

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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## Summary highlights



### **IS Sahel: Consolidating territory and reviving economies.**

Since 2023, the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) has expanded and consolidated its influence over north-eastern Mali's Ménaka region. After eliminating non-state armed groups that represented competition, the group has shifted from mass violence against civilians to building community support, largely by facilitating licit and illicit economic activity. IS Sahel might well apply this behavioural shift, even if accompanied by targeted violence against elements perceived to threaten its local dominance. If sustained, this nascent 'hearts and minds' strategy could bolster the group's local resilience and durability.



### **Bandits shift kidnapping focus in Nigeria's north from rural areas to cities.**

Long a scourge of rural and remote areas, kidnapping by bandits in North West and North Central Nigeria is increasingly shifting into urban areas, as shown by a spate of incidents since May 2024. Urban and peri-urban areas offer bandits more opportunities for financial gain, as they present a larger pool of targets,

alongside potential inroads into other illicit activities. The spike in urban kidnappings may in part be due to military operations displacing bandit activities in rural areas. An effective counter-banditry strategy must include tracking the spread of banditry and forestalling the risk of further geographic displacement.



### **Political extortion? JNIM's blockade of Boni, Mali.**

Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)'s blockade of the town of Boni in central Mali has intensified since June 2024, severely disrupting the local economy and civilian mobility. Under increased military pressure, JNIM has engaged in extortion, robbery and arson against drivers and vehicles attempting to bypass the blockade. This is a departure from its usual focus on attempting to build popular consent. Two key factors are driving this. One is JNIM's typical use of extreme but targeted measures to achieve particular ends – in this case a severance of relations between the population of Boni and state forces. The other is the nature of JNIM's behaviour on roads. Transiting populations are perpetually seen as a source of danger by JNIM, and



they will remain at a higher risk of violence and crime than static populations, at least until the group has absolute confidence in its control.



### **Benin–Niger border closure drives surge in migrant smuggling profits.**

Following a military coup d'état in Niger in July 2023, member states of the West African economic bloc ECOWAS shut their borders with the country. This terminated regular regional migratory flows from Benin

across the Niger River into Niger, and triggered a compensatory surge in human smuggling. Alongside strengthening smuggling networks, the border closure hit traders' livelihoods, boding ominously for security, especially since violent extremist organizations had already established a foothold in the local criminal economy. While there is no evidence at this stage that extremist recruitment has increased, the longer the border stays closed, the more this becomes a risk.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

The 11th issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa aims to highlight the impacts of collisions between illicit actors, states, and the communities that illicit networks rely on.

One of these illicit actors, Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), has dramatically reversed its fortunes since late 2021. From being almost eradicated as an armed group in 2021, IS Sahel now has almost complete control of the Ménaka region of north-eastern Mali, which it staked through extreme brutality. While this may have purged the area of would-be resistors, it has also meant the drying up of local economies, in turn challenging the group's ability to raise the money for its operations and obtain vital supplies. IS Sahel has since changed tack and is now aiming for a more benevolent relationship with civilians, an approach that appears to be serving them well, and could lead to growth in their power as a group.

In Nigeria, evidence is showcased of a changing geography for banditry. A spate of kidnappings in urban areas, apparently committed by the same bandit groups that have destabilized large swathes of north-western Nigeria, is alarming residents and security observers. Several factors may be driving this, particularly military operations against the bandits' rural territory. However, it may also be a consequence of the bandits having over-exploited their home areas, with many families now unable to pay ransoms having already paid them several times before.

In central Mali, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has escalated its blockade of the town of Boni in the Mopti region, a response to the deployment of Malian armed forces and Russian troops to a nearby base. Fearing that Boni residents will collaborate with the armed forces and damage their hold on the area, JNIM has resorted to some extreme behaviour – including pillaging and robbing people attempting to enter Boni. The article also examines why road passengers entering Boni, but also for road users more broadly across the Sahel, appear consistently vulnerable to JNIM's predation.

The closure of Niger's border with Benin following the July 2023 coup disrupted regular migratory routes and led to a sharp rise in human smuggling across the Niger River. As legal crossings were blocked, demand for smuggling services increased, boosting profits for smugglers and straining local livelihoods. Although Benin reopened its side of the border in February 2024, Niger did not reciprocate, causing continued instability and the resilience of the illicit trade. Reopening the Nigerien side of the border could be key to restoring security and economic stability.

These stories illustrate how research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime consistently seeks to offer context when examining organized criminal economies, blending detailed insights into the functioning of illicit markets at the local level with the external factors influencing them.

# IS Sahel: Consolidating territory and reviving economies.

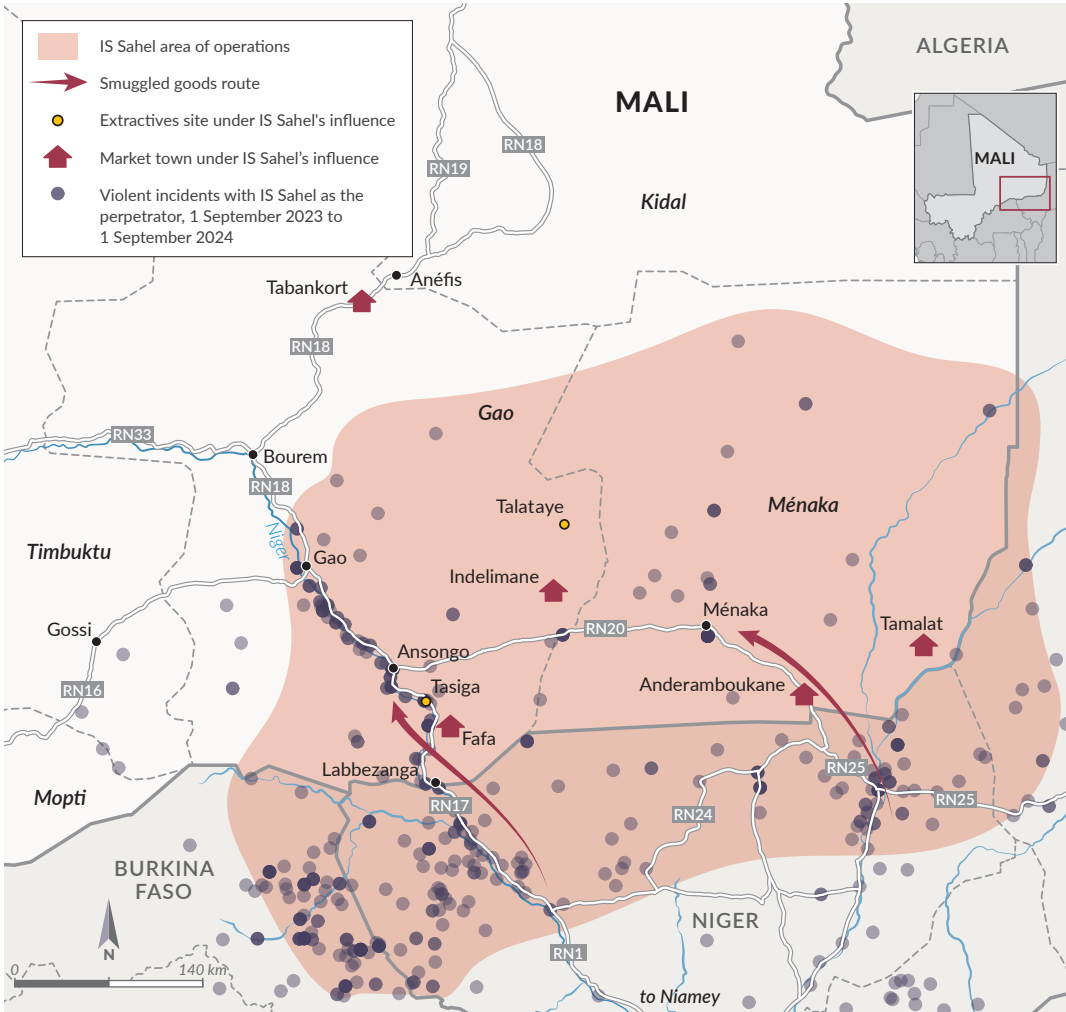
Since 2023, Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), a violent extremist organization affiliated to the Islamic State, has shifted from perpetrating high levels of indiscriminate violence against civilians towards building community support in areas where it has consolidated its influence. It has also begun actively reviving local economies (including illicit activities) that had been heavily undermined by its earlier indiscriminate use of violence.

