

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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Summary highlights



Arms trafficking routes into northern Mali have been disrupted. Why has this happened and what are the implications?

Since mid-2023, arms trafficking routes into northern Mali have been severely disrupted following a major offensive by Malian forces and their then-allies, the Russian Wagner Group, triggering intense clashes with rebel groups. The disruption has driven up prices for illicit weapons, and forced traffickers to seek alternative routes and weapons sources. Meanwhile, new types of weapons have proliferated, such as drones. Rising arms prices and the emergence of new smuggling routes underscore the persistent demand for weapons among armed groups in the region. This carries significant implications for stability across the Sahel, as arms trafficking plays a key role in shaping the regional conflict landscape.



Cinkassé cattle market in Togo – closed due to fears it was being used to launder stolen cattle – reopened under strict reforms, but risks persist.

The GI-TOC's 2025 illicit hub mapping initiative identifies cattle rustling as one of the most destabilizing criminal markets in the Sahel and West Africa. Cattle rustling develops particularly in areas increasingly affected by violent extremist organizations (VEOs), including key hubs such as Cinkassé in Togo. When authorities closed the Cinkassé cattle market in October 2024, they targeted a major hub for cattle trade between Burkina Faso, Togo and Ghana. The closure was triggered by allegations that the market was being used to launder stolen livestock and financing VEOs, most prominently the al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM, which uses markets in coastal states to sell livestock it steals in the Sahel. A month later, Cinkassé market reopened with fewer brokers, stricter rules for tracing cattle, and stronger oversight from the authorities and management. These changes make it a test case for regulating the regional cattle trade.





Lakurawa is rapidly expanding its territory and revenue in North West Nigeria, and may contribute to a long-feared bridge between Nigerian and Sahelian armed groups.

Lakurawa, an armed group in North West Nigeria with reported ties to Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has intensified its violence since January 2025, causing numerous deaths and mass displacement in Sokoto and Kebbi states. Lakurawa sustains itself through several illicit revenue streams, including cattle rustling, extortion disguised as Islamic almsgiving (*zakat*), kidnapping for ransom, and fuel theft from cross-border pipelines and black-market traders. With at least 1 000 fighters and expanding territorial presence, Lakurawa poses a strategic threat as a potential bridge between Sahelian extremist groups and those in Nigeria. This connection could facilitate sharing of resources, combatants and finances between ISGS and Islamic State West Africa Province. Disrupting Lakurawa's diversified income sources is crucial for weakening the group and preventing further extremist encroachment into coastal West Africa.



JNIM's blockade in south-west Mali illustrates the strategic importance of controlling key licit and illicit supply routes for operational, financial and political gain.

The fuel blockade in southern and south-western Mali by JNIM since September 2025 exposed how control of roads is central to the political economy of conflict in West Africa. In targeting fuel convoys and major national roads linking Mali to coastal states, JNIM seeks to demonstrate its strength and the military junta's weakness by asphyxiating Bamako's economy. In addition to manipulating road access as a political lever, JNIM, other armed groups and criminal networks more broadly exploit road infrastructure in different ways. Findings from the 2025 illicit hub mapping in West Africa show that 87% of illicit hubs are near major roads, underscoring how transport corridors enable licit and illicit flows of goods — from gold and fuel to weapons and drugs. Roads provide armed groups with critical operational resources and revenue streams, while serving as spaces of governance and coercion. As violence and extortion cluster along these corridors, reclaiming West Africa's roads through fair, transparent and secure systems of mobility is essential to restoring stability and legitimate economic circulation.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The 13th issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa explores the interdependent relationship between illicit economies and armed conflict. The research presented in this issue draws on the findings of the GI-TOC's 2025 illicit hub mapping in West Africa, a region-wide study analyzing the geography of illicit economies and their intersections with conflict.

The 2025 mapping, which updates a previous iteration released in 2022, provides a snapshot of illicit economy dynamics across the region. It also presents the findings of the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), an expert-led tool that provides a quantitative assessment of the degree to which illicit economies fuel violence and instability, providing policymakers with clear insights as to the major crime–conflict nodes in the region. The IEIM provides a score and classification for each hub, and identifies those that fuel conflict and violence the most.

This overarching study found that some illicit economies play a far bigger role in shaping instability than others. Five specific illicit economies — kidnapping, cattle rustling, the illicit arms trade, the illicit gold trade, and extortion and protection racketeering — are particularly significant in shaping the regional conflict landscape. We describe these as 'accelerant markets'.

The articles in this issue of the risk bulletin unpack how these accelerant markets are underpinning conflict. For example, Lakurawa, an armed group in North West Nigeria, has been able to expand its operations and number of fighters dramatically in recent months. A key factor enabling its rise has been its exploitation of several illicit revenue streams, including cattle rustling, extortion, kidnapping for ransom and fuel theft.

Yet action can be taken to stem the accelerant action of these markets. One such example is the reforms implemented at Cinkassé cattle market in Togo, which was believed to be used to launder stolen livestock and financing armed groups, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). JNIM uses markets in coastal states to sell thousands of livestock it steals in the Sahel. Reforms implemented at Cinkassé to improve traceability of livestock give a case study of how markets exploited by illicit actors can be reformed.

Illicit markets, however, can prove resilient in the face of government action. For example, arms trafficking routes into northern Mali from Libya were severely disrupted following a major offensive by Malian forces and their then-allies, the Russian Wagner Group, in 2023. Former arms trafficking hubs came under government control and movement of illicit weapons became more difficult.

However, armed groups have adapted to seek different weapons sources and trafficking routes.

One lens through which to look at these accelerant markets and other forms of illicit trade is through geography, and the shared routes through which they pass. In West Africa and the Sahel, road routes are key corridors for trade, whether licit or illicit. This means that control of road routes is a source of power for government and armed groups alike. The fuel blockade of southern and south-western Mali by JNIM has exposed how control of roads has become central to the political economy of conflict in West Africa.

These articles show how certain illicit economies in West Africa are a key factor shaping regional conflict. Through the risk bulletin, the illicit hub mapping and other studies, the GI-TOC seeks to provide analysis that captures these evolving dynamics.

Arms trafficking routes into northern Mali have been disrupted. Why has this happened and what are the implications?

Arms trafficking routes into and through northern Mali have undergone major changes since mid-2023. This disruption was triggered, in part, by a major northward offensive into rebel-held territory led by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and their then partners, the Russian Wagner Group (now replaced by the Africa Corps), between August and November 2023. This caused an upsurge of violence in northern Mali and intense clashes between government forces and rebel groups.

As a result, established arms trafficking routes into northern Mali have become less viable, prices for illicit arms have significantly increased and new routes connecting to other regions (such as northern Nigeria) have started to emerge. At the same time, new types of weapons are being smuggled into northern Mali and stockpiles of weapons from new sources — such as spillover from the conflict in Sudan — may be starting to emerge.

Changes in the arms trafficking landscape have wider implications for stability in the central Sahel. The GI-TOC's 2025 West Africa illicit hub mapping initiative identifies the arms trade as one of five 'accelerant' illicit economies (with cattle rustling, kidnapping, the gold trade, and extortion and protection racketeering): markets that play a significant role in shaping the regional conflict landscape.¹ As part of the mapping, the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM) was developed as an expert-led tool that provides a quantitative assessment of how illicit economies in each hub fuel violence and instability. Data from the 2025 iteration of the IEIM shows that arms trafficking features in three-quarters of all the West Africa hubs that play a significant role in fuelling instability.² Disruptions to the Malian arms trafficking market shape how the country's extremist and insurgent groups arm themselves, with far-reaching consequences for the broader conflict landscape.

