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ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND ARMED CONFLICT

Ten dynamics that drive instability

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASWJ   Ahlu-Sunna Wa-Jama'a

ELN   Ejército de Liberación Nacional

EPL   Ejército Popular de Liberación

FACT   Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad

FARC   Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FRELIMO   Mozambique Liberation Front

IS   Islamic State

MRM   Montepuez Ruby Mining

PNIS   Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito

RENAMO   Mozambican National Resistance

Rwandan soldiers patrol at what remains of the airport in Mocímboa da Praia, northern Mozambique, where a jihadist insurgency escalated in 2020 and 2021. © *Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP via Getty Images*

INTRODUCTION

Women queue for water in a refugee camp in Burkina Faso that holds thousands of Malian refugees fleeing conflict. *© Olympia De Maismont/AFP via Getty Images*

The relationship between illicit economies, conflict and instability has been long debated in academic and practitioner circles, and part of the international policy agenda for some time. From the diamond trade in Sierra Leone to the heroin trade in Afghanistan, illicit economies have been shown to fund insurgencies and political actors, and to contribute to ongoing conflict. The United Nations Security Council has engaged in a recurring debate on the linkages between transnational organized crime and terrorism; its most recent resolution on the topic, Resolution 2482, was passed in July 2019.[1] In addition, the council has carried forward specific crime–conflict agendas, such as human trafficking in conflict over a multi-year period, and many of the country-level mandates reference the risks caused by illicit economies in specific situations. A research series produced by the United Nations University on the crime–conflict nexus in 2017 dives further into the nature, extent and implications of conflict and organized crime, focusing on financial flows, criminal agendas on negotiating an end to violence and conflict, and political-criminal alliances on political transitions.[2]

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s 2021 Global Organized Crime Index shows that of the ten highest-scoring countries for criminality – meaning those with the most pervasive criminal markets and influential criminal actors – the overwhelming majority are countries experiencing conflict or fragility. Nevertheless, the dynamics between illicit economies and conflict are dependent on the type of conflict. There is a wide spectrum of modern conflict, from cyber warfare to civil wars to local insurgencies within countries, and each has its own relationship with illicit economies and actors. Sometimes the links are clear cut, as in the illicit financing of armed groups or designated terrorist groups. In other cases, the links are described as possible connections, rather than direct relationships, which muddies the understanding of conflict and crime, as well as policy choices related to them.

This report considers three case studies at different stages of armed conflict to assess the dynamic relationship between criminal networks, illicit economies, and conflict actors and conditions. These three case studies offer unique perspectives in terms of duration, size of the conflict area and stage of the conflict:

- **Armed insurgency in northern Mozambique**: Northern Mozambique is experiencing a small, local insurgency fighting in opposition to the state while causing serious local impacts, including death, displacement, territorial occupation and forced conscription. This insurgency is in early stages (3–4 years) but has been escalating since 2020.
- **Armed groups in Libya and Mali**: The Sahel region after conflicts in Libya and Mali offers a ten-year perspective. Libya has been a catalyst across the region, where civil war in Libya (2011) has had a regional spillover effect, most directly first with conflict in northern Mali (2012) but with a broader impact that has rippled across many areas.
- **Armed groups in Colombia**: In Colombia, armed conflict against the state has persisted for 50 years. This report focuses on the period following the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to provide insights into the post-conflict setting where illicit economies were embedded within the conflict dynamics.

While these conflicts present three distinct cases, they also share relevant similarities. In these cases, unrest is created after an armed group or groups counter the legitimacy of the state. The national response to the conflict is supplemented with regional and international responses. All situations lack a swift resolution, and the instability persists primarily in areas outside capitals, even after formal conflict resolution. In this way, these three cases are representative of sustained, localized instability deriving from armed conflict between the state and non-state armed groups.

All three conflict areas overlap with areas of established illicit economies:

- **Northern Mozambique:** illicit drug trafficking, wildlife poaching and trafficking, and illicit mining.
- **The Sahel region:** cross-border trafficking in illicit drugs, weapons and contraband; migrant smuggling; and illicit mining.
- **Colombia:** illicit drug production and trafficking, and illicit mining.

In these settings, the connections between armed conflict and illicit markets evolve over time. The impacts may be commodity dependent, with different considerations for illegal mining as opposed to trafficked drugs. Illicit markets change over time, as do the power brokers and beneficiaries involved. Illicit economies contribute to long-term enabling environments for instability by prolonging conflict and eroding government responses to conflict. Through the case studies of northern Mozambique, the Sahel region and Colombia, this report identifies ten dynamics that influence illicit economies and conflict situations. These findings make a contribution to vital policy discussions for stabilization and conflict mediation in these – and other – regions.

A note on terminology

There has been a long debate about how to define transnational organized crime, and what defines an organized crime group, including at the United Nations in the context of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. For the purposes of this report, when we talk of transnational organized crime, we are identifying both the illicit markets as well as the groups involved.

'Illicit markets' refers to those that are considered outside the law by the state, such as human trafficking, poaching and wildlife smuggling, or where legal goods, such as gold or timber, are procured through illegal means. Artisanal mining is not itself an illicit market, and we attempt to distinguish between the issues of artisanal and small-scale mining versus illicit small-scale mining. At times, it is determinations made by the government that render the same activity legal one day and illegal the next.

In this report, we use separate terminology for criminal groups and parties to conflict, or indicate specifically when they engage in both. To identify different actors, terrorist groups or insurgents are not labelled as criminal groups.

'Criminal groups' rather refers to organized groups that operate in illicit economies. Both non-state armed groups and criminal groups may share characteristics, such as territorial control and hierarchy, but for the analysis of this paper, they are treated separately.

'Criminal networks' refers to a loose network of criminal associates engaging in criminal activities. This term also includes relatively small groups that do not control territory and are not widely known by a name or with a known leader.

'State-embedded actors' refers to criminal actors that are embedded in, and act from within, the state apparatus.

'Foreign actors' refers to state and/or non-state criminal actors operating outside their home country, which can include diaspora groups.

'Semi-organized violent entrepreneurs' includes loosely formed armed groups, which includes mercenaries, or bandit groups, who may experience continuity temporarily, but do not necessarily control territory or have a hierarchy.

Methodology

This report analyzes the dynamics of illicit economies in three contexts of instability and armed conflict. This research project included initial reviews of organized crime, governance, stability and armed conflict across Latin America and Africa. The findings were tested in two expert level workshops attended by practitioners and academics from the Latin American and African regions. The Latin America workshop included experts from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Brazil. The

Africa workshop included experts located across the Sahel region, Mozambique, South Africa and Nigeria. Key dynamics of illicit economies and stability were presented for each region and discussed by partici-pants. These consultations with experts helped shape this final report, which focuses on three specific cases: northern Mozambique, the Sahel region and Colombia.

TEN DYNAMICS

OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND INSTABILITY

A member of the Colombian anti-narcotics police branch guards cocaine seized in Buenaventura,
the country's main port, 2017. *© Raul Arboleda/AFP via Getty Images*

From the initial survey on instability and organized crime in Africa and Latin America, two expert workshops, and three case studies, we have identified ten key dynamics to consider when assessing the relationship between illicit economies and armed conflict and instability, grouped into four categories:

- Contextual dynamics
- The dynamics of actors involved in criminal economies
- Market dynamics
- The changing dynamics of community-level impact

Contextual dynamics

Two aspects of the economic and political context in conflict regions underpin the relationship between illicit economies and armed conflict:

1. **Development and governance deficits.** Regions where instability and conflict become entrenched – and where illicit economies find a lasting foothold – experience development and political power deficits. Areas considered to have 'low governance' may in fact be the result of national government priorities such that governments prioritize stability in capital and major cities, but neglect rural areas or the periphery of a state. In these regions, the economic development and social services for local residents are low, yet there may be a robust extractive economy, as is seen in the ruby mines in northern Mozambique. In some areas considered particularly vulnerable to instability, state presence is not 'weak' but dominated by one sector, such as military or law enforcement presence. Moreover, local actors fulfilling state functions can have a strong level of control and provide governance to an area neglected by the central state.

   Although illicit economies do not, by nature, lead to armed conflict, there is usually geographical overlap in areas where traffickers and criminal groups operate for a long period and where instability and conflict occur. Illicit activity undermines systems of governance, distorts economic practices and undermines local invest-ment in rule of law. But it may also be a sign of a region that allows for criminal operations due to political neglect. Although these conditions do not automatically

result in conflict, they can lead to anger and resentment in marginalized local populations. If instability or local fighting breaks out, there are few local protections or strong institutions to provide a quick resolution. The areas that remain most vulnerable to continued instability and violence after large-scale conflict resolutions are those regions with less political power, such as the border regions and protected areas (indigenous lands or natural parks) of Colombia. This entrenchment of instability also affords cover for the advancement of criminal economies, which often deploy violence and exploit local communities.

2. **Local–global connections are widespread.** In areas of instability, global interests (geopolitics and economic), global ideologies and global flows of licit and illicit goods interact with local political, economic and social dynamics. The connection between the local and the global – including transactions, both economic and political – and changes over time, are key to understanding the influence of illicit networks and their impact on conflict. Global economic interests include global corporations that operate at the local level with national governments, local political actors and business elites. But it also includes transnational criminal networks, cartels and foreign criminal actors. For instance, cocaine originating in Colombia moves through some of the key conflict regions in the Sahel en route to Europe. Even the most politically and economically excluded regions of countries are connected to the global economy. In these places, both lucrative legal and illegal economies tend to be dominated by a combination of international interests (ranging from cartels to legal multinational corporations) and local elites, with the majority of the local population often on the outside. This can be seen in the legal mining industry as well as elite-run drug trafficking in northern Mozambique, or in criminal group-led cocaine production and control over illegal mining in Colombia.

Dynamics of actors and shifts over time

The relationships between state actors, armed groups and criminal networks prior to the onset of armed conflict is important to consider. At both the national and local level, the state itself is an amalgamation of many actors with varying interests. For instance, some of these actors may be connected to criminal markets yet opposed to insurgents. Three key dynamics between actors, and how they change over time, are important to understand for formulating stabilization policy:

3. **Both internal and external criminal actors hold influence.** Given the prevalence of local-global connections and transnational economies, both internal and external criminal actors influence the relationship between illicit economies and conflict. Internal actors are those on the ground in the conflict zones. These actors may have external connections or seek links with outside suppliers and buyers of illicit products as conflicts evolve. External criminal networks are those actors outside the conflict zones, often with links to political power. Politically protected and established criminal networks who operate at low risk prior to conflict may avoid disruption by moving their routes during times of unrest, which contributes to regional market dispersion. This has been seen in northern Mozambique, where established drug trafficking networks (involving local and international actors) have

A coca leaf processing facility in Bolivar province, Colombia.
© *Eye Ubiquitous/Alamy Stock Photo*

shifted to ports south of the insurgency territory. On the other hand, in Colombia many internal criminal groups have sought to take control over cocaine production after the peace accord, often through violence.

4. **The duration of instability influences the integration of armed groups into illicit economies.** The longer instability persists, the more likely armed groups or insurgents are to capture or capitalize on illicit economic activity. As conflict continues there may be a tipping point where local power shifts from the state to non-state armed groups, which impacts control of illicit economies. This tipping point can force existing criminal networks to coordinate with armed groups rather than corrupt government officials. Armed groups that maintain local power may take over taxation, protection rents for illicit economies or direct involvement and leadership. The impacts of this integration range from strengthened non-state armed groups to increased violence and fragmentation of groups, as has been seen in northern Mali. Once economic interests are established, there is less incentive to reach a settlement.

5. **Illicit economies absorb new actors.** Larger-scale criminal groups are complemented by smaller groups with different objectives, possibly trying to corner new markets or profit from existing markets. In the cases of both Colombia and the Sahel region, the number of armed groups has grown over time. For instance, in southern Libya mercenaries became involved in the gold mines in Chad, and in Colombia the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (national liberation army, ELN) increased participation in the cocaine and illegal mining trade. Across the Sahel, organized criminal activity has involved smaller groups engaging in easier money-making schemes, such as banditry, kidnapping and a growing patchwork of bribery/taxation for local passage. If elite control over illicit markets becomes fragmented, which may occur over time during conflict, it provides an opportunity for the democratization of criminal control as multiple actors seek rents from criminal markets. Within this democratization, there can co-exist highly controlled markets, such as gold mining run by armed groups, complemented by smaller disruptive markets such as kidnapping and banditry. As a result, the number of people dependent on criminal activity facilitated by instability increases. Over time, conflict tends to break up market consolidation, force a realignment and then re-consolidate under a dominant group.

Illicit market and geographic expansion

Market expansion is directly linked to the length of an armed conflict or protracted instability and the shifting engagement by different actors in illicit markets. Impacts may be commodity dependent in terms of the value and type of commodity, who controls the initial supply or market, the number of people drawn into the economy and the level of violence and local impacts associated with it. There are also different types of illicit economies: those that link to a grey market (quasi-legal), those that feed into a legal market (e.g. gold), or end-to-end illicit economies (e.g. illicit drugs, illegal firearms, human trafficking). Three dynamics related to the expansion of illicit markets are prevalent:

6. **Markets grow.** Conflict zones provide an opportunity for market expansion and diversification as transnational actors identify easier routes through conflict areas or find a rising demand for new products. The enterprise of arms trafficking grows as regions become flush with weapons through the looting of government stockpiles, trade in legally procured weapons for assumed loyalty (including through bilateral security assistance), and movement of weapons from one conflict zone to another as need arises. Human trafficking expands as displaced populations become newly vulnerable groups at risk of forced labour, sexual exploitation, child combatants and forced marriage. Migrant smuggling increases through the need to move these vulnerable groups but also due to enforcement vacuums along lucrative routes, as is happening on the border between Colombia and Venezuela, and has occurred across the Sahel route.