After almost 10 years of insurgency in the Sahel, the group has made significant territorial gains in the last two years. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Mali, in the year to August 2023 alone it doubled the area it controlled in the country.<sup>1</sup> From mid-2022 IS

Sahel also started operating beyond the Sahel, including in north-eastern Benin.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the group's largest gains have come in north-eastern Mali's Ménaka region, which it almost entirely controls, except for Ménaka town itself. IS Sahel however controls all the roads leading to and from this town, enabling it to police the movement of people and supplies. The group's hold over the Ménaka region represents the first time its influence has been uncontested over large swathes of territory.<sup>3</sup>

IS Sahel's behavioural shift – away from indiscriminate violence and towards positioning itself as a provider of



**FIGURE 1** IS Sahel's zone of control and main smuggling routes.

economic opportunities – has been especially pronounced in Ménaka. This shift in focus is likely to earn the group a degree of local legitimacy, while also enabling it to exploit and profit from related economic opportunities, both licit and illicit.

### Territorial control enables violence reduction

Established in May 2015, IS Sahel had effectively been territorially defeated by the end of 2021, due to military pressure from two very different sources – the French counter-insurgency Operation Barkhane and competition from al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

However, the IS affiliate has since staged a remarkable comeback, returning to the Ménaka region in 2022, capitalizing on France's military withdrawal that year. IS Sahel's reliance on high levels of indiscriminate violence during its initial territorial resurgence – alongside looting, extortion, *zakat*<sup>4</sup> and cattle rustling – sparked substantial displacement. This mass displacement left some areas empty, and others peopled only by residents who collaborated with the group and did not pose a threat. These effectively became spaces of compliance, reducing the group's need to use high levels of violence and opening an opportunity for a more nuanced local strategy.

From early 2023, IS Sahel reduced its use of violence. Civilian fatalities in the Ménaka region in the first seven months of 2024 were eight times lower than during the same period in 2022 (66 and 525 respectively).<sup>5</sup> Only three cattle rustling incidents were recorded in the seven months to August 2024, a dramatic decline from the thousands of cattle stolen in 2022.<sup>6</sup>

Not only the scale, but the nature of violence used by the group changed. IS Sahel largely leveraged violence more discriminately, although some seemingly random attacks on villages and thefts of herd persisted. The use of violence is now mostly driven by two clear purposes: the punishment of perceived traitors and the exertion of control over goods transiting its territory. Violence therefore tends to target communities perceived by IS Sahel as allied with pro-government groups, notably the Dawsahak community. Meanwhile, territorial control is consolidated by arresting the drivers of vehicles and seizing (or even burning) goods that IS Sahel has not cleared for passage (or taxed accordingly).

This correlation between increasingly uncontested territorial control and decreased violence is in line with

broader patterns tracked by analysts monitoring armed group activity.<sup>7</sup> Comparing IS Sahel's behaviour towards civilians in Ménaka and Gao – a neighbouring region to the west of Ménaka – is telling. In the Gao region, IS Sahel has significantly expanded its influence over the last two years, including in Ansongo district, and across key roads, including the route between Gao and Niamey, the capital of neighbouring Niger. However, IS Sahel faces competition from JNIM, pro-government militias, and the Malian armed forces and their Russian partners in the Wagner Group (now rebranded as the Africa Corps).

In the first seven months of 2024, the number of violent incidents against civilians perpetrated by IS Sahel was almost 10 times higher in the Gao region (65 incidents in total) than in the Ménaka region (seven incidents), despite IS Sahel's presence being spread much wider geographically in the Ménaka region.<sup>8</sup> IS Sahel's behavioural shifts in Ménaka thus appear to have been shaped by the consolidated control it has established in the region.<sup>9</sup>

### Economic revival consolidates territorial control

From early 2023, IS Sahel started engaging in conventional economic activity in the Ménaka region, for two main reasons. First, the group needed to revive supply chains and the local economy, which had collapsed since its 2022 offensive, in order to replenish its own resources. Second, it recognized that long-term territorial control would be best achieved by fostering positive relationships with local communities. By positioning itself as a provider of livelihoods and actively involving itself in critical local economies (notably gold mining and goods smuggling), the group has sought to burnish its governance credentials.



A leaflet distributed by IS Sahel in Ménaka, Mali, as part of efforts to win the trust of the community

Photo: Wassim Nassr/ X

To encourage communities to return, IS Sahel launched efforts to win their trust. Between March and July 2023, it distributed leaflets, preached in mosques and used platforms including WhatsApp and Al-Naba to communicate its methods and values.<sup>10</sup> Promising protection, IS Sahel invited displaced communities to resettle in its territories – a pledge given some credence by its elimination of local resistance.

Although initially hesitant, some communities gradually returned. As livestock is vital for survival in rural areas, IS Sahel returned animals it had previously stolen, including to communities north-east of Ménaka in May 2023.<sup>11</sup> It also invested in rebuilding infrastructure, including houses and water points.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the group's moral police, known as the *Hisba*, launched campaigns against crime, arresting non-affiliated bandits and criminals. In one case, in July 2023 in Anderamboukane, IS Sahel members amputated the hands and feet of two youths at a market for extorting taxes in the group's name.<sup>13</sup>

### **Territorial control boosts revenues**

IS Sahel also focused on reviving economic connections and supply routes between Mali and Niger, with links extending to Nigeria. The group collaborated with traders, providing them with vehicles and mandating them to supply open air markets, the economic hubs of rural north-eastern Mali. Markets in Tabankort, Tamalat, Indelimane, Fafa and Anderamboukane consequently received goods including fuel, motorbikes, food and medicine, mostly smuggled across borders.<sup>14</sup>

The reliance on goods from Niger and Algeria increased after Gao and Ménaka were cut off from southern Mali due to a JNIM blockade that began in June 2023 in Boni on the national road linking Mopti to Gao. These efforts not only ensured the group's access to key goods but also reinforced its role as an economic facilitator for traders and communities under its control.

Traders that are not directly associated with IS Sahel as described above need to pay the group to access territories (or use stretches of road) that it controls. A trader who transports goods along the Gao-Niamey route told the GI-TOC: 'No commercial truck or bus can do this route without having previously agreed with IS Sahel, which in this zone is under the leadership of Moussa Moumouni.'<sup>15</sup>

Regional bus companies operating between Niamey and Gao – a route often used by West African migrants travelling to work in artisanal gold mines in the Gao and Kidal regions, or beyond – confirmed these arrangements, but they were reluctant to share details.<sup>16</sup> Sources revealed that these bus companies typically paid a monthly fee of around 500 000 CFA francs (FCFA), equating to €762, or a quarterly fee of FCFA1.2 million (€1 829) to use the road.<sup>17</sup> Various fees for trucks carrying commercial goods were reported, but could not be independently verified by the GI-TOC.

IS Sahel has consolidated its influence over artisanal gold mines in the Ménaka and Gao regions, around Talataye (north-east of the town of Gao) and in the Ansongo district (south of Gao). The group has also been in control of a manganese site in Tassiga since late 2022.<sup>18</sup> IS Sahel does not operate the mine itself, nor does it regulate activity around the mine heavily (unlike other armed groups). However, it controls the roads and access to mines, imposes a tax on miners in exchange for protection, and prohibits weapons on the sites.<sup>19</sup>

While to date IS Sahel's behavioural shift seems closely tied to the degree of control it exerts over territory, there are some indications that the group is applying amended approaches in more contested areas. One key example is northern Benin, where it appears to be building relationships with communities and positioning itself as a provider of economic opportunities.