Disruption along established arms trafficking routes

In addition to bringing territory back under government control — including towns such as Kidal, Ber and Anéfis³ — the 2023 offensive disrupted a range of licit and illicit flows of commodities, including weapons. This restructure of territorial control in northern Mali

disrupted longstanding arms trafficking routes from Libya, traversing southern Algeria, which have historically fed into northern Mali. (Libya is a major source country for arms used in conflicts across the Sahel.)

Trafficking networks face increased risks along these established routes. Increased air surveillance and drone strikes, and military presence on the ground along key roads and in towns, must be navigated to reach destination markets. Violence in northern Mali has remained intense throughout 2025, through terrorist attacks targeting FAMA positions, banditry on main roads and clashes between armed groups.⁴

The disruption is also due to renewed government control of key towns that were historically arms trading hubs.⁵ Trafficking networks with close links to armed groups — and dependent on their protection — can no longer operate freely there.⁶ For instance, Ber was a key market and storage point for licit and illicit goods, including consumer products such as fuel smuggled from Algeria; stolen and hijacked vehicles; narcotics en route through northern Mali; and gold from the Kidal and Gao regions.⁷ Under the influence of armed groups — including what was then known as the Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad, a coalition of political and military movements in northern Mali, and Jama'at Nusr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the al-Qaeda affiliate and the most active violent extremist organization in the Sahel — traffickers could store and sell their wares openly.

In August 2023, Ber's role as a hub for arms trafficking ended when FAMA seized the town, forcing armed groups and their associated traffickers to withdraw. The town could no longer act as an entrepôt for illicit wares in the same way, but it remains a hotspot for less sensitive illicit activities, such as the sale of contraband consumer goods and synthetic drugs.⁸ Sources in the region suggest that other towns, similarly known as hotspots along arms trafficking routes, have likewise become less active.⁹ This is reflected in data gathered for the IEIM. Arms smuggling scores collected at hubs across northern Mali — such as Foïta, Lerneb and

Taoudeni — all decreased between the 2022 iteration of the IEIM and the latest set of data.

This has driven up the prices of arms in the illicit market and led to the emergence of alternative arms trafficking routes. Data on prices offered for illicit arms points to significant increases on markets in northern Mali, suggesting low supply and high demand. Drawing on interviews with arms dealers, intermediaries and members of armed groups, this increase in arms prices can be traced back to around 2022.¹⁰ As international forces such as France's Operation Barkhane withdrew, violence intensified between armed groups and demand for weapons increased.¹¹ This demand continued in 2023 due to the northward offensive, causing prices to increase further. In 2025, prices have stabilized but remain high. Data collected in Gao, Menaka and Kidal in February and August 2025 showed that prices remained at a similar level.¹²

In February, the price of an AK-47 in Gao rose to about CFA600 000 (about €920), compared to CFA200 000–CFA300 000 (€300–€450) before Wagner and FAMA's northern offensive. AK-47 prices in Gao were even higher in August. Near the Mauritanian border, they were between CFA900 000 and CFA1 million (€1 370–€1 520) for a similar weapon.¹³ AK-47s in this region reportedly sold for CFA600 000–CFA700 000 in 2023. The same change is seen in ammunition for AK-47 rifles, sold for CFA800–CFA1 000 (€1.20–€1.50) per unit before 2023 but now costing CFA1 250–CFA1 500 (€1.90–€2.30) in the Mauritanian border region.¹⁴ AK-47s and small arms (such as Makarov PM pistols and Kalashnikov PKM general-purpose machine guns) remain the most common weapons sold, especially in large towns. Higher-calibre weapons (such as heavy machine guns, anti-tank rifles and rocket-propelled grenades) are also available but are sold more discreetly.

In addition to supply chain disruption, a range of factors are driving increased demand for weapons, pushing up prices. There is sustained demand from Mali's myriad armed groups — who arm themselves through illicit supplies and arms seized from government forces — but other drivers of demand are more counterintuitive. The Malian government recently announced a new disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, aiming to reintegrate armed groups into the Malian armed forces.¹⁵ In 2018, when a previous iteration of this process was haphazardly implemented, the demand

for arms increased.¹⁶ Individuals sought to 'mobilize' by buying weapons in order to participate in the process, and armed groups swelled their ranks so they could 'demobilize' combatants without meaningfully reducing their military capabilities. Sources in the national commission launched to manage this process, and members of the political Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), suggest that this is happening again.¹⁷

Armed groups find new routes and weapons for arms trafficking

One of the effects of this disruption has been that armed groups are seeking alternative routes. For example, several sources report that a route linking northern Nigeria to northern Mali via Niger is becoming important, particularly for Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). According to a source close to the group, senior IS Sahel leaders reportedly travelled to Nigeria in late 2024 and early 2025 to cement links with Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgents and to strengthen mutual supply networks.¹⁸ This may result in more arms being supplied by ISWAP to their IS Sahel allies in Mali and represents a change from previous trends in arms trafficking routes: arms have been more commonly trafficked from Sahelian states into Nigeria, rather than the other way around, as the new information suggests. Niger has faced a surge in Islamic State-linked violence in 2025. According to a Human Rights Watch report, nearly 130 people were 'summarily executed' by Islamist insurgents in attacks between March and September.¹⁹

While established arms trafficking routes from Libya into northern Mali have been disrupted, weapons are still trafficked along these (now riskier) roads, albeit in smaller volumes than before. It appears that armed groups seeking to supply drones and drone parts are using these same routes from Libya.

Arguably, the most important shift in illicit arms markets in Mali and the Sahel has been the emergence of drone warfare in the past two years. Surveillance drones and attack drones, including so-called 'kamikaze' drones where the drone is itself the missile, have become widely used by armed groups across the Sahel, such as JNIM and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), a coalition of Tuareg separatist groups that seeks independence or autonomy for the Azawad region in northern Mali.²⁰ This has been described by observers as 'the fastest period of innovation uptake in the history of asymmetric warfare.'²¹ Footage from so-

called first-person view drones is widely relayed on social media to rebel supporters and the wider world.²²

For example, on 23 August and 5 September 2025, the FLA launched two drone attacks on FAMa and Africa Corps camps in Tessalit, in the Kidal region.²³ In both cases, footage from the first-person view drones was circulated on social media. After the August attack, the Africa Corps claimed there had been no casualties and published an image of the alleged wreckage of the drone online. These are among the latest in a series of similar attacks claimed by the FLA.

