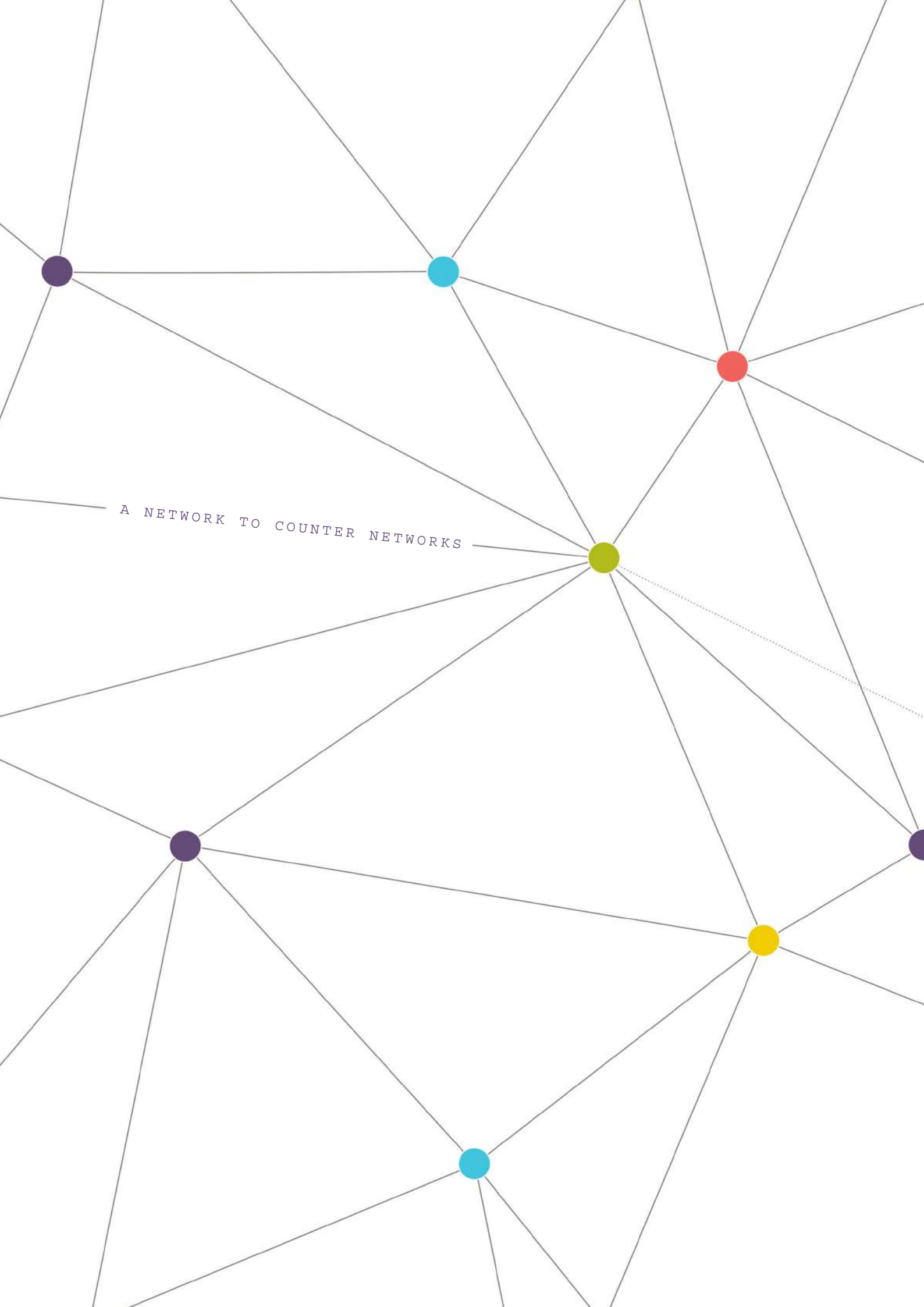


THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: *Past, Present and Future*



A Research Paper
January 2014



A NETWORK TO COUNTER NETWORKS



Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future

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The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
7bis, Avenue de la Paix
P.O. Box 1295
CH-1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland

www.GlobalInitiative.net

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About the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime was conceived from a series of closed-forum dialogues with thirty senior law enforcement officials, representatives of multilateral organizations, development practitioners and policymakers, hosted by the International Peace Institute in New York in 2011-12.

At these meetings, the founding members of the Global Initiative, many of whom stand at the front line of the fight against organized crime, illicit trafficking and trade, described a situation where the challenge was unprecedented and poorly understood, and for which current tools seemed inadequate for the task. They concluded that the problem and its impacts are not well analyzed; they are not systematically integrated into national plans or strategies; existing multilateral tools have not been adapted and frequently fail to provide a sufficient return on the investment. While there have been some successes, these are not enough to claim that our responses are catching up with organized crime. In their view, existing forms of cooperation tend to be bilateral, slow, and restricted to a limited number of like-minded states.

What is required it was concluded is a more strategic and proactive global approach to counter transnational crime and trafficking. This is not only a law-enforcement responsibility. A “whole-of-government” and a more holistic approach is needed at a time when policymakers are increasingly seeking new ideas to inform their responses. Critically, there needs to be space created outside of the traditional multilateral systems to debate and develop new initiatives with a wide range of engaged stakeholders and experts.

The participants in these meetings called for a network of experts to be created which would allow for a much needed debate of the challenges and to serve as an incubator for new integrated strategies. Such networks should consist of experts from a range of thematic disciplines. They should not be constrained by institutional parameters, but should coalesce around common areas of experience such as law enforcement, development, media, the rule of law, research and policy development. It was with this vision that the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime was born.

The Global Initiative is an independent international non-profit organization headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.

For more information please visit our website at www.globalinitiative.net or contact the Secretariat at: secretariat@globalinitiative.net.



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Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, present and future

I. Introduction

Stretched out along the Sahelian band are some of the poorest and most fragile countries on earth with human security challenges that transcend borders: climate change, regional food crises, rapid population growth, weak governments, endemic corruption, internal conflict and violent extremism.¹

The Sahel has always been a land of commercial exchanges where communities depend on trade strategies with their closest neighbors for economic development and survival. Economies in the Sahel are quintessentially regional, with strong connections to markets both in sub-Saharan Africa to the south and North Africa to the north. Many populations in the Sahel rely on mobility as a livelihood strategy, forming the basis of both nomadic and pastoralist communities.²

Arms, consumer goods, and people flow freely due to weak state structures overlaid by closely connected communities and networks that span the area between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Long and porous borders, low population density, and the challenges of surveillance in this vast space have made the Sahel region vulnerable to organized crime and illicit trafficking.

Land-locked at the heart of this zone of fragility is Mali, with the Sahelian band cutting across the middle of her territory. With an estimated population of 12.7 million, a life expectancy of 51 years, and a ranking on the Human Development Index of 182 out of 186,³ the citizens of the Malian state are some of the most vulnerable in the world.

Illicit trafficking has defined the nature of the political crisis in Mali in the immediate past. Yet the nature of how trafficking interacted with local political, social and economic dynamics is poorly understood. A better comprehension of these dynamics is essential to designing an effective response to illicit trafficking and organized crime in the region. This paper relies on interviews with key protagonists and those involved in the illicit economy. Its goal is to review the evolution of illicit trafficking in Mali, from its trading roots to its current form today. In doing so, the study seeks to examine the way in which trafficking has entrenched itself into the Malian ethnography, and to understand the socio-cultural and economic dynamics driving and protecting the trade. In parallel, the paper attempts to understand the way in which the illicit economy has engaged with the political and state-building process, and to anticipate its likely impact in the current peacebuilding framework.

Section II provides a brief contextual summary of recent political developments and the research methodology. Sections III and IV consider the evolution and impact of illicit trafficking in Mali on instability in greater detail. Section V proposes some recommendations on how to better respond to illicit trafficking within the framework of governance and development of Mali.

¹ The Sahel is a band of semi-arid territory up to 1000 kilometres wide in parts which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.

² Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³ UNDP Human Development Report Index 2013
<https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-1-Human-Development-Index-and-its-components/wxub-qc5k>



II. Mali's (hidden) crisis

For much of the three decades since its independence from France in 1960, Mali was governed by a single-party dictatorship led by President Moussa Traoré, and did not hold its first multi-party elections until 1992.

From its first elections the country evolved into what many observers believed was a model democracy, despite the enormous economic and political challenges it faced. Mali transitioned through a number of democratic elections, whilst dealing with periodic violent secessionist movements from ethnic Tuareg rebels in the north who considered themselves alienated from the flow of central state resources. These conflicts ended with negotiated peace settlements, which promised greater regional autonomy, the integration of Tuareg combatants into the military, and more stable state service delivery in the impoverished north. None of these agreements were ever fully implemented and grievances continued to fester.

A pivotal moment in the security of Mali came following the end of the 2011 Libyan civil war. Heavily armed and experienced Tuareg fighters who had fought on behalf of Qaddafi returned to northern Mali and helped reignite the long-standing conflict, tipping the precarious balance of power that had established itself in the north.

The state in the north of the country had been weakened by a policy of decentralization which saw power (and control over illicit trafficking) handed to local leaders in favour with Bamako. At the same time, long established smuggling networks had evolved first to move illicit cigarettes, later hashish and then, most profitably, cocaine.

Cocaine trafficking entering through the West African coast began transiting through Mali and neighbouring countries on its way to Europe from the early 2000s using trafficking routes through the Sahara. Much has been made of the fact that

established smuggling routes served as a platform for new illicit activities, and this is correct. What is often missed however is how dramatic an impact the smuggling of highly profitable commodities, most notably cocaine, had on local communities as well as the militarization of the Sahelian protection economy. Through the corruption required to ensure "protection" or safe passage, illicit trafficking became thoroughly integrated within political and military structures in northern Mali. This process hollowed out the Malian state, undermining institutions and eroding the legitimacy of official systems of governance at the community level.

The situation came to a head in March 2012, when elements of the Malian armed forces carried out a coup to overthrow President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) who was finishing his second term in office. Islamic extremists, fuelled by Libyan arms, rode the back of a separatist insurgency movement to take all of the major cities in Northern Mali: Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, as the Malian army crumbled.

What is surprising in retrospect is how unprepared the international community was for these developments. It is true that the focus at the time was on other international crises, most notably Syria, but thinking around Mali had been conditioned by an established perception that the country was a model development partner. Few if any analysts noted how much the process of democracy and decentralized governance concealed the disenfranchisement of the broader population and empowered a new criminal class who mediated the distribution of profits from the illicit trafficking economy.⁴ In the words of one prominent Malian journalist, "The international community was blind to the crisis because it only willfully saw what it wanted to see: a democratic development state, not a weakening criminalised one."⁵

⁴ For an exception see Morten Bøås, 'Castles in the sand: informal networks and power brokers in the northern Mali periphery', Mats Utas (ed), *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, London: Zed, 2012, pp. 119-134.

⁵ Interview with newspaper editor in Bamako, October 2013.

Although elected civilian rule was re-established in the summer of 2013 following a French military intervention in the north, stability in the country remains fragile. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), who took office in September 2013, faces the challenge of uniting a country torn apart by a separatist rebellion, a coup, an Islamic insurgency and government institutions eroded by criminal activity and illicit trafficking.

The most recent Security Council report on West Africa and the Sahel emphasized the extent to which these illicit flows have become to undermining governance and stability in the region.⁶ The exact scope of illicit trafficking in Mali is impossible to quantify. Figures regarding the amount of narcotics that pass through Mali are usually based on estimates derived from seizures, which provide little if any real indication of the volumes of drugs transiting the territory.⁷

More importantly, focusing on quantities misplaces the analytical imperative as it pertains to peace and security in Mali. While figures would be useful for monitoring trends, the impact of organized crime and illicit trafficking on Mali depends not on the quantity of product, but rather the manner in which trafficking affects more nebulous concepts, such as good governance and state capacity. For these reasons, a more qualitative approach to analysis is necessary.

If the current post-conflict phase is not to relapse into yet another iteration of instability in northern Mali, then the international community must gain a better understanding of the illicit economy. It is only by engaging the impact of organized crime and illicit trafficking in Mali that outsiders can begin to play a constructive role in creating an environment where democratic governance, rule of law, and citizen security can take root and endure.

Methodology and Sources

Gathering information on organized crime and illicit trafficking in Mali is a challenging exercise. Those involved in trafficking have obvious incentives to keep their activities hidden and knowledgeable insiders and interlocutors are often unwilling to speak about the subject with any candor. In other instances, interviewees are eager to highlight the illicit activities of political, economic and military rivals, while insisting that their own allies are not implicated.

This paper relies on close to 50 interviews with relevant stakeholders, including government officials, civil society leaders, citizens from key trafficking hubs, transport operators and traffickers themselves. The bulk of these interviews were conducted in October 2013 in Bamako, but interviews and field research carried out in 2013 in northern Mali were also incorporated into this report.

In order to gather reliable and relevant information on drug trafficking and organized crime in Mali, the authors relied heavily on the use of long, unstructured interviews, often in the form of multiple meetings in various locations. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics at hand, many of the most pertinent interviews - particularly those with government officials and alleged or well-known drug traffickers - were arranged on condition of anonymity. Consequently, interviewees have not been cited by name and where possible, a general description of the interviewee, as well as a location and date of the interview has been referenced.

⁴ For an exception see Morten Bøås, 'Castles in the sand: informal networks and power brokers in the northern Mali periphery', Mats Utas (ed), *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, London: Zed, 2012, pp. 119-134.

⁵ Interview with newspaper editor in Bamako, October 2013.

⁶ United Nations Security Council "Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa", December 11th 2013, (S/2013/732)

⁷ Certain figures, including the amount of cocaine that arrives in West Africa, and the percentage of cocaine in Europe that flows through Africa were admittedly crude estimates by the organizations who calculated them. The wide circulation of these figures in numerous overviews and reports has given these numbers a degree of specificity and authority they were never intended to have.



III. The Evolution of Illicit Trafficking in Mali

It is tempting to romanticize contemporary trafficking networks in Mali by linking them to the halcyon days of the 15th and 16th centuries, when cities such as Timbuktu were global hubs of trade and commerce. More recent economic developments, however, are much more relevant.

Contemporary trafficking frameworks actually began to take form in the 1970s, when networks emerged to facilitate the illegal flow of licit goods from Algeria and Libya into northern Mali and Niger. These goods included subsidized fuel and manufactured goods, as well as cigarettes, vehicles, and food stuffs.⁸

Malian Berabiche Arabs, who comprise much of the traditional merchant class in Timbuktu, were central to the establishment of these networks, leveraging ethnic, cultural and linguistic ties with concomitant communities in Mauritania and Algeria. Malian Tuaregs, who are traditionally nomadic and share ties with ethnic Tuareg communities in Mauritania, Algeria, Niger and Libya also took on prominent roles as smugglers.

The growth of trafficking economies also provided new opportunities for communities not traditionally associated with commerce. One such example were the Lamhar, or Tilemsi Arabs from Gao.⁹

"It was only in the last 25-30 years that they [Tilemsi Arabs] started commerce," explained a prominent businessman from Gao. "The market in Mali was closed to them, but so much was subsidized and available in Algeria," he continued, "so they used their ethnic connections on the other side of the border and made a lot of money."¹⁰

The trade in licit goods through illicit channels, often reliant on informal agreements to bypass official customs systems, provided the foundation for the development of higher profit enterprises, predominantly the trafficking of arms and narcotics.¹¹

Cocaine first entered these networks in 2002, after South American wholesalers began using West African ports as an intermediate step in reaching consumers in Europe. The consequent rise of organized criminal syndicates in coastal states such as Nigeria and Ghana gained the attention of international bodies and policymakers. As a result, many analyses of organized crime and drug trafficking in West Africa have focused on the structure and sophistication of these groups, and the extent to which they are challenging more "traditional" mafias for primacy in markets outside of Africa.¹²

But while crime syndicates in Nigeria and Ghana are very much a part of the broader tableau of organized crime in Africa, and even Europe and Asia, their role in the actual trafficking of illicit goods through Mali has been overstated. In lieu of analysis focusing specifically on drug trafficking in Mali, an emerging narrative based on anecdotal evidence and high-profile incidents suggests the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and people in Mali is carried out by structured criminal organizations and well-defined cartels.