For now, evidence of IS Sahel's involvement in economic activities in Benin centres on the department of Alibori and remains largely anecdotal. The group is reportedly buying small boats (pirogues) for traders who smuggle goods across the Niger River into Niger, alongside funding phone credit for these traders.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, IS Sahel has been taxing communities to access Benin's W National Park, and the group also collects *zakat*.<sup>21</sup> However, no taxation of illicit or contraband goods has been identified in Benin.<sup>22</sup>

Benin's Alibori department therefore appears poised to become a priority area for IS Sahel operations. The group's engagement is driven in part by a desire to present itself as a credible alternative to JNIM,<sup>23</sup> in part because the opportunities W National Park offers as a hideout for launching attacks. Other motives include positioning itself as a provider of livelihoods to communities and the opportunity to secure new sources of revenues and resources.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, Alibori could also serve as a stepping stone for IS Sahel to link itself with another IS branch, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), since this department borders Nigeria, where ISWAP is based. This potential link-up creates a clear risk of a further regional resurgence of jihadist activity.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion: hearts and minds in Benin?

In capitalizing on the security vacuum generated by France's military withdrawal from Mali, IS Sahel appears to have learned valuable lessons from a decade of very mixed fortunes in the region. The last year has seen a marked pivot in its relationship with key communities and in its approach to revenue generation.

As the jihadist group turns its attention increasingly towards Benin, one key factor to watch will be the extent to which it applies the softened playbook that it has already used to significant effect in Mali. It will be especially interesting to see how far IS Sahel seeks to build legitimacy among communities in areas where its territorial control is not yet cemented. If the group's continued territorial expansion is accompanied by a further reduction in its reliance on violence in favour of relationship building, this would signal a medium- to long-term shift in strategy, likely facilitating its regional durability.

## Notes

- 1 United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, August 2023.
- 2 Clingendael, Conflict in the Penta-Border area: Explaining ISGS activity in Benin, December 2022.
- 3 There are no other armed groups that pose a threat to IS Sahel and operations by the armed forces against the group are rare.
- 4 Zakat, when applied legitimately, is a charitable donation required of Muslims, ostensibly to fund support for the poor.
- 5 Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).
- 6 According to data from ACLED.
- 7 ACLED, Gang violence: Concepts, benchmarks and coding rules, February 2023; Héni Nsaibia, Insecurity in southwestern Burkina Faso in the context of an expanding insurgency, ACLED, 17 January 2019; ACLED & GI-TOC, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: JNIM, 18 October 2023; Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid, *Local Orders in an Age of International Disorder, Militants, Criminals and Warlords*, Taylor & Francis, 2017.
- 8 According to data from ACLED.
- 9 Royal United Services Institute, Protecting civilians as strategy: Supporting a conflict sensitive response to the strategic challenge of 'jihadist' armed groups in the wider Sahel, June 2024; *Dans le nord-est du Mali, l'Etat islamique en voie de normalisation*, Afrique XXI, 13 November 2023.
- 10 See for example the IS pamphlet 'This is our dogma and this is our method', shared by Wassim Nassr on X.
- 11 *Dans le nord-est du Mali, l'Etat islamique en voie de normalisation*, Afrique XXI, 13 November 2023.
- 12 Ibid. Water points were rehabilitated in Tajalalt, Tabankort, Inchinane, Tamalat and Aghazraghan.
- 13 According to data from ACLED.
- 14 Interview with a businessperson, Ménaka region, July 2024.
- 15 Interview with a transporter in Gao, March 2023. Information confirmed remotely in July 2024.
- 16 Field interview with representatives of two transport companies (unnamed for security reasons), March 2023. Information confirmed remotely in July 2024.
- 17 Field interview with several transporters who operate along the Niamey-Gao road, March 2023. Information confirmed remotely in July 2024.
- 18 UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, August 2023.
- 19 Field interview with gold miners, Gao, July 2024.
- 20 Interview with an expert, northern Benin, July 2024.
- 21 Until 2023, IS Sahel was demanding one out of every 10 cattle; however, it increased this to two out of every 10 cattle in 2024. Remote interviews with herders, Alibori, July 2024.
- 22 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023.
- 23 Clingendael, Conflict in the Penta-Border area: Explaining ISGS activity in Benin, December 2022.
- 24 Eleanor Beevor et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023.
- 25 Clingendael, Dangerous liaisons: Exploring the risk of violent extremism along the border between northern Benin and Nigeria, June 2024.

# Bandits shift kidnapping focus in Nigeria's north from rural areas to cities.

On 19 May 2024, bandits raided Dawaki, a community in Nigeria's capital Abuja, kidnapping 20 people.<sup>1</sup> This marked the start of a series of kidnappings in both urban and semi-urban areas. The GI-TOC has identified at least six other kidnapping incidents in the outskirts of urban centres in Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina and Abuja that appear to have been committed by bandit groups since May.<sup>2</sup> The most recent incident involved the killing of a resident of Bwari in Abuja and the kidnapping of the deceased's wife and children on 29 August.<sup>3</sup>

As early as January 2024, Nigeria's Minister of Defence Mohammed Badaru Abubajar blamed bandits originating from Kaduna and Niger states for a new spate of abductions in Abuja after a father and his six daughters were kidnapped in Bwari, a suburb of the federal capital. The bandits later released the family in Kajuru forest, a notorious bandit hotspot in Kaduna, but only after killing one of the girls and collecting a ransom payment.<sup>4</sup>

Previously, the activities of armed bandits – operating under gangs that engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping, extortion and lethal attacks against local communities – had been located primarily in villages and rural settlements in North West and North Central Nigeria. The apparent spread of kidnapping activity towards urban centres has significant implications for safety and stability in North West and North Central Nigeria, and could mark a step change in bandits' income generation strategies.

### Exhaustion of rural kidnapping targets?

Banditry has a long history in North West Nigeria, dating back to the precolonial period. However, it escalated significantly in 2011 from small-scale cattle theft and armed robbery to large-scale cattle rustling, kidnapping and lethal violence, due in large part to intensification of farmer–herder conflicts and rising unemployment. As bandits expanded their operations, their activities became increasingly violent, especially in Maru, a local government area in Zamfara State, and in Gusau, the



**Gusau, the state capital of Zamfara, has been experiencing increasingly violent bandit activity since 2011.**

*Photo: Shawn Baldwin/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

state capital.<sup>5</sup> Armed banditry subsequently spread to Kaduna and other neighbouring states, before a depletion of cattle stocks – and an exodus of herders southwards to safer parts of Nigeria – prompted a switch in focus to kidnapping.<sup>6</sup>

From 2019 to 2022, kidnappings surged in the North West, becoming the primary income source for armed bandit groups. There were an estimated 662 kidnapping-related events between 2019 and 2022.<sup>7</sup> However, kidnappings of individuals began to decrease in the first quarter of 2023 and have continued to decline in 2024.<sup>8</sup> This drop is likely due to reduced profitability, as wealthy targets have either left the region or become financially exhausted by repeated kidnappings and ransom demands.

Meanwhile, mass abductions by bandits surged once again in the first quarter of 2024,<sup>9</sup> but remained concentrated in rural settings. The spike was probably due to several factors, including the decreasing profitability of kidnapping individuals – a factor that has