These new weapons are sourced on the same routes as conventional arms. According to an FLA official, drones, their explosives and parts are mainly sourced from Libya. He suggested that fighters are also trained in Libya to use drones.²⁴ Previous media reports have suggested that the proliferation of drones in the Sahel is an indication of support and training supplied by Ukrainian special forces, particularly to counter Russian mercenaries in Africa.²⁵

Similarly, the war in Sudan has triggered an uptick in arms flows around the Sahel. These include flows into Sudan from external sponsors of the conflict who have channelled material via Libya and Chad; and outbound flows as arms destined for Sudan spill over into the wider region. While most of this spillover remains in neighbouring Chad and Libya, GI-TOC research suggests that since late 2024 some weapons have been ending up further afield, in Niger and Mali. These arms are moved through the Tibesti region of northern Mali²⁶ or key trading hubs in southern Libya, such as

Ubari and Ghat, via the Salvador Pass smuggling route into northern Niger.²⁷

Tuareg networks, which have familial and trade links across Mali and Niger, are instrumental in supplying armed groups in northern Mali.²⁸ These networks are involved in moving arms south through the Salvador Pass into northern Niger, ultimately reaching northern Mali.²⁹ Other sources have suggested that JNIM, rather than relying on Tuareg networks to source arms, has individuals dedicated to purchasing weapons in Ubari and transporting them to northern Mali. Similarly, the FLA reportedly sends individuals to buy weapons and return them to areas under its control.³⁰

Effects of disruption in illicit arms markets

Mali's restricted supply of illicit arms in a context of sustained high demand may have hard-to-predict consequences. Some actors may be incentivized to sell surplus weapon stockpiles, putting more illicit merchandise into circulation. Sources report that some JNIM members have opportunistically sold weapons looted during clashes or seized from government stockpiles.³¹ In the Gao and Kidal regions, in particular, JNIM is using gold mining areas it has access to – including the biggest gold mine in northern Mali, N'thaka – as markets for the trade of illicit goods, including weapons.³² This is confirmed by several gold miners from the area.³³ It is not clear whether JNIM's arms sales to gold mining groups are prompted by high prices or simply by the need to shed supplies that JNIM fighters do not need. Interviews with members of armed groups have indicated that certain FAMa troops are illegally selling state weapons.³⁴ Similarly, it is unclear if high prices provide an incentive for this or if it is merely



FIGURE 1 Illicit arms flows to northern Mali, as of September 2025.

a continuation of FAMA's poor arms control, which has been observed in previous years.

The illicit arms trade is an 'accelerant' market because it provides the arms, ammunition and materiel needed to allow conflict to continue. Increases in arms prices in northern Mali and emergence of different routes for

bringing in weapons to armed groups are indications of consistent demand for arms. They also show the connections between violent extremist organizations in Mali and groups in the broader region. These links can help reinforce and strengthen armed groups in the face of arms supply disruption, government offensives and intensified surveillance within Mali.

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Cinkassé cattle market in Togo — closed due to fears it was being used to launder stolen cattle — reopened under strict reforms, but risks persist.

Cattle rustling has become a defining feature of the Sahel's war economy, used by armed groups to build financing and legitimacy among communities. The GI-TOC's 2025 illicit hub mapping data highlighted cattle rustling as one of the criminal markets most fuelling instability (termed an 'accelerant market') in the Sahel and West Africa: it is prevalent in 15 of the 23 hubs that play the most significant role in regional instability.¹

Since 2015, central Mali and Burkina Faso have been the epicentre of conflict and cattle rustling. The criminal ecosystem crosses borders, however, and coastal states are key hubs for laundering stolen livestock. In northern Togo's Savanes region, Cinkassé has long operated as a key trading hub. The cattle market in Cinkassé, which is on the border with Burkina Faso and Ghana (the tri-border area), became one of the main hubs for licit and illicit livestock trade, particularly after Togolese authorities closed the Koudjouaré market, further east near the Benin border, for security reasons in 2022.

Since 2022, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) — predominantly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) — have gained ground in the borderlands between south-eastern Burkina Faso and the Savanes region, and violence has surged. In Savanes alone, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) shows an increase in violent incidents associated with extremism from one between 2020 and 2021, to 60 between 2022 and 2024.²

In parallel, cattle rustling increased and transformed from small, largely non-violent thefts — typically linked to community members or banditry — to violent looting of entire herds, often linked to JNIM.³ The hub mapping initiative tracks a rise in cattle rustling in the northern areas of Benin and Togo — both increasingly heavily affected by JNIM activity. This mirrors trends throughout regional conflict zones: areas infiltrated by JNIM see rising rates of cattle theft and a transformation of the criminal economy.⁴

After seizing the livestock, JNIM relies on a vast network to sell them. Through a complex chain of intermediaries, stolen livestock is either sold on regional markets in northern areas of coastal states (such as Côte d'Ivoire and Togo) or on small black markets (mostly in Ghana), then brought further south to large consumer markets. While these are mostly in central or southern regions (including the capitals), the big regional livestock markets are often closer to border areas, enhancing their vulnerability to infiltration by armed group intermediaries.⁵

JNIM's growing infiltration has driven changes in illicit economies beyond cattle rustling, transforming Cinkassé's criminal ecosystem. Togo is a primary import and transit area for goods from its large maritime port destined for landlocked Sahelian countries. As the point through which almost all trade — licit and illicit — passes on its way north, Cinkassé has long been a key trading node.

The 2022 and 2025 iterations of the illicit hub mapping data track how Cinkassé developed from a general illicit trade hub to an ecosystem in which VEOs — especially JNIM — are more embedded in local economies and logistics.⁶ Until 2022, the main concern — reflected in the findings of the 2022 hub mapping — was the potential role of trafficking networks in facilitating extremist group activities and entrenchment in the area, as they have done in other coastal borderlands, including in the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex on the nearby Benin-Burkina Faso-Niger border.⁷ By 2025, the illicit hub mapping shows that JNIM was operating in northern Togo and fully relying on Cinkassé as a key node for resourcing and financing, in particular trading in motorbikes, fuel and cattle.⁸

Attempts to curb laundering on regional markets

Mirroring approaches adopted elsewhere in the region, the Togolese state responded to the changing criminal environment in Cinkassé with restrictions. It curbed informal fuel sales⁹ and, crucially, closed the town's cattle market in October 2024. Government spokespersons said the market was an important JNIM node for laundering stolen animals and a key source of financing for the group.¹⁰

Cattle markets across West Africa have come under intense pressure from authorities seeking to block financial flows to armed groups. Cattle trade nodes now play a key role in the counter-insurgency strategies of national authorities.¹¹ In Mali, several large Bamako markets were temporarily closed in

September 2024 after a deadly JNIM attack on the capital. In Burkina Faso's Est region, the last large cattle market in the regional capital of Fada N'Gourma is under pressure. The Burkinabe minister of security visited the market in late 2024 to discuss how to prevent insurgents from accessing it.¹² Market closures are not specific to the Sahel and are not a new strategy. In north-east Nigeria, the authorities closed cattle markets as early as 2016 to cut financing to Boko Haram, while in the north-west Zamfara state dozens were closed between 2018 and 2022.¹³

The strategy of cutting off resourcing and financing to VEOs extends well beyond cattle rustling and is part of a broader policy trend. In West Africa and the Sahel, this logic has increasingly been applied to operational