This narrative is incomplete and ultimately, incorrect.

⁸ Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/13/organized-crime-and-conflict-in-sahel-sahara-region/dtjm>).

⁹ Scheele, 2012

¹⁰ Interview with Gao businessman in Bamako, October 2013.

¹¹ Lacher, 2012

¹² David E. Brown, *The Challenge Of Drug Trafficking To Democratic Governance And Human Security In West Africa*, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2013.

Existing and Emerging Trends

Mali is a transit state. The people who profit from drug trafficking in Mali are, first and foremost, middlemen. Many of the narcotics traffickers who operate there, including the most high profile, are not necessarily plugged into or even knowledgeable of the rest of the supply chain. Their role, which is an important and lucrative one, is to arrange the secure transport of drugs across the vast desert expanse of northern Mali and to hand it off for its onward transit to Europe or elsewhere.¹³

In many ways, the trafficking of illicit goods in northern Mali mirrors the broader economy. A shop owner in Timbuktu who sells plastic goods from China, for example, knows his direct supplier, but probably does not know, let alone have a relationship with, the person who precedes his supplier in the supply chain. Likewise, the manufacturer in China has no existing relationship with, or knowledge of, the eventual retailer in Timbuktu. A sequence of individual business calculations moves goods from industrial China to remote Timbuktu. These principles of modern capitalism in the age of globalization are as relevant in the illicit economy as they are in the licit one.

Though the processes that move goods from one point to another may not be easily discernible and are predicated on loose networks, and in some cases, one-off partnerships, they still constitute a system.

In the case of narcotics trafficking in Mali, the system is incredibly effective at allocating incentives and spreading risk according to the political, economic and security realities of the region.

For the wholesaler in Colombia, the risks of consignment are removed, as his profit margin is not dependent on the product reaching the end consumers in the destination market. His earnings are derived only from his participation in a small portion the system, which for him, often ends once

the narcotics are en route to Africa. From that point, a complex web of interests and factors will determine whether the cocaine ends up in France or Italy, Israel or Japan.

Similarly for traffickers in Mali, profit is derived from moving narcotics just one step closer to consumers. "At every step of the chain, the previous person has already profited," explained a government official from Gao who is familiar with the inner workings of the narcotics trade in Mali. "You buy. You move. You sell," he continued, "There is no profit unless you move it. There is no local market."¹⁴

"You buy. You move. You sell. There is no profit unless you move it. There is no local market."

The flow of drugs through Mali is often described as a "south to north" undertaking. That is, drugs come into ports in coastal hubs such as Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria, travel north through southern Mali, into northern Mali, and eventually into Algeria.

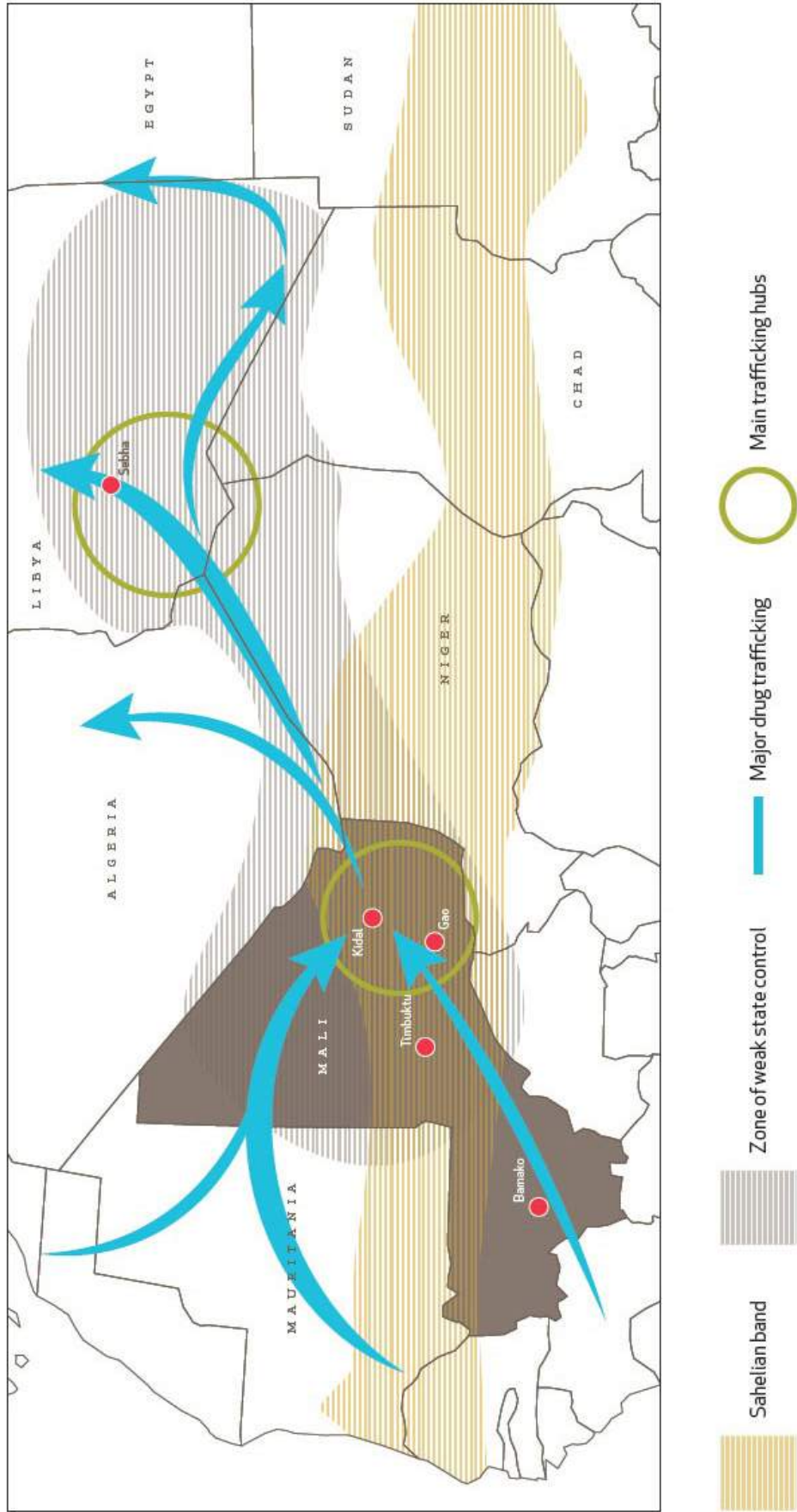
But traffickers, interlocutors and government officials alike maintain that only a small amount of the narcotics trafficked through northern Mali passes through Bamako. Rather, the majority of product enters Mali from Mauritania. Although some amount of cocaine arrives by boat or plane directly to Mauritania and Morocco, the main ports of entry for South American wholesalers to the region are still believed to be Guinea and Guinea-Bissau.¹⁵

¹³ Interviews with alleged traffickers and interlocutors in Bamako, October 2013; Gao, February and March 2013; Timbuktu, March 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with elected official in Bamako, October 2013.

¹⁵ Interview with Malian anti-trafficking official in Bamako, October 2013.