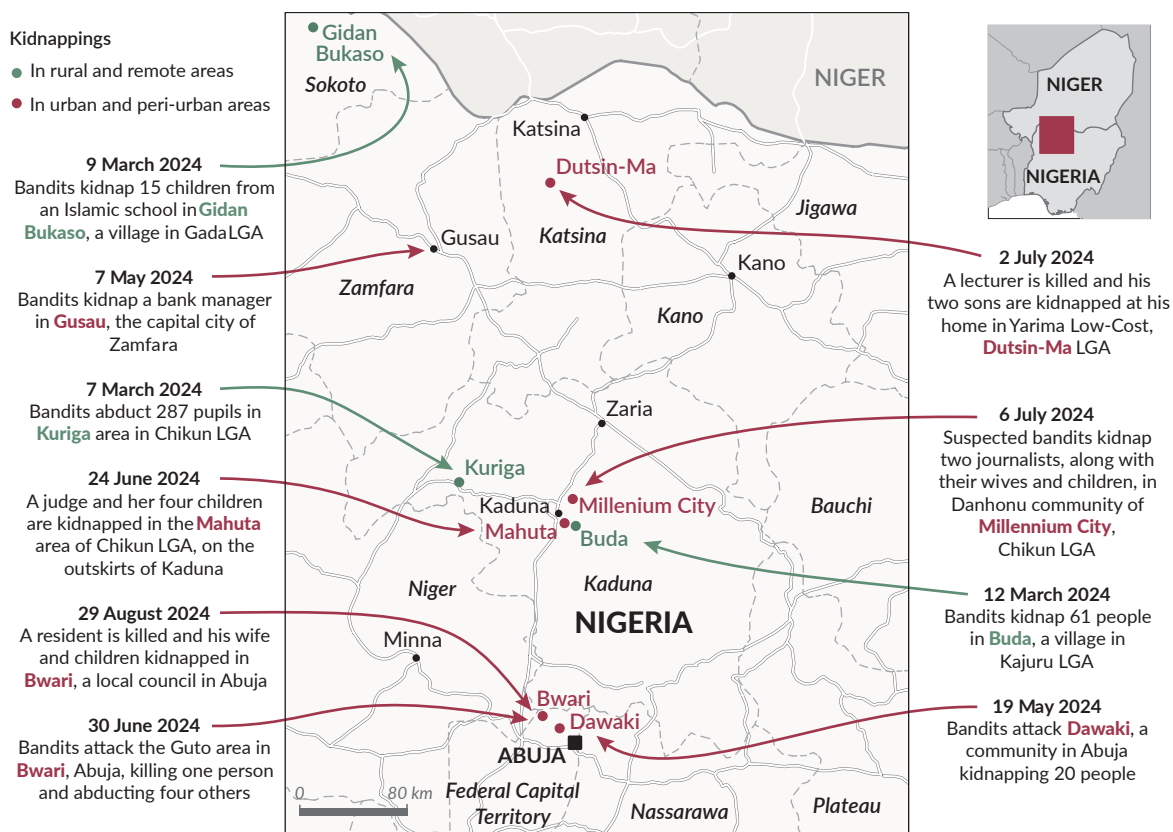
also likely contributed to the more recent increase in urban abductions.

Rural mass abductions appeared to trail off from March 2024, giving way to kidnappings by bandits in urban and semi-urban settings.

### Urban and semi-urban kidnappings: key drivers

The recent kidnappings around Abuja have put a lot of fear in the hearts of residents of the city,' said a police officer serving in the federal capital. 'People used to think kidnapping was a problem for villagers only but now it is also a major problem for people in the cities.'<sup>10</sup> Investigations into kidnapping incidents found that some bandits arrested in Abuja had come from Zamfara and Kebbi.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the perpetrators of these new urban kidnappings are the same bandit groups that have been operating across the rural North West.

Several factors could be driving the rise in kidnappings in urban and semi-urban areas. Alongside the dwindling supply of wealthy rural targets, intensified military operations since 2023 have restricted bandits' activities



**FIGURE 1** Kidnappings in rural and urban areas of Nigeria, March to August 2024.

Note: LGA refers to 'local government area', an administrative division governed by a local council, serving as a third tier of government below the federal and state levels.

Source: Based on a compilation of media sources



in the North West and North Central regions, including across strategic areas like key transport corridors. This has forced them to seek new areas of operation, including urban and semi-urban zones.

A senior government official in Kaduna reported that bandits are increasingly targeting semi-urban parts of the state because security forces have prevented them from operating along the major road linking Kaduna and Abuja. 'Their goal is to take over the Abuja-Kaduna highway, but [they] have been denied,' he said. 'So they go for soft targets, attacking outskirts of the city centre.'

Dialogues between bandit groups and communities since 2023 might also have influenced this rural-urban shift. A growing number of communities, especially in Zamfara, have negotiated with bandit groups. Agreements reached through such negotiations revolve around preventing bandits from targeting those communities, likely contributing to the geographic displacement of bandit activities.<sup>12</sup> However, many previous agreements between bandits and communities have proved fragile, indicating that the latest truces could easily unravel.

### Future implications of urban kidnappings

The shift to kidnappings in urban and semi-urban areas generates significant new income possibilities for bandits, who have proven to be nimble in moving between distinct revenue streams and will likely win entry to other forms of urban criminality.

Adding to concerns, urban kidnappings undermine the role of urban centres as safe havens for people fleeing from violence in rural areas. As bandits begin to operate in these areas, residents of affected communities are left with diminishing options for safe refuge. This could accelerate loss of trust in authorities among communities repeatedly targeted by bandits.

The spread of kidnappings into urban areas underscores the dangers of current, predominantly military, approaches to combating the groups in the North West region of Nigeria – namely of geographically displacing, rather than necessarily achieving wholesale reduction, of bandit activities. Evaluating the risks caused by displacement, and close monitoring to track bandit infiltration of new areas, should be integrated into response strategies. These strategies should complement securitized responses with community resilience initiatives.

## Notes

- 1 Abiodun Sanusi, Bandits abduct 20 in Abuja night raid, Punch, 21 May 2024.
- 2 Further attacks have been reported in Gusau and Katsina, the respective capitals of Zamfara and Katsina states, including in Janyau and Kofar Jange in Gusau, and at FMC Layout and other areas within the Katsina metropolis. Interview with an analyst based in Katsina, 6 August 2024.
- 3 Bandits kill Abuja resident, abduct wife, kids, Channels TV, 30 August 2024.
- 4 'Daddy, don't allow them to kill us' - father of abducted girls recounts daughters' plight in captivity, Vanguard, 22 January 2024.
- 5 Kingsley L Madueke et al, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, GI-TOC and ACLED, July 2024.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 According to data from ACLED. Although there are no verifiable pre-2019 kidnapping statistics, analyses indicate that the number of kidnapping was lower before 2019. For example, ACLED only recorded about 50 kidnapping events in 2018, see: Olajumoke Ayandele and Curtis Goos, Mapping Nigeria's kidnapping crisis: Players, targets, and trends, ACLED, May 2021.
- 8 Kingsley L Madueke, Lawan Danjuma Adamu and Ladd Serwat, What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us? GI-TOC and ACLED, 15 March 2024.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Remote interview with a police officer in Abuja, 7 August 2024.
- 11 Isaac Kaledzi and Idris Uwaisi, Nigeria: Kidnappings in Abuja spark new fears, Deutsche Welle, 19 January 2024; Remote interview with a police officer in Abuja, 4 June 2024.
- 12 Interview with a journalist based in North West Nigeria, 5 August 2024, by phone.

# Political extortion? JNIM's blockade of Boni, Mali.

In June 2024, fighters from the Katiba Serma sub-group of Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) redoubled their efforts to cut off the town of Boni, in the Mopti region of central Mali.<sup>1</sup> This is the latest iteration of a blockade that the jihadist group had intermittently imposed for more than nine months on the Route Nationale (RN) 16.<sup>2</sup> Blockades are very much part of JNIM's toolkit in its areas of influence not just in Mali, but also in neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Until June, some Boni residents had been able to negotiate passage in and out of the town on an ad hoc basis, but their ability to move was unpredictable and extremely constrained, generating profoundly negative consequences for the local economy. However, on 25 May, JNIM signalled that an intensification of the blockade was coming. The group sent messengers into the town warn residents that they believed some locals were collaborating with the security forces.<sup>3</sup>

This belief stemmed from the fact that Mali's military had recently established a base in Boni, hosting Russia's Africa Corps alongside its own soldiers.<sup>4</sup> According to an aid worker, JNIM's leadership became convinced that collaboration between civilians and soldiers at the camp explained the loss of several local leaders in unexpected strikes.<sup>5</sup>

A few days after the message was delivered, JNIM made good on its threats. Reports have emerged of the group robbing passengers arriving in buses and cars of all their money and belongings as they attempted to enter Boni, and an aid worker reported that JNIM had even seized vehicles from civilians attempting to enter the area.<sup>6</sup> An academic researcher from the area confirmed that local extortion had worsened substantially since May.<sup>7</sup>

Truck drivers have also been seriously affected by these developments. On 18 June, four trucks were torched by JNIM on the RN16 near Boni.<sup>8</sup> Some civilians reportedly still travel to JNIM bases in the bush near Boni to negotiate movement, including into town. However, this hardly guarantees their protection, since such movements risk attracting the suspicions of the military.<sup>9</sup>