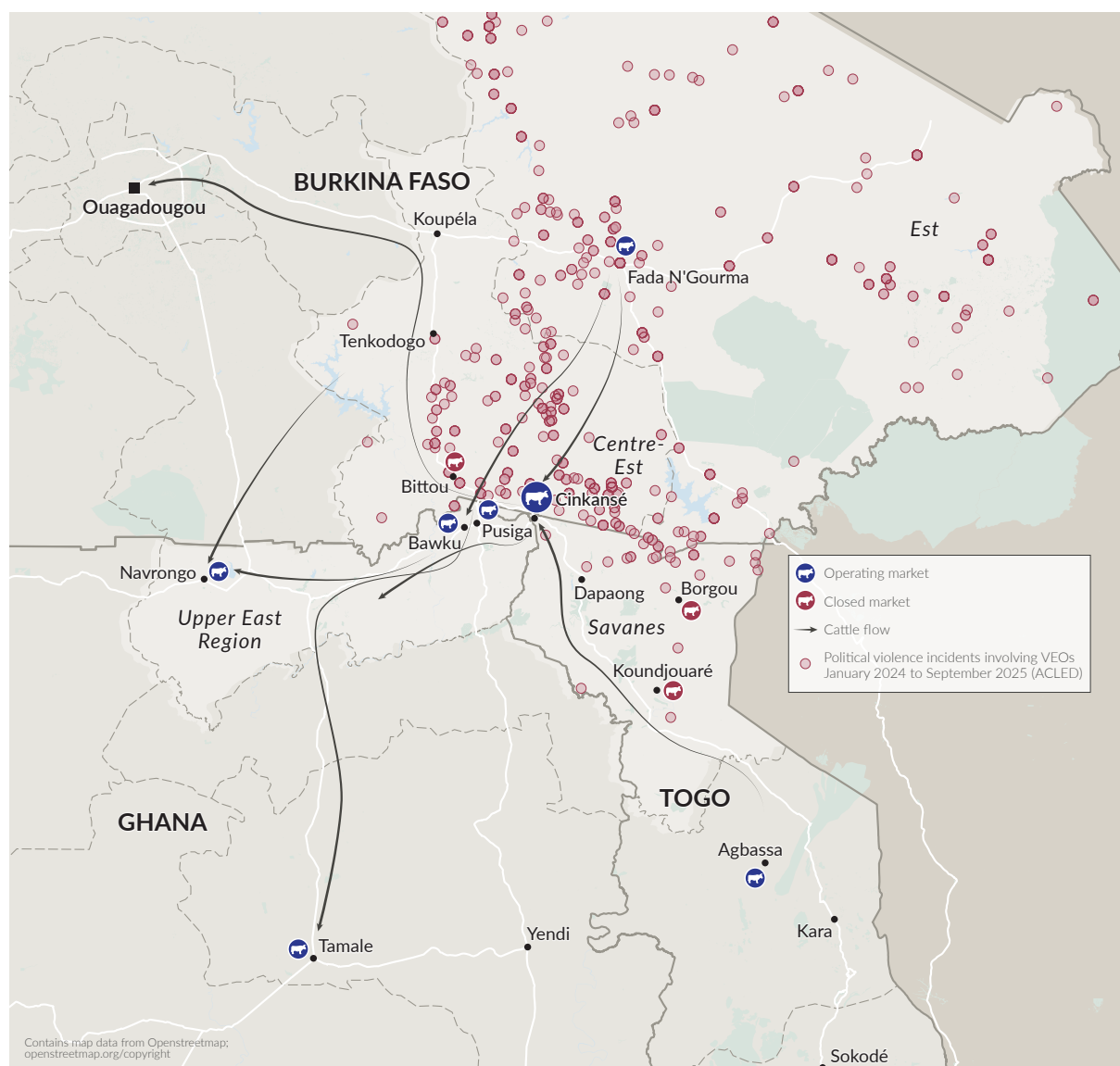


FIGURE 1 Cattle trade flows, market closures and insecurity in the tri-border area of Togo, Burkina Faso and Ghana.

Source: Based on data collected by the GI-TOC, Acting For Life and ACLED

supply chains, with measures targeting commodities such as fuel, motorbikes and even gold, on the assumption that restricting access will weaken armed groups. However, these approaches carry similar risks across contexts: they often fail to account for the adaptive strategies of armed actors while imposing severe costs on communities who rely on the same flows for their livelihoods.¹⁴

Since 2022, authorities in Togo have temporarily or permanently closed all primary markets in Savanes, including Koudjouaré and Borgou, as JNIM infiltrated and stepped up attacks in the region. The closures have had significant consequences for pastoralists, traders¹⁵ and the wider economy: markets generate municipal taxes and fees for local authorities, and sustain linked economic activities such as transportation, food and water vending, fodder sales, and informal jobs for intermediaries and loaders.¹⁶

Further, the closure of markets does not eliminate the laundering of stolen cattle. Instead, it displaces the trade into informal settings (such as black markets), where transactions are even less regulated and more opaque.¹⁷

The Cinkassé experiment

A month after the October 2024 closure of the Cinkassé market, negotiations between the market management committee and the authorities led to its reopening. Under state pressure, the management committee introduced measures to tighten traceability, ensure stricter control of transactions and facilitate stronger oversight by the authorities, including the defence and security forces.¹⁸ The measures include:

- Halving the number of registered brokers allowed to operate in the market, from more than 40 to 21, selected on the basis of peer trust and reputation.
- Registering brokers and issuing them with badges, making transactions easier to monitor.
- Registering traders who want to sell animals in the market and requiring them to produce identification.
- Mandating standardized receipts for all sales, which include the name of the broker, and the number and breed of animals.
- Sharing copies of receipts with the authorities (including police and gendarmerie at checkpoints) so they are informed of movements in and out of the market.

- Checking receipts and livestock headcounts at checkpoints as traders move out of the market.
- Restricting movements of cattle in and out of the market to daytime.

Taken together, these reforms constitute one of the most ambitious attempts yet to regulate a regional cattle market. They have succeeded in safeguarding business at the market: in the first eight months of 2025, 23 000 animals were sold in Cinkassé, 59% more than the 14 500 sold in 2024, when the trade was affected by insecurity at the Burkina border and limitations (culminating in the October closure) imposed by the authorities.¹⁹

As of October 2025, a year after the market's month-long closure, local authorities, the market committee and security forces all describe the reforms as credible safeguards against the laundering of cattle stolen by JNIM. They have closed three main loopholes through which stolen livestock previously entered the market. First, the sharp reduction in the number of brokers has limited the space for more opportunistic intermediaries — particularly younger brokers once suspected of facilitating shady sales. Second, stricter documentation rules — and investigations whenever there is doubt about an animal's provenance — have raised the costs and risks of attempting to introduce stolen cattle. Third, the ban on night-time livestock movements means transactions occur only during official market hours, under the eyes of the committee and security forces. Together, these measures are seen as closing the vulnerabilities that groups such as JNIM-linked intermediaries once exploited, while improving compliance and transparency.²⁰ Importantly, there is no



The Cinkassé cattle market in Togo is a key example of efforts to reform markets previously exploited by illicit actors.

evidence of parallel markets emerging or of traders avoiding Cinkassé; instead, sales have increased.²¹

Nevertheless, the model is not bulletproof. Some brokers still bypass receipts, and ongoing sensitization and strict enforcement are key to ensuring compliance does not diminish. More fundamentally, Cinkassé's success cannot entirely insulate the trade from cattle stolen further upstream. Stolen livestock may still be laundered earlier in the chain, particularly in markets in Burkina Faso, before reaching the border. For many, the lesson is that the practices piloted in Cinkassé should ideally be extended across the wider market network.

The lesson from Cinkassé is clear: strong regulatory pressure, when combined with inclusive local engagement, can transform a market rather than shut it down. Market closures may appear to be a quick security fix but they deprive communities and states of revenue while pushing trade into informal settings, failing to curb the threat that triggered them. By contrast, negotiated reforms, backed by the credible threat of closure, can align incentives for better traceability. Authorities from neighbouring coastal and Sahelian states should therefore consider Cinkassé as a model for how to curb laundering of stolen animals and financing streams to violent extremist organizations.

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Lakurawa is rapidly expanding its territory and revenue in North West Nigeria, and may contribute to a long-feared bridge between Nigerian and Sahelian armed groups.

Violence linked to Lakurawa — an armed group in North West Nigeria that has reportedly pledged allegiance to Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) — has surged since January 2025.¹ It has caused dozens of fatalities,² large-scale destruction of homes, and mass displacements in Sokoto and Kebbi.³ The increased violence, centred in the volatile region where Nigeria, Niger and Benin meet, could represent a worrying bridge for the expansion of Sahelian violent extremist groups into northern Nigeria.