7. **Arms trafficking is an accelerant market.** An influx of arms not only fuels armed fighting and violence, but contributes to the fragmentation of conflict, increased numbers of criminal groups, increased violence as a vehicle for market control, and strengthening of armed ideological and criminal groups against state responses.

Weapons confiscated from insurgents who have been terrorizing populations in northern Mozambique.
© Simon Wohlfahrt/
AFP via Getty Images

As arms flood a region both for insurgents and anti-insurgent efforts, the likelihood of weapons finding a second life in a regional arms trade increases. This has been seen across conflict regions, such as in Libya and Mali. If armed groups exhaust opportunities to loot military weapons, they may tap into the existing transnational arms trade to build their stockpile. Monitoring and deterring the growth of an illegal arms trade should be a top priority for international actors, as it has the power to escalate instability across countries and regions.

8. **The geographic reach of illicit markets expands.** While markets linked to instability may expand within conflict areas, too much instability can lead established criminal networks to shift markets to areas where there are comparatively higher levels of stability for their business operations. Government, military and international responses increase risks for traffickers to conduct business, driving them to relocate their operations. At the same time, areas of instability can expand themselves, creating more room for criminal groups within these areas to expand operations. The shift is often to the periphery of conflict zones, but the nodes through which illicit flows move – including cities, border towns, ports, and major and minor roads – may diversify as conflicts expand and change. This may result in the further erosion of governance in these areas through corruption and criminal influence. These conditions can create a regional spillover effect, where instability expands due to the increased competition for territorial control or new alliances.

Community dynamics

A third party must be included in the analysis of conflict between state and non-state actors: the communities that live in areas of contestation. These communities bear the brunt of violence between armed groups and the state, and experience the risks of living through continued local fighting and subnational instability in two important ways:

9. **Criminal group governance and other forms of territorial influence are major sources of human insecurity.** When instability allows for illicit economies to become the dominant economies in wider swathes of national territory, this brings greater risks to communities. Multiple layers of opportunists jostle for control, increase local violence and victimize local communities as crimes like extortion, kidnapping, and sexual violence impact communities and local businesses. The provision of basic services such as water, cooking gas, electricity and even public transport by armed groups or criminal groups are often exploitative enterprises. Users often have little choice in using these services and the rules and services of criminal groups often carry a significant threat.

10. **New predatory economies emerge around existing community insecurities.** The level and length of the armed fighting will compound issues in already fragile communities with shortages of food and basic supplies, disruptions to local economic activity and human rights abuses by state and non-state armed groups. In many cases, armed groups recognize humanitarian assistance as a new revenue stream, for instance hijacking food trucks destined for vulnerable communities.

NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE

Soldiers on patrol in Cabo Delgado province, northern Mozambique, September 2021.
© Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP via Getty Images

I n northern Mozambique, an insurgency has taken root in a region known for low economic growth and established illicit markets. It is the youngest conflict surveyed for this paper, and allows us to consider the initial interplay between illicit economies and the conflict. The insurgency's impact on criminal markets so far has followed some patterns similar to the Sahel, such as market displacement, but there has not been any co-optation of existing markets by the insurgents. The fighting has contributed to shifts in trafficking routes. Medium-sized drug shipments have moved southward, while small packet heroin trafficking from Tanzania for local consumption in northern Mozambique has moved westward. There is a risk of an escalating arms trade in the region, as well as increasing numbers of vulnerable populations. Reports of kidnapping of women by the insurgent group Ahlu-Sunna Wa-Jama'a (ASWJ) suggest human trafficking is also a key concern. So far, the insurgent group has not approached the mining hubs and there are no reports that they have begun to engage in or tax the trade. There are also no reports about involvement in the illicit wildlife trade.

The insurgency in the north

Since 2017, there has been an ongoing insurgency in Cabo Delgado Province in northern Mozambique, leading to the displacement of more than 800 000 people, some of whom have moved into the neighbouring provinces of Nampula, Niassa, Sofala and Zambezia.[3] Most of this escalation occurred from April 2020 into 2021.

The main insurgent group is the Islamic sect ASWJ, known locally as Al Shabaab (which means 'the youth' and is not to be confused with Al Shabaab in Somalia, with whom they share no link except name). ASWJ has been seeking a breakaway territory under Sharia law in the north. The size of the group is small in comparison to the local population and most estimates suggest that the group consists of 1 000–2 000 fighters.[4] A second estimate claims it has 4 500 members, 2 000 of whom carry arms.[5] The Mozambican leaders of the group mostly come from coastal populations between Palma and Macomia, usually kiMwani speakers. The power of individuals tends to come from the knowledge of Islam, international contacts and military capability.[6] The group consists mostly of Mozambican citizens but has a very close relationship with southern Tanzania and there are numerous Tanzanian fighters. Other foreign fighters from countries including Uganda, Somalia and South Africa have joined the group for periods, but not in large numbers.

The group originated as a conservative Islamic sect in Cabo Delgado Province in 2007/2008. Its teachings reject the Mozambican state, and its education system in particular. This led to conflict with the state and ultimately ASWJ's first attack on three police stations in Mocímboa da Praia on 5 October 2017, ostensibly to release some of its members who had been detained, but also to acquire weapons. Before 2020, the group mostly conducted raids on towns, villages and military camps to loot them for supplies and money. There was a notable escalation by the group in 2020, when it began attacking larger targets and took control of the town of Mocímboa da Praia in late August 2020.[7] In March 2021, an attack by armed groups in Palma led to the displacement of 30 000 people.[8] The insurgency is locally contained but has caused extensive damage and loss of life. Since 2017, ASWJ is thought to be responsible for more than 3 100 deaths and the displacement of more than 800 000 people.[9]

The government in Maputo is led by the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), the dominant party since Mozambique's independence. Although FRELIMO has retained power since independence, it has faced challenges from the main opposition party, Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), which is an armed group located primarily in the central region of the country. After periodic fighting over a protracted period of time, the two groups signed a peace agreement in August 2019, agreeing to hold elections and to disarm and integrate roughly 5 000 RENAMO fighters into state forces, which began in July 2020. A RENAMO dissident group immediately formed, which went on to attack vehicles travelling in the central region during 2020.[10] The insurgency in the north is not linked to RENAMO fighters, yet with the political integration of RENAMO incomplete, the government faces competing challenges to security across the country.

Struggling to contain the insurgency in the north, the Mozambican state sought external support, which initially came through foreign military contractors, first the Russian outfit the Wagner Group followed by South Africa's Dyck Advisory Group. Since July 2021, the Rwandan Defence Force has supported the government followed by Southern African Development Community troop involvement in late August 2021. This has helped the government recapture the majority of the bases and territory it lost to ASWJ.

ASWJ pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) in 2018, and in July 2019, IS started referring to this insurgency as part of its Central African Province, ISCAP. In March 2021, the US State Department designated ISIS-Mozambique, a US labelling for the region's militants, to be a Foreign Terrorist Organization and, under a 2001, post-9/11 Executive Order, also designated the group and its leader a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.[11] The US and Portugal have sent military trainers to Mozambique to assist its military. While the relationship between ASWJ and IS is clearly mutually beneficial, there is nothing to suggest that IS exerts strategic or tactical control over ASWJ activities.[12]

FIGURE 1 Conflict events in Cabo Delgado, August 2021, showing clashes between insurgents and regional forces concentrated around Mocímboa da Praia.

SOURCE: ACLED, Cabo Ligado, https://www.caboligado.com/dashboard

Montepuez, Mozambique, is a hub of illicit gemstone mining.
© John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images

Socio-economic conditions

The province of Cabo Delgado, the insurgency's area of origin and primary operation site, borders Tanzania and is one of the poorest regions of Mozambique, although it is rich in minerals and natural gas.[13] The world's second largest reserve of rubies was first identified in 2009 in Montepuez, Cabo Delgado, and global gemstone company Gemfields signed a deal in 2012 with Mozambican company Mwiriti to extract the gems. Large reserves of natural gas off the coast of northern Mozambique were discovered in 2010 and in 2019, the French company Total Energies, the world's second largest liquefied natural gas company, signed a US$20 billion deal to begin extraction in 2024.[14] Total has since suspended its operations to extract natural gas due to the insurgency.

Yet, local economic opportunity is 'viewed as being captured by the elite, or by foreigners who are allowed access to the resources under corrupt systems'.[15] This includes the illicit economies. The north of the country was the staging site for the independence war and as independence leaders transitioned into political positions, links between the new government and criminal networks were fortified. A combination of direct links in trades, such as timber, and corrupt political capture, such as granting land concessions, has been documented.[16] A 2017 census presented by Mozambique's National Statistics Institute states that the energy, extractive industry,

administration, construction and manufacturing industry are the sectors that employ the fewest people by far, with a total of 25 673.[17] The youth population within the province, with 53% under the age of 18, has one of Mozambique's highest population growth rates at 3.4%. As analyst João Feijó points out, the establishment of the extractive industry has created new pressures – ranging from an influx of international migrants and pressure on land and natural resources – that contribute to the 'increase of social inequalities' around access to public services, employment and resources.[18] Youth often experience competition amongst themselves and with the older generations for low-paying, menial jobs, pushing them to seek opportunities in the informal sector, often at the 'margins of legality'.[19]
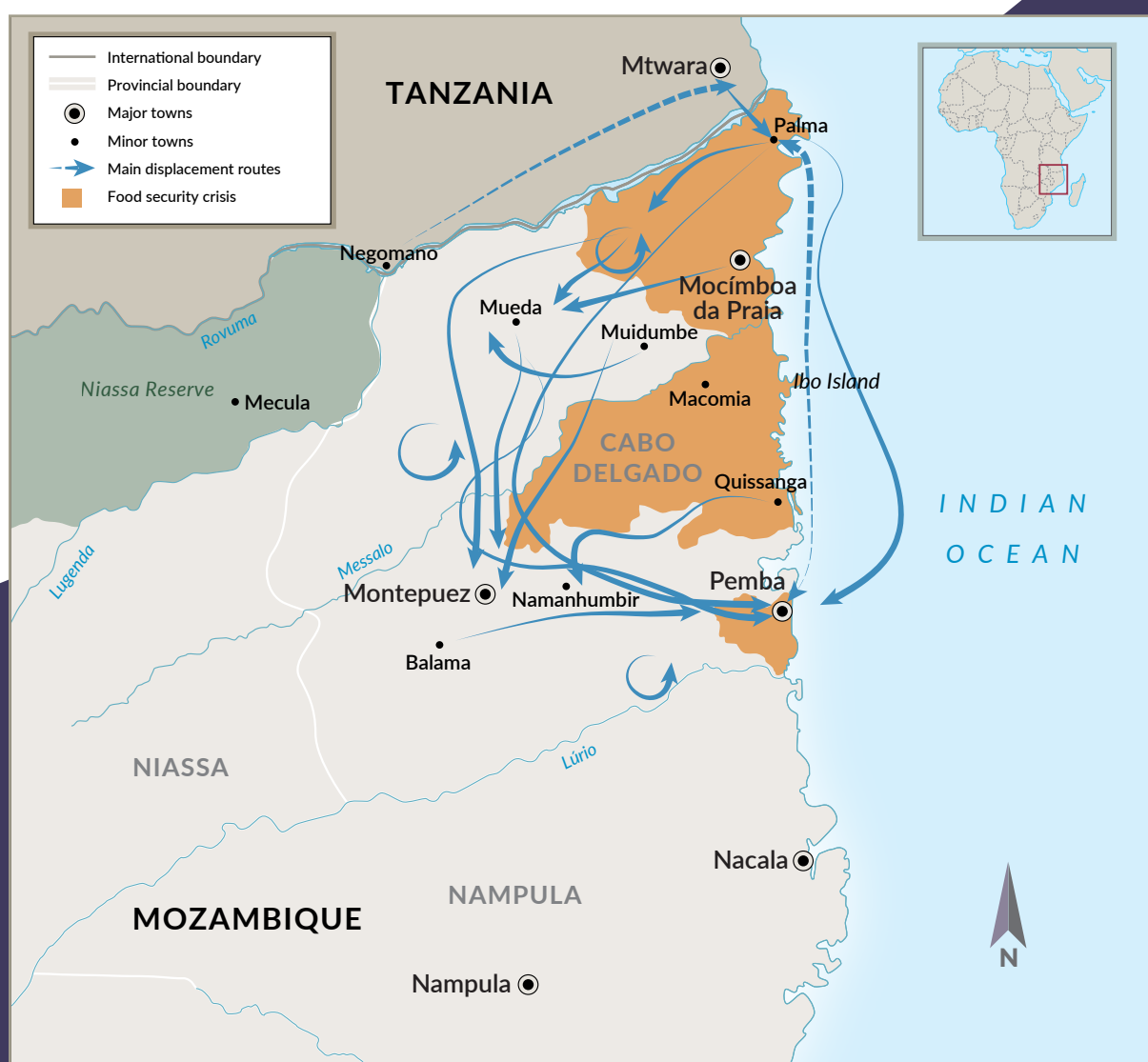
FIGURE 2 Current humanitarian developments in Cabo Delgado Province, 2021.

SOURCE: ACLED, Cabo Ligado, https://www.caboligado.com/dashboard

The illicit economy and instability

Background

Northern Mozambique has been connected to trading routes along the east coast of Africa for centuries. Mozambique, and Cabo Delgado in particular, is a transhipment point for illicit drugs, predominantly heroin and more recently methamphetamines. The region has been a site for extraction and exportation of illegally sourced rubies, gold, timber and wildlife for decades. Although products and tactics along these routes have shifted over time, the ways illicit markets operate reinforce structural and social inequalities as networks built on corruption at all levels ensure that the wealthy and politically connected benefit most.