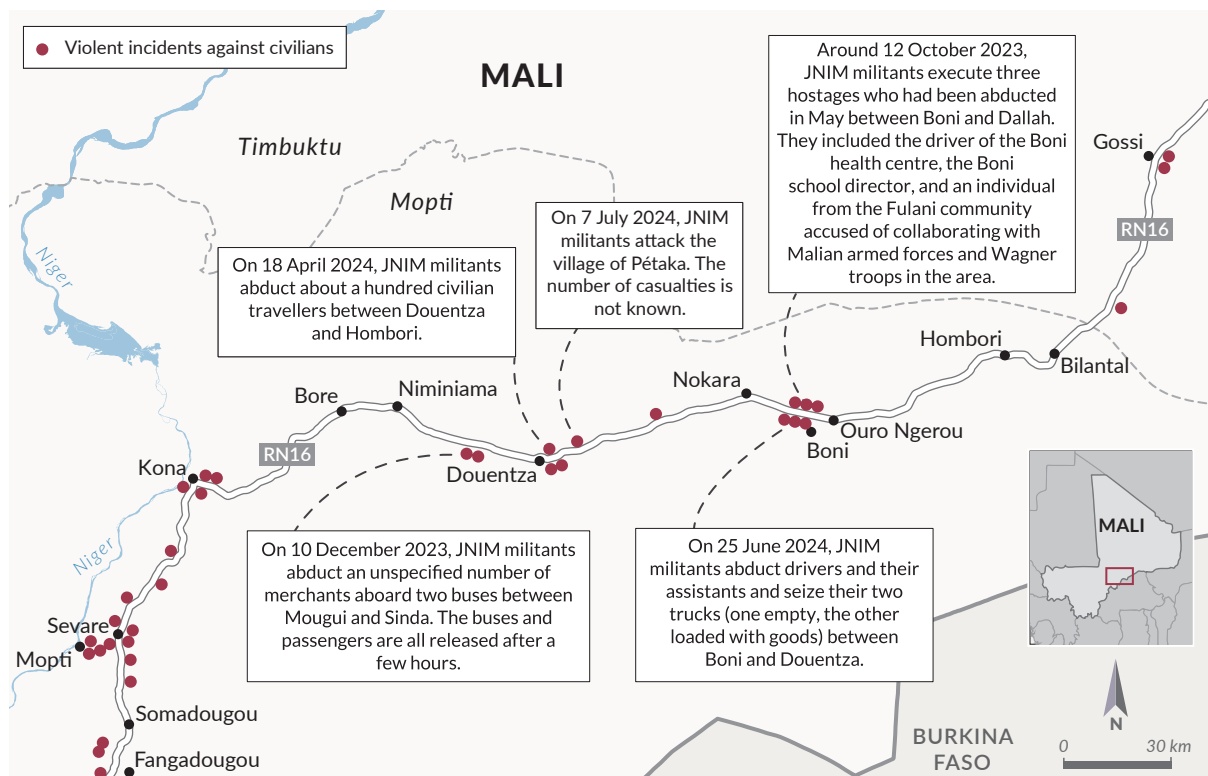
JNIM usually seeks to differentiate itself from its local jihadist rival, Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), through better treatment of civilians. It also typically exerts quite a high degree of control over its fighters, to prevent them from extorting civilians. JNIM's violence against civilians tends to be targeted and in line with clear political objectives.<sup>10</sup> However, these acts of extortion and apparently indiscriminate attacks against road users and truck drivers around Boni should not be read as the wholesale adoption of a more predatory, criminal strategy by JNIM.

## Roads as spaces of enhanced civilian targeting

This is not to say that JNIM is not in need of money nor that it is never tempted by criminality. Indeed, JNIM cells in Mopti are reportedly short of money, partly due to increased aerial surveillance over Serma forest, which has restricted their ability to steal livestock from those communities they deem acceptable targets.<sup>11</sup> However, the seizure of belongings from the few road users attempting to enter Boni does not constitute a serious revenue generation strategy. Nor is JNIM attempting to resell the trucks it seizes – instead, it burns them, albeit after confiscating the cargo.

The seizing and burning of trucks, and indeed thuggish and indiscriminate violence towards road users, has been perpetrated by JNIM elsewhere. While the aims of the Boni blockade are local, and intended to elicit compliance from the resident population, JNIM does also tend to exhibit a higher degree of violence and unjust behaviour towards people in transit, especially road users passing through areas the group is attempting to control. The violence and pillaging in Boni reflects not only JNIM's local aims, but also the challenge that roads as mobile spaces present to JNIM – rather than a pivot by JNIM to greater criminality. A similar trend can be seen in JNIM's history of violence on roads in Burkina Faso.

Traffic on Burkina Faso's major roads, particularly in the north-east, began to grind to a near-halt in 2022, provoking localized shortages of goods. This was in large part because JNIM frequently attacked passenger transport and trucks. Trucks were stopped by armed men on the road, and the drivers were told to follow fighters' directions and drive into the bush to a secluded location.<sup>12</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Violent incidents against civilians on the Route Nationale in Mali's Mopti region, August 2023–August 2024.

Source: Based on ACLED data

The goods in the truck would be taken, and typically the truck would be torched or abandoned.<sup>13</sup> While the drivers would usually be released, the trauma of the ordeal and the loss of their truck meant that most lost their livelihoods. While the military tried to escort large convoys of trucks to keep goods moving, these convoys became the targets of some of the worst mass attacks. For instance, in September 2022, 11 soldiers and more than 50 civilians were killed after a JNIM ambush on a convoy approaching the blockaded city of Djibo.<sup>14</sup>

The gains of these attacks on roads for JNIM are twofold. By attacking convoys nominally protected by the state, it sends a clear signal that the state cannot protect civilians, to the point where any association with the state becomes perceived by civilians as a source of danger. The second benefit of substantially limiting movement on roads is that it helps the group to entrench control over territories it already holds.

### A defensive form of offensive behaviour

A key goal of JNIM in resorting to violence is to prevent state-linked individuals infiltrating areas it controls. Paranoia around state informants sharing intelligence with security forces is also a key driver of other JNIM behaviour, including its widespread use of kidnapping.<sup>15</sup>

Violence on roads, for JNIM, is ultimately a defensive strategy that involves offensive violence. However, this form of defensiveness substantially undermines the local popular legitimacy that JNIM has tended to build in the Sahel, which often relies on offering economic incentives. JNIM can often make the case that civilians will be freer to pursue local economic opportunities in peace under their rule. This is particularly effective in places where most economic opportunities have an illicit dimension – such as smuggling, artisanal gold mining or the grazing of cattle in protected areas.

However, in applying the blockade against Boni, JNIM seems unperturbed by the resultant damage to local communities' livelihoods. It is difficult to overstate the impact on those affected; some goods in Boni are selling for 10 times the pre-blockade price (see Figure 2).<sup>16</sup>

Item	Cost prior to blockade (FCFA)	Cost during blockade – circa June to September 2024 (where available) (FCFA)
Cooking oil (1 litre)	900 (€1.40)	3 000 (€4.50)
Grilled meat (0.5 kg)	500 (€0.75)	1 000 (€1.50)
Fuel (1 litre)	600–800, depending on season (€0.90–€1.20)	2 500 (€3.80)
Flour (1 kg)	300 (€0.45)	3 500 (€5.30)
Sugar (1 kg)	450 (€0.70)	1 000 (€1.50)

**FIGURE 2 A comparison of prices for staples in Boni before the blockade and in August 2024.**

Source: Telephone interviews with Boni residents, August 2024

Still, the town's residents emphasize that the main problem is extreme scarcity rather than price. Flour, for instance, has not been available since April 2024. Residents are relying on fruit and herbs, alongside stocks of meat, but the humanitarian situation is acute. One resident even reported being prevented from harvesting herbs by JNIM fighters:

On 7 August, I went out of town to look for 'oulo', a herb that grows a lot in the area and is eaten in times of severe famine ... a unit of three motorbikes from the jihadists came and asked me to leave what I'd already picked .... Their leader told me that they were going to lay siege to Boni until the people of Boni returned to God.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, JNIM has calculated that the costs of blockading Boni are outweighed by the risks generated by residents colluding with personnel at the newly established army base. Put another way, legitimacy building has been put on hold until such time as the leadership's perception of risk declines to a level that it judges is commensurate with lifting the blockade. While JNIM is generally more willing to deploy violence against mobile, transient populations, it is also prepared to use extreme coercion against those it hopes eventually to win over; or even those it has previously invested significantly in winning over.

