

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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Summary highlights



3R rebel group in the Central African Republic loses territory and control over the illicit cattle economy, damaging legitimacy and offering entry points for state intervention.

The rebel group 3R (Retour, Réclamation and Réhabilitation) rose to prominence in 2015, providing security to Fulani cattle herders in western Central African Republic in return for illegal taxation. After the death of leader Bi Sidi Souleymane – known as Sidiki Abbas – in 2021, 3R lost significant territorial control to government forces. As a result, the group has lost income from taxing the cattle market and, in desperation, has turned to more predatory, opportunistic criminal tactics. These have caused 3R to lose legitimacy, perhaps providing an opportunity for the state to rebuild the social contract with local communities by providing a better governance alternative.



Beyond Prigozhin: Russia's continuing mercenary, military and criminal engagement in Africa.

After the death of Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin and several of his closest lieutenants in August, many international observers have wondered about the fate of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin's economic, military and criminal activities in Africa. Yet, while Wagner is a unique organization, it is not the only mercenary or 'grey zone' Russian actor with its sights set on Africa, as the recent forays of former arms trafficker Viktor Bout into politics and business exemplify. Other Russian private military companies also appear to be making moves to expand into Africa. These often interlinked private actors and proxies can be seen as part of a broader military-business complex through which Russia seeks to influence events overseas.





Intercontinental drug trafficking networks operating via West Africa have begun trading hashish directly for cocaine.

Since at least 2020, a new dynamic has appeared in intercontinental drug flows. Criminal networks are exchanging hashish produced in Morocco directly for cocaine originating from Brazil. The same ship will often transport cocaine one way and hashish the other. Many vessels travel via West Africa, dropping off cargo for later pickup. This new trend towards bartering hashish for cocaine could be a step-change in the capacity of maritime trafficking networks to transit larger quantities of cocaine via West Africa and the Sahel.



The Niger coup has led to a halt in cross-border law enforcement cooperation against armed banditry in north-west Nigeria.

After a coup that toppled the democratically elected government in Niger on 27 July 2023, the Economic Community of West African States implemented sanctions on Niger and ordered its members to close their borders with the country. For Nigeria, which shares a border over 1 600 kilometres long with Niger, the measures led to the collapse of a cross-border security collaboration against armed bandits operating in Nigeria's north-west border areas. Nigeria's security forces have noticed a spike in the number of bandit attacks in border areas, which they have linked to a corresponding increase in ammunition smuggling into the country. Reduced cross-border cooperation has had negative security implications, and the border closures have had significant humanitarian and economic consequences for border communities.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This ninth issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa aims to show how organized crime dynamics in West Africa are linked to wider political and economic trends, both regionally and globally. Our research into cocaine trafficking networks operating via the West African coast, for example, has found that there is a new trend where these networks exchange hashish directly for cocaine. This trend, which has emerged due to favourable economic conditions in the globalized illicit drugs trade, has significant implications for West Africa and the Sahel, where drug trafficking networks traverse some of the most politically unstable countries in the region. The particularities of illicit markets and corruption at the local level are linked to these global market forces.

Similarly, Russia's Wagner Group has been making waves across Africa, even after the death of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. The mercenary group's operations, including widespread human rights abuses and involvement in the minerals sector that have led the US to designate the group as a 'transnational criminal organization', is impacting regional security in West Africa and the Sahel. Geopolitical forces are at work here: the Wagner

Group's role in Africa is part of the wider geopolitical contestation between Russia and the West in light of the war in Ukraine.

One of the crises that has gripped the region in recent months is the fallout of a military coup in Niger on 27 July. In response, the Economic Community of West African States imposed sanctions on Niger and ordered its members to close their borders with the country, and the region remains at an impasse. This breakdown in regional communication has had many impacts, including a severance of cross-border law enforcement cooperation between Nigeria and Niger. This has led to an increase in bandit attacks in border areas. Here, regional political dynamics have had a measurable effect on organized criminal activity.

These stories exemplify how the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's research always aims to provide context when analyzing organized crime, combining granular detail of how illicit economies operate on the ground with the broader regional and global factors that shape them.

3R rebel group in the Central African Republic loses territory and control over the illicit cattle economy, damaging legitimacy and offering entry points for state intervention.

The death in March 2021 of Bi Sidi Souleymane, known as Sidiki Abbas, the former leader of the Retour, Réclamation and Réhabilitation (3R) Fulani rebel movement in the Central African Republic (CAR), led to disruption and upheaval within the group that continues today.

3R rose to prominence in 2015, illegally taxing Fulani cattle herders in western CAR in exchange for protection. Two and a half years on from Abbas' death, defeats at the hands of Central African armed forces aided by Wagner mercenaries have caused the group to lose control of swathes of its former territory in northern and western CAR. This loss of territory, combined with the flight of many ethnic Fulani herders to the north and east of Cameroon to escape the fighting between 3R and government forces,¹ has led to a significant drop in 3R's income.

Today, this damage to their system of criminal governance has resulted in the group taking more extortionist, predatory approaches towards local populations in order to shore up their financial base. Support from Fulani herders has consequently fallen. Similar dynamics have been tracked across West and Central Africa, where decreases in non-state armed group income streams drive spikes in violence and extortion, eroding the legitimacy of such groups.

The evolution of 3R's extra-legal control over the cattle market shows how a change in a key income stream can impact an armed group, affecting its tactics and altering its relationships with supporters and communities in the areas under its control. Crucially, such changes offer entry points for states seeking to rebuild their legitimacy in the eyes of communities previously close to alternative governance providers; they hold promise for eroding the support base of non-state armed groups and weakening their access to resources and support.

The emergence of 3R and its role in the cattle economy

3R has its roots in the ethnic conflict that followed the 2013 crisis in CAR. In March of that year, former president François Bozizé was ousted from power by the Séléka, a coalition of rebel factions with Muslim leanings who felt oppressed under Bozizé's regime.² In the wake of this, the anti-balaka – a militia comprised of Christian ethnic groups – targeted Muslim groups, particularly the Fulani, in reprisal attacks. As Fulani cattle herders fled into exile in Cameroon and Chad, many were killed by anti-balaka groups.³

In this context, Sidiki Abbas and 3R emerged, mobilizing the Fulani community from November 2015 onwards with promises that the group would protect herders.⁴ The militia's name, Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation), refers to the Fulani goal of returning to CAR after having been dispersed throughout the region by the anti-balaka.

Providing security to herders was the credo behind the 3R movement. 'Although its leader, Sidiki Abbas, made the return of the hunted Fulani his main demand, the militia's action has above all a pastoral objective: to reopen access to the pastoral areas on the Central African-Cameroonian border and to combat cattle rustlers, and hence all types of crime that undermine this pastoral society,' explained a Central African journalist.⁵

Sidiki Abbas emerged at the head of this organization in part due to his criminal past as a *zaraguina* – a term used to describe rural bandits whose activities include cattle rustling,⁶ kidnapping and attacks on highways.⁷ Abbas' role as a *zaraguina* allowed him to emerge as a warlord among the young outlaws, who turned their experience in criminality and violence towards forming 3R as a Fulani self-defence group.⁸