Illicit economies fuel and sustain Lakurawa, and the group's expansion into new territories brings greater access to critical revenue sources. The group generates income through cattle rustling, kidnapping, extortion under its self-imposed *zakat* (a form of almsgiving mandated in Islam) and the illicit oil trade, including vandalizing cross-border pipelines and seizing fuel supplies from black market traders.⁴ Illicit revenues strengthen the group's operational capacity and further entrench its presence in the region.

This is in keeping with patterns across West Africa of armed groups engaging with illicit economies. As the findings of the 2025 Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor⁵ set out, armed groups in West Africa enter illicit economies for three main reasons: revenue generation; obtaining operational resources such as weapons, fuel or vehicles; and building legitimacy among the communities in which they operate. Lakurawa's extortion of communities, imposing a form of extra-legal 'governance' to gather revenue and resources, shows that it is using this common playbook.

Lakurawa's origins and expansion

Communities along the Niger–Nigeria border first encountered the group as armed herders — predominantly made up of Malian and Nigerien nationals — who frequently moved between communities in Sokoto State in 2017 and 2018.⁶ Initially perceived as a

potential ally, some community leaders enlisted Lakurawa's help to combat bandits who were destabilizing the region. Between 2018 and 2019, the group reportedly succeeded in pushing back these criminal elements.⁷

Stability was short-lived, however. After a dispute with one of the leaders who had sought its help, Lakurawa turned against the communities it had once protected. Between 2020 and 2022, the group became a predatory force, imposing levies, confiscating livestock, engaging in kidnappings and enforcing a rigid version of Islam. Some of the bandits dislodged by Lakurawa formed alliances with the group — not as formal members but as collaborators, particularly in cattle rustling and kidnapping operations.⁸

By the third quarter of 2024, Lakurawa had established permanent operational bases in Gudu and Tangaza, and its activities had expanded into parts of northern Kebbi.⁹ Since early September 2025, new camps have emerged in Jega, Maiyama and Koko (see Figure 2).¹⁰ Local sources report that with the establishment of these camps, the geographical scope of the group's activities has increased, spreading into Kogi in the north-west, Kwara in the south-west and the Benin–Nigeria–Niger border area.¹¹

An analysis by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies estimates that the group has more than 1 000 fighters.¹² This is likely to be a conservative estimate, as local sources report that the group has up to 700 members in two local government areas (LGAs) alone — about 500 in Gudu¹³ and 200 in Arewa.¹⁴

A bridge between Sahelian and Nigerian extremist groups

Evidence is mounting that Lakurawa is affiliated with ISGS. In July 2025, the UN sanctions monitoring team focused on Islamic State said: 'Since late 2024, ISGS demonstrated its intention to shift activities towards the

north-west border of Nigeria, relying on the Lakurawa group, which reportedly pledged allegiance to ISGS.¹⁵

Lakurawa's reported affiliation with ISGS poses a significant threat.¹⁶ While Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) — another Islamic State affiliate with a strong and long-running presence in West Africa — has long operated in northern Nigeria, Lakurawa's ties to ISGS increase the risks of a potential nexus between

ISGS elements from the Sahel and extremist actors in Nigeria, creating a long-feared bridge between Nigerian and Sahelian groups. In practice, this could mean that operational resources, combatants and potentially finances could be shared with Lakurawa, and closer links established between ISGS and ISWAP in Nigeria. Lakurawa's continued expansion into North West and North Central Nigeria represents a concerning development, reflecting the broader southward

LAKURAWA-LINKED EVENTS AND EVOLUTION



FIGURE 1 Lakurawa-linked events and evolution.

Source: Analysis of media reports and interviews with a cross section of vigilantes, community leaders and residents in Sokoto and Kebbi.

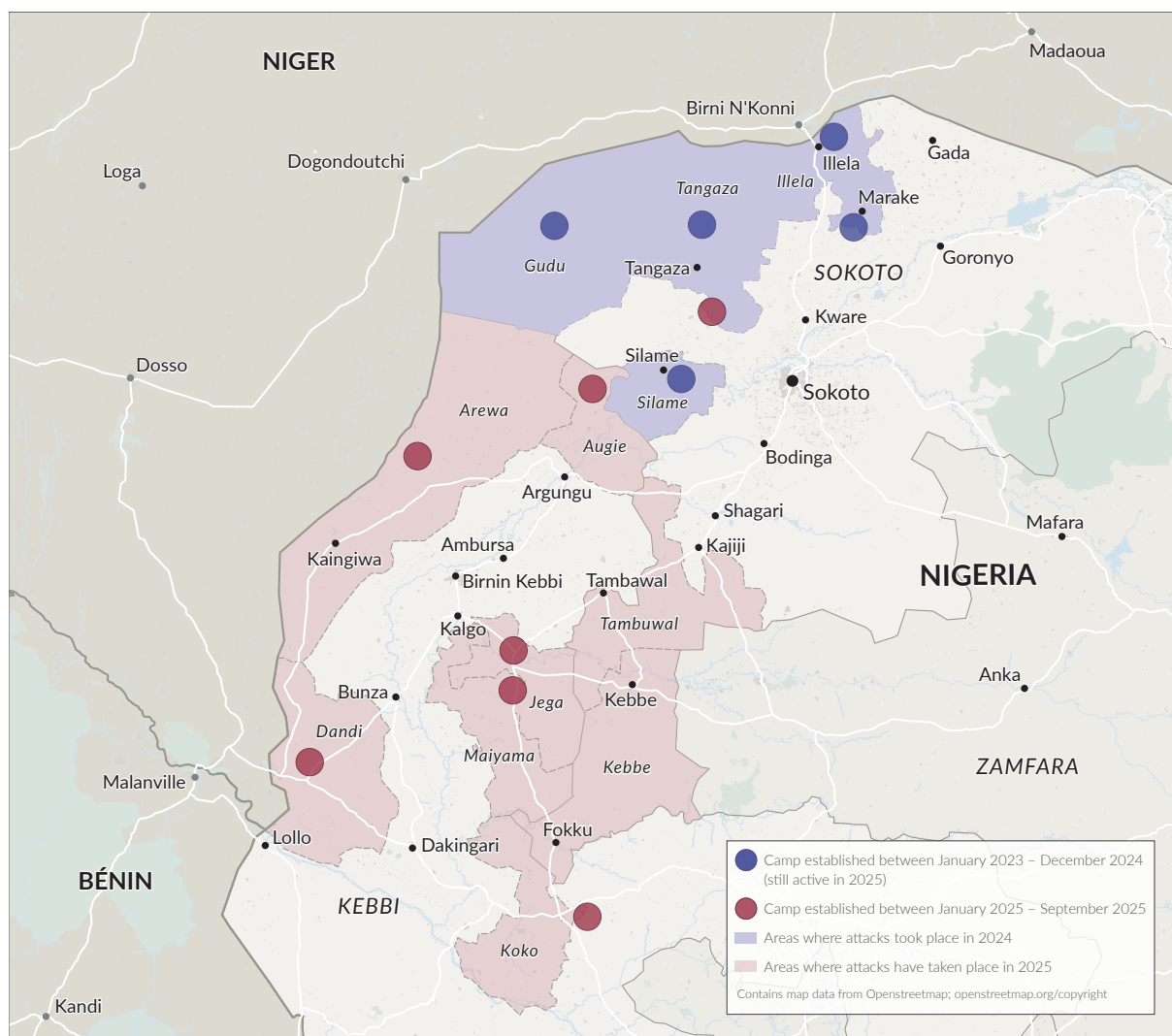


FIGURE 2 Lakurawa camps and violent attacks, November 2024–September 2025.