Notably, in West Africa, a person's physical mobility (i.e. their access to good, reliable transport) is deeply connected to their social mobility, to the point where those with poor transport options are economically

disadvantaged from birth.<sup>18</sup> In this context, JNIM's strategy in Boni is conceived as a temporary extreme, designed to relieve intensified military pressure.

### Conclusion

JNIM's ongoing blockade of Boni helps us to understand why armed groups tend to veer towards relatively severe predatory behaviour on roads, even when such behaviour damages the legitimacy they are trying to cultivate over the longer term. In this case, violence and pillaging aim not just to force residents into compliance, but to discourage all possible road movement that could also represent a threat. JNIM's local legitimacy in Boni will be deeply damaged, but that damage is intended by the group to be temporary. Judging from the experience of Burkina Faso, transient populations on roads are viewed as a more constant threat, and will be at higher risk until the group is absolutely confident of its control.

In conflict-affected areas, danger on roads (and the economic consequences) represents one of the most acute ways that many civilians experience instability. This is certainly not unique to the Sahel, but a consequence of armed group activity around the world, including elsewhere in West Africa.<sup>19</sup> Roads, by consequence, are a critical – and opportune – space for positive state interventions. State efforts to secure mobility could have profound economic benefits and counter armed groups' rhetoric on how the state restricts freedoms – although for such a measure to work, it is critical that state agents do not themselves extort vulnerable citizens on the move.

## Notes

- 1 David Baché, *Mali: Les jihadistes punissent les habitants de Boni*, RFI, 2 June 2022.
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- 4 The Africa Corps represents an umbrella established by Russia's defence ministry to replace the Africa operations of the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group was a Kremlin-affiliated mercenary organization active in the Ukraine theatre, Africa and the Middle East, until its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin mutinied against President Vladimir Putin in June 2023, and was later killed in a plane crash.
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- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Interview with an academic researcher and expert on central Mali, from the Mopti area, 22 July 2024, by phone.
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- 19 Nigeria is severely affected by armed group violence on roads, for instance. According to ACLED, there were 178 incidents of violence against civilians on roads perpetrated by armed groups between August 2023 and August 2024. For further information, see Daniel Agbibo, *Mobility, Mobilization and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context*, University of Michigan Press, 2022.

# Benin–Niger border closure drives surge in migrant smuggling profits.

When Niger's democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown in a July 2023 coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) moved within days to impose punitive measures that it hoped would force a return to constitutional order. This included financial sanctions on Niger and the closure of all member states' borders with the country.<sup>1</sup> The bridge over the Niger River, linking the Beninese city of Malanville and the city of Gaya in Niger – a key transit point for migrants and both licit and illicit trade – was therefore officially closed.

Over the next few months, the governments of Niger and Benin took various escalatory measures (see Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The regional dispute peaked in January 2024, when the military juntas of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali announced their decision to leave ECOWAS.<sup>3</sup> Backed into a corner after failing to force a return to civilian rule, the regional bloc lifted most of its sanctions in late February.<sup>4</sup> However, while Benin reopened the border on the Malanville side, the Nigerien authorities did not reciprocate.

The extended closure has fuelled the smuggling by boat of migrants as well as licit commodities across the Niger River, swelling profits from illicit transportation and bribes, while damaging the livelihoods of local traders. Northern Benin had already become an area of significant concern over the past five years, due to an increased presence of violent extremist organizations.

The border closure has had little effect on the ability of these armed groups to use Malanville as a transit point for the supply of illicitly traded commodities such as fuel.<sup>5</sup> Individuals living in and around Malanville with pre-existing ties to extremist groups have also continued to provide them with intelligence. While there is no evidence at this stage of any increase in recruitment, economic hardship and deteriorations in community–state relations are well-known drivers of violent extremist groups' recruitment.<sup>6</sup>

The dynamics at play at the Malanville–Gaya crossing illustrate the counterproductivity of border closures, which invariably simply fuel increases in clandestine traffic. The booming flow of migrants facilitated by smugglers across the Niger River underscores that

human smuggling is among the most resilient illicit activities to external shocks. Benin cracked down in May this year on smuggling of migrants across the river. However, the principal effect of this appears to have been to drive up the price of the journey and further boost human smugglers' profits.

## Regional migration flows reshaped by insecurity

The closure of the Benin-Niger border is just the latest factor to influence regional migratory flows in recent years, however. In particular, the impact of insecurity in the Sahel region on regional mobility has been pronounced, even ahead of the closure.

The route from Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou to Niger's capital Niamey is a key itinerary connecting coastal West African countries to Niger, and is therefore crucial to regional migratory movements. Migrants seek to move north on this route from Burkina Faso as well as other countries in the region



**The Niger River is a key transit point for the smuggling of fuel between Malanville and Gaya.**

*Photo: GI-TOC*

(namely Gambia, Guinea, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali) to Niger.

Niger is the penultimate African stage – ahead of onward travel to the Mediterranean springboards of Algeria and Libya – of migrant journeys to Europe. The repeal by Niger in November 2023 of an anti-smuggling law has made the journey noticeably easier, at least once migrants have safely navigated passage into the country. The route is also popular among those aiming to reach gold-mining areas in Niger or Mali.<sup>7</sup>

Before the border closure, travelling via Benin had increased in popularity for migrants, particularly those coming from Burkina Faso.<sup>8</sup> An increase in violence and predatory behaviour by extremist organizations – primarily Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) but also, to an extent, Islamic State Sahel Province – in Burkina Faso's Sahel and Est regions made transiting the area highly risky for migrants travelling to Niger directly. Regional bus companies, the go-to for migrants travelling across the Sahel, were forced to adapt. In 2021, one of the main bus routes from Ouagadougou to Niamey via the city of Kantchari in eastern Burkina Faso was shut down due to threats and violence carried out by JNIM.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative route further north, via Dori in Burkina Faso and Téra in Niger, was initially used thereafter. However, JNIM also attacked buses along this route repeatedly in 2022.<sup>10</sup> In early 2023, following a further attack by a suspected extremist organization on two buses near Dori, regional bus companies suspended services on the route.<sup>11</sup> Bus companies and the migrants who use them turned instead to the Togo-Benin route (see Figure 1).

A large proportion of West African migrants travelling to Libya or Algeria with the objective of reaching Europe therefore travel via Benin. In 2023, internal displacement in Burkina Faso reached record levels, surpassing 2 million, with increasing numbers fleeing to neighbouring countries, Benin among them.<sup>12</sup> While most Burkinabés fleeing insecurity are displaced internally – seeking refuge in larger towns, or settling in neighbouring countries (chiefly Côte d'Ivoire) – there has been an increase in their movements beyond the region too, including into Italy.<sup>13</sup>

## **Benin–Niger border closure strengthens smuggling industry**

Along most of Benin's border with Niger, the two countries are separated by the Niger River. Pirogues (wooden canoes) have long been used to smuggle goods and people across the border. The river is a significant transit point for migrants travelling north from coastal states up through Niger and on towards North Africa.<sup>14</sup> Until the July 2023 border closure, passengers typically entered Niger over the Malanville-Gaya bridge.

While the overall number of people arriving at the Benin-Niger border (legally) from elsewhere in West Africa dipped slightly due to the bridge closure, the impact was relatively short-lived. When land travel over the bridge was halted, pirogue operators saw demand for their services skyrocket and river crossings surged. As noted earlier, the number of migrants moving via Benin had increased substantially following the closure of the Dori-Téra bus route. GI-TOC monitoring suggests that just ahead of the coup in July, between 7 000 and 8 000 people per month were entering Niger via the Malanville-Gaya bridge, compared to around 3 000 per month before April 2023.

As land crossings were halted, commercial bus operations came to a standstill. In the months after the border closure, Malanville resembled a 'parking lot' as trucks and buses stretched back kilometres from the border, stranded and unable to continue their journeys into Niger.<sup>15</sup> However, the smuggling system adapted, facilitating the cross-border movement of migrants who would otherwise have been moving legally.