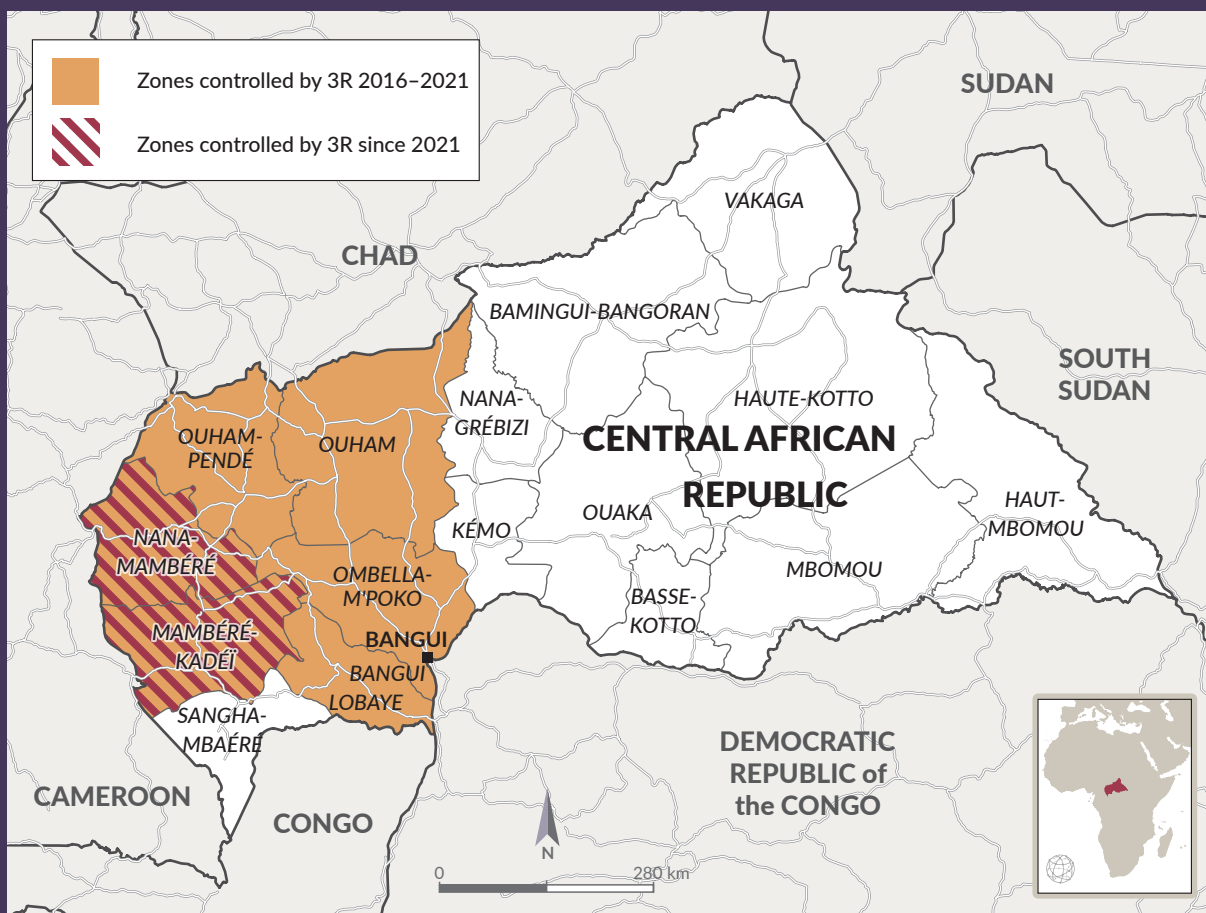


FIGURE 1 Zones controlled by the 3R rebel group in the Central African Republic.

Note: Areas controlled by 3R have been identified as hotspots for illicit economies, including gold trading, arms trafficking and gemstone trading. For more information, see: <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>

The *tchoffal* taxation system under Sidiki Abbas: 2015–2021

Under the cattle taxation system instigated by 3R and Sidiki Abbas, which is known as *tchoffal*, any herder with cattle in the area controlled by 3R must pay taxes in exchange for protection against cattle rustlers and hostage-takers who attack herders' camps.⁹ The funds derived from this system support 3R's activities and enable the purchase of weapons.¹⁰

This *tchoffal* was inspired by the system of taxes paid by livestock farmers to traditional chiefs and communes (local authorities) in CAR and northern Cameroon for access to land and grazing.¹¹ Due to the security crisis and widespread violence, these levels of government were no longer functioning in many territories. The 3R

took up the mantle of these traditional governance and security providers and signed a deal with the livestock farmers who had fled the conflict.

Tchoffal taxation payments are calculated based on the size of the herd. Each herd of around 30–50 animals would be taxed one bull, estimated at a value of 400 000–500 000 CFA francs (FCFA), around €600.¹² For a large herd of more than 100 animals, two bulls would be levied. This tax applies to resident herders as well as those crossing into 3R territory from neighbouring countries. Any herder who evades this tax may be levied twice the standard amount: one bull as a fine for evasion and another as a *tchoffal* payment.¹³

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 3R REBEL GROUP



During the dry season, when herders are on the move, the 3R movement adapts its tactics. Mobile units with motorbikes are tasked to follow herders who may try to evade paying the taxes by taking different migration routes than those where 3R has permanent tax collection points.¹⁴ To collect these taxes, the movement also works within the pre-existing institutional fabric, forcing the *lamibé* and *arbé* (traditional chiefs among the sedentary and nomadic Fulani, respectively) to maintain and provide a list of all herders present in their areas of jurisdiction.¹⁵

This, in return, buys protection for one six-month pastoral season from 3R for the herders, their livestock and their families. In the event of an attack, a herder may alert a 3R lieutenant, who sends a task force to pursue the bandits and recover stolen livestock or kidnapped family members.¹⁶

Notably, the taxes imposed by 3R are far higher than the taxes local authorities levied prior to the security crisis, which amounted to FCFA100 (€0.15) per head for a six-month breeding season – 80–100 times lower than the 3R *tchoffal*. The increased tax is reflective of the armed group taking advantage of being the only available security providers in a dangerous area.

Other armed groups in CAR have made use of similar *tchoffal* systems, although they may function differently.

The Unité Pour la Paix en Centrafrique, created in October 2014 and led by Ali Darassa, reportedly takes tax in cash rather than in kind – FCFA100 (€0.15) per head of oxen, in return for protection.¹⁷

Under the leadership of Abbas, the 3R created a protection system that supported some herders, who chose to graze their cattle in CAR rather than in neighbouring Cameroon or Chad. The mass displacement of the Fulani came to a halt in 2016, and many of those who had already fled to northern Cameroon and Chad returned. From the beginning of 2016 onwards, the 3R movement positioned itself as a source of protection in the cattle-raising communes of western CAR.¹⁸

‘It’s a simple contract: freedom to graze and a measure of protection in exchange for exclusive recognition of 3R as an authority,’ explained a group of Fulani herders, speaking in Mbaimboun on the Cameroon–CAR–Chad border in 2020.¹⁹ Due to good grazing land in western CAR, the cattle can breed more successfully. ‘We don’t complain about rebel taxes. A farmer who has four herds of 100 to 250 head will have no fewer than 250 to 300 births a year, so even if he pays 30 to 50 head of cattle in taxes, he loses nothing,’ the herders explained. ‘That’s the advantage of the Central African Republic, despite the war.’²⁰

According to the herders' statistics, the 3R system reduced attacks on herders by both bandits and anti-balaka militias. The president of the livestock farmers in Ouham-Pendé province noted that, from 2017 to 2020, no hostage-taking of the families of livestock farmers was recorded, and this was attributed to 3R's punishments for kidnappers.²¹ Local officials found that the number of conflicts between herders and farmers – widespread before the 2013 crisis – was also significantly reduced between 2015 and 2022 in areas under the control of 3R.²²

The 3R movement following the 2021 death of Sidiki Abbas: Spike in taxation rates and eroded legitimacy

Although during his lifetime Sidiki Abbas succeeded in rallying the Fulani community to the 3R cause and establishing a functioning *tchoffal* protection system, his death in March 2021 threw the 3R movement into disarray. Disputes over leadership between two founding members, Bobbo Sembé and Siwo Tchirgou, split and weakened the movement.²³ Taking advantage of this internal dissension, the Central African armed forces, supported by the Wagner Group, launched an assault on 3R positions. The movement suffered a major loss of territory, and the intensity of the conflict caused many livestock farmers who had previously settled in the areas controlled by 3R to flee.²⁴

This cost 3R dearly, both in terms of territory and income. As a result, the movement – now in disarray – has resorted to more desperate tactics. 3R has been accused of raiding villages and conducting ambushes on roads, recalling the criminal *zaraguina* past of many of its combatants.²⁵ The group has also imposed additional monthly taxes of two cattle per herd, sometimes referring to this as a tax for the 'war effort'. In other cases, the *tchoffal* tax has been imposed at random, with 3R fighters returning soon after a tax has been paid and using the group's lack of financial resources as an explanation for their new demands.²⁶

Cattle taxation is not 3R's only form of income, however. A UN Panel of Experts' report from 2021 reported that 3R was taxing the gold sector, as well. The panel said that 3R controlled gold production centres in Nana-Mambéré and Mambéré-Kadéï prefectures and was 'often' involved in gold mining in Ombella-Mpoko prefecture, taxing artisanal miners weekly and collecting a percentage of their gold production. The panel reported that extortion of industrial mining companies by 3R had become 'more commonplace' leading up to

2021.²⁷ However, with the significant reduction in 3R's territorial control, it has lost control over many of these gold-producing areas. The new sporadic, desperate tactics used to tax cattle herders suggest that the group has experienced a major loss of overall income.

These tactics have discredited the 3R movement in the eyes of many herders. Over the past two years, the allegiance to 3R shown by Fulani chiefs has given way to criticism as the line between protection and extortion has become increasingly blurred. 'The armed groups' stranglehold on the livestock sector is now being denounced as a racket against herders. Forced to deliver several animals a month to the armed groups, livestock farmers say they are fed up with these abusive charges,' said a traditional leader in Niemi-Yelwa, western CAR, in late 2022.²⁸

3R's main strength used to lie in the support they had from Fulani herders and chiefs.²⁹ Yet where they used to seek protection, several sources say that herders now pursue a strategy of avoiding the armed groups.³⁰

Today, the future of the 3R taxation system looks less certain. Although some herders who fled have returned to CAR, many are now more acceptant of the legitimacy of the Central African state, which has made significant progress over the past two years in reclaiming its territory from rebel groups such as 3R.³¹

The pattern of non-state armed groups facing revenue shortfalls from loss of territory, hiking taxes on communities, becoming more predatory, and thus losing community legitimacy has repeated in different contexts across West and Central Africa. For example, as reported in a previous issue of this Bulletin, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northern Cameroon increased illegal taxation of communities after it had been targeted by military operations. This increased taxation was met with resistance and led to a reported increase in ISWAP violence against civilians.³²

3R and its cattle taxation system therefore illustrate how shifts in illicit economies can impact the modus operandi of armed groups. In this case, while 3R has become a smaller threat to the state in having lost territory, legitimacy among its support base and sources of income, it has at the same time transformed into a greater threat to the community within its remaining territory, becoming more violent, opportunistic and predatory. This behaviour, while increasing harm to

communities, also offers an entry point for states to reclaim legitimacy, a key factor in determining the success of non-state armed group territorial control. Tracking shifts in illicit taxation patterns can therefore

offer insights for timing state interventions seeking to rebuild social contracts with the communities they purportedly govern.