Mali's Place in the overall Sahelian Trafficking Economy



However, once in Guinea or Guinea-Bissau, most of the narcotics that eventually find their way into northern Mali are first trafficked to Mauritania, sometimes via Morocco. From these points, some cocaine is smuggled directly to Europe, while other packages enter well-established trafficking routes that first developed as a means of transporting Moroccan hashish through Mauritania and into Mali.¹⁶

In the case of one emerging route, cocaine passes overland through Guinea and into Kayes, a region in western Mali that shares long, porous borders with Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania. From Kayes, the narcotics cross into Mauritania where they are then rerouted back into northern Mali.¹⁷

No matter what the changing routes, northern Mali, given its governance deficit, remains a key hub for illicit trafficking (see the map on page 6). From there drugs move to the north or north-east. As will be seen, changing conditions in south western Libya since the fall of Qaddafi have seen the development of a new hub there, from where drugs are transported either northwards or to the east.

By 2008-2009, traffickers began developing deeper ties with suppliers who began flying narcotics directly into Mali. In some cases, cocaine was airdropped into pre-arranged locations. In other instances, small aircraft or "bush planes" would land on impromptu airfields. Interlocutors from Europe, North Africa, and coastal West African hubs such as Nigeria, Guinea and Senegal are believed to have been involved in many of these instances.¹⁸

This practice garnered international attention in November 2009, when the charred remains

of a Boeing 727 were discovered outside the town of Tarkint, in the region of Gao. Subsequent investigations found that the plane, since dubbed "Air Cocaine," was registered in Guinea-Bissau and took off from Venezuela carrying as much as 11 tons of cocaine.¹⁹

In the case of "Air Cocaine," the state prosecutor suggested that the cocaine on board was later smuggled overland to Morocco by a network of French, Spanish, Malian, Senegalese and Moroccan nationals. But as researcher Wolfram Lacher notes, despite the spectacular nature of the incident, "there is no evidence that a transaction of this magnitude was anything more than a one-off incident for northern Mali."²⁰

Once narcotics have entered northern Mali, the vast majority of the product begins a west to east migration across the desert in small convoys of Toyota 4x4s.

The convoys, which are almost always armed, carry spare parts, extra fuel and provisions. Most of the vehicles have been modified to have extra tank capacity. Thanks to the ubiquity of GPS equipment and satellite phones, remote fuel depots now dot the Sahara, affording traffickers an unprecedented diversity of routes, the capability to meet in remote locations, and an ability to avoid towns and cities altogether.²¹

With the right vehicle, much of the terrain is easily traversable. And though the fabled navigational acumen of Tuareg guides is no longer essential, the journey is still a dangerous one, requiring planning, know-how and local knowledge.²² Reconnaissance vehicles often travel ahead of

¹⁶ Interview with Malian anti-trafficking official in Bamako, October 2013.

¹⁷ Interview with European diplomat in Bamako, October 2013. Confirmed by several drivers, alleged traffickers, interview in Bamako, October 2013.

¹⁸ Interview with Malian anti-trafficking official in Bamako, October 2013. Interviews in Bamako, 2013. Interview with West African diplomat in Bamako, October 2013.

¹⁹ For more, see S. Daniel, AQMI: L'industrie de l'envèment, Daniel S. AQMI: L'industrie de l'enlèvement. Paris: Fayard, 2012.

²⁰ Lacher, 2012

²¹ Interview with elected official from northern Mali in Bamako, October 2013. Interviews with drivers for transport companies in Timbuktu, March 2013. Interview with alleged trafficker in Gao, March 2013.

²² Interview with drivers based in Kidal. Bamako, October 2013.

the rest of the convoy, alerting their associates of possible trouble, or negotiating passage through areas that may be controlled by rival groups.²³ The networks and contacts required to navigate checkpoints, borders and community hubs are invaluable to the operation.

Another widely used method is to smuggle narcotics into well-known commercial hubs such as Gao, where they can then be loaded into trucks and hidden within larger quantities of licit goods.²⁴

While traffickers need not rely on any specific paths or tracks, two broad flows through northern Mali generally describe the most frequently used routes, which several interlocutors have described as the “short trajectory” and the “long trajectory.”²⁵

The “short trajectory,” which has variants that pass through the region of Timbuktu and the region of Kidal, ends in Algeria, where Malian traffickers link with well-established Algerian criminal networks. Although the “short trajectory” is less circuitous than other alternatives, it is only a viable option for certain well-connected traffickers. As one interlocutor from Kidal confided, “Algeria is complicated.”²⁶

Many major Algerian crime syndicates are structured similarly to their counterparts in Europe, have direct links to Spain, Italy and France, and allegedly benefit from significant ties with Algerian military and intelligence services. While the trafficking environment in southern Algeria closely resembles those of northern Mali, northern Niger, and southern Libya, moving product to coastal ports is a riskier undertaking, requiring established contacts in advance.²⁷

As a result, many of the narcotics smuggled into southern Algeria by Malian traffickers continue onward to northern Niger, as part of the “long trajectory.”²⁸

The “long trajectory” which is more feasible for low-level and mid-level traffickers as well as “freelancers,” passes through northern Mali into northern Niger (sometimes via southern Algeria), Chad, and Sudan, finally ending in Egypt. As one alleged trafficker explained, all these states boast the requisite “infrastructure” for trafficking to thrive — weak states, vast ungoverned swaths of territory, open borders, complicit governments, and established networks.²⁹

In some cases, Malian traffickers will sell their packages upon arriving in Niger. In other instances, the Chadian border is the “point of sale.” On rare occasions, the same caravan will continue all the way through Sudan until the Egyptian border.³⁰

Egypt emerged as a destination for Saharan traffickers for several reasons. Its domestic market, combined with its proximity to other consumer markets such as Israel and Lebanon means that the “mark up” can be considerably higher than other transit states, where domestic demand for cocaine, while growing, remains extremely limited.³¹ More importantly, Egypt is an access point to several criminal networks trafficking licit and illicit goods to Europe, the greater Middle East and Asia.

Several traffickers, some of whom had made the trip as recently as July and August, confirmed that the “long trajectory” has been diverted directly to southern Libya with the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Interview with government officials and anti-trafficking agents in Bamako, October 2013.

²⁵ Interviews with alleged traffickers and interlocutors in Bamako, October 2013; Timbuktu, March 2013; Gao, January 2013.

²⁶ Interview with interlocutor from Kidal in Bamako, October 2013.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Interview with interlocutor from Kidal in Bamako, October 2013.

²⁹ Interview with alleged trafficker in Bamako, October 2013.

³⁰ Interviews with several drivers who have trafficked goods to Libya, Niger and Chad. Bamako, October 2013; Gao, March 2013.

³¹ Interview with European diplomat in Bamako, October 2013. Interview with African diplomat in Bamako, October 2013.

“Chad, Sudan and Egypt have been abandoned because Libya is wide open,” explained a northern Malian official with trafficking contacts in Kidal and Gao. “On the Niger-Libya border, arms, drugs... everything goes through there. There is no state in southern Libya, there is no state in northern Niger, and there is no state in northern Mali,” he continued. “If you know what you are doing, you can do whatever you want.”³²

“There is no state in southern Libya, there is no state in northern Niger, and there is no state in northern Mali. If you know what you are doing, you can do whatever you want.”

As of September, anywhere from 7-30 convoys were crossing the Niger-Libya border daily at the “Salvador pass,” a remote but oft-used transit point cum smuggling hub.³³ Interviews conducted in southern Libya at different points during 2013 confirm a shift of illicit flows and their concentration onto the “Libyan highway” with important implications for state consolidation there.³⁴

At a macro-level, the collapse of the Malian state and subsequent Islamist takeover in the spring of 2012 had a negligible impact on illicit trafficking in northern Mali. According to numerous sources, illicit trafficking continued once existing economic and security arrangements were quickly re-calibrated to northern Mali’s new political context.³⁵

As will be explored in more detail in the next section, security providers and interlocutors who

were formerly embedded within state structures either changed affiliations or were replaced by others fulfilling the same role. Many local elites and prominent businessmen associated with the illicit economy who had previously bought off or co-opted government and military officials simply forged similar agreements with the mosaic of armed groups that nominally controlled the territory. Northern Mali was an “open zone.”³⁶

Even the ongoing French-led military intervention, Operation Serval, and the accompanying UN Peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA have had relatively little impact on illicit trafficking.³⁷ “There have been some small changes in tactics,” explained one source based in Timbuktu. “No one is using large convoys anymore, because of aerial surveillance,” he continued, “but most of northern Mali is still wide open.”³⁸

Neither Operation Serval nor MINUSMA consider counter-trafficking a priority. “Our priority is counterterrorism. When we stop a car, we are looking for weapons and explosives. Other than that, we let them go,” explained a French security source. “It [Northern Mali] is the size of Germany, it’s impossible to search everyone who is passing through. That is the reality.”³⁹

The fact that illicit trafficking continued, largely unabated, amid seismic shifts in political and security arrangements in northern Mali, further underscores the adaptability and flexibility of the networks involved, and further highlights the responsiveness of the broader system in allocating incentives and spreading risk according to realities on the ground.