Most markets are dominated by networks of foreigners and local businessmen, with political corruption providing the protection for operations. There are no estimates of how many local people each illicit market employs. In northern Mozambique, illicit trafficking was previously centralized around a few key commodities – namely, heroin, timber and ivory – which were controlled by economically powerful traders with high-level support from the local political elite. The diversification of trafficked products has driven growth of low-level corruption needed to support these networks.[20] The illicit mining trade is dominated by foreigners, while the mining is primarily done by Mozambiquans and Tanzanians. There are major West African networks in Nampula and South Asian buyers from countries such as Myanmar and Bangladesh.[21]

The level of violence linked to illicit markets in this region is low. It is almost non-existent for drug traffickers or wildlife traffickers. In the early 2010s, there was reported violence between miners in Montepuez competing for access, but there is no reported violence among the traders. Kidnapping between criminal networks or gangs is more common in the south of the country, as is kidnapping for ransom. Assassinations are also a more common phenomenon in the south of the country, although there was the high-profile assassination of the mayor of Nampula, Mahamudo Amurane, in 2017.[22]

Ivory was one key illicit commodity trafficked from Mozambique, although there have been no recorded incidents in recent years.
© Roberto Schmidt/ AFP via Getty Images

The northern insurgency and illicit economies

The GI-TOC has undertaken three rounds of fieldwork over the last two years to investigate possible links between insurgency and illicit economies in northern Mozambique. In the case of Cabo Delgado, there is no evidence that insurgents have taken over any illicit economies. Rather, illicit economies seem to have contributed to the conditions which gave rise to the insurgency and continue to drive it: endemic corruption, elite economic capture and a lack of legitimate economic opportunities for large sections of the population.[23] Trafficking and other illicit economies exacerbate these conditions by undermining governance and ensuring that state resources are focused on development in areas that support the economic and political elites while at the same time allowing these elites to capture the primary and secondary benefits from Cabo Delgado's natural resources. The insurgency is largely driven by resentment of endemic corruption and the feeling that local youths are having their futures stolen from them. In fact, while it is reported that the group's leaders want a strict Islamic state, their messages lack 'sophisticated theological elaboration or a well-defined political ideology'.[24] They do, however, criticize the democratic government of Mozambique for its policies that breed 'widespread corruption, social injustice, or political exclusion' as they preach that democracy is 'a system that allows the rich to become richer at the expense of the poor'. The group's leadership believe the solution to this is the overthrow of the government and implementation of Sharia law.[25]

So far, there has not been a tipping point in favour of ASWJ where established criminal networks seek new alliances with the insurgents. However, ASWJ was able to overrun and hold Mocímboa da Praia for nearly a year, until Rwandan and Mozambican forces re-took the port town in August 2021. While it has been suggested in several local media reports[26] and by foreign officials that ASWJ have become involved in drug trafficking, GI-TOC research shows that this is not the case. Some sources on the ground report to GI-TOC that they are actively opposed to it, and possibly executing those involved. Some loose connections have been made between the insurgents and illicit economies, such as recruitment of informal/illicit miners whose operations were disrupted, often violently, by the state. Another example is insurgents using trafficking routes and camps to evade authority.[27] There is also evidence that the instability has led to shifts in the trafficking patterns to protect illegal trade from disruption, moving to destinations in the south or west, outside the fighting areas.[28]

In the case of Cabo Delgado, there is no evidence that insurgents have taken over any illicit economies.

Mozambique: Profile of criminal actors

There are many local criminal networks in Mozambique, including powerful families who exercise control over some of the country's ports and have a strong presence in the biggest cities in the northern parts of the country. These groups have established tight relationships with Mozambique's political elite as well as international links to the Pakistani market for heroin.

Evidence shows that some state-embedded actors own legal ruby companies in Mozambique that are involved in tax evasion and exploitation of local populations. They are also complicit in a number of illicit economies. There is virtual impunity for high-ranking politicians involved in criminal markets. Moreover, the police are described as the closest thing to a mafia group in the country, with law-enforcement officers often engaging directly in organized crime activities and acting as a hit squad for the government and ruling party.

Foreign criminal actors are known to operate in Mozambique. For example, Chinese criminal actors play a significant role in the country's illicit timber industry as well as in illicit mining, illegal fishing and, until 2018, ivory trafficking. Tanzanian criminal groups are involved in the illegal drug trade, while Somali nationals drive human smuggling operations and Thai networks have a stake in the smuggling of rubies. Vietnamese groups are reportedly involved in the illegal rhino trade and the local heroin market is linked to Tanzanian groups.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021.

Arms trafficking

Prior to the insurgency, there was not a significant illicit arms trade in northern Mozambique. There was a small trade in assault rifles left over after the previous war, and rentals of AKs from the military by poachers. Arms trafficking has not yet become a significant phenomenon in the north. The majority of arms used by ASWJ are Mozambican military arms – including mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, sniper rifles and AKs – which they stole while overrunning major military camps. Since the August 2020 takeover of Mocímboa de Praia, the military has changed its tactics and made it harder for the group to access weapons.[29] There have been unconfirmed reports of boats with weapons arriving from Somalia or Yemen, but the majority appears to be captured military weaponry. If the insurgency grows, and if more arms flood the region to fight the insurgents, the likelihood of weapons finding a second life in a regional arms trade is possible. This is a pattern observed across conflict regions, such as Libya or Yemen. In addition, if the insurgents seek to escalate and cannot loot military weapons, they may tap into existing transnational arms trade to build their stockpile. Monitoring and deterring the growth of an illegal arms trade should be a top priority for international actors as it has the power to escalate instability in the north, across the country and in the region.

Illicit drugs

Trafficking of heroin and cocaine was known to occur in Mozambique in the 1990s and early 2000s, with northern Mozambique being the primary transit region. In recent years, heroin has been the dominant product in drug shipments, with methamphetamine and cocaine becoming increasingly common, particularly since the beginning of 2020.[30] There are some reports that Mozambique also has production sites for methamphetamine and methaqualone, but the extent of this operation is unknown. There is also a local market for sale and consumption, which is largely left alone by authorities.

Drugs move through Cabo Delgado in three main channels: by dhow, by containers on cargo ships and overland from Tanzania. The best-known channel is the trafficking of heroin and methamphetamine via dhows from the Makran coast of Pakistan and Iran, which can carry up to one tonne of heroin and meth.[31] These are broken into smaller shipments, which are offloaded onto smaller fishing boats from meeting points over the horizon to be brought into harbours and beaches. These shipments are primarily directed to markets in Europe and the United States, but an increasing amount is absorbed by local African markets.[32]

The second channel is to bring product through in containers arriving on cargo ships, which is organized by networks of 'high-volume traffickers reputedly enjoying support from senior party and government officials'.[33] Heroin from Pakistan and cocaine from Brazil both arrive this way into the ports of Pemba and Nacala in northern Mozamique. In the case of heroin, some trafficking networks intentionally shifted from the dhow channels on the Makran coast to the more controlled and secure system of containers. The destination for these shipments is primarily to markets in Europe and the United States.[34]

Heroin destined for local consumption in the north is imported to Mozambique overland from Tanzania. In 2020, heroin was packaged into trucks in Dar es Salaam inside foodstuffs for export to shops in northern Mozambique. It was then trucked across the Mozambique border at the Unity Bridge across the Rio Rovuma, in the far northwest of Cabo Delgado province.[35]

Some drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine, are transported to Cabo Delgado by dhow. © *Education Images/ Universal Images Group via Getty Images; Alfredo Zuniga/AFP via Getty Images*

While the Pemba route (containers and collections from offshore dhows) appears to have been unaffected by the insurgency (as insurgent control has not stretched as far south as Pemba), GI-TOC research in northern Mozambique in January, February and October 2021 found that, rather than these trafficking routes becoming a major source of income for the ASWJ, trafficking networks have actually moved operations further south and west due to risks of the violence and the logistical challenges of moving contraband through a heavily militarized area. Other researchers who have conducted recent fieldwork around the conflict in Cabo Delgado have corroborated these findings.[36]

The land route bringing heroin from Tanzania for local consumption has shifted much further west, crossing into the northwest of Niassa province, then heading south to Lichinga and along the poor road linking Niassa and Cabo Delgado provinces. This avoids the conflict zone while still reaching consumer markets in towns such as Montepuez and Pemba.[37] Drug shipments from dhows were previously offloaded onto beaches around Mocímboa da Praia, Quissanga and Pemba in Cabo Delgado. However, drop-offs are now made at points further south, including Pemba (which remained out of insurgent control), but also the relatively safer coast of Nampula district (Nacala and Angoche).[38]

The GI-TOC conducted extensive field research in early 2021, including interviews with law enforcement officers, local sources connected to the drugs trafficking routes, local drug couriers and local journalists, which found no evidence linking ASWJ with the dhow-based drugs supply route. It appears that safety concerns over landing along the insurgent-held coastline, as well as the potential increased costs of having

to move goods south through two front lines, have guided these drug trafficking networks to move to the relatively safer coast of the Nampula province (Nacala and Angoche). Some traffickers known to the GI-TOC who were previously based in Mocímboa da Praia moved operations to Nacala.[39]

The province of Nampula is known for various forms of illicit activity, including money laundering and trade in illicitly sourced minerals, and increased illicit trade in the region could have impacts on the provincial government and elite interests.[40] While former trafficking hotspots – such as Mocímboa da Praia and the surrounding coastline – have now come back under government control, cyclone season has restricted shipments and it is unclear where drop-offs will take place in December 2021 going forward.[41] Since August 2021, when weather made dhow shipments difficult, traffickers who moved south to avoid the conflict have remained, and heroin and meth shipments by dhow and container are continuing to reach the more southerly ports.[42]

In northern Mozambique, there has been a diversification of actors in the drug trade as small-scale actors have entered the market buying small quantities over time, carving out roles locally. There has also been a knock-on-effect of the insurgency, where small-scale traffickers have actually moved into northern Mozambique as surveillance in Zanzibar in response to the insurgency has made operating there more difficult.[43] As lower-level entrepreneurs continue to operate in the conflict area, they may run up against resistance from ASWJ and hence find themselves in conflict, especially related to drugs. There could also be an increase in individual relationships between small-scale criminal actors and ASWJ components.

FIGURE 3 Illicit flows through northern Mozambique, as of February 2021.

SOURCE: Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa, Issue 17, March–April 2021, GI-TOC

Illicit mining

There are two major regions for sourcing gemstones in northern Mozambique. The first mining site is near Montepuez in Cabo Delgado province, where ruby mining is concentrated east of the city, around Namanhumbir. Here, a large mining concession controlled by Montepuez Ruby Mining (MRM) – a joint venture between Mozambican company Mwiriti (25% owner-ship) and global gemstone-producing giant Gemfields (75% ownership) – covers 33 600 hectares of one of the most significant ruby deposits in the world. MRM began operations in 2012. Gemfields claims on its website that MRM 'provides employment (both direct and via contrac-tors) to 1 400 people, 95% of whom are Mozambican nationals'.[44] In the province, Mwiriti is the biggest single holder of concessions, owned by retired general and senior figure in the ruling Frelimo party Raimundo Domingos Pachinuapa and his business partner Asghar Fakhraleali. According to an analysis by the Maputo-based NGO the Public Integrity Center, Mwiriti owns 7% of mining concessions in the province.[45]

The second mining region is the Msawise site within Niassa Special Reserve. GI-TOC research suggests that gemstones mined in this region are primarily smuggled to Malawi, where traders are able to obtain official paper-work claiming the gems to be Malawian-mined, before being exported to Asia. Reports also suggest that this gem smuggling route is connected to the illicit wildlife trade, primarily in carnivore body parts such as lion teeth and claws, and also live pangolins from Niassa Reserve.[46]

In 2016, the Mozambican government introduced com-pulsory mining licences for artisanal miners to form and register as associations, rendering wide swathes of exist-ing artisanal and small-scale mining operations illegal.[47] Other illegal mining results from extraction in protected areas or private mining concessions owned by large-scale mining companies. Some immediate impacts have included the forced removal of artisanal miners from the ruby fields near Montepuez by the state and private security forces in 2016.[48]

Once informal mining became technically illegal, local police became essential to the market's functioning. In

Smuggled precious and semi-precious stones likely excavated during illegal mining in Mozambique. © *Miroslav Pavicevic/Alamy*

both Montepuez and Niassa Special Reserve, miners – typically referred to as *garimpeiros* – report that local arrangements with police, either through profit-sharing agreements or bribes, facilitate their ability to mine. Police may even run their own mining operations. There are also reports that police control and extort miners through the threat of violence.[49]

Police and security guards at concessions also facilitate mining. As noted in the GI-TOC's East and Southern Africa Risk Bulletin: '[Miners] often bribe police to gain access at night, typically for a slot of two to four hours, before the police or security guards signal that it is time to leave. Miners then take excavated soil with them for washing and processing, before selling their rubies to Thai, Sri Lankan and West African buyers in Montepuez. There are reports that local gemstone buyers fund exca-vation teams and, in some cases, provide miners with the money to pay the necessary bribes.'[50]

Arrests are very uncommon and, along with beatings, often result from miners' inability to pay a bribe.

However, in a recent case in June 2021, police officers, members of MRM security contractor GardaWorld and one MRM employee were found guilty of facilitating illegal mining at the MRM concession by the Montepuez district court. There are also reports that an increasing number of officers are no longer accepting payments in return for access to the concession.[51]

High-level corruption is apparent in how land concessions are granted and the board appointments of mining companies. Prime land in both areas has been awarded as concessions to elite families, and key national and international ruby-mining companies have the sons of political elite families on their boards.[52] Corrupt access to residency permits in Montepuez, for example, has resulted in foreign nationals (including from Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Pakistan and Thailand) capturing the various secondary and illicit economies associated with the ruby mining: from market stalls selling wheelbarrows and spades, to buying rubies on the black market and the local heroin market.[53] High-level corruption and local government corruption in Cabo Delgado in particular are now rife and are leading to a major breakdown in law and order.[54]

High-level corruption and local government corruption in Cabo Delgado are now rife and are leading to a major breakdown in law and order.