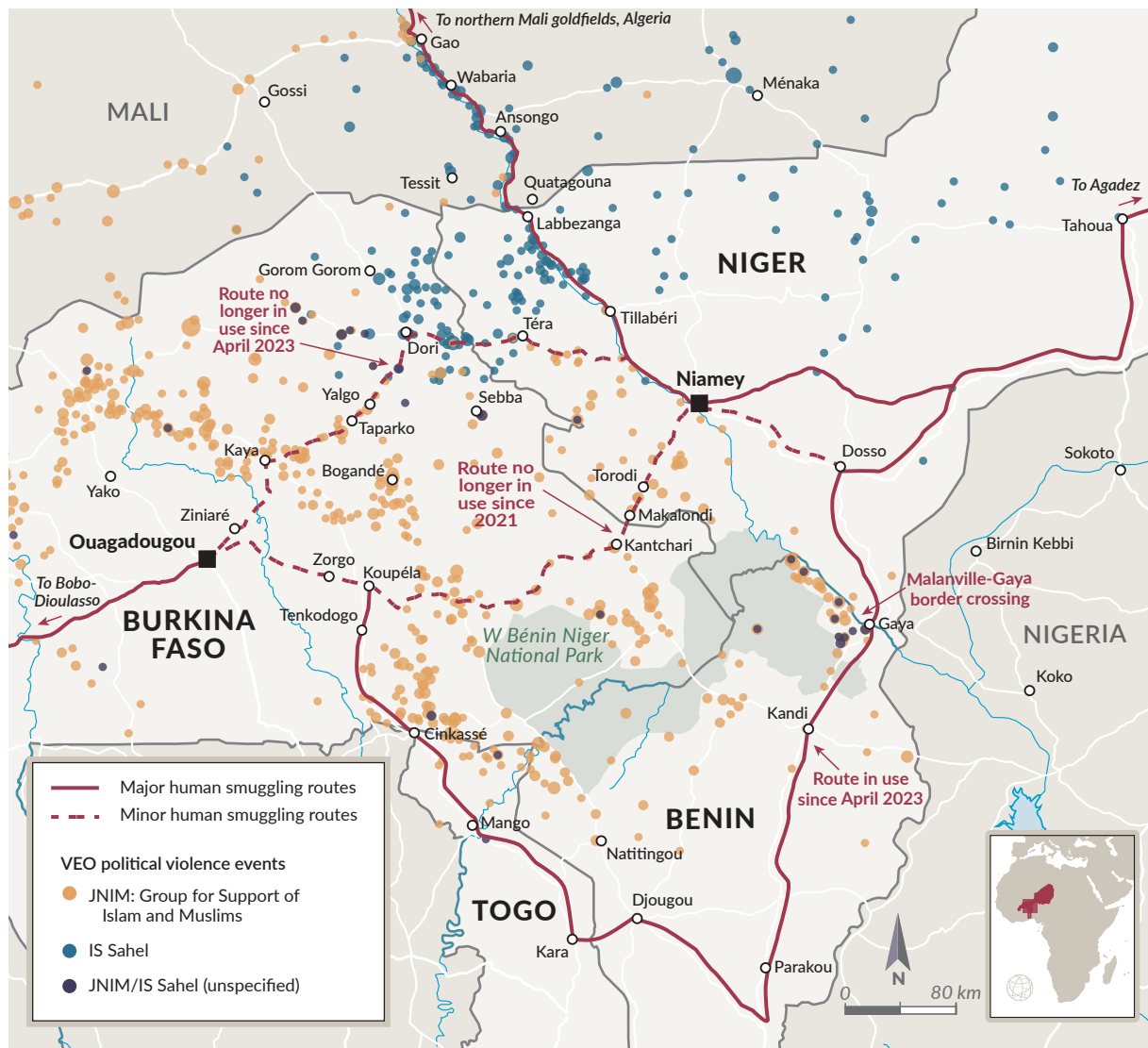
Local sources at the Benin-Niger border in Gaya estimate that in August 2023, around 500 passengers a day, many of whom arrived by bus from Burkina Faso and through Togo, were being smuggled across the river by pirogue, at a cost of FCFA5 000 (nearly €7.60) per passenger.<sup>16</sup> By December 2023, up to 850 people were estimated to be crossing the river by pirogue every day – a 70% increase in just four months.<sup>17</sup>

### First the bridge, then the river

On 22 May 2024, the Beninese authorities cracked down on informal Niger River crossings, which they had tolerated for the previous 10 months.<sup>18</sup> Initially, the impact on the migrant smuggling route was pronounced, as the number of arrivals into Malanville dropped.<sup>19</sup> 'The closure of the river has a direct impact on our business,' said an official from a bus company operating routes from Ouagadougou to Malanville. 'After the news, the chiefs instructed us to temporarily close the station. If passengers cannot cross the river, there is no point in taking them to Malanville, and vice versa. Therefore, our services in Malanville are suspended until further notice.'<sup>20</sup>

However, smuggling systems adapted. With bus routes now terminating at the Beninese city of Kandi, 100 kilometres south of Malanville, taxi drivers saw a sharp rise in demand. Crossings moved further away from the official Malanville-Gaya bridge and embarkation points multiplied.<sup>21</sup>

As the risks involved in migrant smuggling increased, so did the level of organization – and profits. Pirogue crossing fees surged from FCFA1 500–FCFA2 000 (€2.30–€3.00) to FCFA3 000–FCFA5 000 (€4.50–€7.50), as did bribes payable to security officials to enable transit, which increased from around FCFA1 000 (€1.50) to FCFA3 000–FCFA4 000 (€4.60–€6) per traveller.<sup>22</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Insecurity along routes used by bus companies between Ouagadougou and Niamey, July to December 2023.

Source: ACLED data and GI-TOC monitoring, published in Alice Fereday, Niger: Coup reverses 2015 human smuggling ban amid major political and security upheaval, GI-TOC, June 2024



Date	Event
26 July 2023	A military coup topples Niger's democratically-elected President Mohamed Bazoum. General Abdourahamane Tiani is proclaimed President of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP).
30 July 2023	The ECOWAS regional bloc imposes financial sanctions on Niger and orders the closure of all member states' borders with the country.
12 September 2023	Niger announces end to military cooperation agreement with neighbouring Benin.
25 October 2023	Benin's Autonomous Port of Cotonou blocks imports destined for Niger.
26 November 2023	Niger's military junta signs a decree revoking a 2015 law criminalizing the smuggling of migrants.
28 December 2023	Benin lifts blockade of imports destined for Niger through the Port of Cotonou.
28 January 2024	The juntas of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso announce their decision to leave ECOWAS.
24 February 2024	ECOWAS lifts most of its economic and financial sanctions on Niger. While Benin reopens the border at Malanville, the Nigerien authorities keep the Gaya side of the crossing closed.
6 May 2024	Benin's President Patrice Talon blocks exports of Nigerien oil through Benin's Seme-Kpodji pipeline terminal in response to Niger's refusal to re-open its side of the Benin-Niger border.
8 May 2024	Benin's government announces a temporary export ban on various food product exports in a bid to tackle inflation and to protect its domestic food supply.
11 May 2024	Niger's junta announces a bilateral agreement with Togo's government, effectively banning Beninese trucks from transporting Nigerien goods from the Port of Lomé or anywhere on Togolese territory.
15 May 2024	Benin provisionally reverses its blockade on Nigerien oil exports through Seme-Kpodji.
22 May 2024	Beninese police are deployed to embarkation points on the Niger River at Malanville and order all river crossings to cease. A ban is also imposed on bus travel in Malanville department.
5 June 2024	Benin authorities detain five Nigerien nationals for allegedly entering Benin's Seme-Kpodji pipeline terminal under false pretences. President Tiani describes the incident as a 'kidnapping followed by hostage-taking'.
24 July 2024	Buses are re-authorized to enter and depart from Malanville, reversing the ban of two months earlier.
24 July 2024	Benin receives a high-level Nigerien delegation in Cotonou in a sign of possible bilateral détente.
6 August 2024	Benin's ambassador to Niger begins duties after presenting his credentials to the CNSP authorities.