“In the last year alone,” explained a Tuareg interlocutor from Kidal, “there are people who have changed from Malian military, to separatist rebel, to jihadist, to French ally, all while being narco-traffickers.”⁴⁰

³² Interview with Malian official in Bamako, October 2013.

³³ Interview with government official from northern Mali in Bamako, October 2013.

³⁴ See Mark Shaw and Fiona Mangan, *Profits and Losses: Illicit economies and emerging patterns of organised crime as obstacles to peace and state consolidation in Libya*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013.

³⁵ Interviews with elected officials, alleged traffickers, interlocutors in Bamako, October 2013; Timbuktu, March 2013; Gao, February and March 2013.

³⁶ As described by interview with alleged trafficker and interlocutor in Bamako, October 2013.

³⁷ Interviews with elected officials, alleged traffickers, interlocutors in Bamako, October 2013; Timbuktu, March 2013; Gao, February and March 2013.

³⁸ Interview with prominent businessman from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013.

³⁹ Interview with Western diplomat in Bamako, October 2013.

⁴⁰ Interview with businessman from Kidal in Bamako, October 2013.

IV. Impact of Illicit Trafficking in Mali

Narcotics from South America were first introduced into well-established Malian trafficking networks in the early 2000s. These networks were primarily run by Arab businessman and Tuareg smugglers, and grew out of the trafficking of licit and illicit goods from Libya, Algeria and Mauritania into northern Mali.

Many communities in northern Mali, notably Arabs and Tuaregs, are organized along tribal and clan structures that have traditionally designated certain groups as “vassals” or “subservient” to more “noble,” “free,” or “dominant” groups. Though these structures are not codified into Malian law, they do, in many ways, form the basis of informal economic, political and security arrangements and account for underlying attitudes and animosities between various groups in northern Mali.

The influx of cash that came with trafficking higher profit goods - such as cocaine, hashish, and arms - had a profound impact on traditional balances of power in northern Mali. Unprecedented profits altered preexisting political and security arrangements and exacerbated tensions both within and across groups.

Northern Malians say they first began to notice the economic impact of the drug trafficking in 2004 and 2005, when previously unknown traffickers and businessman suddenly seemed flush with cash. The trafficking of narcotics at this time was widely discussed, according to northern Malian sources, but the tremendous scale of profits associated with the trade were not yet obvious. By 2006, however, young Arabs and Tuaregs from traditionally poor communities began to engage in high-cost activities, such as starting transport companies, purchasing new fleets of vehicles, and buying expensive property and large quantities of livestock.⁴¹

The influx of cash distorted local markets and transformed inter-communal relationships. “There was one trafficker in 2006 who decided to launder his money through livestock,” recounts an elected local official in Gao, “he bought almost all of the cattle in one rural market in Gao, and it completely messed up the economic ecosystem between the Songhai [agriculturalists] and Fulani [herders] in that community.”⁴²

Increased profits and the emergence of new economic opportunities for previously marginalized groups fueled rivalries between traditionally “dominant” clans and tribes and their economically ascendant “vassal” counterparts. Trafficking rivalries pitted Ifoghas Tuaregs, Idnan Tuaregs, and Kounta Arabs against Berabiche Arabs who had sided with the traditionally “vassal” Tilemsi Arabs and Imghad Tuaregs.

A new Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali began in May 2006, when Col. Hassan Ag Fagaga, a former Tuareg rebel who had since been integrated into the army, and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga another Tuareg rebel who had received military training in Libya during the 1980s, attacked army posts in Menaka and Kidal. Ag Fagaga and Ag Bahanga demanded that the Malian government honor the haphazardly implemented 1996 peace agreement that ended a previous Tuareg rebellion.⁴³

The rebellion at first appeared to be a limited affair and was widely believed to be merely another iteration of Tuareg uprisings that date back to the 1960s. The 2006 rebellion, however, would prove to be a watershed moment in Mali’s history, deepening domestic rivalries and bringing new geopolitical realities to the fore.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Interview with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013; interview with community leader in Gao, March 2013

⁴² Interview with community leader in Gao, March 2013.

⁴³ See Alex Thurston and Andrew Lebovich, A Handbook on Mali’s 2012-2013 Crisis, Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought, Working Paper Series. Working Paper No.13-001, September 2, 2013, 24-27

⁴⁴ Ibid.

In July of 2006, the Malian government and Tuareg representatives signed the Algerian-mediated "Algiers Accord," which promised to renew some of the provisions of the 1996 agreement. One such provision was the withdrawal of state security forces from key locations in northern Mali and the creation of local security units, which would be known as Saharan Security Units.⁴⁵

Implementation of the agreement stalled, and though Ag Fagaga and Ag Bahanga belong to the broader Ifoghas Tuareg confederation, the spoils of the agreement disproportionately benefitted Kidal-based Ifoghas leadership.⁴⁶ Ag Fagaga and Ag Bahanga soon defected in early 2007, and the conflict quickly escalated as rebel groups fragmented.⁴⁷

A panoply of rebel groups and armed gunmen, notably those led by Ag Bahanga, began attacking Arab smuggling convoys in northern Mali. In response, Arab businessmen in Timbuktu and Ber began funding and establishing militias to protect their trafficking interests.

Desperate to keep the north under control, Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré - known by his initials, ATT - outsourced the securing of northern Mali to various actors whose security interests aligned with those of the state.

As a result, government supported Berabiche and Tilemsi Arab militias, as well as Imghad Tuareg militias - some of these militias coalesced into irregular army units led by Malian military officers such as Mohamed Abderahmane Ould Meydou, a Tilemsi Arab; Lamana Ould Bou, a Berabiche Arab; and El Hadj Ag Gamou, an Imghad Tuareg - battled against Ifoghas and Idnan Tuareg rebels, who were allied with the Kounta

Arab militias. From 2007 onward, the Malian state and various northern elites with trafficking interests were allied in a battle against anti-state Tuareg rebel groups and their own trafficking interests.

By 2008, illicit trafficking, notably narco-trafficking, had become deeply enmeshed with state security and political structures and, in the words of one elected official from Timbuktu, "the door had been blown wide open."⁴⁸ The hollowing out of Mali's fledgling democracy was well under way, with illicit money directly influencing local elections, particularly in the region of Gao.

"For narco-traffickers, the system under ATT, right up until the end, was perfect," said one prominent businessman in the city of Gao who is believed to have significant trafficking interests.⁴⁹

Local elites laundered money through undertakings they could bill as development projects, building wells and paving roads, as well as purchasing property and investing in for-profit infrastructure projects.⁵⁰ Illicit money was also scrubbed in Bamako via the purchase of property and the construction of high-end houses in neighborhoods such as ACI 2000 and Cité du Niger, where rows of mansions are not uncommon.⁵¹

A section of town on the outskirts of Gao, northern Mali's largest city, boasted newly constructed opulent villas. Though many of the owners of these houses were established businessmen, many of whom made the bulk of their fortune in trafficking fuel and cigarettes, the neighborhood was subsequently nicknamed "Cocainebougou" - or "Cocaine-ville" - by domestic media.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013.

