profiting to the tune of hundreds of millions of naira (approximately hundreds of thousands of US dollars), while at the same time strengthening their positioning as providers of economic opportunities and regulators of local economies.

In addition to agriculture, livestock breeding is also among the most pivotal economic activities in the area. The Lake Chad Basin is the only body of water in the arid Sahel zone. As a result, its *yaéré* (a Fulani term for the floodplain around the lake used as pasture once the waters have receded) is a prime area for livestock production and attracts millions of head of cattle each year.<sup>15</sup>

ISWAP has also established a tax system within the livestock sector. Taxing cattle is a common activity undertaken by violent extremist organizations across West Africa.<sup>16</sup> In Mali, for example, Katibat Macina militants impose herd taxes on whole villages or larger areas under their control in exchange for the herd owner's protection.<sup>17</sup>

In northern Cameroon, herd owners are forced to give away part of their herd in exchange for access to the green pastures around the lake. Between 15% and 20% of each 50-head herd is taken by ISWAP militants.<sup>18</sup> This levy is the highest that violent extremist groups are charging across West Africa and the Sahel that the GI-TOC is aware of. Although no data has yet been collected, it is likely that the levy has increased to even higher levels, mirroring the tax rises in other industries as described below.<sup>19</sup>



**FIGURE 2** Violence against civilians in the Lake Chad area, 2022–2023.

Source: ACLED

Although the principle of the levy is generally accepted by herding communities in northern Cameroon, there has been a discernible upset at the increase. Livestock belonging to anyone unwilling to abide by the system are forcibly confiscated and sold back to the owners.<sup>20</sup> In other instances, the livestock are killed and the meat smoked, to be sold in local markets.<sup>21</sup>

### Disruptions to ISWAP operations

It is complex to estimate revenues drawn by ISWAP from taxation activities; however, this is believed to be a significant source of financing. Estimates by the intelligence services of the Nigerian army go as high as approximately US\$47 million, although it is not possible to triangulate this.<sup>22</sup> ISWAP has reportedly used these





**Items seized from ISWAP, including a motorbike, weapons and ammunition, by military officials from Operation Lake Sanity.**

*Photo: Multinational Joint Task Force, Operation Lake Sanity*

funds to pay the salaries of recruits, to maintain them and to purchase supplies.

Continued military responses to ISWAP in 2022 heightened the group's need for additional resources. This came in the form of Operation Lake Sanity, a sustained military offensive by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) between March and August 2022. According to officers from Sector 1, the Cameroonian brigade of the MNJTF based in the town of Mora, the operation aimed at clearing the Lake Chad Basin of armed extremists and resulted in the killing of over 800 militants in its first three months.<sup>23</sup>

Separately, Nigeria's central bank announced in October 2022 that it would be redesigning naira banknotes and introducing ATM withdrawal limits, in part to disrupt terrorist and criminal activity.<sup>24</sup>

In response to this measure, Ibn Oumar and Malam Ba'ana Wali, the two ISWAP figures in charge of taxes and *zakat* in Cameroon's Lake Chad region, issued an edict banning the use of naira in areas under their control (the ban on the use of naira was, however, also applicable across all ISWAP territory, including in Nigeria,

Chad and Niger).<sup>25</sup> To prevent naira entering ISWAP territory in Cameroon, only certain roads were permitted to be used for travel from Nigeria, which were under heavy surveillance, with ISWAP monitors conducting patrols to ensure obedience.

Despite the CFA franc being the national currency of Cameroon, in the country's Extrême-Nord region, communities around the Lake Chad Basin mostly use the naira.<sup>26</sup> However, since the policy announcement, only payment in CFA franc has been accepted by ISWAP for the levies and taxes imposed on fishermen, farmers and herders in the area.<sup>27</sup> Not only has this caused delayed or missed payments because CFA francs are far less easily accessible in the area, but it has also completely devalued any existing cash held by ISWAP, which cannot be easily exchanged.<sup>28</sup>

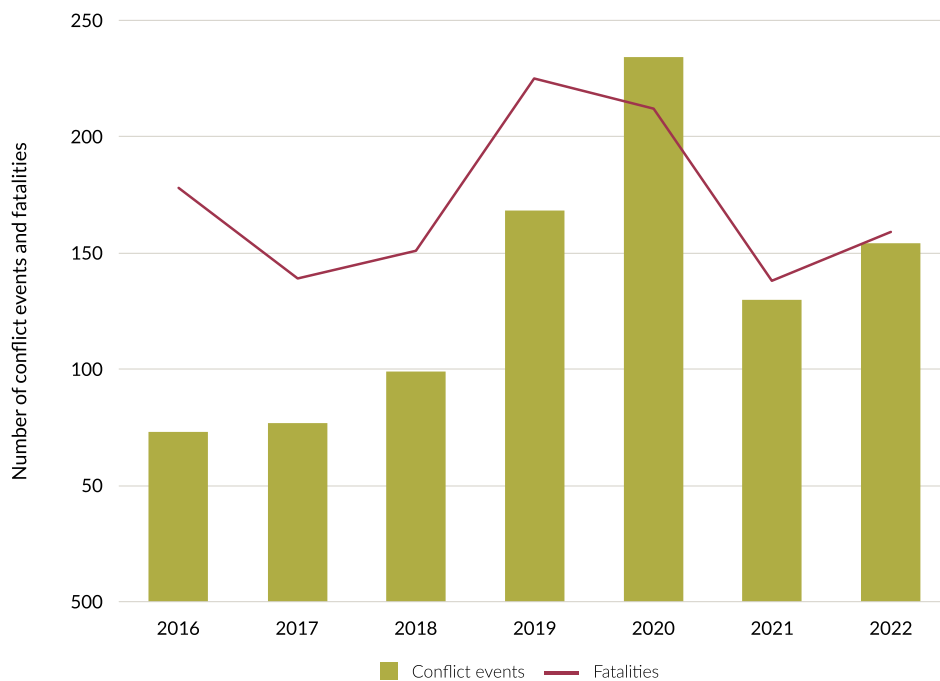
### **Communities' obedience begins to wane**