**FIGURE 2** Developments in Benin-Niger relations since July 2023.

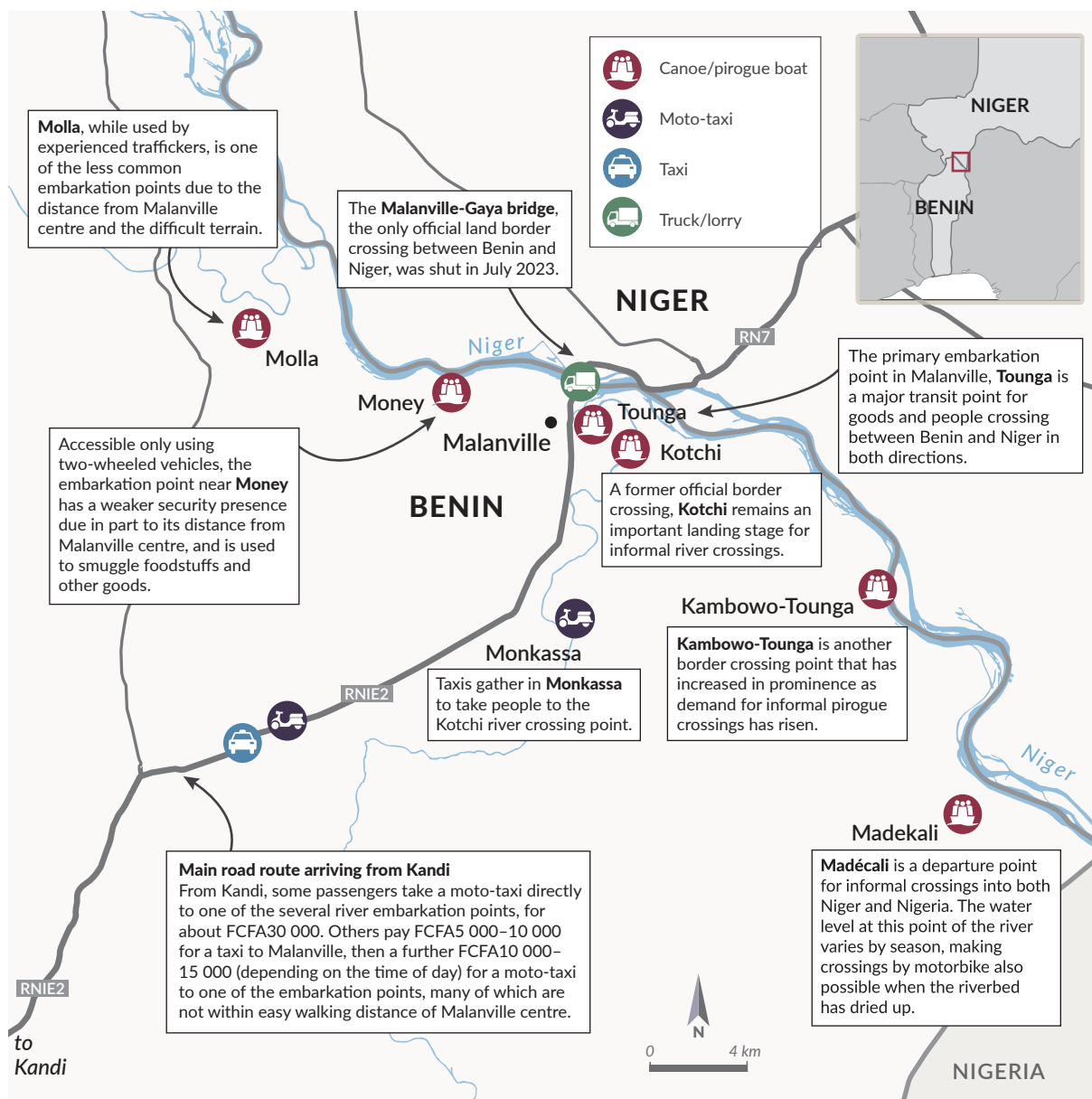
People began to cross at embarkation points on the Niger River or on one of its tributaries, the Sota River or the Alibori River, further away from the official Malanville-Gaya bridge (see Figure 3).<sup>23</sup> The crossings are often arranged collaboratively between moto-taxi drivers and the pirogue operators, and take place at night, when police surveillance is weaker.

### **Migrant smuggling resilient to insecurity and uncertainty**

As of September 2024, the ban on river crossings remained in place. However, recent political developments, including reciprocal visits by delegations of both countries, suggest that bilateral tensions are de-escalating. It is therefore conceivable, if not likely, that the border will open soon.

The boom in migrant smuggling in Malanville in the wake of the border closure has strengthened relationships between key players, from moto-taxi drivers to pirogue operators, law enforcement officers and the intermediaries who keep the entire enterprise moving. Just as heightened insecurity in Burkina Faso led to a shift in migration routes towards Benin, migrants and those who facilitate their movement across borders have adapted to challenges created by the Benin-Niger border closure.

While the route via Togo and Benin is considerably safer than the previously used routes that run directly from Burkina Faso to Niger, the expansion of extremist organizations' activity southwards from the Sahel and into the northern areas of coastal West African states generates increasingly significant risks for individuals travelling through these areas. In April 2024, for



**FIGURE 3** River embarkation points on the Benin side of the Benin-Niger border.

example, JNIM targeted a customs station in Monkassa, a village just south of Malanville, killing two civilians and one soldier. There have also been security incidents in Kandi and in Djougou, 30 kilometres west of the Togo border.<sup>24</sup>

### Border opening key to security

Migrant smugglers' adaptation to heightened insecurity and border closures highlights just how resilient this trade is; indeed, heightened insecurity is a key driver of migrant flows. Authorities in Benin and Niger should therefore reopen the border to allow the regular movement of people to resume, as a key step to diminishing both the volume and profitability of human smuggling.

The reopening of the border would also ease pressure on legitimate livelihoods in both countries that have been severely damaged by the bridge closure and the subsequent ban on river crossings. Such pressure has not – at least yet – triggered protests against the authorities, or any discernible recruitment drive by armed groups, but other countries' experiences suggest that resentment towards political leaders can bolster support for violent extremist groups. The longer the border remains closed, damaging the livelihoods of local traders, the more vulnerable these residents become to recruitment.

## Notes

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- 2 Niger denounces military cooperation agreement with Benin, Africa News, 13 September 2023; Abdoulie Sey, Cotonou port closed to Niger bound goods, APA News, 27 October 2023.
- 3 Proposed ECOWAS exits leave West Africa at a crossroads, ISS Today, 8 February 2024.
- 4 ECOWAS lifts sanctions on Niger amid tensions in West Africa bloc, Al Jazeera, 24 February 2024.
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- 6 Flore Berger, Mouhamadou Kane and Patrick Gnonsekan, Community resilience to violent extremism and illicit economies: Community resilience dialogues in Atakora (Benin) and Bounkani (Côte d'Ivoire), GI-TOC, February 2024.
- 7 Ongoing GI-TOC monitoring.
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- 12 UNHCR Burkina Faso, *Aperçu des personnes déplacées de force au 31 juillet 2024*, July 2024.
- 13 UNHCR, Sahel situation: 2023 situation overview,
- 14 Citizens of ECOWAS can normally travel across member states' borders freely (provided they possess a valid travel ID), but mobility facilitators – or passeurs – are still required when natural obstacles, notably rivers, require navigation.
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- 19 The decision to block river crossings was accompanied by a prohibition, imposed by authorities in Malanville, on buses arriving and departing the area.
- 20 Interview with a bus company official, Malanville, May 2024.
- 21 Initially, some passengers sought to cross into Niger via Nigeria, crossing into the latter through Segbana, but this was short-lived, given the long route and the high prevalence of road checkpoints on the Nigerian side of the border. Request for information conducted with migrants, customs and law enforcement officials, piroguiers, bus company officials and local residents, August 2024; Interview with security researcher in northern Benin, August 2024, by phone.
- 22 Interview with a migrant, Malanville, August 2024; Request for information conducted with migrants, customs and law enforcement officials, piroguiers, bus company officials and local residents, August 2024; Interview with security researcher in northern Benin, August 2024, by phone.
- 23 Interview with security researcher in northern Benin, August 2024, by phone.
- 24 Data from ACLED.

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