⁴⁹ Interview with prominent Gao businessman in Bamako, October 2013.

⁵⁰ Interview with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013. Interviews with businessman and alleged traffickers in Gao, February 2013.

⁵¹ Interview with government officials in Bamako, October 2013.

Significant amounts of money were also pushed abroad, namely to Nouakchott, Niamey, Ouagadougou, Tamanrasset, Abidjan and Dakar. “Dakar [Senegal] is more into drugs than Mali,” claimed an elected official from Timbuktu, “but no one talks about Dakar because they keep it discrete. There are so many legitimate ways you can clean your money there.”⁵²

“Drugs are just the tip,” said one prominent community member from Gao with significant ties to Kidal. “The illicit economy is the issue, not the drugs,” he continued, “But starting in 2009, narco-trafficking was a mentality, and that mentality changed the way everyone interacted with each other.”⁵³

“Narco-trafficking was a mentality, and that mentality changed the way that everyone interacted with each other.”

Outside of the cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, smaller towns and locations throughout northern Mali became key smuggling nodes, each with their own irregular forces or militias that were backed by the business and trafficking interests of local elites. These hubs included Bou Djebeha, Lere, and Ber, in the region of Timbuktu; Menaka, Tarkint, Almoustrat, and Bourem in the region of Gao; and Anefis, In Khalil, Tinzaouaten, Aguelhoc, Tessalit, Talahandak, Boghassa, Intadjedit and Tin-Essako in the region of Kidal.⁵⁴

Violent clashes related to narcotics trafficking took place from 2007 onward. Perhaps the most high profile incident took place in 2010, when a group of Ifoghas Tuareg and Kounta Arabs seized a large

cocaine shipment being transported by Tilemsi Arabs and Imghads Tuareg smugglers. Tilemsi Arabs responded by kidnapping the leader of the Kounta Arabs in the region of Gao.⁵⁵

Government officials up to the highest levels were not only complicit, but began to intervene on behalf of traffickers on whom they were reliant, having ostensibly outsourced state security functions. The political protection allowed for all manner of high-profile incidents, including the infamous “Air Cocaine” affair.

“The state security services interfered with the investigations for Air Cocaine,” said one official close to the investigation. “The president intervened directly to make sure that investigation was stalled,” he continued, “The army - on behalf of powerful interests - regularly blocks police investigations.”⁵⁶ Several Malian security sources, including those who were involved with parts of the investigation, have provided similar accounts.

While “Air Cocaine” is widely cited as evidence of the “lawlessness” that defined northern Mali during this period, it was the proliferation of lower profile incidents, in which the rule of law was bypassed in favor of personal connections with ATT, that eroded state legitimacy at the local level.⁵⁷

“Decentralization provided cover for narco-traffickers who could buy all the local offices,” explained a prominent Arab from Timbuktu, “Decentralization destabilized traditional structures, and legitimized personalized politics.”

“The majority of Malians in the south say, ‘that’s just the way it is in the north,’” he continued, but “the situation in the north was created by politics in the south, by a lack of comprehension... by failing to think things through.”

⁵² Interview with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013.

⁵³ Interview with community leader from Kidal in Bamako, October 2013.

⁵⁴ These are just some of the key locations. There are many more.

⁵⁵ Lacher, 2012.

⁵⁶ Interview with Malian government official in Bamako, October 2013.

⁵⁷ Interview with former Mali government official in Bamako, October 2013. Interviews with community leaders in Gao February/March 2013.

“Traffickers used their influence to persuade the government to create new fractions [administrative units in the north for nomadic communities] and to create Taoudenien for them,” he asserted, alluding to an alleged agreement with ATT to create a new administrative region in northern Mali before leaving office.⁵⁸

While the roots of illicit trafficking can be traced to the 1970s, and the intensity of rivalries can be attributed to the introduction of high-profit goods, one cannot adequately understand the impact of organized crime on governance in Mali without examining the role kidnapping for ransom played in advancing state complicity with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM.

“The first taste of illicit money was 2003, when they paid for the first hostages. That is when everyone developed a taste for illicit money.”

AQIM began operating in northern Mali in 2003, and at the time was mostly comprised of Algerian nationals. Formerly the Group Salafist for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the group is a legacy of the 1992-2000 Algerian Civil war, but rebranded itself in late 2006, officially pledging its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. AQIM is thought to have amassed tens of millions of dollars, perhaps more, through kidnapping ransoms and to a lesser extent, illicit trafficking.

“We can talk about the relationships that ATT started building with traffickers in 2006 and 2007,” said a well-connected community leader in Timbuktu, “but the first taste of illicit money was 2003, when they paid for the hostages,” he continued, “that is when everyone developed a taste for illicit money.”⁵⁹

Prior to becoming AQIM, the group burst onto the international scene with the kidnapping of 32 European tourists from southern Algeria in 2003. The Malian government and its European counterparts relied on several northern Malian intermediaries to negotiate ransoms, including Iyad Ag Ghali - a veteran Tuareg rebel and chameleon-like figure who would go on to serve as a Malian diplomat, only to later become the leader of AQIM ally Ansar Dine in 2011 - and Baba Ould Cheikh, the mayor of Tarkint, in the Gao region, who is an alleged-drug trafficker accused of having connections with AQIM.

As would become standard practice over the ensuing decade, multi-million dollar ransoms were paid by European governments to liberate their hostages, a cut of which went to intermediaries and their allies in government.⁶⁰

Iyad Ag Ghali and Baba Ould Cheikh continued to act as negotiators and facilitators. Moustafa Limam Chafi, a Mauritanian national and advisor to Burkinabé President Blaise Compaoré, became a fixture in regional hostage negotiations. Ibrahim Ag Mohammed Assaleh, an elected government official who hails from Bourem and would later become a leading figure in the Tuareg rebellion in 2011, also emerged as a key interlocutor.

By 2009, Mali’s military had become infamous amongst its allies for its inability to maintain operational security, which until that point

⁵⁸ Interview with Arab businessman/community leader from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lacher, 2012.

had largely been attributed to infiltration and incompetence. But accusations of complicity came to a head in September 2010 when the Mauritanian army suffered heavy casualties at the hands of AQIM during an incursion into Malian territory.⁶¹

ATT's style of governance, which privileged triangulation over institutions, had undermined every existing institution to the point of collapse.

"ATT was not a natural politician," said one interlocutor from Gao, who ATT regularly consulted on security matters during this time. "He thought he knew everything and he could manage everything. He reached his own conclusions, and that was that," he continued. "And he spoke in a language that certain Western governments loved, especially the United States. He had them eating out of his hand."

"[ATT] did not delegate, or invest in good people. He didn't listen to competent people who understood the situation," the same source continued, "He always talked to the Tuareg leaders directly, and found temporary solutions at his level. But he ignored the lower levels."

According to this source, ATT's biggest mistake was that he did not realize the extent to which traditional structures in northern Mali had been completely undermined by the influx of illicit cash and the "mafia culture" that came with it. Below the Arab and Tuareg notables was a separate strata of "elite"; a younger generation who had acquired their status through trafficking and who had "different morals and different ways of doing business."⁶²

An elected official from Timbuktu region broadly agreed with this assessment. "Either they tricked him, or he was naive," he explained. "ATT thought he was buying loyalty with all the deals he was cutting," he continued, "he thought they were all in the same boat, but it was not like that."⁶³

It is within this context that an insurgency led by the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an ethnic Tuareg movement with the stated goal of establishing an independent state in the north called Azawad, swept across northern Mali in March of 2012 with its ally of convenience, a Tuareg-led Islamist group called Ansar Dine.

Emboldened by an influx of equipment, weaponry and experienced Tuareg fighters from post-Qaddafi Libya, the MNLA and Ansar Dine achieved a string of surprising military victories in Mali's remote north between January and March.

On March 22, 2012, mid-ranking military officers who were unhappy with ATT's handling of the rebellion led a successful coup d'état in Bamako. The ensuing political power vacuum provided the MNLA and other rebel groups with the opportunity to surge ahead while the southern Mali was preoccupied reshuffling its political elite.