Notes

- 1 Interview with an official from the Association pour l'Intégration et le Développement Social des Peuhls – Mbororo de Centrafrique (AIDSPC), Mbaimbom, 20 April 2020.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Human Rights Watch, Central African Republic: Muslims trapped in enclaves, authorities, peacekeepers should allow evacuations, improve security, 22 December 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/22/central-african-republic-muslims-trapped-enclaves>.
- 4 Interview with an official from the office of the Ouham-Pende province livestock breeders' association, Mbaimbom, 24 May 2020.
- 5 Interview with a local Central African journalist, Mpang, 18 April 2020.
- 6 For more on zaraguinas in Cameroon, see: Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Farmers and herders increasingly targeted as kidnapping for ransom reaches record levels in Cameroon's Nord region, Risk Bulletin – Issue 8, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-008/02-farmers-and-herders-increasingly-targeted-as-kidnapping-for-ransom.html>.
- 7 Interview with a local Central African journalist, Mpang, 18 April 2020.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interview with an official from AIDSPC, Mbaimbom, 20 April 2020.
- 10 Interview with an official from the office of the Ouham-Pende province livestock breeders' association, Mbaimbom, 24 May 2020.
- 11 Interview with an official of the Fédération Nationale des Éleveurs Centrafricains, Mbéré, 22 May 2020.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Interview with an official from the office of the Ouham-Pende province livestock breeders' association, Mbaimbom, 24 May 2020.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Interview with a group of Fulani herders, Mbaimbom, 25 May 2020.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Telephone interview with an official from the commune of Kouï, 10 June 2020.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ndjoni Sango, *RCA : guerre de succession au sein du mouvement 3R après la mort de Sidiki Abbas?*, 7 April 2021, <https://ndjonisango.com/2021/04/07/rca-guerre-de-succession-au-sein-du-mouvement-3r-apres-la-mort-desidiki-abbas/>; Interview with an official from the office of the Ouham-Pende province livestock farmers' association, Mbaimbom, 24 May 2020; Interview with a traditional chief from the Niem-Yelwa livestock farming commune, Touboro, 30 September 2022.
- 24 Interview with a traditional chief from the Niem-Yelwa livestock farming commune, Touboro, 30 September 2022.
- 25 Interview with a local Central African journalist, Mpang, 18 April 2020.
- 26 Interview with a traditional chief from the Niem-Yelwa livestock farming commune, Touboro, 30 September 2022.
- 27 United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2536 (2020) (S/2021/569), 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/final-report-panel-experts-central-african-republic-extended-4>.
- 28 Interview with a traditional chief from the Niem-Yelwa livestock farming commune, Touboro, 30 September 2022.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Interview with a local breeder from the Central African Republic, Mbéré, 10 May 2023; Interview with a local Central African journalist, Mpang, 18 April 2020; Telephone interview with an official from the commune of Kouï, 10 June 2020.
- 31 Interview with a traditional chief from the Niem-Yelwa livestock farming commune, Touboro, 30 September 2022.
- 32 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, ISWAP's extortion racket in northern Cameroon experiences growing backlash from communities, Risk Bulletin – Issue 7, GI-TOC, April 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-007/04-iswaps-extortion-racket-in-northern-cameroon.html>.

Beyond Prigozhin: Russia's continuing mercenary, military and criminal engagement in Africa.

After the dramatic death of Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin and several of his closest lieutenants in August, much of the discussion among international observers has centred around which individuals or organizations might take control of Prigozhin's economic, military and criminal activities in Africa.

At the helm of the Wagner Group, Prigozhin established a complex business empire that spanned both licit and illicit economies, exchanging hired guns for access to natural resources in the African countries with whose governments he partnered. These resources, including gold and diamonds, are extracted through Wagner-controlled operations, secured by Wagner forces through often brutal means and smuggled overseas.¹

Yet while Wagner, as it evolved under Prigozhin's charismatic leadership, is unique in the scale and scope of its activities, it is not the only Russian actor in Africa operating in the mercenary space or 'grey zone'. A range of different players are taking action to fill the void of Prigozhin's leadership, including other Russia-based private military companies (PMCs), as well as Russian state officials and Wagner commanders who were not involved in August's plane crash. Other Russian mercenary and criminal actors may also be making moves on the continent, as evidenced by the recent activities of former arms trafficker Viktor Bout, who is re-establishing himself as an economic and political player after having been freed from US prison in a 2022 prisoner swap.

While the current international focus on Wagner is understandable given the tumultuous recent events, understanding Russia's influence overseas requires looking beyond Wagner to other PMCs, criminal networks and arms suppliers.

Viktor Bout: a forerunner to Prigozhin

Before his arrest by the US Drug Enforcement Administration in 2008, Bout was arguably the most prolific arms trafficker of the post-Cold War era, earning himself the nickname the 'Merchant of Death'.² He ran a network of companies that were implicated in trafficking

arms to 17 African countries – including Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo – as well as other countries such as Afghanistan.³ These businesses included freight companies and airlines that could ship Bout's merchandise in exchange for access to natural resources.

In many ways, Bout can be seen as one of the forerunners of the Wagner Group's strategy in Africa.⁴ Much like Prigozhin, Bout profited as a criminal entrepreneur, using a complex corporate network and offering Russian military assets in conflict zones to gain access to natural resources. He was the most prolific and high-profile of a number of prominent Russian criminal entrepreneurs who emerged in Africa from the remains of former Soviet military and intelligence institutions. At the time Bout was active in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many of the Russian criminal networks operating in southern Africa were 'ex-securocrats who [had] gone private', an officer from an elite unit of the South African police force told researchers in 2001.⁵

Investigators from the US who worked on tackling Bout's network have argued that it was state-backed and state-facilitated. 'It's clear that he had significant ties to Russian government circles', Lee Wolosky, a US official who led investigations into Bout's network under the Clinton administration, told the Washington Post in 2022.⁶

Such arrangements are part of a broader pattern in which the Kremlin has reportedly used criminal actors to serve political ends overseas. 'Russian-based organized crime groups in Europe have been used for a variety of purposes, including as sources of "black cash", to launch cyber-attacks, to wield political influence, to traffic people and goods, and even to carry out targeted assassinations on behalf of the Kremlin,' Mark Galeotti, a leading analyst of Russian organized crime, has said.⁷ The Wagner Group should be understood through the framework of this tendency to use criminal and grey zone private actors for political gain.

Bout's modern day political and economic career

Now returned to Russia, Bout once again has an active career. He has made a start in politics, winning a seat in the regional assembly of Ulyanovsk in September 2023 as part of an ultra-nationalist party.⁸ During his campaign, Bout publicly demonstrated his links to the Wagner Group. He was joined on the campaign trail by Yevgeny Prigozhin in early June, just days before the ill-fated Wagner mutiny. According to local reports, Bout and Prigozhin visited weapons factories and developed plans for modernizing

the military industry in Ulyanovsk,⁹ which is a 'special economic zone' within Russia.

Assisting on Bout's campaign was Maxim Shugalei, a Russian sociologist and long-time ally of Prigozhin. Shugalei heads the Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC) think tank. He has been backed by and worked on behalf of Prigozhin in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), promoting pro-Russian narratives and disinformation.¹⁰ After being held hostage in Libya, Shugalei also became the hero of a