Since around May 2022, shortly after the Operation Lake Sanity military offensives began, ISWAP nearly doubled tax rates on communities around the Lake Chad area. In response, populations have increasingly turned against the armed group, refusing to pay them. Despite an established social contract between ISWAP and communities that the former would refrain from targeting the latter, threats against civilians began to mount.

Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project suggests that after falling in consecutive years between 2018 and 2020, since the end of 2021, there has been an uptick in the number of civilian fatalities at the hands of violent extremist groups in Cameroon's Extrême-Nord region.<sup>29</sup>

Since May–June 2022, many Buduma, an ethnic group composed mainly of fishermen and cattle rangers living in the Lake Chad region, have moved from their homes on the islets of the lake to avoid the taxes – and potentially violent retribution – from ISWAP militants.<sup>30</sup>

A group of people displaced from their homes on Kofia island reported: 'We had never experienced the violence of the terrorists; we have always lived in harmony with their fighters. But since May or June 2022, with the military operations that have intensified in all the villages occupied by the violent extremists, the level of violence has intensified. Even civilians who were once spared are no longer safe.'<sup>31</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Violence against civilians in Cameroon's Extrême-Nord region, 2016–2022.

Source: ACLED

This reported increase in violence from ISWAP against civilians may be linked to growing resistance to taxes from the communities they seek to control. A further drive could also be the mounting military pressure, which has triggered predation by ISWAP on civilians in the past.<sup>32</sup>

ISWAP's differing approach to revenue extraction in areas where they have complete control, compared to areas that are more contested or where they have not yet earned populations' full obedience, is also key. Maintaining legitimacy appears to be prioritized in the former, with violence more commonly meted out in the

latter.<sup>33</sup> Fractures in control, and growing threats from the military, may have shifted ISWAP's approach to be more in line with that adopted for areas of contested control. If residents of the towns and villages in Cameroon's Lake Chad area are increasingly reluctant to adhere to ISWAP's imposed system of taxation, as it shifts from a consensual arrangement to one more akin to extortion, further escalation in the deliberate targeting of civilians in these areas is a real possibility.<sup>34</sup> The likely resultant erosion of ISWAP's legitimacy in the area also offers opportunities to break the group's hold on regional criminal markets, and debunk its growing strength as an alternative governance provider.

## Notes

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- 6 Interview with a Multinational Joint Task Force intelligence officer, Mora, 18 December 2022.

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- 16 Kingsley L. Madueke, Driving destruction: Cattle rustling and instability in Nigeria, GI-TOC, January 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-instability-nigeria/>.
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- 19 In Yobe State, Nigeria, insurgents collect one head per 40 cattle heads as tax from herders, whereas in Zamfara State there is no fixed number of cattle accepted as levy by bandits. In one district of Mali, the Katibat Macina armed group takes a one-year-old bull calf for every 30 heads of cattle and a heifer calf for every 40 heads of cattle as part of *zakat*. In 2021 in Benin, armed groups raised the *zakat* from the traditionally accepted toll of one head of cattle out of 100 to one animal out of 10. See Kingsley L. Madueke, Driving destruction: Cattle rustling and instability in Nigeria, GI-TOC, January 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-instability-nigeria/>; Flore Berger, Locked horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy, GI-TOC, March 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-mali-war-economy/>; Antônio Sampaio et al, Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, forthcoming.
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- 28 Although the deadline for exchanging old denominations for the new has been extended, individuals seeking to exchange large amounts of money are subject to checks, which may attract attention of the authorities. As such, ISWAP elements are unable to exchange their cash stocks.
- 29 Most local media outlets do not make the distinction between the two Boko Haram factions, ISWAP and JAS, and as a result it is not possible to compare the number of events of violence against civilians committed by each group. For more detail on ACLED's coding methodology, see: [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ACLED\\_Boko-Haram-ISWAP-Factions\\_March-2021.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ACLED_Boko-Haram-ISWAP-Factions_March-2021.pdf).
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- 31 Interview with a group of people displaced from Kofia, Darak, 25 November 2022.
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