Source: Analysis of media reports and interviews with a cross section of vigilantes, community leaders and residents in Sokoto and Kebbi.

movement of extremist groups toward coastal West Africa. This trend is particularly alarming given that the region has historically remained relatively insulated from extremist influence and now risks becoming a hub for illicit revenue generation, with far-reaching implications for regional stability.

The Benin–Nigeria–Niger border area is home to a growing constellation of armed groups. The expansion of violent extremist groups from the Sahel towards the littoral states of West Africa is an emerging regional threat, with Nigeria increasingly exposed to this southwards shift.¹⁷ In this context, confronting the Lakurawa insurgency is vital for restoring stability within Nigeria's borders and halting the broader trajectory of extremist encroachment into coastal West Africa. Disrupting Lakurawa's sources of revenue is a crucial

step in tackling the group's growing influence and therefore mitigating the expansion and entrenchment of Sahelian extremist networks in northern Nigeria.

Lakurawa's expanding revenue streams

Lakurawa's access to resources increases as it establishes new operational bases and expands its activities to new areas. The group draws revenue from four key illicit economies — cattle rustling, extortion, kidnapping and the illicit oil trade.

Cattle rustling is the most lucrative and destabilizing activity. Between May and July 2025, more than 1 800 cattle were reported stolen in Sokoto's Illela LGA, with Lakurawa and affiliated bandits responsible for the theft. In Augie LGA in Kebbi state, a vigilante noted

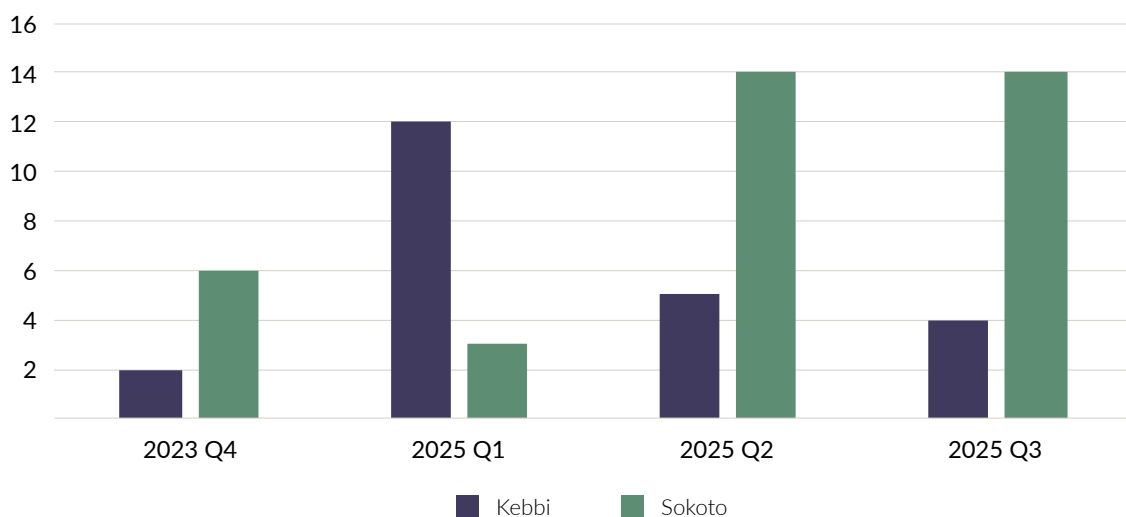


FIGURE 3 Incidents of violence linked to Lakurawa in Sokoto and Kebbi, 2023 and 2025.

Source: ACLED data

that ‘about 2 000 cows and more than 1 500 sheep and goats’ were stolen within eight months in 2024.¹⁸

Previously, rustled cattle were sold in border markets in Niger, where they could fetch higher prices. However, recent border closures and stricter enforcement by Nigerien authorities have cut this key supply chain. In response, Lakurawa now moves rustled livestock to distant markets in southern Nigerian cities such as Lagos, Ilorin and Ibadan.¹⁹ This marks a strategic adaptation to international pressure, and it has given rise to a new class of brokers and dealers who travel into the forests to buy stolen livestock directly from Lakurawa for resale in urban centres. This emergent grey market illustrates how Lakurawa’s economic influence is not limited to remote borderlands but extends into mainstream commercial systems.

Explaining the group’s entrenchment and growing influence in the local cattle economy, a businessman in Gudu noted: ‘Our people have started business with them, especially cattle business. Their cattle are very cheap and available in our market.’²⁰ In Augie, Lakurawa’s cattle rustling activities have devastated the cattle sector. According to a local source, some of the cattle dealers have ‘left the business’.²¹

Another important source of funds for Lakurawa is extortion. Under the guise of collecting *zakat*, they coerce farmers and herders into handing over livestock and other goods. This is a forced extraction process, a common strategy deployed by violent extremist org-

anizations across West Africa. Thefts transform into *zakat* as a group’s level of influence over a territory increases.

Kidnapping for ransom is often conducted in collaboration with bandit groups. Previously a source of tension between Lakurawa and bandits, primarily due to disagreements on operational jurisdiction and revenue sharing, it has become a coordinated effort. Some of the bandits dislodged by Lakurawa have joined the group to perpetrate kidnappings since they have lost territorial control and need to sustain themselves.

Typically, a Lakurawa kidnapping involves members of the group storming into communities on motorcycles. They shoot and kill anyone who resists or whom they suspect is a vigilante, and abduct those they think are wealthy enough to pay a ransom. For example, in coordinated attacks targeting communities in Kebbe and Tambuwal LGAs, an unknown number of residents were kidnapped and scores were killed in September 2025.²²

Fuel theft is another revenue stream. On 13 December 2024, the Niger–Benin oil pipeline was attacked in Dosso Region, Niger, allegedly by Lakurawa fighters. Nigerien authorities alleged that the militants attacked with the backing of Nigerian forces. The federal government of Nigeria denied this, emphasizing that the country is committed to countering violent extremism in the region.²³

Though media reported Lakurawa’s vandalizing of the Niger–Benin oil pipe as primarily an act of sabotage,

local sources suggested it had a strong economic motivation.²⁴ The group regularly siphons fuel from Niger–Benin pipelines passing through its area of operations and sells it to buyers from Niger. This is often accompanied by targeted sabotage of the pipelines, possibly to mask the thefts or to assert control over critical infrastructure.²⁵

There were at least six attacks on the Niger–Benin oil pipelines between December 2024 and May 2025.²⁶ While in Sokoto, the group mainly taps fuel from cross-border pipelines. In Kebbi, where there are no such pipelines, a vigilante leader described how they ‘steal fuel from black marketers and filling stations’.²⁷

Anti-Lakurawa strategy must target its income streams

Lakurawa’s diversified economic base sustains its operations and enables the group to adapt to shifting conditions, such as the impact of border closures on its role in the cattle rustling market.

In some ways, Lakurawa’s exploitation of illicit economies is a textbook example of trends seen across illicit hubs in West Africa.²⁸ Through cattle rustling and kidnap for ransom, the group builds the revenue it needs. Through fuel theft, it can amass revenue and access a resource it needs to conduct operations. Through *zakat* and extortion, as well as kidnappings, it enforces its image as a feared group and builds legitimacy as a power broker.