Economic consolidation by the politically connected

There has been an uptick in the granting of land concessions during the period of the insurgency, which has favoured the Mozambican political elite. In July 2021, Public Integrity Centre published a report which analysed data from the mining cadastre of Cabo Delgado and found an increase in the average licences issued per year from five before 2017, to 12 after 2017. From 1992 to 2016, the year before the start of the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado, 67 mining concession licences were distributed in the province. However, after the start of the conflict, over just four years between 2017 and February 2021, 46 licences were distributed.[55] These concessions are for a range of natural resources, including gold, sand and stone. The analysis found that many of these concessions are linked to influential members of Frelimo party or 'politically exposed people', and that many companies are registered outside Mozambique, making ownership difficult to identify.[56]

Displaced people arrive, but not insurgents

GI-TOC research looked for evidence directly linking gemstone trafficking from the illicit mining operations with ASWJ, but no direct relationship was found. There is little evidence to suggest a systemic link of either gems or large-scale financial support flowing to the insurgents. The insurgency has generated a large number of displaced people and many have arrived in Montepuez, with estimates approximating 10 000. Fleeing violence, but also in need of income, many have turned to illegal mining at the MRM site, which has led to increased conflicts with mine security and artisanal miners. There is also the possibility that miners who are frustrated because they are unable to conduct business may turn to the insurgents, either because they see insurgents as a new source of power or authority, or purely due to grievance. But, as of yet, ASWJ has not attempted to co-opt the illicit gem markets.

Human trafficking

There are reports of women and girls being kidnapped by ASWJ, and of the use of child soldiers. An estimated 1 000 girls have been abducted by insurgents and held captive. Women and girls are expected to serve primarily as soldiers wives, but also carry out espionage, recruitment and loading of goods.[57] Feijó reports from a series of interviews that 'kidnapped women and young teenagers are placed on intermediate bases, located in abandoned villages' and 'subjected to political and religious indoctrination, during which themes of exclusion and social injustice are explored to capitalize on individual resentments'.[58]

There are also reports that the group kidnaps people based on their potential skill offering. During the attack on Palma de Março in 2020, one of the group's assumed leaders was seen screening captured people for skills and experience as military service people, doctors, nurses, mechanics or drivers.[59] Others were kidnapped for ransom, including nuns from Brazil for whom a ransom was paid, two sisters from Zimbabwe for whom negotiations opened have not been heard of for a few months, and a man from India who has suffered the same fate and whose safety and whereabouts are unknown.[60]

Vulnerable population grows

The insurgency has displaced nearly 800 000 people who have sought refuge within Mozambique and in Tanzania. Many have arrived in the south of Cabo Delgado and into northern Nampula province, in the districts of Nangade, Mueda, Montepuez, Ancuabe, Metuge, Balama, Namuno, Chiure, Mecufi, Ibo and Pemba. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported in June 2021, that thousands were stranded in very insecure areas around Palma with restricted humanitarian access.[61] Between January and June 2021, Mozambican border authorities reported that more than 9 600 people were forcibly returned from Tanzania through the Negomano border point.[62] This population is at risk of multiple forms of human trafficking, from child sexual exploitation to forced labour.

Wildlife and timber

Mozambique has long been known as a wildlife-trafficking hub. Until recently, northern Mozambique was an epicentre for elephant poaching, illegal wildlife trade and illegal logging on the continent. From 2008 to 2018, poaching in Niassa National Reserve led to the loss of at least 72% of the 2008–2009 elephant population of 13 000–15 000.[63] By 2016, the ports of Pemba and Nacala had become the main exit ports on the east coast of Africa for shipping ivory to Asia, which was facilitated by the erosion of rule of law and the spread of corruption across northern Mozambique. The GI-TOC has also found that lion teeth and claws are being trafficked through Pemba and that pangolins are available for sale – both live and scales. Investigations also showed the ongoing illegal export of restricted hardwood species from Pemba, facilitated by patronage and corruption.[64]

A significant case of a known ivory trader has all but stopped the trade for the time being. The high-profile arrest and deportation of ivory trafficker Chupi Mateso from Tanzania, followed by the arrest of low-level traffickers in 2017, appear to have slowed ivory trafficking as it signalled the government's prioritization of law enforcement.[65] In early 2020, small-scale traffickers were known to be holding small stockpiles of ivory in the field around Niassa Reserve, but are not yet prepared to sell them.[66] So far, this market has not been impacted by the insurgency, and major sales points are outside the conflict region.

Poaching in the Niassa Game Reserve, shown here, led to a 72% depletion of elephant stock from 2008 to 2018.
© Ariadne van Zandbergen/ Alamy Stock Photo

SAHEL REGION

Smugglers along the Algeria–Niger border. *© Raouf Farrah*

T he Sahel spans the breadth of the African continent, connecting 15 coun-
tries. Here we focus on a region that is more accurately described as the
Sahel-Sahara (i.e. Mali, Niger, Chad, southern Algeria and southern Libya).
For the purposes of a regional analysis of organized crime, some of the most salient
territories (including most of northern Mali, northern Niger, northern Chad, large
parts of southern Algeria and southern Libya) are not technically part of the Sahel
region despite being interconnected from a socio-economic perspective, as well as
a criminal one.

Taking the Libyan civil war of 2011 as a starting point and looking at developments
across a corrridor to the south, encompassing Chad, Niger and Mali (which were
known before the conflict as an area where smuggling routes traversed), one can
see a number of the key dynamics uncovered in the larger study. Arms trafficking
from Libya after 2011 caused further instability. The number of actors involved in
illicit economies have grown, as have the types of illicit economies. There has been
geographic expansion of markets, especially in areas that lack national political
power, and political resolutions must contend with the expanded number of benefi-
ciaries of these economies.

A rocket lodged in the roof of a building in Tripoli – a remnant of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces' 2019-2020 attempt to occupy the capital. © *Hazem Turkia/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

National-level political instability and regional armed conflicts

Instability at the national political level has persisted to differing degrees in each country of the Sahel region, as well as within specific areas and communities. With the exception of Niger, the national governments of Mali, Libya and Chad continue to undergo uncertain transitions. Across each country, armed groups seek to rule pockets of territory or even regional areas, while some seek to overthrow the state.

In Libya, yet another bloody war in 2019 and 2020 saw the eastern-based commander of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, Khalifa Haftar, fail to overtake Tripoli.[67] A UN-sanctioned process led to the establishment a transitional government, the Government of National Unity (GNU), led by Prime Minister Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba, and elections intended for December 2021. However, deep divisions remain and the election itself could be a trigger for instability. Moreover, the country is challenged by various external actors, including states and armed groups operating within or on Libya's borders.[68] National-level military actors have been adopting a Qaddafi-era model, co-opting militias by allowing them to self-finance through criminal activities. These are attempts to bring Libya's post-revolution predation economy under hierarchical command.[69]

In 2021, Mali experienced its second coup in two years, both led by Colonel Assimi Goita. In 2021, the military detained President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane hours after announcing a new cabinet. In August 2020, Malian military officers carried out a coup and arrested the country's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and several other high-ranking officials.

By 2019, organized violence in central Mali had reached unprecedented levels. Armed violence in the north continues, arguably overtaken by violence in central Mali. As GI-TOC analysts have noted, by the time of the August 2020 coup, 'there was still a full-blown insurgency across the country's northern and central regions, with local populations finding themselves targeted by jihadist gunmen, so-called "self-defence" militias and the Malian armed forces'.[70] While the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement was signed by the Coordination of Azawad Movements and the Plateforme, there are in fact upwards of 20 armed groups,[71] some aligned with the larger coalitions, some breakaways, some jihadist groups, and some ethnically com-posed and non-aligned.

As noted by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, there have been attacks on civilians by armed extremists such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and others consolidating their control over the centre of the country. Moreover, these groups are also expanding into southern regions, while communal violence is increasing in central Mali. The kidnapping epicentre has moved away from the north to the centre of the country. Abductions increased dramatically, with 435 documented in just the first six months of this year – five times as many as in all of 2019, with the perpetrators primarily being community-based armed groups and militias in central Mali.[72]

In 2016, two Chadian rebel groups, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad – FACT) and the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic. FACT, which is composed largely of Daza Gorane (Tebu) members from the Bahr el-Ghazel and Kanem regions of Chad, has been primarily based in Libya since 2016[73] and launched offensives against the Chadian government in 2021. This FACT offensive was the most serious challenge to Chad's government since February 2008. In April 2021, the president of three decades, President Idriss Déby Itno, died from wounds received while reportedly visiting soldiers fighting rebels from FACT. Following his death, regime loyalists organized a military coup d'état, dissolving the executive branch, the National Assembly and the constitution. Déby's son, General Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, was declared president and the head of the transitional military council, taking charge of the country.[74] Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno's government has given conflicting statements on the potential reintegration of Chadian rebels. On the one hand, the national dialogue meant to pave the way to a democratically elected government has officially sought to integrate rebels, with the objective to discuss a reintegration process. On the other, the government has expressed much hostility towards the reintegration of the rebels and has a poor track record of rein-tegrating rebels, which has undermined trust in Chadian DDR processes.[75] In fact, some note that the 2020 ceasefire agreement in Libya, and diminished fighting, has increased the threat in Chad by these mercenary groups as they seek to diversify their revenue streams from mercenary work to Sahelian criminal economies.

In the region, armed groups seek to rule pockets of territory, while some seek to overthrow the state.

In Niger, the first transfer of power from one elected president to another took place following a failed coup attempt ahead of the inauguration.[76] There is not a clear threat to the national government of Niger, but the country is facing a security crisis in the areas bordering Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Mali, where armed groups carry out repeated attacks against security forces and civilians.[77] In November 2021 for instance, armed gunmen in southwest Niger targeted a delegation including the mayor of Banibangou, killing 69 people including the mayor. Multiple armed groups operate in the region, often targeting people in leadership roles, including mayors, village chiefs and religious elders, to destabilize communities. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project reports that 530 people have been killed by armed groups in Niger in this year.[78] In neighbouring Burkina Faso, gunmen have targeted civilians and foreign mining companies. In September 2021 gunmen attacked Canadian-based gold mining company Iamgold Corp, forcing them to halt opera-tions in the largest mine in the country near the Niger border.[79] Along the northern border with Libya, the country is also facing the continued threat of a fallout from Libya, including from Chadian and Nigerien armed groups who have been increasing insecurity in the northern Agadez region, which has a recent history of rebellion against Niamey.[80]

Socio-economic conditions

Niger, Chad, Mali and Libya all experience low rankings on the UNDP Human Development Index (Niger: 189, Chad: 187, Mali: 184, and Libya: 105),[81] and Niger, Chad and Mali remain on the list of least developed countries. In Libya and Chad, the oil industry makes up the dominant economic activity and Mali is a significant gold exporter. In Niger, agriculture accounts for 40% of its GDP,[82] and in Mali 80% of its population engaged in agricultural activities.[83]

These countries face serious challenges for development. In Niger, more than 10 million people (42.9% of the population) were living in extreme poverty in 2020.[84] Chad has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in central Africa, with 856 deaths for every 100 000 live births.[85] In Chad, roughly 6% of the population have access to electricity. Only 8% have access to basic sanitation.[86] The expected years of schooling in the four countries range from 4.5 in Niger to nearly 13 in Libya.

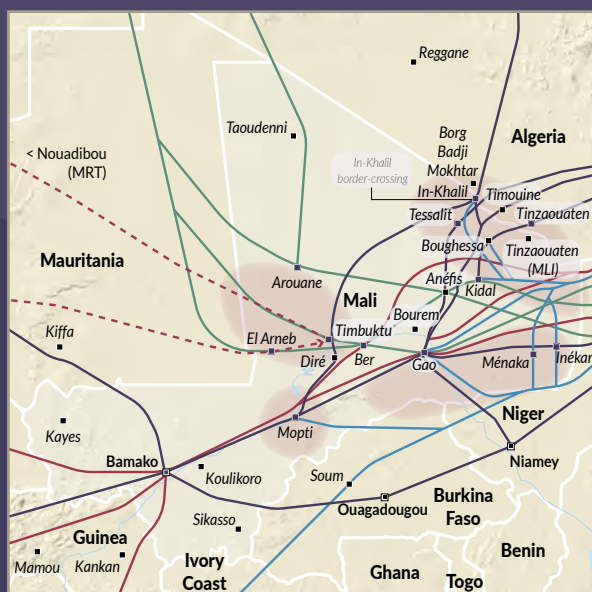| Libya	Chad	Mali	Niger
▪ 212 593 internally displaced persons	▪ 402 703 internally displaced persons	▪ 401 736 internally displaced persons	▪ 280 818 internally displaced persons
▪ 41 681 registered refugees and asylum seekers[87]	▪ 4 700 asylum seekers[89]	▪ 46 930 refugees	▪ 249 765 refugees
▪ 12.9 expected years of schooling[88]	▪ 7.3 expected years of schooling[90]	▪ 894 asylum seekers[91]	▪ 3 306 asylum seekers[93]
		▪ 7.5 expected years of schooling[92]	▪ 4.5 expected years of schooling[94]

Illicit markets and instability

Background

Organized crime in the Sahel–Sahara has mostly been centred on cross-border traf-
ficking and its protection, ranging from weapons trafficking to human smuggling
and contraband. Before the outbreak of the conflicts in Libya and Mali, the region
was primarily a trafficking region for goods such as subsidized goods and cannabis
resin, building on long-running trans-Saharan trade routes. Smuggling in cigarettes
and cannabis resin as well as migrant smuggling, have a decades-long history in the
region. The business models were well established over time. For instance, cannabis
resin trafficking is a hierarchical economy in which major Moroccan drug barons work
with a pool of trusted wholesalers across the northwest of the Maghreb and the
western areas of the Sahara, who then sell to smaller smuggling networks.[95] Cocaine
trafficking emerged as a prominent commodity in the early 2000s, arriving from
South America via West Africa typically. Political corruption allowed the trafficking to
continue uninterrupted while garnering benefits for elites. For instance, before 2012
in Mali, the government used access to and control of trafficking in the north of the
country as a political tool, offering it to those loyal to the government.[96] Separatists
and local leaders also courted traffickers and their money to support their interests.[97]
Similarly, the Mukhabarat, Libya's secret service under former dictator Muammar
Qaddafi, put in place an elaborate system of control based on loyalty and privileged
access to different criminal economies.[98]