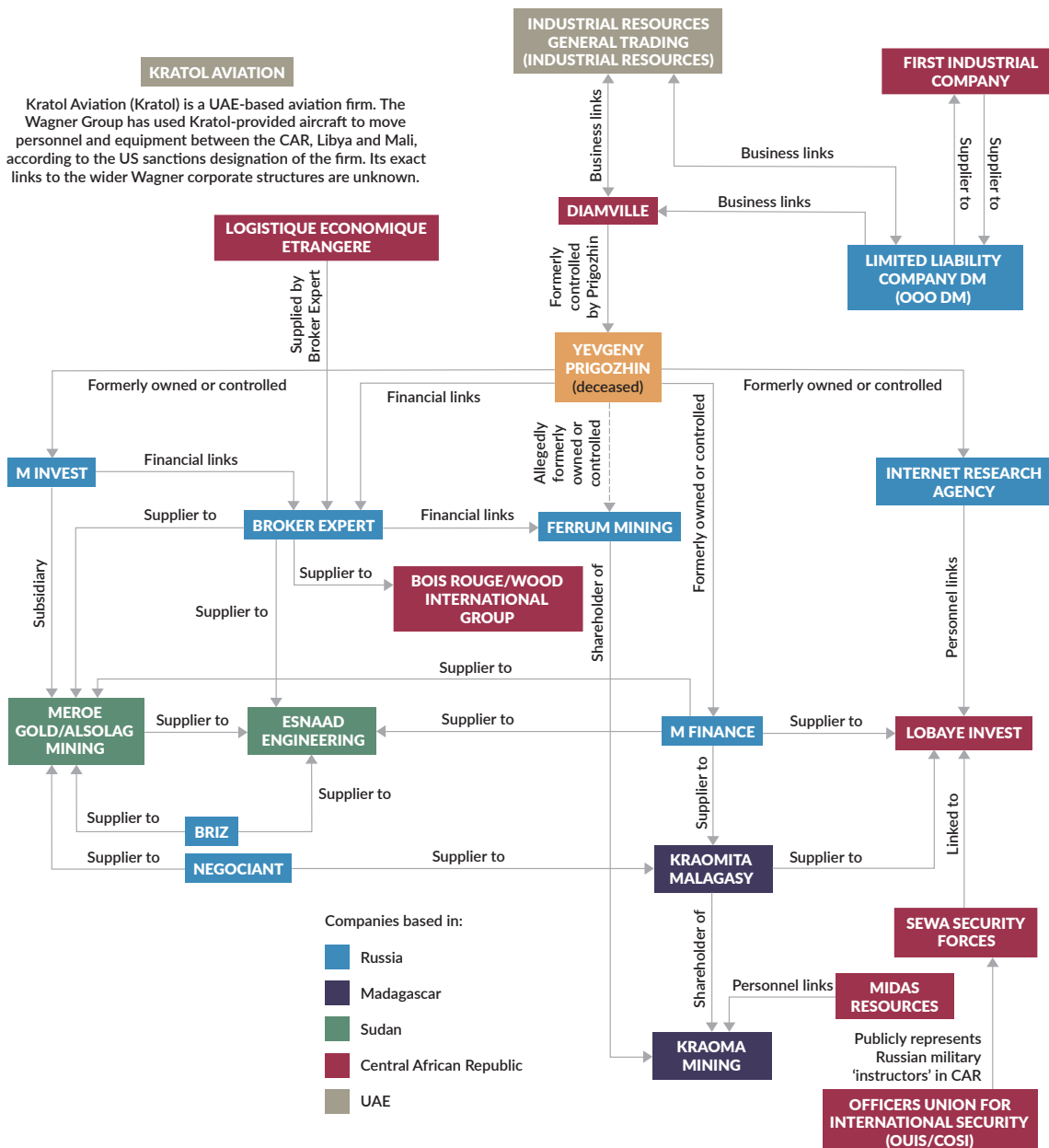


FIGURE 1 Wagner Group corporate structures relating to their activities in Africa.

Note: This graphic updates research first published in our February 2023 report 'The grey zone: Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa'. For more details on the companies involved, please refer to the original report.

series of action movies that heroized Wagner's exploits in Africa and were promoted heavily by the FZNC, among others.¹¹

Prigozhin himself compared Bout with Shugalei in December 2022: when Bout was released by the US, Prigozhin described him glowingly as an 'ideal of unshakeableness' and as 'Shugalei squared'.¹²

Bout has also developed a new business portfolio. He holds 90% of the newly registered company GK VBA Project, according to Russian corporate databases. GK VBA Project, in turn, holds a 49% stake in three other companies: A-Trade NP, Verax and RusAfro-Impex. The listed purposes of these companies include the wholesale trade of natural gas, fuel, machinery, equipment, food, beverages and tobacco products.¹³

Bout remains under US sanctions on the basis of his historical criminality.¹⁴ Since the mid-1990s, Western states have increasingly used targeted sanctions as a foreign-policy tool to counter transnational organized crime, often focusing on the relationships between criminal and conflict actors.¹⁵ Such was the case with Bout, who was originally sanctioned – alongside 30 linked companies and four individuals – due to his connections with former Liberian President Charles Ghankay Taylor.¹⁶

Under US sanctions rules, any entity owned 50% or more by a sanctioned individual is deemed 'blocked',¹⁷ meaning that the companies listed – of which Bout's VBA Project owns only 49% – may still be able to operate through the international financial system with no barriers from the US. There is no information yet available as to where these companies are trading, nor is there any evidence to



Yevgeny Prigozhin (left) and Viktor Bout (right) on the campaign trail in Ulyanovsk region, mid-June 2023.

Photo: Image shared to a Wagner-linked Telegram channel, 13 June 2023.

suggest that these companies have engaged in the illegal activity for which Bout became notorious.

However, Shugalei may have provided some clues as to what these companies will be doing. In updates posted to his Telegram channel, Shugalei has reported on discussing plans with Bout to export military utility vehicles and aircraft to Africa.¹⁸ Both of these are produced at factories in Ulyanovsk, Bout's new political homeland, and RusAfro-Impex, the name of one of VBA Project's subsidiary companies, could plausibly stand for 'Russia-Africa Import-Export'.

Bout downplayed the possibility that he might once again develop a business portfolio in Africa in an interview with the *New York Times* in September 2023: 'He [Bout] added that he had "nothing much left of any old contacts," especially in Africa, where "the regimes are changing quicker than the weather sometimes".¹⁹ Yet in an interview with South African outlet DefenceWeb a month earlier, Bout told a very

different story, claiming he would like to 'apply his expertise' to developing Russian economic cooperation with Africa and saying that he had founded new companies for this purpose.²⁰ It appears that Bout is shaping his narrative to his audience, downplaying his business plans to a flagship newspaper from the country that hunted and jailed him for years.

Other Russian PMCs following the Wagner 'blueprint'

Bout, Prigozhin and Wagner can be seen as part of a broader pattern in the way that the Russian state has backed and co-opted illicit and grey zone entrepreneurs. In the same way, some of the other Russian PMCs that may be poised to muscle in on Wagner's operations in Africa follow the same blueprint and model.

Russian commentators with close ties to Wagner have referred, in the aftermath of Prigozhin's death, to a possible 'raider takeover' of Wagner assets by other Russian PMCs. Two PMCs that may be orienting themselves to usurp Wagner's role in Africa are Convoy



Viktor Bout (right) and Maxim Shugalei (centre) make a public appearance at an art exhibition in August 2023 showcasing some of Bout's artwork he produced while in prison in the US. Dmitry Grachyov, a deputy of the legislative assembly of the Ulyanovsk region for the same far-right party as Bout, the LDPR, appears on the left of the image.

Photo: Images shared on social media platform VK.

and Redut. Both of these organizations have parallels to Wagner, as they are backed by prominent Putin-allied businessmen (as, until recently, Prigozhin was) and have links to Russian intelligence. Additionally, both organizations are led by former Wagner commanders.

Convoy is reportedly financially backed by Arkady Rotenberg, a close associate of Putin,²¹ and is led by Konstantin Pikalov, known by the call-sign ‘Mazai’, who was a Wagner commander in CAR when the three Russian journalists investigating the group were murdered.²² Pikalov was also prominent in Wagner’s operations to disrupt the 2018 presidential election in Madagascar.²³ In late August, Convoy began advertising on Telegram to recruit pilots for African operations. An investigator for Russian media outlet iStories went undercover and spoke to a Convoy recruiter, who confirmed that recruits would be deployed in Africa.²⁴

Redut, in turn, is led by Antoli Karazi,²⁵ allegedly a former head of Wagner intelligence. Set up to protect the assets of prominent businessman Gennady Timchenko (Redut’s financier), and reportedly backed by Russian military intelligence,²⁶ Redut has also reportedly become more active in recruitment for operations in Africa since the Wagner mutiny in June.²⁷

Of course, Wagner and its associated networks remain active, and some leading Wagner figures who were closely allied to Prigozhin remain in post. For example, Dmitri Sytii, the longstanding frontman for Wagner’s political and (legally dubious) economic operations in CAR, continues to work from a former presidential residence in Bangui, according to reporting from the *Wall Street Journal*.²⁸ Alexander Ivanov, head of a front company for Wagner’s operations in CAR – the Officers Union for International Security – likewise remains in post.²⁹

Looking ahead: Russian military and proxy engagement in Africa

As demonstrated by Bout’s apparent positioning for providing military equipment to Africa, the Wagner Group is not the only agent of Russian influence in the mercenary grey zone. Other Russian PMCs and extant Wagner networks are also making their moves towards Africa. And when one scratches beneath the surface, there are links between Bout, Prigozhin, Wagner and the other Russian PMCs.

These private actors and proxies – including criminal actors – can be seen as part of a broader military–business complex through which Russia seeks to influence events overseas. Even with Prigozhin gone, the strategic goals of the Kremlin in furthering its interests, displacing the influence of Western nations, and extracting resources appear unchanged.