Yet in other ways, it is a unique actor in the Nigeria–Niger border region. Its relationship with ISGS may transform the role of Sahelian armed groups in northern Nigeria. Through this lens, its embedded role in illicit economies such as cattle rustling, extortion and kidnapping is a concerning development. These are markets that the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor analysis has found to have an ‘accelerant’ effect on instability and conflict.²⁹ Any effective strategy to weaken Lakurawa must therefore target its income streams to disrupt the group’s financial ecosystem.

Notes

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JNIM's blockade in south-west Mali illustrates the strategic importance of controlling key licit and illicit supply routes for operational, financial and political gain.

On 14 September 2025, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) militants ambushed a convoy of more than 100 fuel trucks arriving from Senegal on the RN1 highway linking Senegal to Bamako.¹ Just over a week later, JNIM attacked several fuel tankers travelling towards Bamako from Côte d'Ivoire, looting and then torching them.² These operations — and a number of other attacks and activity by the al-Qaeda linked violent extremist organization in southern and south-western Mali — took place against the backdrop of a blockade, announced by JNIM on 1 September, of the city of Kayes and the town of Nioro du Sahel in the country's south-west. In addition to banning residents from leaving, JNIM announced a ban on imports of fuel from neighbouring coastal states — Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

By targeting the primary commercial arteries into Bamako, JNIM sought to asphyxiate the Malian capital to put maximum pressure on — and ultimately topple — the military junta. The economic, political and social impact did not take long to manifest. Fuel shortages quickly hit the southern regions, including Bamako, and local populations were forced to spend hours searching for petrol or were stuck at home, unable to afford sharply increased taxi fares.³ In the last week of October, Malian authorities announced the temporary nationwide closure of schools and universities as a result of the blockade-induced fuel shortage.⁴ Shortly afterwards, the US and many other states urged their citizens in Mali to leave the country immediately.⁵

The deliberate targeting of major roads has demonstrated the strategic importance of transport infrastructure. Armed groups exploit roads for political gain by simultaneously disrupting local economies and weakening the state, positioning themselves as alternative governance providers. However, roads and transport connectivity more broadly do not only underpin the flow of licit goods sustaining national and

regional economies, they also underpin the flow of illicit goods. The findings of the 2025 illicit hub mapping in West Africa highlight the intersection between roads, illicit economies and armed group violence: twelve stretches of major roads in the region were identified as illicit hubs. They are concentrated in the Sahel and Nigeria, and include cross-border arteries such as the Dori-Téra road connecting Burkina Faso and Niger.⁶ The findings illustrate how roads are exploited by armed groups and criminal networks for operational and financial gain through the trafficking of supplies, and through roadblocks and taxation.

Control the roads, control the population

When it comes to their engagement with illicit economies, armed groups face a trade-off between seeking support from local populations and acquiring money and other resources.⁷ Often, public support for them can be damaged if they engage in certain illicit economies that directly harm communities. In contrast to locations such as gold mines or national parks, where armed groups may need to build legitimacy among residents, transient populations on roads can be treated differently. Armed groups may be more predatory, extorting travellers at roadblocks or engaging in robbery, kidnapping and extortion.⁸

However, while armed groups often prioritize financial gain over civilian acceptance on roads, control of roads has significant implications for governance. Extortion on roads goes beyond revenue generation: it is a sign of who controls a road and, by extension, who has the authority to tax it. Safety on roads is central in shaping civilians' livelihoods, perceptions of their own security, and their understanding of which entity is in control. They are therefore key spaces of contestation between non-state armed groups and states, all vying for influence.⁹

In Nigeria, for example, a bandit group reported that a number of roadblocks on the Magami–Dansadau and Kaduna–Abuja roads, while helpful in generating revenue, were also an expression of defiance towards state forces – a political step, rather than a merely criminal one.¹⁰ Violent extremist organizations in the Sahel, notably JNIM, have imposed similarly political blockades on towns and villages in Mali and Burkina Faso. At least 40 towns were under blockade in Burkina Faso by the end of 2025.¹¹

The fuel blockade, and other violent JNIM activity in southern and south-western Mali since July 2025, illustrates how road infrastructure and illicit economies intersect to generate supplies, revenue and leverage for armed groups. The breakdown of formal supply chains is driving businesses to rely on informal networks, which are frequently taxed by JNIM, reinforcing the group's financial control.¹² More importantly, by seizing control of roads connecting Mali to other countries – primarily Côte d'Ivoire through Sikasso and Senegal through Kayes – JNIM has demonstrated its strength to the state and to local populations. Fuel is critical for the functioning of the country, and by disrupting the economy JNIM has exposed the weakness of the junta, which it is strategically pushing to its breaking point.

Armed group exploitation: operational resources and revenue extraction

Roads are pivotal for the transport of resources that are fundamental for armed groups' ability to operate, and are an enabler of illicit economies financing the groups. Eleven of the 12 roads identified as illicit hubs in the GI-TOC's mapping feature at least one of the five illicit economies categorized as 'accelerant markets': those particularly strongly linked to violence and instability. These include extortion and kidnapping but also cattle rustling and arms trafficking.

Nearly half (47%) of illicit hubs identified across the region channel flows to conflict actors, albeit to varying degrees. Most of these hubs (81%) are concentrated in the Sahel and Central Africa, with additional clusters in Gulf of Guinea states – Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. In hubs where illicit economies significantly contribute to conflict actor resourcing, the most prevalent commodities include excisable goods (such as motorbikes), present in 68% of such hubs; synthetic drugs (particularly tramadol) present in 60% of those hubs; fuel (59%); and medical products (48%). In other words, they reflect the flows of critical resources that enable armed groups to maintain mobility and operational capacity. The corridor between Malanville in