Malian refugees. Civilians in
the country have been forced
to flee violence at the hands of
various extremist groups.
*© Olympia de Maismont/AFP
via Getty Images*

ILLICIT TRAFFICKING ROUTES 2019

MALI

Reggane
Taoudenni
< Nouadibou (MRT)
Borg Badji Mokhtar
Algeria
In-Khalil border-crossing
In-Khalil
Timouine
Tessalit
Tinzaouaten
Boughessa
Tinzaouaten (MLI)
Mauritania
Anefis
Arouane
Kidal
Mali
Kiffa
Bourem
El Arneb
Timbuktu
Diré
Ber
Gao
Ménaka
Inékar
Kayes
Niger
Mopti
Niamey
Bamako
Koulikoro
Soum
Sikasso
Ouagadougou
Burkina Faso
Guinea
Ivory Coast
Ghana
Togo
Benin
Mamou
Kankan

NIGER

Ghat
Libya
Qatrun
al-Wigh
Algeria
Tamanrasset
Salvador Pass
Toummo crossing
Amelul
Madama
Kouri Bougoudi goldfield
Wour
In-Khalil border-crossing
Tchibarakatene goldfield
Djado goldfield
Dao Timi
In-Khalil
El Akla
Seguedine
Zouar
Assamaka
Amzeguer goldfield
Lateye
Achegour
Kidal
Arlit
Aguelal
Puits de l'Espoir
Dirkou
Mali
Tassara
Ingal
Agadez
Arbre du Ténéré
Bourem
Tamaya
Tiguidit
Niger
Agadem
Gao
Tahoua
Abalak
Aderbissinat
Chad
Filingué
N'Guigmi
Mao
Maradi
Zinder
Diffa
Moussoro
Niamey
Katsina
Kano
Lake Chad
Burkina Faso
Maiduguri
N'Djamena
Benin
Nigeria
Maroua
Togo
Cameroon
Garoua

LIBYA

Tunisia
Zuwara
Tripoli
al-Khoms
Nalut
Misrata
Benghazi
Tobruk
Ghadames
Bani Walid
Sirte
Harawa
Ajdabiya
Dirj
Shwarif
Nawfaliya
Egypt
Debdeb
Waddan
Jaghbub
al-Hamada
Zilla
Brak al-Shati
Tamanhint
Libya
Ubari
Sebha
Tazirbu
Ghat
Um al-Aranib
Rebiana
Qatrun
al-Wigh
Kufra
Salvador Pass
Kilinje goldfield
Djanet
Toummo crossing
Kouri Bougoudi goldfield
Ezri goldfield
al-Sara airfield
Madama
Aweinat
Niger
Wour
Aouzou
Bardaï
Aounga
Zouar
Miski goldfield
Chad
Sudan

CHAD

Ghat
Libya
Qatrun
Tazirbu
Kufra
Egypt
al-Wigh
Kouri Bougoudi goldfield
Salvador Pass
Toummo crossing
Tanoua
Ezri goldfield
Kilinje goldfield
al-Sara airfield
Amelul
Madama
Aouzou
Aounga
Aweinat
Djado goldfield
Dao Timi
Wour
Bardaï
Miski goldfield
Gouro
Lateye
Seguedine
Zouar
Tigi
Achegour
Dirkou
Ogi
Ounianga Kébir
Puits de l'Espoir
Faya-Largeau
Fada
Ennedi
Arbre du Ténéré
Agadem
Niger
Chad
Kalait
Tiné
Sudan
N'Guigmi
Mao
Biltine
Diffa
Abéché
Jabal amir goldfield
Lake Chad
Moussoro
Ati
Al-Geneina
al-Fashir
Maiduguri
N'Djamena
Batha goldfield
Nyala
Nigeria
Maroua
Zakouma National Park
South Sudan
Garoua
Sarh
Moundou
Cameroon
Central African Republic

LEGEND

— Human smuggling
— Arms
— Cocaine
— Tramadol
— Hashish

◻ Capital
■ City
◼ Trafficking hub
⬤ Goldfield
▨ Area of violence/banditry

SOURCE: Mark Micallef and Alexandre Bish, After the storm: Organized crime across the Sahel following upheaval in Libya and Mali, GI-TOC, November 2019, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/after-the-storm/

Armed groups and illicit economies

Armed group involvement in criminal markets across the Sahel has been extensive. In northern Mali, criminal actors have sought political expedience to conduct business in part by aligning with armed groups. After the state was pushed out of the north in 2012 by a coalition of Islamist, separatist and terrorist groups, traffickers in the region realigned partnerships with 'loyalist, rebel or jihadi groups' who controlled territories that overlapped with their trafficking routes.[99] Meanwhile, armed groups themselves have sought financial gains from control of local trafficking routes. During clashes throughout 2013–2015, armed groups fought over control of territory with lucrative trafficking routes for the ability to tax and trade in lucrative illegal markets. Criminal actors have adapted to political settlements between armed groups, with the ultimate aim of stabilizing their business operations, as in the case of the 2015 accord between the government and armed groups in the north.[100]

The case of migrant smuggling in Libya shows the flexibility of armed groups to capitalize on both illegal activity and responses to it. In Libya, armed militias profiting from the migrant smuggling boom in the western coastal areas changed course in 2017 to serve as enforcement for international interests aiming to stem the flow of migrants.[101] Since then, they have moved to capitalize on the country's detention of migrants.

As established criminal networks broke down after 2012, growing instability in the northern Sahel increased the number of armed groups in the region, resulting in greater violent competition for control of trans-Sahelian trafficking and smuggling routes. Two of these types of groups are mercenary groups and groups of bandits. Armed mercenary groups in northern Chad engage in criminal economies three mains ways: transporting arms, people or drugs (usually cocaine, cannabis resin and sometimes heroin); protection and escorting of traffickers; and hijacking drug convoys.[102] More recently, since 2020, Chadian Zaghawa and Libyan Tebu armed groups have repeatedly clashed while smuggling cannabis resin in northern Niger.[103]

Organized banditry is a secondary illicit economy that profits off existing routes for the movement of goods and general instability. Groups often target commodities ranging from gold to drugs and weapons.

Since 2020, Chadian Zaghawa and Libyan Tebu armed groups have repeatedly clashed while smuggling cannabis resin in northern Niger.

Mali: Profile of criminal actors

The traditional notion of mafia-style groups does not apply to Mali's criminal networks as these groups do not have strict hierarchies. Criminal networks are prevalent across the country. Human smuggling in Mali is built around various sets of actors with overlapping webs of relationships. In many cases, human trafficking networks in the north are integrated with drug trafficking and politico-military groups. The narcotics networks – which grew out of the trafficking of both licit and illicit goods from Libya, Algeria and Mauritania into northern Mali – are controlled mostly by Arab and Tuareg groups. While other foreign nationals are involved in criminal economies in some of Mali's urban centres, they do not exert control over the entire supply chain.

Numerous armed groups engage in different illicit activities, and organized crime funds most armed groups – either through direct involvement, taxation or protection rackets. Yet there is ongoing tension between armed groups and trafficking networks because their interests are not exactly aligned. Clashes over criminal economies often form the basis of alliances between armed groups.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021

Niger: Profile of criminal actors

Smuggling is carried out predominantly by loosely organized criminal networks. Criminal groups from the Tuareg and Tebu ethnic groups smuggle everything from foodstuffs to cars along Niger's border with Nigeria, using truck convoys to travel through the desert. Most local criminal networks are territorially based and organized into ethnic groups. Agadez's transnational smuggling networks are often organized along ethnic lines and connected to larger networks.

Since 2018, a large drug trafficking network has increasingly been using Niger as a transit point between the Maghreb and Europe. Armed Malian groups have a stronghold on some smuggling routes and have been connected with key political stakeholders in Niamey. A number of violent extremist organizations act as quasi-mafia-style groups in southern Niger. Tramadol is sold by mafia networks made up primarily of both Nigerien and Malian nationals. Government officials at all levels are suspected of being involved in the smuggling of drugs, humans and gold, and there have been a number of corruption and alleged embezzlement scandals in Niger in recent years.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021

Malian soldiers and members of France's Operation Barkhane on patrol in central Mali. © *Daphne Benoit/AFP via Getty Images*

Regional spread and market expansion

Some armed groups have moved throughout the region to capitalize on areas of opportunity and instability. For instance, Nigerien, Chadian and Sudanese rebel groups, as well as less organized armed gangs, have based themselves in various parts of Libya, using these bases to access revenues through various forms of trafficking, protection rackets and mercenary services. Opportunists in both criminal groups and militias relocate to gold mining regions, such as in northern Chad, where they engage in or tax mining, or provide related services (e.g. equipment procurement or trafficking tramadol to sell to miners).[104] In Mali, there has been a geographic shift in instability since 2019 from the north to the central region of the country. While goods moved through the central region, it has since become a hub of trafficking activity and violence, increasing the need for more arms. Mopti is now the central hub for local banditry and local abduction.[105]

Military operations have also caused a number of groups to relocate. A growing military presence in Mali, Algeria and, to a lesser extent, Niger – with the French military Operation Barkhane since 2014 and US surveillance and security operations – have added pressure on trafficking across the region, especially in the corridor connecting northern Mali to southern Libya through northern Niger.[106] Criminal actors and terrorist groups have moved 'towards border areas, often forcing these actors to share the same spots'.[107]

Foreign criminal actors across the Sahel

Foreign criminal actors feeding the Sahel's drug and smuggling economies include Latin American and Asian cartels, mafia groups in the Maghreb, and mafia groups linked to African diasporas abroad. Foreign actors are also involved in the smuggling of humans and gold, and those with connections in Sudan and Dubai appear to have increasing influence. Most foreign criminal networks are loosely structured and their key members are easily replaced.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021
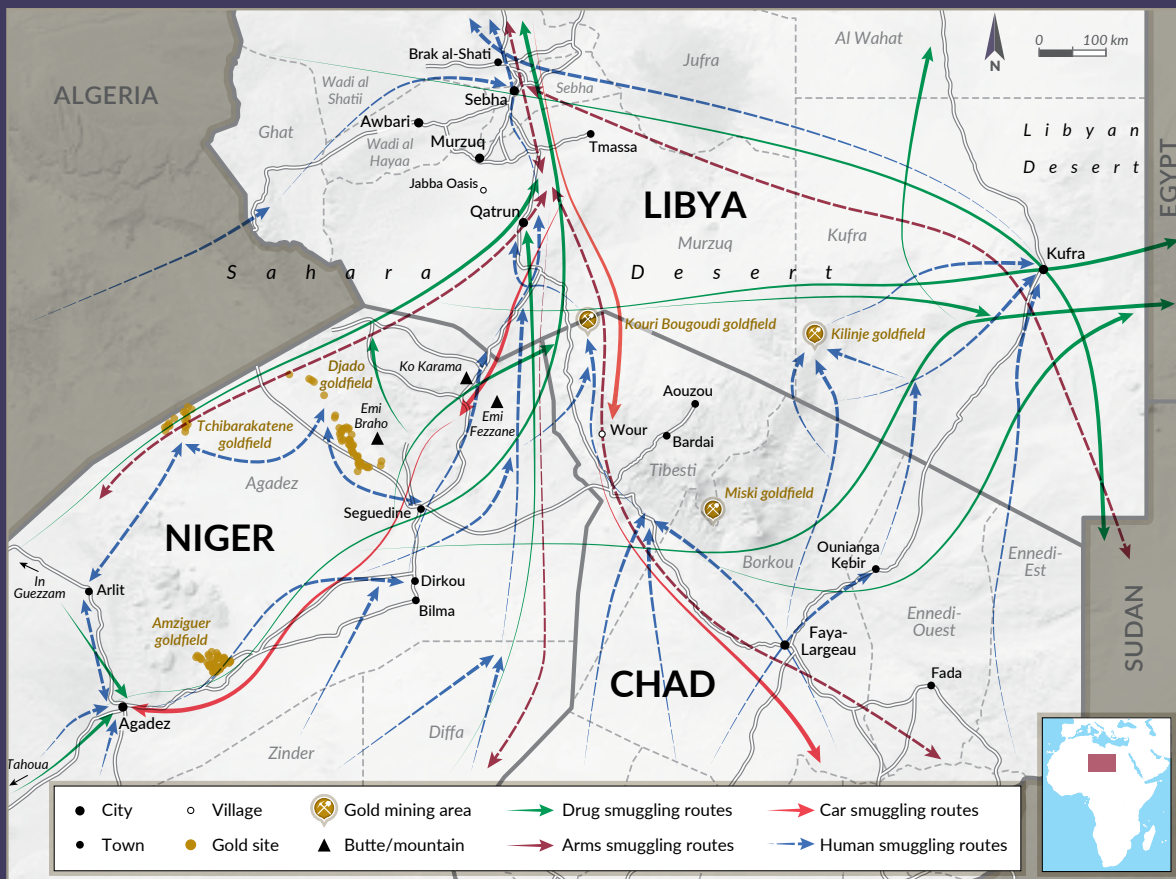
FIGURE 4 Smuggling flows in the Chad–Niger–Libya triangle, August 2021.