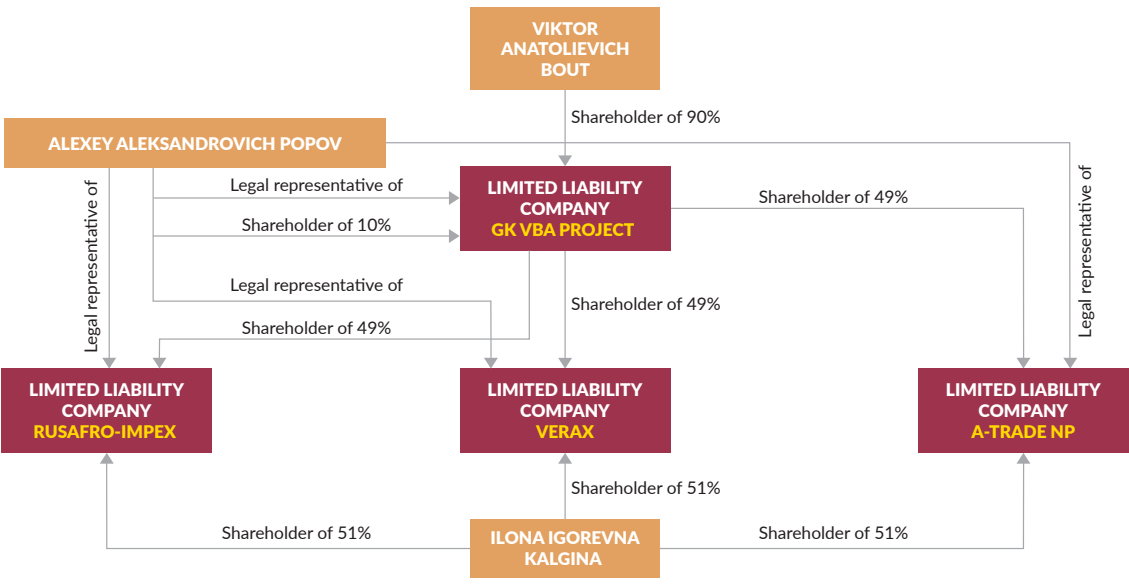


FIGURE 2 Network of newly registered companies linked to Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout.

Notes

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Intercontinental drug trafficking networks operating via West Africa have begun trading hashish directly for cocaine.

In July 2023, Spanish customs seized 6 tonnes of hashish (cannabis resin) on a sailboat near the Canary Islands. The vessel had left Portugal and loaded its illicit cargo off Morocco's northern port city Safi. It then headed not towards Europe, but South America. The destination was Brazil, an emerging market for hashish.¹

This seizure highlights a new dynamic in the long-standing cocaine trafficking flows between South America, West Africa and Europe. Since 2016, Brazil has been by far the most important export point for cocaine moving through West Africa to Europe. Since at least 2020, European criminal organizations appear to be exchanging hashish directly for cocaine from Brazilian

networks, the Lisbon-based Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (MAOC) reports.²

The same ship will often transport cocaine one way and hashish the other, with many vessels traveling via West Africa, dropping off cargo for later pickup and contributing to what law enforcement sources describe as 'giant stockpiles' of hashish along the West African coast.³

By enhancing the efficiency of operations and negating the need for cash payments, this new trend of bartering hashish for cocaine could be a step-change in the capacity of maritime trafficking networks to transit larger quantities of cocaine via West Africa. This barter system,

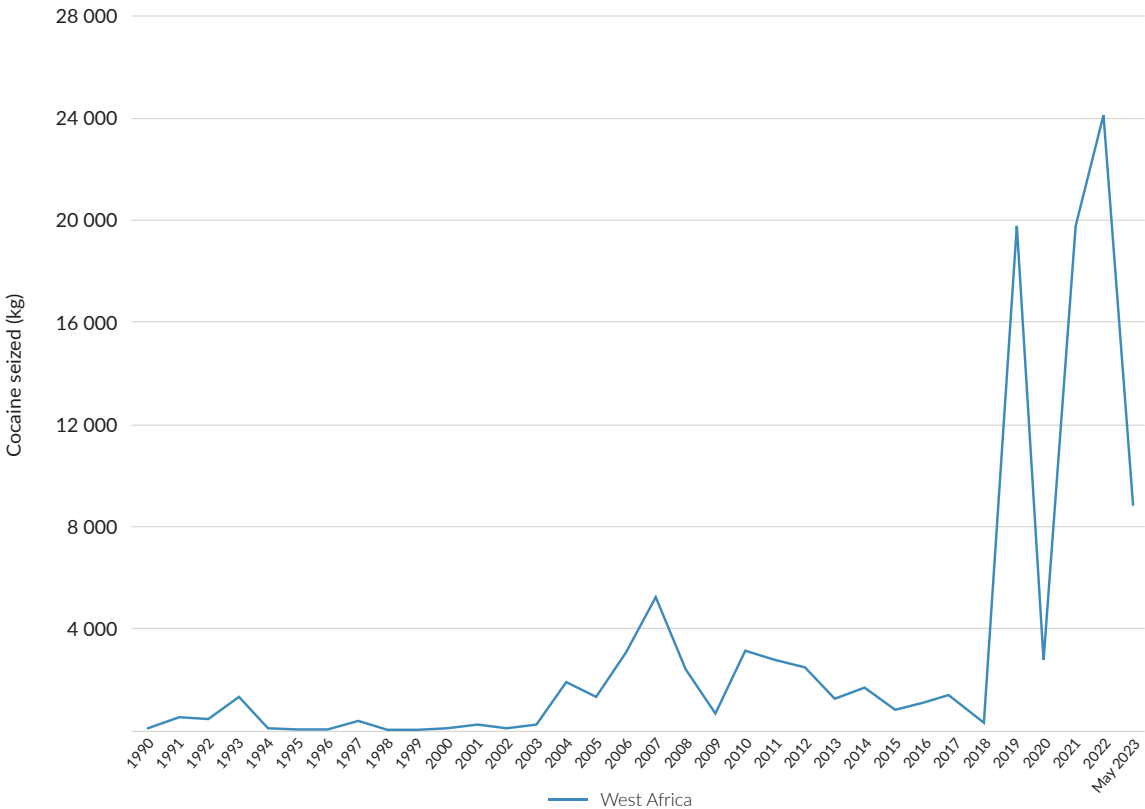


FIGURE 1 Cocaine seizures in West Africa, 1990–2023.

Note: 2023 figures as of end of May.

Source: Data collated by the GI-TOC from various sources, including the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, media publications and confidential sources.

and an increase in hashish transported via West Africa, also feeds into overland trafficking routes for both hashish and cocaine, which transit from West African ports across some of the most unstable and conflict-affected areas of West Africa and the Sahel.

The emergence of hashish-cocaine swaps via West African maritime routes

Trading hashish for cocaine directly exploits huge differentials in drug prices across continents. In Morocco, hashish currently wholesales for around US\$800 per kilogram and cocaine for US\$28 000,⁴ while in Brazil both hashish and cocaine wholesale for around US\$8 000–10 000 per kilogram.⁵ For a kilogram of hashish that arrives in Brazil, Brazilian groups send 1 kilogram of cocaine in return, an arrangement that suits the trafficking networks as being a far more economical option than cash, likely significantly expanding their purchasing power.

The relationship between Moroccan cannabis trafficking networks and Latin American cocaine trafficking networks has a long history. Around 20 years ago, cocaine trafficking networks began to leverage cannabis trafficking routes from Morocco to Europe to ship cocaine, which these networks were trafficking via West Africa.⁶ Swapping hashish directly for cocaine is a significant evolution in this long-standing relationship, allowing these intercontinental trafficking networks to use their existing supply chains and logistics arrangements more efficiently. This new trend has arisen amid record-level global cocaine production and record-level cocaine seizures in West Africa.⁷

Since 2020, West Africa appears to have become an important transit hub for Moroccan hashish. From 2007 to 2019, MAOC, an EU-supported maritime force focused on counter-drug trafficking operations, seized 457 tonnes of Moroccan hashish, 95% of which was seized in or around the Mediterranean. From 2020 to 2021, 65% of hashish seizures occurred in West Africa, around the Canary Islands or near Brazil.⁸ Since 2019, over 12.5 tonnes of hashish known to be destined for Brazil have been interdicted across four different seizures.⁹

Reporting on the June 2021 seizure of 15 tonnes of hashish near the Canary Islands from a vessel with an Italian captain and a Senegalese crew, Spanish authorities highlighted several West African countries as growing hubs in the increasingly popular 'Atlantic hashish route'.¹⁰ These included Senegal, Guinea,

Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone. In their statement, Spanish authorities reported that intelligence suggests trafficking hashish from Morocco by sea to the West African coast and then northwards overland through the Sahel via Libya to Europe is seen by criminal organizations as more secure than traditional trafficking routes from Morocco to Europe, due to disruption by Italian, French and Spanish law enforcement.¹¹ Such routes have been leveraged by networks in major hashish-producing countries beyond Morocco: in March 2021, a record interception was made in Niger of 17 tonnes of hashish that had originated in Lebanon and had been imported through Lomé port, in Togo.¹²

Senegal has made the region's largest seizures. In June 2021, Senegalese navy vessels intercepted over 16 tonnes of hashish on two sailboats heading south just weeks apart. Local media reported that one of the vessels was bound for Côte d'Ivoire.¹³ Seizures of smaller quantities along Senegal's land border with the Gambia have also become an increasingly frequent occurrence since 2020, according to a source in the Office Central de Répression du Trafic Illicite des Stupéfiants (OCRTIS), Senegal's drug agency.¹⁴

Guinean law enforcement have also reported an uptick in hashish seizures. One investigation into a larger consignment – 84 kilograms – seized in April 2021 resulted in the arrest of a police colonel and several military officers tasked with presidential security, suggesting a degree of institutional protection for the trade among elements of the country's security forces.¹⁵

The emerging role of coastal West Africa as an important transit point for international hashish trafficking may be being overlooked by West African law enforcement. Guinean police commissioner Benjamin Camara noted that the dominant focus of Guinean security forces on cocaine could mean that the rise in hashish trafficking is being missed.¹⁶ Similarly, in Senegal, despite there having been large-scale seizures of hashish by the Senegalese navy and within Senegal, several law enforcement sources interviewed did not have a strong awareness of the link with cocaine trafficking or the nature of the cocaine-hashish barter trade. This may reflect a lack of information sharing between the regional and international authorities seizing hashish at sea and the predominantly national law enforcement authorities intercepting drugs flows on land.