Rebel groups captured the three northern capitals of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu in a matter of days. Less than two weeks after the coup, the Malian military conceded the north in its entirety, leaving weapons, equipment and vehicles behind in a "tactical retreat."

Shortly after declaring the independent state of Azawad, the MNLA was quickly outmaneuvered and outgunned by an assortment of armed Islamist groups, who drove them out of all major cities and towns in northern Mali.

In the following months, northern Mali came under the control of a web of jihadist groups. AQIM, and to a lesser extent Ansar Dine, controlled Timbuktu. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, an AQIM offshoot known locally as "Mujao," came to control Gao. Ansar Dine, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, controlled most of the region of Kidal.

⁶¹ Interview with US military source, October 2012. See Lacher, 2012.

⁶² Interview with interlocutor/alleged trafficker from Gao in Bamako, October 2013.

⁶³ Interview with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013.

As previously discussed, the Islamist occupation had a negligible impact on the flow of illicit goods through northern Mali. Part of this continuity can be attributed to the fluidity of relationships and players that has allowed illicit trafficking to thrive in the region. Some examples of the resiliency of traffickers at the local level help demonstrate how, despite apparently enormous shocks to the system, illicit flows continued.

In the city of Gao, several “notables” - a term northern Malians use to describe people of stature, encompassing religious figures, community elders, and prominent businessman - sought to protect their business interests by establishing arrangements with Mujao. Among these notables were Tilemsi Arabs and Songrai businessmen with ties to illicit trafficking.

Several of the Gao notables had pre-existing relationships - which predated the advent of Mujao - with members of Mujao’s leadership, some of whom were well known Arab narco-traffickers.⁶⁴ Mujao’s rank and file, however, was largely comprised of local recruits, predominantly ethnic Songrai and ethnic Fulani from towns and villages outside of the city.⁶⁵

Several sources close to the events confirmed that traffickers were able to establish working relationships with the elements of Mujao who were narco-traffickers first, ideologues second, if at all. Traffickers from Gao region agreed to pay Mujao tribute in exchange for protection, passage of convoys through areas held by Mujao, and assistance facilitating transit through areas held by AQIM and Ansar Dine.⁶⁶

Since its inception, Mujao’s agenda has baffled outside observers, who are unable to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies in its stated goals,

its diverse membership, and its actions. However, it is this ideological opacity that has allowed the organization to forge strategic relationships with drug traffickers and religious zealots, thriving as both a criminal enterprise and a jihadist organization in a symbiotic and self-sustaining manner.

Negotiations between traffickers in Timbuktu and AQIM played out quite differently. Berabiche Arab traffickers sought to protect their business interests by forming a local militia called the National Front for the Liberation of Azawad, (FNLA). Initial reports suggested that the FNLA sought to ally itself with AQIM in order to bar the MNLA from entering Timbuktu. But not long after arriving, AQIM expelled the FNLA from the city.⁶⁷

Due to this strategic defeat, and disagreements within the Berabiche Arab community, the FNLA soon dissolved, re-emerging as the Arab Movement of Azawad, or MAA. For most of the Islamist occupation of northern Mali, the MAA sat on the sidelines. Some sources suggested that Berabiche Arab traffickers resumed their operations from Mauritania. Others said narco-traffickers who were affiliated with AQIM quickly filled the void. Both scenarios are plausible, and the veracity of one does not preclude the other. Interviews in Mauritania with government security officials certainly expressed similar concerns.⁶⁸

As previously discussed, several sources confirmed that northern Mali during the Islamist occupation was still, by and large, an ungoverned space. Prior to the country’s collapse, much of northern Mali, specifically Kidal, was controlled by an increasingly complex patchwork of militias who sought to collect rents and levy taxes on goods passing through their territory. Many of these armed gunmen would join the rebellion in 2012, joining either the MNLA or

⁶⁴ Interviews community leaders from Gao in Bamako, October 2013; Gao, February/March 2013.

⁶⁵ For more, See Peter Tinti, “The Jihadi from the Block,” Foreign Policy, 19 March 2013.

⁶⁶ Interviews with Gao community leaders in Bamako, October 2013; Gao, February/March 2013.

⁶⁷ See Eric Wulf and Farley Mesko, Guide to a Post-Conflict Mali, C4ADS, August 2013, 48.

⁶⁸ Interviews with senior security officials in Nouakchott, November 2013

Ansar Dine. Prominent traffickers in both groups were able to continue their activities. By the time the MNLA was pushed out of almost all of the major towns and cities in northern Mali in June 2012, many of its rank and file joined Ansar Dine. Others retreated to various border towns with the MNLA.

Just as illicit flows continued across northern Mali after a brief reshuffling caused by the rebellion and subsequent Islamist occupation, the French intervention, according to sources on the ground, has done little to stem the flow of illicit trafficking.

In Gao, for example, the same alleged narco-traffickers have remained largely in place at every phase of the crisis. Residents of Gao have accused some of these individuals of colluding with, if not outright funding Mujao. Among these are Mohamed Ould Mataly, a Tilemsi Arab from Bourem, and Ali Bady Maiga, a Songhai businessman from Gao who funded ethnic Songhai self-defense militias in the past. Both men deny the accusations.⁶⁹

In Kidal, the continuity is less direct but no less substantial. A significant portion of the traditional Ifoghas leadership in Kidal either pledged their allegiance to Ansar Dine from the outset of the rebellion, or joined Ansar Dine once the MNLA had been pushed out of northern Mali's major towns and cities, facilitating their ongoing ability to conduct business, licit or otherwise. With the French intervention to drive Islamist forces out of northern Mali, several prominent Ifoghas and Idnan Tuaregs who were previously affiliated with Ansar Dine quickly formed the Islamic Movement for Azawad (MIA), and denounced AQIM and Mujao.

The formation of the MIA was considered by outside analysts as an attempt by the Tuareg notables who had cast their lot with Iyad Ag Ghaly to break with the extremist elements within Ansar Dine, and

offer a more palatable version of the organization so as to have a seat at the future negotiating table (and to avoid being on the receiving end of French military wrath). In May, the MIA merged with another organization to form what is now the High Council for Unity in Azawad (HCUA). In February 2013, the MNLA reentered the city of Kidal under the auspices of the French military, and the MNLA and HCUA have since agreed to participate in future negotiations with the Malian government as a joint delegation.

From February to May 2013, several clashes took place between gunmen linked to the Malian Arab MAA and Tuaregs associated with the MNLA in Ber and In Khalil, two key trafficking hubs formerly controlled by Berabiche militias before the rebellion. Several consistent accounts suggested that these skirmishes were trafficking related.⁷⁰

Even at the political level, there are indications that some of the same political arrangements that compromised the state and mixed politics with trafficking interests might be taking shape.

Ould Mataly successfully ran for a seat in the national assembly as a candidate for RPM, the party of newly elected Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Ahmada Ag Bibi, who represented Ansar Dine during meeting in Algeria last year, as well as Mohamad Ag Intalla, a senior MNLA official who later went on to form the High Council for Unity in Azawad (HCUA) were also elected as RPM candidates.

These developments should give pause to those who claim that the forced expulsion of groups like AQIM and Mujao means Mali has "turned the page" with regards to trafficking and organized crime. In fact, one of the more common refrains among Malians who are familiar with trafficking networks and the drug trade in northern Mali is "nothing has changed."

⁶⁹ Interviews with community leaders from Gao in Bamako, October 2013; Gao March 2013.

⁷⁰ Interviews with elected official from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013. Interview with community leader from Timbuktu in Bamako, October 2013. Interview with Western diplomat in Bamako, 2013.

Illicit trafficking and organized crime were integral to the erosion and eventual collapse of the Malian state. Despite an adroitly executed French intervention to drive Islamist forces from their strongholds, and successful, if rushed, Presidential elections, illicit trafficking and organized crime still pose a huge impediment to peace building, state consolidation and development in Mali.