SOURCE: Alexandre Bish, Soldiers of fortune: The future of Chadian fighters after the Libyan ceasefire, GI-TOC, December 2021, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/chadian-fighters-libyan-ceasefire/

High-value commodities, such as cocaine and weapons, have been impacted by banditry and instability, raising costs of operation and reducing the profit margins of traffickers, thus making the Sahel-Sahara a less desirable region for global trafficking.[108] The trafficking of prescription medicines, such as tramadol, for both local markets and export to North Africa has increased in recent years. The decreasing viability of human smuggling operations has led some smugglers to traffic prescription medication and engage in banditry. The spread of kidnap for ransom targeting local communities is also a growing industry, particularly in Libya and Mali, in which criminals target officials and military personnel in order to extract a financial rent or conduct on-command operations.

Arms trafficking

Libya has been the primary source for the arms trade in the region since 2011. The outflow of arms from government stockpiles in Libya fuelled an illicit arms trade across the region, and contributed to increased conflict, strengthening the capacity of criminal groups. Since the heyday of the post-revolution period, the flow of weapons pouring out of Libya has declined as internal needs grew following the 2014 civil war. The French and US security forces in Niger and Libya, and the militarization of the Algerian border, have also undermined weapons trafficking.[109]

As noted in the GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index 2021, currently most arms dealers in Libya are relatively small and play a mediator role between different actors. However, arms transfers by governments to Libya continue, in breach of a UN embargo, making it a key source country for illegal arms. Arms transfers are made possible through enabling structures such as offshore banking, offshore companies, and jurisdictions with low levels of enforcement and high levels of corruption.[110]

In Mali, Libya was an important source of illicit arms and ammunition for armed groups. Arms collected in 2012 are still circulating in the arms trafficking market. Weapons transferred included heavy machine guns mounted on 4×4 vehicles. More recently, there has also been a proliferation of sophisticated and deadly small arms in central Mali, which likely come from looted local stockpiles and might even be procured directly from Malian security forces. The issue of arms trafficking is increasing, in part because conflict is spreading across the country, including in the central region.[111]

In Chad, a growing number of armed groups along the country's borders has increased demand for arms. The overflow of conflicts from Libya since 2011, the Darfur region of Sudan since 2003, and the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region since 2009 have all impacted the demand for arms. Several different corridors are used for trafficking arms, including Niger, Sudan, Libya, Nigeria and the Central African Republic.[112]

As noted in the GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index 2021, Niger is a major transit corridor for weapons destined for conflict zones in the region. The deterioration of Niger's own security and stability however has increasingly made it a destination market for arms. The Islamic State in West Africa poses a substantial threat to Niger's border region with Nigeria, and armed groups operating in Nigeria's Zamfara forests, which border Niger's Maradi region, have become increasingly violent. Conflict in the Tillabéri region continues, while armed Tebu groups based in southern Libya prey on illicit economies in northern Niger. Illegal gold mining has also generated a market for illicit explosives. Weapons include munitions from past conflicts, diversions from government stockpiles, and those smuggled from other countries in the region.[113]

Libya: Profile of criminal actors

Libya has a diverse range of mafia-style militia groups with different names and clearly identifiable leaders. These groups are well armed and not only dominate different criminal markets, but hold more control over specific areas in the country than the government. Criminal entrepreneurs are present in Libya. They tend to be individual families with political affiliations using quasi-corporate structures to import and export a wide range of commodities. In particular, large-scale arms supplies from foreign states to different Libyan parties create new opportunities for criminal networks to proliferate in the country.

Over the last couple of years, organized crime in Libya has largely been linked to the proximity of militia groups and criminal actors to the political class. In some cases, this closeness creates an interdependence whereby the political process is indirectly dependent on the proceeds of organized crime. Meanwhile, there are very few foreign criminal actors in Libya. There are, however, foreign mercenary groups who engage in criminal activity in southern Libya and in bordering countries.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021

Migrant smuggling

Migrant smuggling through the Sahel and Libya to Europe experienced a boom in the years after the conflict, reaching its peak around 2016. State collapse in Libya greatly amplified the movement of people migrating irregularly through the region, many of them heading for Europe. This became the primary illegal market targeted by Western governments at the time.

Partnerships struck by some EU member states with various actors in Libya and Niger ushered in a law-enforcement campaign that reduced the industry's capacity while driving it underground. Since 2017, the upward trend in migrant smuggling has been reversed, with the collapse of the protection racket by Libyan militias that underpinned the surge in irregular migration between 2014 and 2017. In Libya, the armed groups previously involved in the business largely retreated from the trade, switching to law enforcement instead. These shifts were accompanied by EU-backed crackdowns on migrant-smuggling economies in Niger and Sudan in 2016 and 2017. Chad's attempts to close its border with Libya since 2017, which have been stepped up since early 2019, have further impacted transnational criminal operations.[114] By 2019, human smuggling routes scattered, particularly in Niger, and at least part of the industry shifted focus westward, targeting Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as coastal passages to Europe from these countries.[115]

The number of migrants leaving Libya for Europe remained constant through 2019 and 2020 (though below 2016 levels) despite Haftar's attack on Tripoli in April

Migrants attempt to reach Europe, 2017. Migrant smuggling, which peaked in the years following state collapse in Libya, became the main illicit market targeted by Western governments.© *Samuel Nacar/ SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images*

2019, the massive mobilization following it, and COVID-19. In 2020, there were nearly 30 000 attempted departures compared with approximately 19 500 in 2019 and 40 000 in 2018.[116] These departures were expected to double over 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Niger's human smuggling economy hard in 2020 due to local and regional travel restrictions, following a year in which irregular migratory flows had recovered slightly from the massive declines after mid-2016. Dozens of smugglers, known as passeurs, turned to alternative activities such as fuel and goods smuggling and gold mining. Others resorted to arms and drug trafficking, as well as armed banditry. Smugglers who continued to operate moved people through riskier paths, causing the deaths of dozens of migrants. While Agadez remained a key hub for northbound flows, several new departure hubs emerged across the country.[117]

In Mali, Gao and Timbuktu served as northern Mali's two principal hubs of human smuggling activities. However, from 2018 into late 2019, Gao became increasingly isolated, owing to insecurity in central Mali and the neighbouring areas of Burkina Faso and Niger.[118] After COVID-19 precautions lessened, activity in Timbuktu was returning to pre-pandemic levels, as happened in Gao towards the second half of 2021. The pick-up in Gao was slower owing to widespread insecurity in the Liptako-Gourma region.[119] According to one analysis, human smuggling has shrunk but become increasingly clandestine, resulting in longer routes, increased costs to smuggling services, increased profits for smugglers, and greater risks to migrants moving through more dangerous territory.[120]

Illicit drugs

Large-scale trans-Saharan cocaine trafficking is declining as Libya's conflict and banditry in Niger and Libya have undermined the reliability of these routes. This dynamic has been augmented by greater use of maritime routes, connecting South America to Europe via West and North Africa, especially Morocco, Algeria and Libya. In spite of the disruption to this trafficking stream, the high profit margin in cocaine trade still makes it the most lucrative illicit economy in the Sahel. To facilitate its trade and avoid the scrutiny of security forces, new routes and strategic trafficking hubs have emerged in remote border regions of Niger and Mali in recent years. Even these shifts are risky as armed groups target these convoys in transit.[121] Violence and competition for control over narcotics trafficking in northern Mali have impacted the cocaine trade, making movement from Mali to Libya riskier and costlier. This process, aided by shifts in West and North Africa, has displaced a great deal of large-scale cocaine trafficking away from trans-Saharan routes. Notwithstanding this, cocaine trafficking remains a profitable and contested activity that is likely to keep fuelling instability in the years ahead.
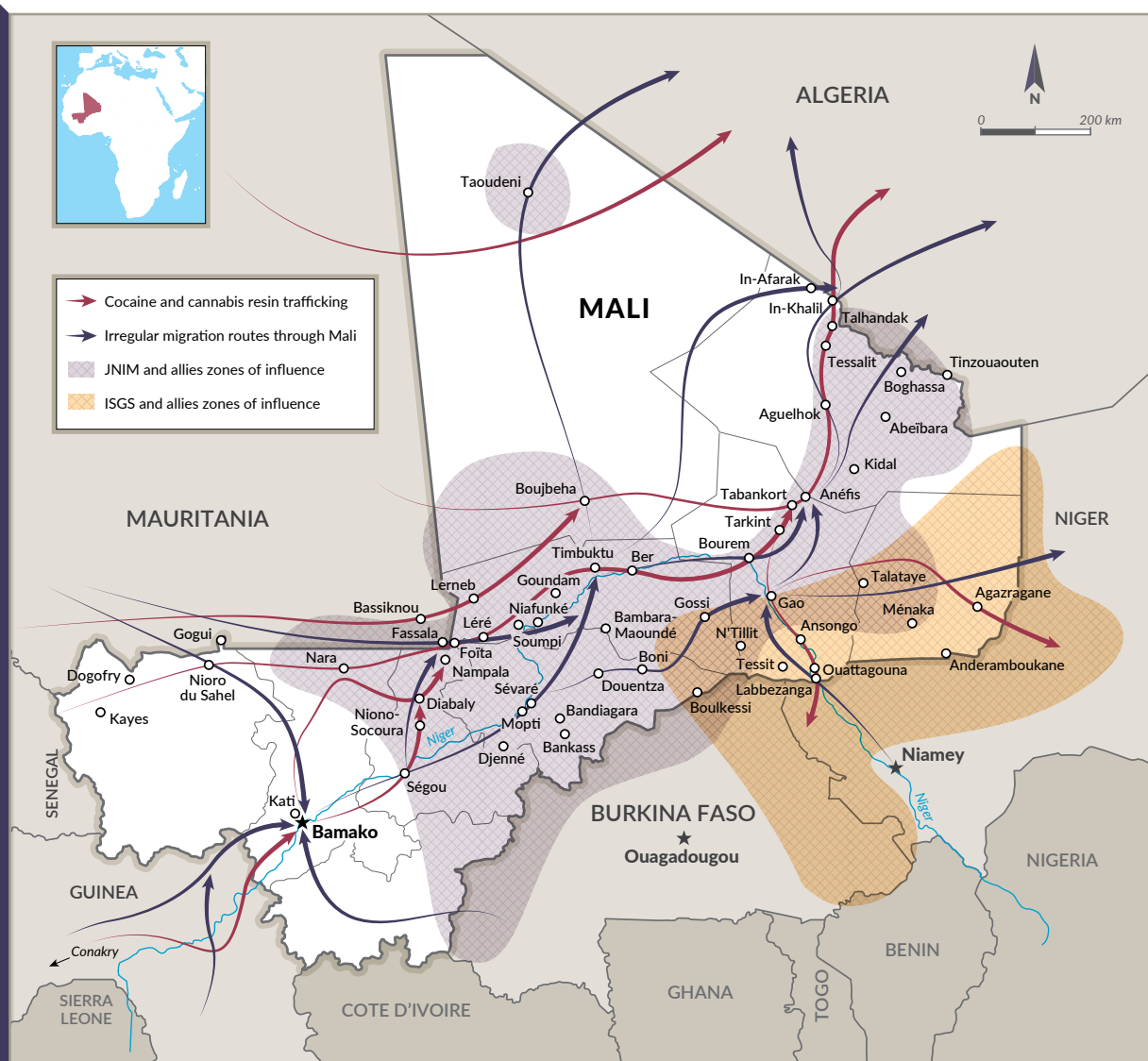
FIGURE 5 Drug and migrant smuggling, and extremist groups' areas of control, 2021.

SOURCE: Peter Tinti, Whose crime is it anyway? Organized crime and international stabilization efforts in Mali, GI-TOC (forthcoming)

Illicit mining

Illicit gold mining throughout the region has been on the rise since the 2012 discovery of a significant gold vein in the region. Mali is Africa's third largest producer of gold, and deposits have been found in Niger, Chad, Algeria and Sudan. Since 2016, armed groups have seized gold mining sites in areas where the state is weak in Mali and Niger.[122] It is reported that several important artisanal gold mining entrepreneurs in the north of Niger and Mali, were or still are major players in narco-trafficking.[123] Gold mines have played a key role in the development of criminal operations in northern Chad as mining sites act as logistical hubs for various criminal activities, such as drug trafficking and human smuggling and trafficking. Since the end of the last war in Libya, between April and June 2020, the situation in Chad has been compounded by the return of various Chadian and Sudanese rebel groups engaged in the conflict as guns for hire on both sides of the fighting. These groups have been leveraging the hardware they acquired during their time in Libya to draw revenue from lucrative gold mining, trafficking and human smuggling in the region.[124]

'Mohmammed' is one of many human and drug smugglers based in Agadez, Niger.
© *The Washington Post/ Getty Images*

Chad: Profile of criminal actors

Several armed groups and rebels operating in the north and east of Chad are involved in trafficking activities, including drug trafficking, artisanal gold mining, car smuggling and human smuggling. There is a proliferation of unorganized and informal traffickers, bandits, criminals, robbers and road gangs in this region. There are also small autonomous foreign militias in the country, which are known to be involved in wildlife poaching, human trafficking, arms trafficking, mineral trafficking, raiding and kidnapping. It is also possible that armed groups in the far north that are opposed to the N'Djamena regime recruit Sudanese and Libyan mercenaries.

Corruption is omnipresent in the Chadian administration. Customs and police services have been singled out for protecting traffickers. There are also reports of wildlife officers being involved in the illicit ivory trade. As for foreign actors, Chad is at the epicentre of cross-border crime in the region.