Not all the hashish heading towards West Africa is bound for Brazil. Due to increasingly high interdiction rates off

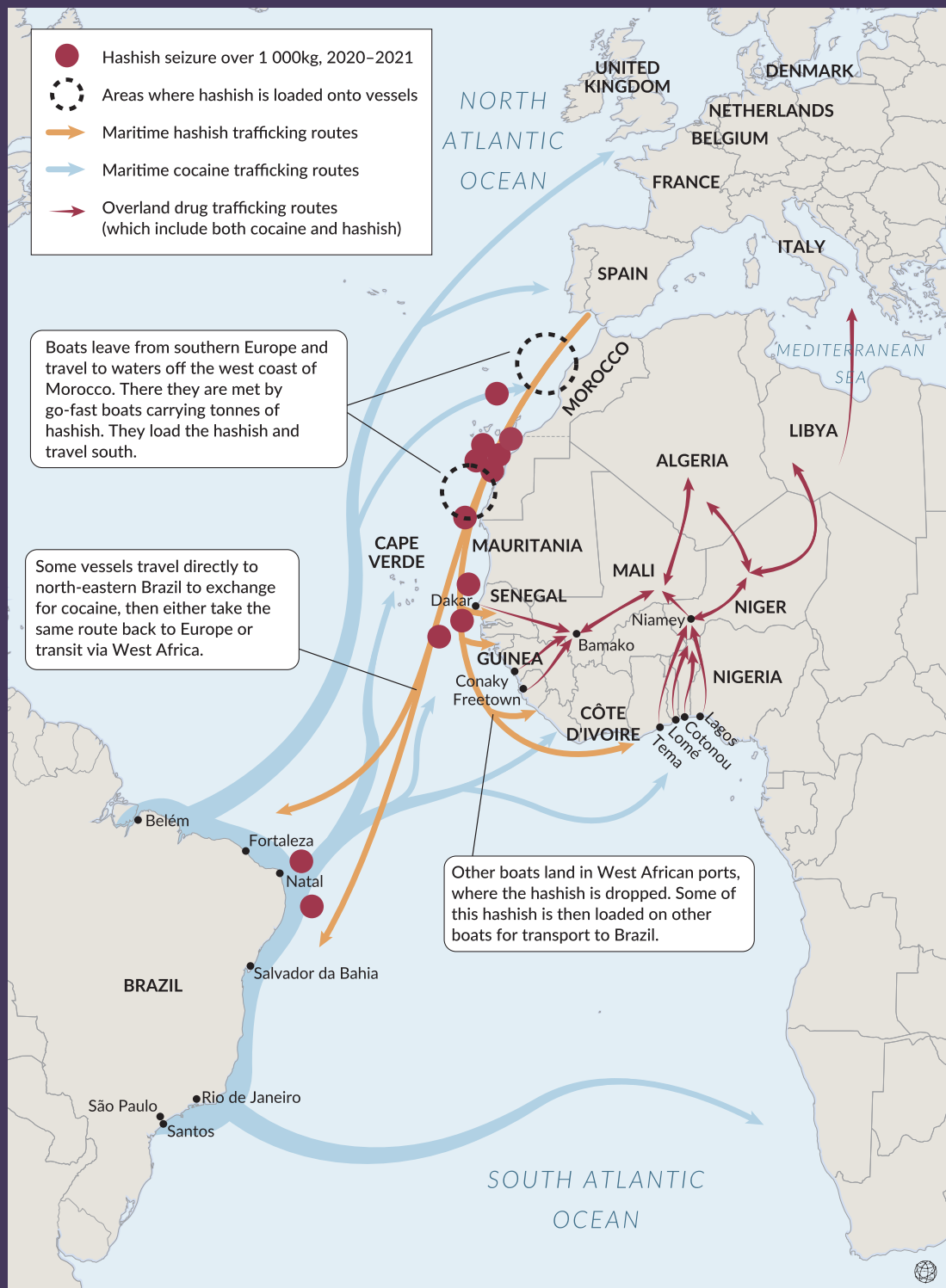


FIGURE 2 Hashish and cocaine trafficking flows via West Africa.

Sources: Data for this map on hashish trafficking routes and seizures was shared by MAOC. Data on maritime cocaine trafficking routes is drawn from the GI-TOC's August 2023 report 'Atlantic connections: The PCC and the Brazil-West Africa cocaine trade', available at <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/brazil-west-africa-cocaine-trade/>. Data on overland drug trafficking routes through West Africa and the Sahel is based on the UN Panel of Experts on Mali report, July 2023, annex 18, available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf.

Spain and Portugal, traffickers are having to seek new routes into Europe, resulting in an overall southward shift in hashish trafficking routes. Some networks, having smuggled hashish from Morocco south to West Africa by sailboat, are splitting tonnes of hashish into smaller cargos of 200 to 300 kilograms and hiding them in containers leaving West African ports bound for European entry points such as Antwerp and Rotterdam.¹⁷

In other instances, criminal networks employ overland routes for hashish from Morocco through the Sahel and Sahara into Libya.¹⁸ In 2020, the UN Panel of Experts on Mali described the traffic of 'hashish, from Morocco, moving via Mauritania and Mali through the Niger to Libya' as 'the most regular and stable narcotics flow through Mali'.¹⁹ Once in Libya, some of this cannabis is then moved across the Mediterranean into Europe.²⁰

A complex set of intercontinental criminal actors

Europe-based networks play a role in the intercontinental cocaine-hashish trade via West Africa. These include Albanian crime rings, as well as Bulgarian gangs – often based in Spain – that have set up logistics outposts in West Africa. Guinea, for example, was a favoured spot for Dimitar Mitrin, a Spain-based Bulgarian drug trafficker arrested in 2020. Mitrin started out importing Moroccan hashish to Spain, then he expanded into cocaine before realizing the money to be made in exporting Moroccan hashish to Brazil in exchange for cocaine. He reportedly established outposts in Guinea, both for the transit of hashish and cocaine and as locations to conduct swaps.²¹

Some Brazilian law enforcement sources believe that members of West African criminal networks – most prominently Nigerian networks – negotiate hashish-for-cocaine swaps in Brazil, though it is difficult to say for certain. 'The West African traffickers most prolific in Brazil are the Nigerians. There is a Nigerian underworld very much active in São Paulo for decades [including] within the prison system,' Christian Azevedo, a senior official in the federal police, said. Azevedo added that Senegalese and Ghanaian criminal networks are also present, as are Moroccans.²²

The São Paulo-based First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC) is a pivotal player in the transit of cocaine from Brazil to West Africa,²³ collaborating closely with Nigerian cells. Some reports indicate that the PCC may be taking a role in the emerging Brazilian market for African hashish. In April

2023, an investigation uncovered a smuggling ring importing African hashish in the north-eastern state of Rio Grande do Norte. The ring operated alongside what was described in media reports as 'a large criminal faction in São Paulo', which is likely a reference to the PCC.²⁴ A sailing vessel carrying three tonnes of hashish off the coast of Brazil was recently seized on 10 November 2023. All four crew members were Brazilian nationals. This is the latest suggestion of Brazilian network involvement in hashish trafficking.²⁵

Within coastal West Africa, Moroccan networks reportedly play a significant role in supplying hashish. According to an officer of the OCRTIS agency in Senegal, Moroccan criminal networks traffic hashish into Senegal under the protection of corrupt security force officers.²⁶

Implications for hashish and cocaine trafficking through West Africa and the Sahel

The development of cocaine-hashish swaps to Latin America – and the far higher volumes of hashish consequently arriving in West African ports – could have broader implications for the political economy of drug trafficking in West Africa.

Swaps offer greater efficiency by enabling vessels to be used in both travel direction, generating significant cost savings for Africa-based traffickers. Reduced operating costs could contribute to further increases in the volume of cocaine that trafficking networks move through West Africa towards European consumer markets.