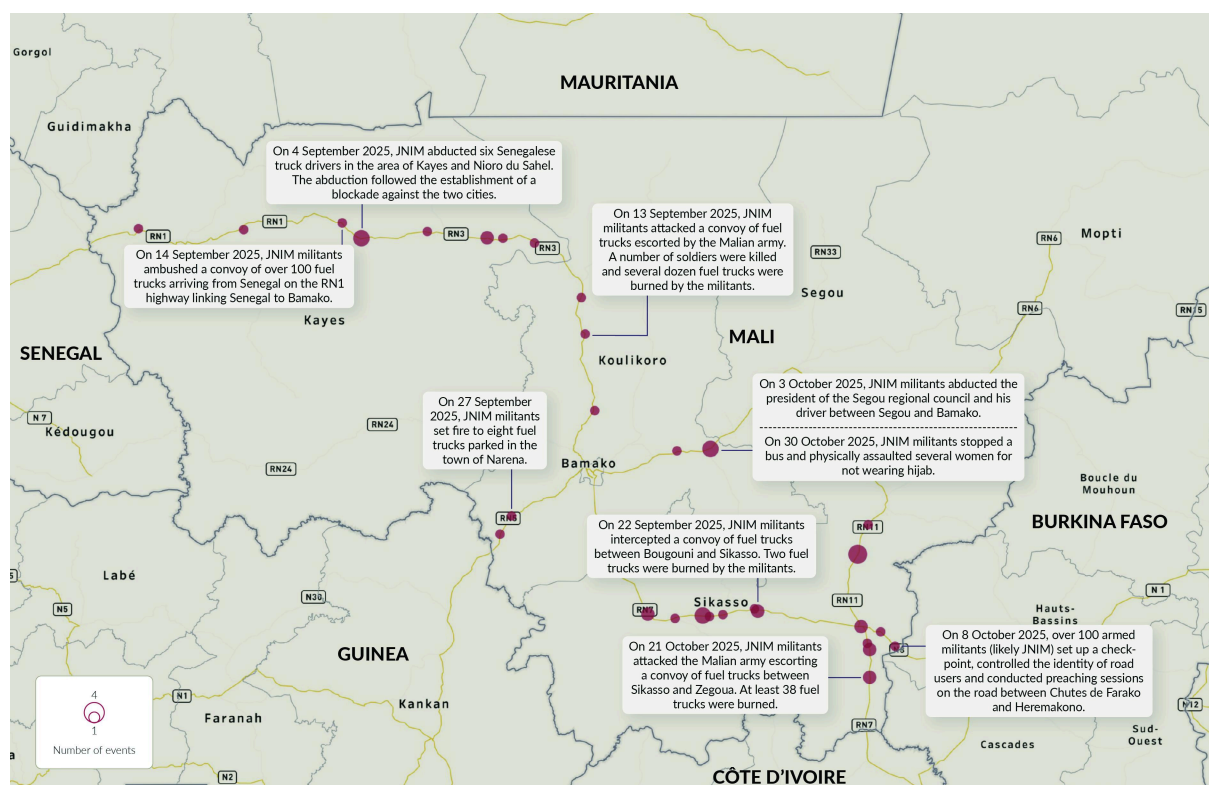


FIGURE 1 Key JNIM attacks on major roads in southern and south-western Mali, July to October 2025.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data



FIGURE 2 Road segment illicit hubs in West Africa.

Source: Lyes Tagziria and Lucia Bird, Illicit economies and instability: Illicit hub mapping in West Africa 2025, GI-TOC, October 2025.

north-eastern Benin and Gaya in southern Niger, and the major road connecting Lomé to the town of Cinkassé in northern Togo, for example, are key to the supply of fuel and motorbikes to Sahelian violent extremist groups.

Other criminal markets are equally important from a financial perspective. An illicit economy that plays an important role as a means of armed group financing, particularly for JNIM, is cattle rustling. The illicit hub mapping finds that the illicit cattle trade is far more prevalent in hubs with stronger links to conflict and violence.¹³ The Batié-Gaoua-Kampti axis is a key transit point for the movement of cattle stolen by JNIM in southern Burkina Faso to markets in northern Ghana and northern Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁴

Geography of illicit economies – the roads to riches

Armed groups are not the only ones that exploit roads. The geography of illicit economies across the region is closely tied to road infrastructure. Nearly nine in 10 illicit hubs (87%) lie within reach of major operational roads (59% on primary and 29% on secondary).¹⁵ From coastal ports to inland towns and villages, roads connect extraction zones and consumer markets. Capital cities in

the Sahel, in particular, depend on overland transport. Landlocked Burkina Faso, for example, relies heavily on products imported from coastal countries such as Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The price difference between goods in Burkina Faso and its coastal neighbours, combined with the country's location between coastal countries and other landlocked countries (Mali and Niger), creates the conditions for thriving contraband economies.¹⁶

Conversely, roads are vital gateways for the transportation of natural resources extracted in the Sahelian countries towards coastal states. Gold extracted in Burkina Faso, for example, is smuggled southwards by road towards the Togolese capital city, Lomé, for export by air. In December 2024, Burkinabé customs officials seized 28.6 kilograms of gold, worth more than €2 million at the time, from three passengers travelling by bus to Lomé.¹⁷

Nigeria has the largest road network in West Africa, and although most of its 195 000 kilometres are unpaved, the 60 000 paved kilometres are indispensable to the economy and the population, with about 95% of Nigerians relying on road transport for their movement

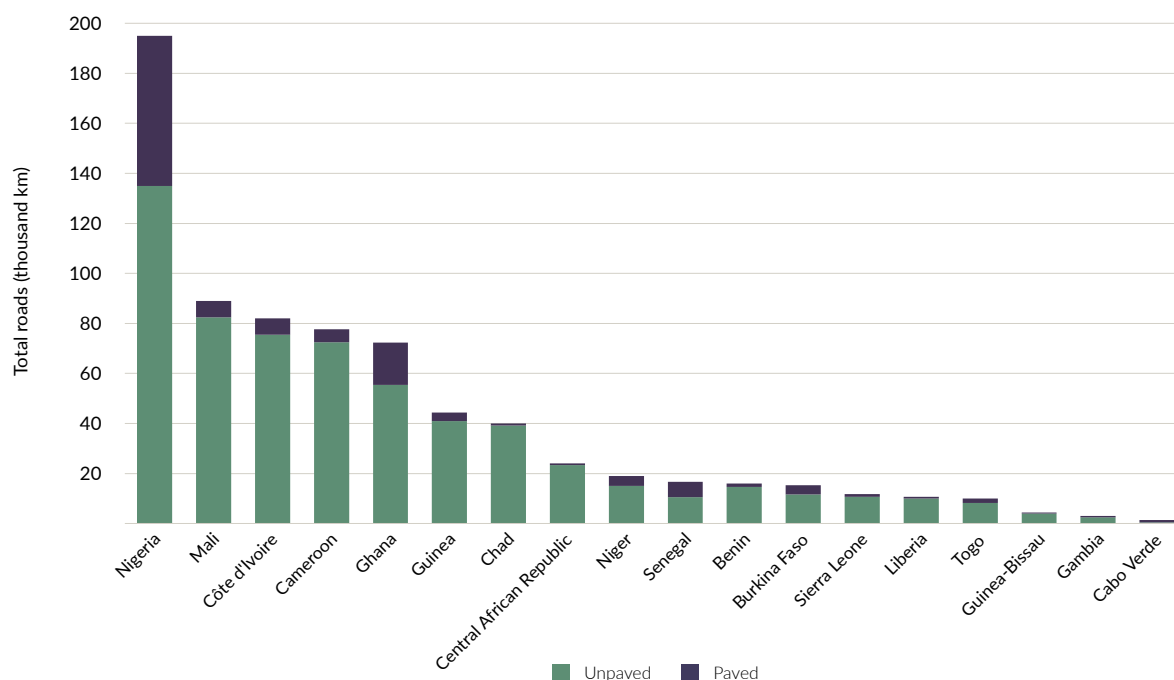


FIGURE 3 National road networks in West Africa.

Source: CIA World Factbook; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Sahel and West Africa Club, Roads and Conflicts in North and West Africa.

and that of goods.¹⁸ However, as the main artery linking northern and southern Nigeria, the Kaduna–Abuja expressway, for example, also plays a key role in trafficking of drugs,¹⁹ primarily cannabis and tramadol sourced from states in the south to be distributed by gangs in the north.²⁰ Similarly, the Kano–Daura highway, the primary road connecting Kano – the commercial hub of northern Nigeria – to the Nigerien border, has seen an increase in the number of people being smuggled into Niger for onward travel to North Africa and eventually Europe.²¹

Roads are critical spaces where there is overt interplay between illicit economies and violence. Most violent killings in West Africa happen within 1 kilometre of a road, and civilians are particularly vulnerable to violence at the hands of armed groups, in the form of ambushes,

blockades, kidnapping and more.²² Most (75%) road segment illicit hubs in West Africa bisect regions with high rates of violent killings, and the illicit economies on roads in the Sahel are significant drivers of instability.

Reclaiming roads, therefore, is not only a matter of security; it is about restoring legitimate movement of goods, people and revenue. Roads are the physical expression of the social contract: they link communities, markets and states. As a village chief in the Kayes region put it, ‘we cannot live without these roads. The terrorists know this better than we do.’²³ As long as they remain spaces of coercion, illicit profit and violence, stability in the region will remain elusive. Building fair, predictable and secure systems of mobility may be the most effective way to dismantle the infrastructure of crime.

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