The enduring challenges can be considered under four main categories: perception, political will, capacity, and culture.

The perception that illicit trafficking and organized crime are only important in terms of their relationship to global terrorism remains a serious roadblock to rebuilding the state and maintaining peace in Mali. The overall dynamics of trafficking networks in Mali are not well understood beyond generalities, and their impact on state institutions is largely absent from both the domestic and the international discourse.

While the majority of illicit trafficking and organized crime is carried out at the margins of Malian society, its impact goes right to the heart of prevailing governance and security challenges in Mali. Yet curiously, tackling these issues has not been made a priority at any level of Malian government, nor by the international community. On the rare occasions that illicit trafficking and organized crime are discussed by international policymakers, they are couched within vague and largely inaccurate frameworks of “narco-terrorism” or “narco-jihadism.”

Beyond perception, a lack of political will to take on illicit trafficking and organized crime hinders Mali’s progress. To date, there has been little evidence to suggest that the new Malian government is committed to fighting illicit trafficking and organized crime, or intends devote the resources necessary to address these issues.⁷¹

Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that the new Malian government has any significant domestic political incentives to do so. For all the deleterious effects that narco-trafficking and organized crime have had on northern Mali, the need to counter them is noticeably absent from the national political discourse. To the extent that political parties even have discernible platforms, none of them have made combatting illicit trafficking and organized crime a part of their campaign agenda.

Furthermore, weak state institutions mean that even with sufficient motivation, Mali simply does not have the capacity to fight illicit trafficking and organized crime. “Do they have the means to wage this battle? The answer is ‘No.’ That is very clear,” explained a European diplomat. “They don’t have the training or the equipment.”

In order to conduct effective counter-trafficking operations, the Malian authorities would have to have the capability to listen in on phone lines or conduct clandestine operations, said several sources. But a functioning anti-trafficking regime, with the ability to gather intelligence and respond rapidly, is hard to imagine when the current baseline is regional bureaus that rarely have their own vehicles and often go days without electricity.⁷²

However, these problems are self-reinforcing. Lack of political will - whether it stems from complicity or failure to grasp the extent of the problem - ultimately undermines domestic capacity.

“There can only be two explanations as to why we don’t have the equipment or training” claimed an officer in Bamako who is part of a team tasked with countering drug-trafficking in Mali. The government does not care, or the government does not want us to do our job.”⁷³

⁷¹ Interviews with government officials and western diplomats in Bamako, October 2013.

⁷² Interview with Western diplomat in Bamako, October 2013. Interview with Malian anti-trafficking official in Bamako, October 2013.

⁷³ Interview with Malian anti-trafficking officer in Bamako, October 2013.

Several sources highlight this paradox as the central challenge to building capacity in the current Malian context. That is, the Malian state is too weak to meaningfully wage a battle against illicit trafficking, and the continued corrupting incentives presented by illicit trafficking further enfeeble the state.

Thus, in addition to political will, these sources suggest that the key to developing capacity will be to strengthen central Malian institutions before addressing those that deal most directly with illegal trafficking. These fundamental institutions represent the prerequisite scaffolding upon which wider state structures can be built, including those necessary to combat the drug trade.

The final, and perhaps the most difficult challenge to countering trafficking and organized crime in Mali is a deeply embedded culture of corruption and impunity, resulting from a decade of mismanagement, personalized politics, and crass opportunism.

“Corruption here [Mali] is incredible,” asserted one European diplomat who has worked on anti-trafficking projects in several African and Eastern European countries. “You pay someone, and that is it. No questions. No pretending it is something else.”⁷⁴

Northern Malians have begun to fear that this pervasive political corruption, compounded with other harmful impacts of trafficking and crime, has torn the social fabric that holds their societies together.

“We have become a mafia culture,” said one notable from Kidal. “Everyone wants to be a part of it. Every youth in our society now wants to be part of the black economy,” he continued, “it makes development impossible.”

“We have become a mafia culture – everyone wants to be part of it.”

“The lifestyle is now normalized,” added another notable from Timbuktu. “We have to convince a new generation that this is not the default setting.”⁷⁵

Given these challenges, the best that Mali and the international community can hope to achieve over the short term is to mitigate the most harmful impacts of illicit trafficking and organized crime on governance and security in Mali. Over the longer term, they will need to set about undertaking the hard work required to build institutions that are resilient to their effects.

⁷⁴ Interview with Western diplomat in Bamako, October 2013.

⁷⁵ Interview with community leader from Kidal in Bamako, October 2013.

V. Conclusion: Future responses

What lessons can be learned from charting the evolution of illicit trafficking in Mali?

The growth of criminal networks and their influence across all the countries in the Sahel region is a story that is symbiotic with the narrative around governance, democratization and decentralization. Yet a clear finding is the extent to which it remains broadly absent from current debates around peace building and state consolidation, both nationally and internationally.

The topic of illicit trafficking and organized crime is generally relegated to an ancillary issue to the discourse on countering global terrorism, or it is couched within concerns of volumes of cocaine flowing to Europe. These tendencies underplay the manner in which trafficking affects more nebulous concepts, such as good governance and state capacity. For these reasons, a more nuanced approach is necessary.

The international community will need to recognize the extent to which illicit trafficking and organized crime influences broader security and governance issues. And with this change should come the recognition that many of the people the international community consider partners in the quest to rebuild Mali - politicians, traditional leaders, the military - are themselves implicated or complicit in illicit trafficking and organized crime.

In order to tackle corruption, government officials and state institutions will have to be held accountable by their own people as well as by aid donors. Both types of accountability are essential to countering illicit trafficking and organized crime. Without this, governance will always be weak, development assistance diverted, and genuine efforts to address the causes of human security undermined. Options do exist, and have been tried, to build both the political momentum and independent structures to counter high-level and systemic corruption and impunity, and these need to be brought front and center into debates for the new government.

Similarly, in what is fundamentally a transit state within a broader sub-regional economy, a focus on strategies of DDR and cantonment are unlikely to take root in

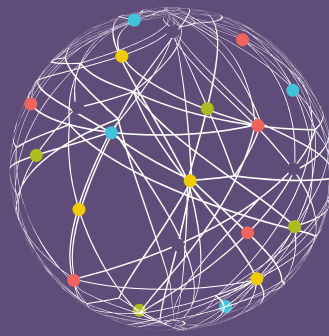
communities where the presence of arms and the requirement for mobility are basic livelihood strategies. Furthermore, with proximate illicit flows of considerable value transiting the regions, and with loose network structures in operation facilitating the trade, disarming one group only serves to advantage others. Destabilizing established power balances in this way may result in greater violence and vulnerability as new hierarchies and patterns of control are re-established.

It is for this reason that those who seek to make a long term difference in Mali must gain a better understanding of the illicit economy and its dynamics at a community level. There is a nuanced political economy at play and vested interests at stake. The race to elections – both central and provincial – may well have reinforced those powerbrokers who have easy access to illicit funds, and who will be in a position to shape the future political and (illicit) economic order.

Strengthening the capacity of state institutions to combat organized crime and controlling borders is necessary, but given the vast expanse of borders under question, to do so comprehensively is unlikely to be effective on its own. A more nuanced and broader community based approach is required that seeks to reverse the incentive structure that now makes illicit trafficking such an attractive economic option. That requires not only strengthening governance but also sensitizing communities to the harms of illicit trafficking and trade, building civil society capacity to report and advocate against criminal groups, and ensuring viable alternative livelihoods.

As with before the current crisis in Mali, it is critical that external partners who now have much invested do not see, to again quote a leading Malian journalist, only “what they want to see”⁷⁶: that is, a simple trajectory of progress towards democracy and sustainable development supported by the international community, when in reality the incentives provided by the illicit economy disrupt and distort processes of governance. A failure to address these realities would all but ensure that when the international community reduces its presence and interest in Mali, the same incentives that drove the most recent crisis will reassert themselves within a new crisis of governance.

⁷⁶ Interview with newspaper editor, Bamako, October 2013



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