The increased efficiency offered by these swaps fits into an overall pattern of major criminal actors seeking to enhance the efficiency of the cocaine supply chain between Latin America and Europe. Brazil's PCC, for example, is known to try to enhance the efficiency of its supply chains. Gabriel Feltran, a Brazilian ethnographer who has authored a book on the PCC and interviewed a number of the PCC's business partners, hypothesizes that the group often works by decreasing profits per consignment while driving overall profits higher by increasing the volumes transiting the relevant route.²⁷

Increasing quantities of cocaine transiting West Africa could have knock-on effects on political stability. Cocaine markets have a deeply corrosive effect on many West African state institutions, with the high-profit transit trade supporting entrenched protection structures that reach into high levels of the political and security apparatus.²⁸

Furthermore, growing quantities of cocaine and hashish arriving on West African coastlines would also funnel yet more consignments through the extremely unstable Sahel, benefiting non-state armed groups active in armed conflicts in the region, particularly Malian political signatory groups that have long been deeply entrenched in the drugs trade. Cocaine and hashish follow many of the same trafficking routes through the central Sahara, tending to travel through the Salvador Pass into Libya, for example.²⁹ Along these routes, cocaine and hashish are, on occasion, trafficked by overlapping groups that would be paying off the same corrupt actors and armed groups.

Global drug markets are arguably the ultimate example of how illicit economies have become as globalized as their licit counterparts. The price differentials for cocaine and hashish in Brazil and Morocco may seem irrelevant to the activities of Tuareg and Tebu smugglers moving goods through the Salvador Pass in southern Libya, yet they are connected through the global factors of supply and demand. The broader picture of how drug markets are changing – and, in the case of the global cocaine supply, booming – is necessary to understand how trafficking and smuggling dynamics work on the local level.

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The Niger coup has led to a halt in cross-border law enforcement cooperation against armed banditry in north-west Nigeria.

West African politics have been thrown into limbo since 27 July 2023, when military leaders in Niger announced the overthrow of the country's democratic government led by President Mohammed Bazoum. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) responded by imposing sanctions on Niger, suspending Niger's ECOWAS membership, and directing its members to shut their borders to the country.¹ It also threatened a military intervention to remove the putschists from power.

The Niger coup – and the regional response to it – has also resulted in a halt in cross-border law enforcement cooperation between Niger and its neighbours. The more than 1 600-kilometre border between Niger and Nigeria, now closed, plays host to a range of transnational illicit flows, and it forms the boundary of several of Nigeria's most insecure regions. International car theft syndicates, human smuggling flows, and trafficked arms, ammunition and drugs all traverse this border (see Figure 1).²

Security sources told the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) that the aftermath of the Niger coup has hindered cross-border collaboration to counter armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. Border towns in the Katsina province have experienced an uptick in attacks by armed bandits, and the increased availability of ammunition – smuggled across the border with Niger – may be a driving factor.

Niger and Nigeria had been improving cross-border security cooperation over the past decade to respond to Boko Haram

Nigeria has closely cooperated with neighbouring states on its northern border against violent extremist groups and armed bandits for the past decade. These cooperative mechanisms arose from a need to counter the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria's north-east.

Cross-border cooperation reached a turning point in 2013. Following military offensives by the Nigerian state,

Boko Haram was driven out of its urban base in Maiduguri, the largest city of Borno State. In response, the group strengthened its influence over a number of rural areas, including along the border with Niger.

With its increased presence in border areas, the group gained influence over strategic corridors for arms trafficking from outside Nigeria, including in Abadam, which shares borders with Niger and Chad. A former Boko Haram commander said that, at the time, the town Malam Fatori, headquarters of the Abadam Local Government Area and a former Boko Haram stronghold, 'allowed us to avoid security surveillance at Cameroon or Chad borders when bringing in weapons from Mali and Libya. The route was vital for our weapons supply. (...) Channels through Chad and Cameroon were often disrupted by security forces'.³

Boko Haram's expansion into these areas posed a threat to border communities in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad. In response, Nigerian and Cameroonian forces, in cooperation with Nigerian forces, crossed into Nigeria in 2013 in pursuit of Boko Haram, marking Niger's first involvement in a cross-border combat mission against the insurgent group.⁴

To this day, Abadam is still a smuggling hub for arms and drug trafficking across the Niger-Nigeria border.⁵ Both of the main Boko Haram factions – Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) – strive to control the strategic area.⁶

In 2014, Boko Haram captured Damasak, another strategically located town on the Niger-Nigeria border in Borno state, further west than Abadam. As its fighters began launching cross-border attacks on Nigerian security forces,⁷ Niger, which initially was content with mounting containment operations at its border, increasingly became involved in regional efforts against Boko Haram.

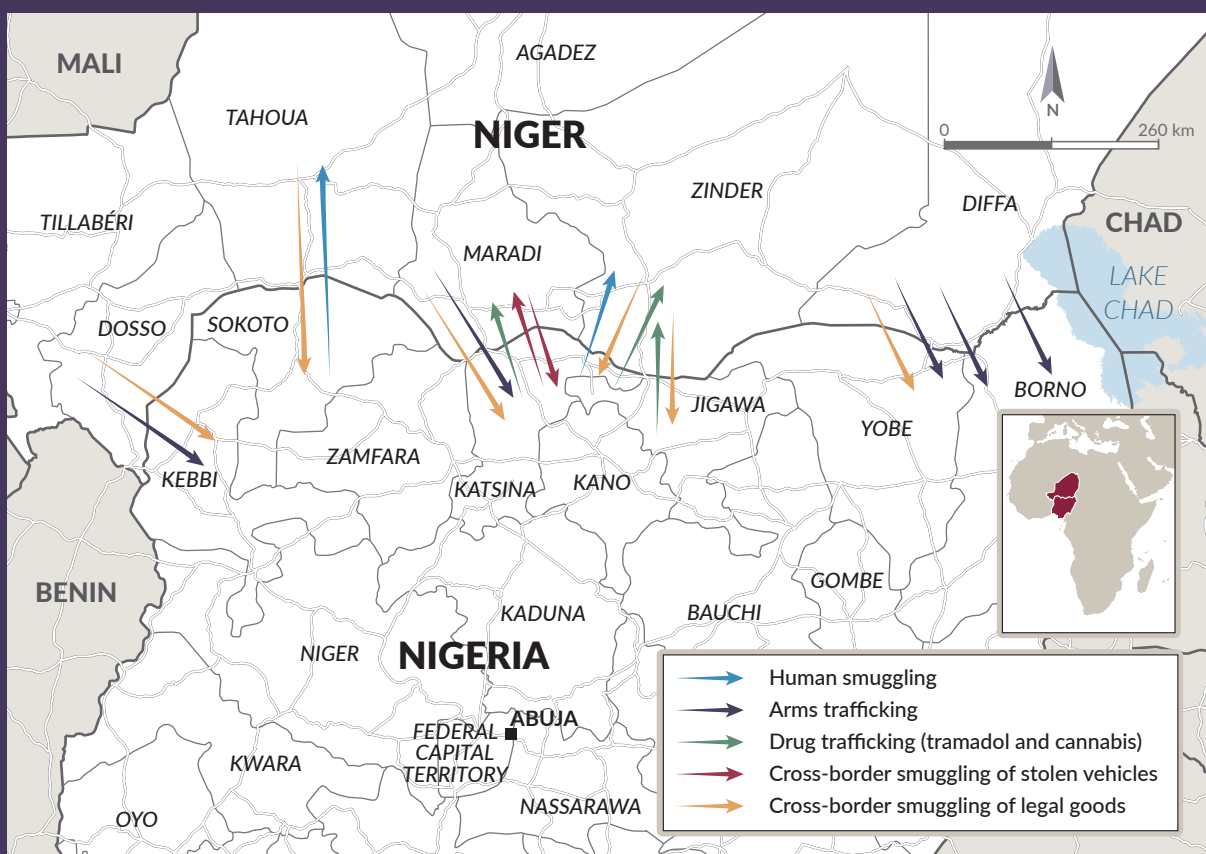


FIGURE 1 Illicit flows across the Nigeria–Niger border, as of September 2023.

Cross-border collaboration crystallized with the formation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) by Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin in 2015, after which Niger stepped up offensives against Boko Haram, joining Chad to launch a cross-border operation on Boko Haram’s positions in Nigeria. The operation was described by the media as ‘Niger’s first major push into Nigerian territory to combat Boko Haram’.⁸

MNJTF operations regained control of many of the border areas that were previously under the control of Boko Haram. Niger has dialled back its cross-border operations in the north-east since 2018, focusing instead on patrolling its borders and contributing some troops to MNJTF operations.⁹ A Nigerian special forces commander told the GI-TOC that border surveillance by Nigerien forces has had some impact on reducing the flow of arms and ammunition across the border through smuggling hubs such as Abadam.¹⁰

Nigerien and Nigerian forces have also cooperated to counter armed banditry and arms trafficking in Nigeria’s north-west

Since at least 2011, armed bandits in north-west Nigeria have engaged in kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling and extortion, representing the most significant threat to peace in the region. Drawing on their experience cooperating against Boko Haram in the north-east, Niger and Nigeria have applied a similar approach to fighting these armed bandits, including through intelligence-sharing between national authorities, joint investigations and cross-border operations by Nigerien troops against bandits in Nigeria.