Source: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021
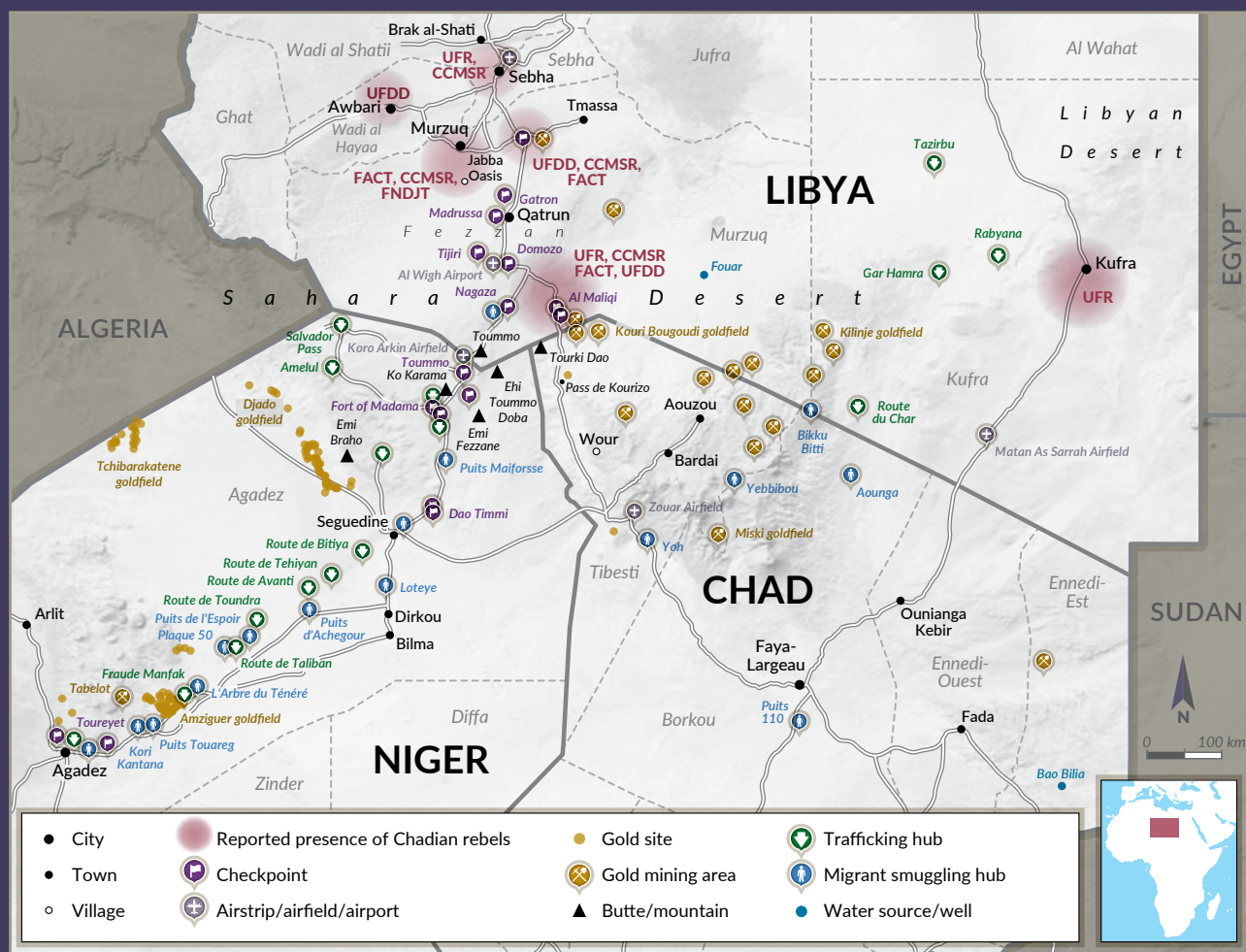
FIGURE 6 Chadian rebel presence in southern Libya, early 2019.

NOTE: Geocoordinates were collated by the GI-TOC between 2018 and 2021.

SOURCE: Alexandre Bish, Soldiers of fortune, The future of Chadian fighters after the Libyan ceasefire, GI-TOC, December 2021, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/chadian-fighters-libyan-ceasefire/

COLOMBIA

Members of Colombia's guerrilla movement, Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), 2016.

© Nicolo Filippo Rosso/Bloomberg via Getty Images

I n the case of Colombia, the short-term aftermath of a 2016 peace settlement with
the main armed group in the country, the FARC – which is also a significant actor
in illicit economies – reveals post-conflict conditions. In this case, territory left by
the main armed group has been fought over by multiple armed groups to gain control
of the cocaine trade and illicit mining.

Crime and conflict following the FARC peace accord

Colombia is a middle-income country and a member of the Organisation for
Economic Co-operation and Development. The national government is stable and
elections occur on a regular basis. The country has experienced an ongoing internal
conflict with armed groups, primarily the FARC, since the 1960s. In 2016, after over
50 years of internal armed conflict, the Colombian government and the left-wing
guerrilla group FARC signed a comprehensive peace agreement that comprised
several structural reforms including on security, land and coca production. The agree-
ment was signed amid a politically adverse environment and became a divisive issue
for Colombians, who voted 50.21% against the peace process in a plebiscite. After
the results of the plebiscite, Congress introduced some changes and approved the
new agreement that was later ratified by the Constitutional Court.

As of 2016, it was reported that the FARC controlled territory holding 70% of coca
crops. The group was known to tax coca growth and coca paste production, while
smaller criminal groups typically converted the paste into cocaine and moved it
onward. The FARC was also known for extorting local businesses and communities
in the territory it controlled, such as cattle ranchers and illegal gold miners.[125] Where
the FARC held territorial control, it had some form of local authority over illicit and
legal economic activity, but evidence suggests it did not singularly operate either
illegal gold mining or the cocaine trade.

With the signing of the peace accord, the FARC largely disbanded and relinquished control of its territory. The remaining armed groups are now disputing the areas left by the FARC that the state failed to occupy. These areas often have one or more illegal economies or are strategic for drug trafficking (such as border areas and key cities on the Pacific coast).[126] The inefficient implementation of the peace process, the failure of the state to occupy the areas under FARC control and the incapacity of the state to establish an integral presence in traditionally marginalized areas are believed to have contributed to the increase in violence.

The government did not quickly fill the leadership void in these territories, and different armed groups have struggled to gain control of the territory and the illicit markets. This has happened both through armed confrontation and violence against local communities, civil society leaders and other armed groups, and through agreements between criminal actors that were former enemies in other regions of the country. In some cases, groups have aligned in some parts of the country while fighting each other in other regions.

The 2016 Peace Accord

The peace agreement managed to successfully demobilize approximately 13 000 men and women[127] and saw a reduction for all security indicators, including homicides, forced disappearances, kidnappings and internal displacement at the national level.[128] However, the agreement was signed not only amid a politically challenging environment in a divided society but also against a backdrop of many other active illegal armed groups willing to enter and control the recently contested areas and the illicit economies. The ability of armed groups to exploit areas left over from the demobilization of the FARC has undermined the commitments made by the government during the peace process and strengthened illicit economic revenues, on which many agricultural labourers are dependent. Therefore, insecurity and violence have been increasing in these regions since 2017.

Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos (front left) shakes hands with the leader of rebel group FARC during the 2016 Peace Accord aimed at ending a half century of conflict. © *Luis Acosta/AFP via Getty Images*

Illegal armed groups

The peace process with the FARC left around 30 dissident groups that seem to be organizing around two branches. One key group is led by Gentil Duarte, a former middle-rank actor with military power and knowledge of the situation on the ground. The other is Nueva Marquetalia (also called Segunda Marquetalia), led by former chief negotiator Iván Márquez who has political connections and reputation but low military power.[129] They create violence but are nowhere close to becoming a nation-wide guerrilla organization in part because the local, national and international context has changed, but also because the different groups have different interests and are at different stages of development. Some groups are more interested in securing local illicit rents and criminal governance, while others specialize in the provision of criminal services for transnational organized groups.[130]

Among the active armed groups, the ELN is the oldest one. They have significantly grown in number and geographical influence since the peace agreement – with an estimate of between 3 000 and 5 000 members[131] operating in nine of Colombia's 32 departments[132] – and have increased their participation in illegal economies, including drug trafficking. This expansion has meant increased fighting with other armed groups, like Clan del Golfo ('Gulf clan').[133]

The last negotiation attempt with the ELN was cancelled by the government after an attack on a police station that killed over 20 people.[134] The negotiators are still in Cuba, unable to return to Colombia due to an arrest warrant issued by the government, which could have a negative impact on the level of control exerted by the highest-ranking combatants over an already federal group.[135]

Civil society organizations at the local level have been calling on them to resume negotiations with the hope of reducing the levels of violence. But some experts believe the conditions are not right at this time, citing the fact that the ELN has increased its presence on the Venezuelan side of the border, where they have a safe haven and access to illicit economies such as gold mining. The exact number of ELN members in Venezuela is uncertain, but estimates point to 1 100 combatants.[136]

Clan del Golfo is an armed group that was created after the paramilitary demobi-lization between 2003 and 2006. They operate with a mix network model, where part of the organization responds to a central structure, while other parts are local criminal groups that provide services or follow orders when instructed. They became the strongest criminal group in the country, operating in 17 departments, but have been the target of strong and continued military actions that have weak-ened them. They have been clashing with the ELN and FARC dissident groups and tried to make an alliance with Los Rastrojos ('the stubble fields'), another post-para-military group and former enemy, to further their influence on the Venezuela border.[137]

There are myriad other armed groups that fall under different categories, including criminal groups, which are progressively gaining more relevance. They all have different capacities, influence, interests, level of operation (local vs. regional), and ever-changing relationships with one another. For instance, Clan del Golfo has an active dispute with FARC dissident groups in one region, but is allegedly cooperating with them in another one.

Members of the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's last remaining rebel group, 2019. *© Raul Arboleda/ AFP via Getty Images*

Colombia: Profile of criminal actors

There are numerous sophisticated and powerful mafia-style groups in Colombia, including the ex-FARC mafia and the ELN. Colombia's main cultivation and departure points for illegal drugs and many of the informal mining areas are largely under the control of these powerful organized criminal groups. They comprise thousands of individuals and are involved not only in transnational organized crime, but also in activities such as extortion. They exert social control and illicit governance in certain areas, imposing norms, regulating civilian activity, and providing social services in lieu of the state.

Colombia's organized crime networks are well structured, though there has been some fragmentation in recent decades. These groups appear to have stronger levels of influence and impact in modern-day Colombia. As the cocaine trade has fragmented, more criminal networks have entered the industry to carry out parts of the trade. However, they also operate in most other illicit economies, including arms trafficking, environmental crimes and the trafficking and smuggling of people.

Although corruption in Colombia is of a lower level and less systemic than in its neighbouring Latin American countries, it is still endemic in all state branches and levels of government. For example, politicians often form alliances with criminal actors in an attempt to win elections, later returning favours by embezzling state funds to such actors. Criminal groups regularly bribe judges and attorneys. Police, military and prison officials are also frequently embroiled in corruption scandals.

There is no evidence of armed, organized foreign groups having a presence in Colombia. However, there are a plethora of foreign emissaries from drug trafficking groups involved in the processing and transport of drugs. There has also been an increase in members of European mafia groups collaborating with Colombian actors in the cocaine trade, and a notable increase in Mexican actors. However, the evidence points to Mexican cartels serving in emissary roles within Colombia, rather than seeking to establish territorial control or solidify their presence in the country. Finally, Brazil's powerful prison gangs also maintain an operational presence within Colombia.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021

Illicit economies and instability

Colombia has many illicit economies ranging from environmental crime to extortion and drug trafficking, but cocaine production and export has been at the centre of the agenda for decades as Colombia is the world's number one producer.

Coca crops significantly decreased after an intense US-backed programme to reduce illicit crops. However, between 2013 and 2018 – during the peace process and the first year of implementation – crops almost tripled, reaching an all-time high in 2017 with 171 000 hectares cultivated.[138] This increase can be explained through the reconstitution of drug trafficking in territories no longer controlled by the FARC, low levels of eradication and substitution in key clusters, the increase in shipment seizures that might have fostered an increase in crops, and the expectation of benefits for coca farmers as part of

the peace process.[139] A downward trend in crop production started in 2018 and is now consolidating, as 2020 closed with 143 000 hectares.[140] The increase of forced eradication and substitution, the end of the incentives of the agreement's substitution plan, the increase of crops in Peru and Venezuela, and the increase in productivity help explain this trend.[141]

Illegal mining also plays an increasingly important role, especially since the price of gold has increased in the international market. The illegal mining boom started in Peru and has now expanded to Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil and it appears to be the fastest growing illegal economy in countries with the natural resource[142] as it can compete in price, is less risky than illicit goods, and helps launder illicit money through 'legal' companies in a legal market.[143]

ARMED GROUPS IN COLOMBIA

1 Bajo Cauca/Southern Córdoba

2016

ARMED GROUPS

Increased presence and domination by Clan del Golfo and some small paramilitary groups.

RELATIONSHIP

Confrontation until 2015 when Clan del Golfo led non-aggression pacts with other organisations.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

2020

ARMED GROUPS

Clan del Golfo remains dominant, increased presence of additional groups, including ELN, Caparrapos, and four FARC dissident groups.

RELATIONSHIP

Confrontation

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

2 Catatumbo, Northern Santander

2016

ARMED GROUPS

Disputed territory among armed groups, including ELN, FARC and EPL.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

2020

ARMED GROUPS

Multiple armed groups with different and changing levels of infuence and power. ELN, EPL, Los Rastrojos, FARC dissident groups, Clan del Golfo.

RELATIONSHIP

Shifting Alliances, including ELN – EPL confrontation in 2019; collaboration to weaken ELN by Clan del Golfo and Los Rastrojos.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

COLOMBIA

3 Cauca

2016

ARMED GROUPS

FARC dominant

RELATIONSHIP

Confrontation with armed forces.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

2020

ARMED GROUPS

Multiple armed groups disputing the territories, including EPL, at least 3 ELN factions, and at least 7 FARC dissident factions.

RELATIONSHIP

Confrontation, including: different FARC dissident groups vs. ELN and Pelusos/EPL. ELN vs. Local gangs.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Coca crops and Illegal mining

Illicit drugs

In recent years, coca crops have become more concentrated in production clusters, concentrating more crops in fewer municipalities. These areas are often in border areas or strategic locations for drug trafficking and include the capacity to cover more steps of the process, from harvesting the leaves to producing and exporting cocaine. As of 2020, they represented 16% of the affected territory and contained 40.5% of coca, compared with 36% in 2019.[144] The UN Office on Drugs and Crime reports that 85% of coca in Colombia is grown in just five departments.[145]

Notwithstanding a decrease of crops and its concentration (often in protected areas like indigenous reservations, Afro collective lands and national parks), productivity has increased: more cocaine is being produced with less crops due to the improvement of techniques, the use of agrochemicals and the age of the crops (between two and four years). For instance, two large production sites linked to the ELN were found in Nariño, on the southern border with Ecuador, and Catatumbo, on the eastern border with Venezuela, with an estimated production capacity of five tonnes a month.[146]

Colombia's approach to tackling coca crops has so far failed to produce successful results in the longer term and has often increased tensions between the state and coca farmers. After years of aerial spraying and forced eradication, the peace process provided a national voluntary substitution programme (Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito, PNIS) that included temporary payments, technical assistance and productive projects to replace coca for farmers that subscribed.

By 31 December 2020, 98% of the almost 100 000 families subscribed had fulfilled the commitments, while fewer than 6 000 families have a project supported by the state.[147] The current government, partially elected on a mandate to modify the peace agreement, has shown questionable political will to fully implement the PNIS. They have created a parallel substitution programme while boosting forced eradication and attempting to resume aerial spraying, which was banned by the Constitutional Court during the previous administration due to health risks.

Communities are often trapped due to the armed and criminal groups interested in the crops and operating in the areas, the lack of other opportunities, and the forced eradication attempts. This strategy fails to provide long-term results because the replanting rate with forced eradication is 50–67%,[148] compared with 0.8%[149] for voluntary substitution, stressing the relationship between the state and already marginalized communities.

It is worth highlighting that while there are general theories explaining the increase and decrease of crops at the national level, every department and municipality has its own dynamics. In some departments there were large crop decreases, only some of which were linked to eradication and substitution,[150] while in others crops increased more than six times in just four years.[151] In other departments, the security situation linked to criminal dynamics and criminal governance increases the risk for communities to participate in the PNIS and contributes to an increase of violence. Analyzing such local dynamics is key to understand the illicit drug trade more broadly.

Illegal mining

In Colombia, gold mining occurs along river beds and in mines. There are around 67 000 hectares of illegal mining, many of which are influenced or controlled by armed and criminal actors. Armed groups are involved in several ways. Controlling territory where mining occurs, they extort artisanal miners, either by the amount of product they extract or charge for the machinery they use. Gold is also valuable to criminal groups as a money laundering asset.[152] In terms of smuggling and export, it is unclear how much control criminal groups maintain, but appear linked to wider networks that include businesses and individuals. Research carried out by Global Financial Integrity found that 13 separate criminal groups appeared linked to cases in which authorities seized illegal gold or illegal gold mining equipment. Those most frequently mentioned were the ELN, Clan del Golfo or Los Urabeños, and the now-defunct FARC.[153] By 2016, illegal mining generated around US$3 billion in Colombia, almost twice as much as drug trafficking.[154]

Colombia's approach to tackling coca crops has so far failed to produce successful results.

Aerial view of an illegal mining area on the banks of the Cauca river. © *Luis Robayo/AFP via Getty Images*

Illegal mining has many consequences beyond human security, criminal governance and violence. For instance, networks of labour and sexual exploitation tend to surround mining sites, preying on the vulnerable local population and migrants. The environmental consequences are also very relevant. For example, illegal gold mining in the Amazon region has contaminated rivers, affecting local fauna and indigenous communities and contributing to deforestation.[155]

The Venezuela factor

Colombia and Venezuela share a porous border of over 2 000 kilometres. The ongoing crisis in Venezuela has led to the migration of over 1.7 million people to Colombia, exceeding the capacity of the Colombian government, especially at the local level.[156] The (mis)handling of diplomatic relationships has negatively impacted security in Colombia.

Many armed and criminal groups from at least three countries (Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil) are disputing the control of the illicit economies and the territory along the border region, leading to constant clashes and unstable alliances. For instance, the Clan del Golfo and Los Rastrojos are working together to weaken a very strong ELN, which has historically had influence and power in the area, despite being rivals in other regions.[157] Both the ELN and Los Pelusos ('the squaddies') – a division of the former Ejército Popular de Liberación (popular liberation army) guerrilla group – have historically had a strong presence in bordering departments and have been involved in cross-border arms and drugs trafficking. The FARC dissident groups are

now disputing control of illicit economies, both among themselves and with other armed groups like Los Rastrojos. Meanwhile, further south there are Brazilian crime groups involved in illicit activities, especially drug trafficking.[158]

In addition to the disputes and changing alliances between illegal armed groups, the Venezuelan Armed Forces and regime also play an important role in illegal dynamics in the border area. After years of passive acceptance of guerrillas and armed groups in Venezuela, the regime has started to openly combat some of the groups, which has caused a spiral of violence, human rights abuses and divisions between groups. In March 2021, the Venezuelan Army openly clashed with Gentil Duarte's group (the dissident FARC faction), taking more losses than the dissident and weakening Maduro's image, while strengthening Duarte's reputation of armed strength. These confrontations between FARC dissidents and the regime benefit the already strong ELN.[159]

The violence and the broader Venezuelan economic and humanitarian crises have had a negative effect on human security. For instance, the department of Norte de Santander has above average rates of sexual exploitation and forced labour.[160] Homicides have been increasing in border municipalities since 2016 and since a reconfiguration of armed groups started at the end of 2020, hundreds of people have been forcibly displaced, including Venezuelan migrants.[161] On the other side, disputes over territory, control over illicit economies and trafficking routes have increased the vulnerability of indigenous communities in the Venezuelan Amazon region as they are now subject to extortion and the influence of different armed groups.[162]

Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. The crisis in Venezuela has led to over 1.7 million migrating across the border.
© Juancho Torres/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Venezuela: Profile of criminal actors

Venezuelan mafia-style groups are violent and have substantial territorial control and access to weapons. Megabandas, a new type of criminal organization originating in prisons, have developed control over territories and are involved in arms, cocaine and non-renewable resource trafficking. The most notorious megabandas include El Juvenal, El tren del Norte, El tren del Llano, Los Capracio, El Totó, El tren de Aragua and El Coqui. Criminal structures known as pranes also control illegal weapon and drug markets within prisons, engaging in violence and instigating deadly prison riots and attacks against state security officials.

The colectivos are armed, unregulated groups financed by the government and, although their initial aim was to protect communities, many are accused of drug trafficking and violence against anti-government protestors. The most influential are Los Tupamaros, Alexis Vive, La Piedrita, Colectivo Montaraz and Colectivo Tres Raíces in Caracas. Another group with mafia characteristics is the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation, previously known as the Bolivarian Liberation Forces, a pro-government guerrilla group that split in 2008.

Other criminal actors include Colombian criminal groups, primarily FARC dissidents and the ELN, who use Venezuela as a base for cocaine, gas, gold and human smuggling. FARC groups move drugs to Mexico and Brazil in return for high-grade weaponry and are also involved in gold and coltan extraction and smuggling. The ELN is involved in cocaine, arms and human smuggling and is tolerated by Venezuelan authorities and security forces, who are accused of aiding its expansion. BACRIM groups (from the Spanish bandas criminales, 'criminal gangs') are also involved in cocaine and human smuggling.

Loosely organized criminal networks may use violence to commit theft, contract killings, extortion and the street sale of drugs. Their increasing membership may be ascribed to the current economic and humanitarian crises. The cocaine trade is reportedly aided by state actors and armed forces; many officials are accused of facilitating drug trafficking through airports and via connections with Colombian guerrilla groups as members of the loosely knit Cártel de los Soles. In addition, the Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – Bolivian National Guard (GNB) has allegedly collaborated with Colombian drug traffickers, and political elites have also been accused of cocaine trafficking and of using the state-owned oil company for money laundering.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC, September 2021, https://ocindex.net/

Impact

The struggle to control the vacated land and lucrative businesses after the signing of the peace agreement has had unwanted consequences. Among other negative impacts, coca crops, illegal mining, ranching and land-grabbing have increased the rates of deforestation in Colombia. The criminal dynamics that emerged after the signing of the peace agreement and the exit of FARC combatants from these areas allowed for the deforestation to increase at high rates.

While the national homicide rate has decreased, murders of human rights defenders and ex-combatants have increased and Colombia has become the most danger-ous country in the world for human rights defenders.[163] The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported a non-exhaustive count of 472 leaders killed[164] between 2017 and 2020 (while civil society organizations have reported over 1 200),[165] and 243 ex-combatants killed since the signing of the agreement.[166] Many of the attacks have been in areas heavily affected by conflict and where the FARC was historically present,[167] which often had weak state presence and slow implemen-tation of the agreement.

Indigenous leaders have been disproportionally affected, with 41 leaders killed in 2020.[168] Historical violence in the municipalities, armed groups in dispute and strong capacities of the community seem to increase the risk of leaders being killed, particu-larly those defending the PNIS[169] that resulted from the peace agreement.

Massacres, confinement and forced displacement have also significantly increased in recent years. In 2020 alone, 292 people died in 76 massacres (with five more pending verification), the highest number since 2014. Criminal groups are responsible for 66% of these killings and departments with active disputes over the territory were those most affected.[170]

Confinement and forced displacement also continue to increase. In 2020, over 74 000 people were forced to confine due to illegal and criminal armed groups and over 25 000 were forcibly displaced,[171] compared with around 11 300 in 2016.[172] Regions with violent disputes of the territory continue to be at high risk for both displacement and confinement.

Venezuelan mafia-style groups are violent and have substantial territorial control.

CONCLUSION

Protesters participate in the 'Great March for Life' against the murder of hundreds of human rights activists, in Bogota, Colombia, 2019. © *Juancho Torres/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

These three case studies have provided examples of protracted armed insurgencies where violence is sustained within portions of a country, including after formal conflict resolution with the national government. They show three different time frames and geographic perspectives, but share important similarities as well. They are also examples of areas where illicit economies overlap with areas of instability and armed conflict. Violence against communities – such as persecution of indigenous people and human rights activists in Colombia, displaced populations in northern Mozambique, and citizens and security forces under attack in Mali and Niger – harms the social fabric in these regions and creates the risk of escalation of crimes, such as forced labour or sexual violence.

In northern Mali and Colombia, there have been formal resolutions between the state and armed groups, yet violence and instability persist in the areas where fighting was centred, and have spread. In Colombia, the state's failure to assume a stronger role in conflict areas after the formal resolution left a power vacuum that an increasing number of smaller groups have fought to fill, including to take over illicit activity, such as the cocaine trade and illegal mining. In northern Mozambique on the other hand, the main insurgency group has not taken on a major role in the local illicit economies; existing criminal networks are, in fact, responding to the instability, as demonstrated by their decision to shift drug trafficking routes.

Responses to these conflicts have included a combination of national, regional and international interventions. While over time illicit economies often become deeply intertwined with conflict dynamics, responses do not always share the same goals or approaches. In some cases, the goals of stabilization and combating transnational illicit markets are actually in conflict. For instance, in Colombia, the US government has funded stabilization programmes, which include supporting coca farmers, while also pressuring for the resumption of aerial aspersion using glyphosate, a process that harms all crops, the local environment and human health.[173]

The ten dynamics outlined in this paper are intended to contribute to developing a situational analysis that is responsive to shifting political economies of conflict, and that include the impacts of illicit economies and those who operate them. They also point to three key implications to support this type of policy analysis.

Implications for analysis and response

Integrate strategic imperatives for stabilization and for organized crime. International interests – multilateral and bilateral – can be different for illicit economies (particularly those linked to transnational flows) and conflict. The interests of international actors in addressing conflict may be focused on local humanitarian concerns, regional spillover effects, the spread of violence, such as terrorism, or economic interests. Typically, the motivations for responding to illicit markets globally have a more domestic-focused imperative, or derive from a domestic political imperative, such as stopping irregular migration, as has been seen in the Sahel. However, some develop from efforts to reduce global harms, such as terrorist financing or deforestation. The same foreign government may have different priorities in the same conflict-affected area for each agenda. Greater efforts should be made to assess priorities collectively, identify competing interests and identify mitigation approaches when strategies do not align.

Map the actors involved, including the criminal networks and government connections. Tracking shifting power dynamics and strategic interests of governments, local elites, armed groups and criminal networks will paint a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of armed conflict and instability, beyond a binary analysis of armed groups versus a centralized state. Policy and planning should take account of these complex relationships, where they might provide leverage or where strategic areas for intervention exist. Local state actors may be cooperating with criminal networks to the detriment of stabilization objectives. Criminal groups may forge alliances with armed groups and push out existing elite-run criminal networks. Militarized and repressive state responses may do little to undermine criminal groups that receive protection from other parts of the state. Effective law enforcement responses based on intelligence-led investigations and case-building, when conducted by well-led units insulated from local influence, can be effective in these environments.

Strengthen accountability to local communities. This paper has outlined how development and government deficits create enabling conditions for illicit economies to entrench themselves, as well as for armed conflict and instability to persist. Longer-term stability requires international actors to consider what a return of the state to conflict areas may mean, and to coordinate with a range of actors and civil society. The national state may have had very little presence beyond security actors, or had an adverse relationship with local communities. In certain areas with limited state presence, community leaders represent and provide community-based solutions to their citizens. Violence against them undermines the community's hope in the future and undermines political stability at the local level. Engaging a wide range of local actors and community members is needed to build a wider fabric of economic and social cohesion in communities over the long run.

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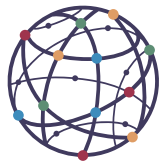
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