These operations have led to the formation of strong relationships between some Nigerian communities and Nigerien military forces, as they have been able to respond to distress calls from victims of kidnapping, cattle rustling and raids.¹¹ Some of these communities

are more likely to call on Niger for help when under attack, according to Nigerian security sources.¹² 'We have the phone contacts of some Nigerien commanders and we used to reach out to them to alert them of attacks on our communities or movement of bandits towards their villages,' said a local vigilante leader in Jibiya, in Katsina State in north-west Nigeria.¹³

Cross-border cooperation has also targeted arms and ammunition flows. Between March 2022 and April 2023, over 10 000 rounds of ammunition were seized from traffickers as a result of intelligence sharing between Nigeria and Niger. In one case, an individual was apprehended transporting cash to Agadez in Niger to buy ammunition for the high-profile Nigerian bandit leader Dankarami.¹⁴ In August, the Nigerian Air Force reported that air strikes targeting bandit groups in Zamfara and Katsina states had killed 16 members of Dankarami's criminal network.¹⁵

According to security officials, intelligence sharing and joint operations by the security forces of the two countries have underpinned the disruption of some trafficking networks operating through Jibiya, as well.¹⁶ Jibiya, a border town in Katsina State, is known as a hub for arms trafficking, human smuggling and the smuggling of a range of everyday goods.¹⁷ Traffickers have exploited the porous state of the Jibiya border to supply

arms to bandit groups in Nigeria.¹⁸ 'All the weapons used by bandits come from across the border through arms traffickers operating between Jibiya and Niger. It is a lucrative business for the traffickers and crucial to bandits' operations,' explained a police chief in Katsina.¹⁹

Following the Niger coup, security cooperation has halted

In the aftermath of the coup, security cooperation between Niger and Nigeria came to an abrupt halt. While Nigerien forces have remained part of MNJTF headquarters in N'Djamena,²⁰ they have halted cross-border security patrols and surveillance in north-west Nigeria,²¹ disrupting attempts to combat arms trafficking and banditry.²²

A security official in Nigeria described how the border closure prevented him from crossing into Niger to participate in the interrogation of an arms trafficker he had been tracking: 'Last week, I tracked an arms trafficker travelling to Mali to buy arms for a Jibiya-based bandit kingpin (...) I contacted the Nigeriens based on the personal relationship that has grown between [us] and he was arrested. But I could not join them over there because of the sanctions and severance of the security relationship between our countries. So, I lost the opportunity to interrogate him and gain some

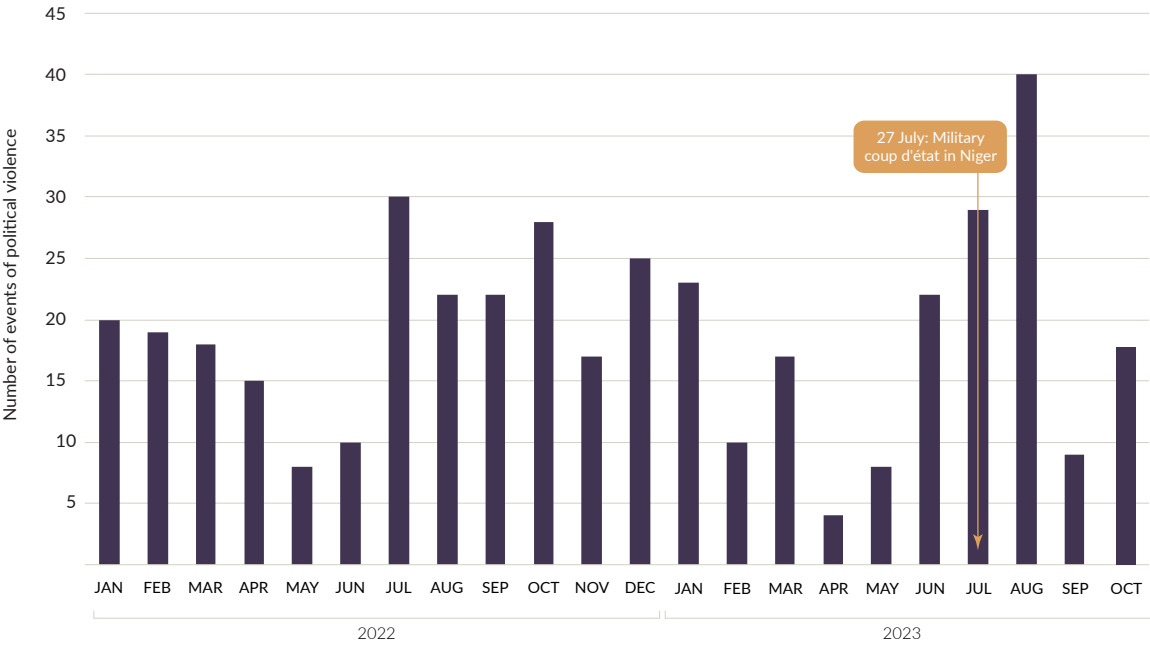


FIGURE 2 Frequency of political events in Katsina State, Nigeria, 2022–October 2023.

Source: ACLED

valuable information on his Nigerian dealings, collaborators, fellow traffickers and sponsors'.²³

Villages in the Jibiya area have reported an increase in attacks following the Niger coup. One member of a vigilante group in the Jibiya Local Government Area said bandits have increasingly targeted the community since the unconstitutional takeover: 'We have seen more attacks on our communities and neighbouring villages since late July and the attacks suggest that the groups are hell-bent on establishing a foothold near the border'.²⁴ A resident of the Magama community, another town in Jibiya, also remarked on the increasing attacks: 'Bandits have obviously taken advantage of this because kidnappings and raids on communities, farms and the highway now happen daily'.²⁵

Data from the Armed Conflict and Location Data (ACLED) project corroborates these claims, showing a significant increase in the number of attacks in Katsina province, where Jibiya is located, as compared to previous months in 2023. Security sources in the area described how, in early 2023, a cross-border clampdown on ammunition trafficking routes into Nigeria seemed to be effective in cutting off supplies to bandit groups and reducing attacks.²⁶ Attacks had slowly begun to increase again in mid-2023 as bandits and arms traffickers had seemingly found a way to circumvent security forces, and they surged following the Niger coup.²⁷

Notes

- 1 Martin Ronceray, Can ECOWAS still defend democracy in West Africa after the Niger coup?, ECDPM, 11 September 2023, <https://ecdpm.org/work/can-ecowas-still-defend-democracy-west-africa-after-niger-coup>; Mohammed Yusuf, ECOWAS unity put to test as West African coup crisis deepens, Voice of America, 11 September 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ecowas-unity-put-to-test-as-west-african-coup-crisis-deepens-/7263280.html>.
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- 4 International Crisis Group, What role for Multi National Joint Task Force in fighting Boko Haram, 7 July 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/291-what-role-multinational-joint-task-force-fighting-boko-haram>.
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- 9 Interview with a Nigerian special forces commander, Abuja, August 2023.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Interviews with residents of Jibiya, 25 August 2023.
- 12 Interview with a Nigerian special forces commander, Abuja, August 2023.
- 13 Interview with a local leader, Jibiya, August 2023.
- 14 Interview with a security operative in Jibiya, 26 August 2023.

Security sources report that, since mid-August, bandits arrested or killed during encounters with security forces in north-west Nigeria have often been found to be better equipped with ammunition than in previous months. Whereas in May and June 2023 a typical bandit might have had one or two magazines of ammunition when arrested, in August this rose to three or four magazines, suggesting that there may have been a resurgence in the flow of ammunition. Some interlocutors suggest that the suspension of the security collaboration in the wake of the coup was one possible factor influencing this resurgence, noting the spike in hostility between the two countries.²⁸

The impact of border closures and sanctions

The ECOWAS response to Niger's coup has sparked fierce political debate about the appropriate diplomatic response in these situations, the role of sanctions and the role of regional organizations such as ECOWAS in promoting the rule of law. Alongside these conceptual political questions, there are practical challenges in how sanctions are applied on the ground. In border towns in Niger and Nigeria, ECOWAS sanctions have had severe economic and humanitarian ramifications for communities.²⁹ A decrease in law enforcement cooperation – and therefore an increased risk to the safety and security of these communities due to the ever-present threat of banditry – is another challenge in this complex border region.

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- 17 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>.
- 18 Interview with a law enforcement officer, Jibiya 26 August 2023.
- 19 Interview with a police officer, Katsina, July 2023; Interview with a local government official, Jibiya, July 2023.
- 20 Interview with a senior security officer, Abuja, September 2023.
- 21 Interviews with residents and law enforcement officers, Jibiya, July–September 2023.
- 22 Interview with a Niger-based security expert, August 2023. The security expert explained that any increase or decrease in arms flows to Nigeria would have resulted from significant changes in military patrols influenced by the border closure.
- 23 Interview with a security agent, 3 September 2023.
- 24 Interview with a local vigilante member, Jibiya, September 2023.
- 25 Interview with a resident of Jibiya, August 2023.
- 26 Interview with a law enforcement officer, Jibiya, 26 August 2023.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Interviews with security agents, Jibiya and Abuja, August–September 2023.
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