

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. Re-examining Russia's presence in West Africa's gold sector.

Since the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, Russia has been hit by severe economic sanctions, isolating the country from the global financial system. Given their increasing presence in the gold sector across West Africa, it is likely that Russia will seek to use gold as a means of generating funds, moving money internationally and accessing foreign currencies. In Mali and Central African Republic, where Russia has been for several years building their influence, criminal networks are likely to play a role in smuggling gold out of the countries, disguising the origins of the gold and thus enabling the evasion of the sanctions in place against Russia.

2. Violence surges as criminal networks spread to new territories amid economic downturn in Jos, Nigeria.

The central Nigerian city of Jos and its surrounding areas have been experiencing a resurgence of violence since 2021. A spike in criminal activity in Jos, partly attributable to increases in unemployment and economic hardship, is one key driver behind this explosion in violence, with fatal incidents linked to illicit markets, including cattle rustling, arms and drug trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom, doubling between 2020 and 2021. An increase in inter-communal clashes, driven partly by the growing operations of rural based militias in peri-urban areas of Jos, has further contributed to escalating violence. The violence and instability, moreover, is likely to intensify in the lead-up to the 2023 elections, as political actors seek to instrumentalize criminal networks.

3. A reported coup attempt brings to the fore how cocaine trafficking continues to shape Guinea-Bissau's politics.

In the wake of an attack on Guinea-Bissau's governmental palace in February, labelled a coup attempt by the Bissau-Guinean government, we track the chequered history of the alleged mastermind – Bubo Na Tchuto – to explore the evolving role of the cocaine trade in Guinea-Bissau's volatile politics. Although the nature of the incident remains unclear, this article does not attempt to opine on whether Tchuto, and the other two men arrested, were truly behind the attack. Instead, it analyzes the historical and contemporary context that grants the government's current position credibility, and explores the concerning aftermath of February's incident in Bissau, characterized by escalating repression of voices critical of the current administration.

4. The Organised Crime Index Africa 2021 underscores differing relationships between certain illicit markets and instability.

The results of the Organised Crime Index Africa 2021 underscore the strong but complex relationship between instability and illicit markets in West Africa. The Index highlights that certain markets – most prominently arms trafficking, but also trafficking in persons – show marked positive correlations to conflict, whereas others – such as cannabis and the illicit wildlife trade – appear to have none. These findings underscore that it is vital to recognize the complexities of the relationship between different kinds of criminal markets and conflict and instability.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the first article of this issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa examines Russia's presence in the gold-mining sector in West Africa, specifically in Mali and Central African Republic. We explore how criminal networks may play a role in disguising the origins of gold mined by sanctioned entities, enabling sanctioned Russian entities and individuals to use gold mined in West Africa as a means of generating funds, moving money internationally and accessing foreign currencies.

The second article highlights the recent resurgence of violence in Jos, Nigeria, as criminal networks in the city have spread to new territories and expanded their portfolio of illicit activity. One of the key drivers of the explosion of violence is unemployment and economic hardship, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures. As the political environment becomes more hostile in the run-up to the 2023 elections, a further surge in violence is expected as political actors seek to instrumentalize criminal networks in Jos.

In Guinea-Bissau, the attack on the governmental palace in February 2022, labelled a failed coup attempt by the authorities, has shone the spotlight on the cocaine trade in the small coastal state once again and its role in destabilizing the country. This article analyzes the historical and contemporary context of the intertwining of the political and military elite, and the cocaine trade, and considers the aftermath of the attack, most concerningly manifesting in a crackdown on critical voices.

The common thread running through all three articles is the way in which illicit economies and conflict and instability are inextricably linked, whether that be as it pertains to physical conflict such as in the case of Jos or political instability as witnessed in Guinea-Bissau. Illicit economies often feed off of political and economic instability, as the case of Russian sanctions illustrates. However, different illicit markets have distinct relationships with instability, and this is underscored by the findings of the 2021 Organized Crime Index, explored in the final article, which provide a statistical framework for understanding the strong but complex relationship between instability and illicit markets in West Africa.

1. Re-examining Russia's presence in West Africa's gold sector.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulting in a tsunami of economic sanctions, Russia's presence in the West Africa gold sector has taken on new meaning. Sanctions regimes and their bite are only expected to increase, raising questions about how Moscow and other targeted entities will generate funds, move money internationally, and access foreign currencies going forward. Gold is likely to be part of the answer, as a commodity easily moved around the world outside of financial networks and with a strong overlap existing between licit and illicit flows.

Russia has been building its influence in Africa since 2014, including with the governments of West African gold producers Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR).¹ Interlinkages range from the presence of Russian private military companies (PMCs) and gold mines majority-owned by Russian entities, to warm relations between Moscow and West African host governments. Although not a new phenomenon, an increasing number of gold-mining companies with Russian links are becoming active in Africa's industrial-mining sector.² However, Russian interests can at times be difficult to identify. These relationships raise the possibility that Moscow and other

sanctioned actors will continue gold-mining operations or may funnel gold with Russian origins through West Africa.

While not inherently illicit, these activities become illegal when gold is smuggled or laundered into gold markets that have barred transactions with Moscow or other sanctioned entities. The explicit exclusion of Russian refineries by the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA),³ and calls by US lawmakers for sanctions on Russian gold transactions, reflect the growing blockades that sanctioned actors will face in accessing international gold and financial markets.⁴ Additionally, Russian gold miner Nordgold, which has operations in Burkina Faso and Guinea,⁵ is majority-owned by Alexey Mordashov. Mordashov, who is reportedly Russia's wealthiest man, is now a target of EU sanctions.

Criminal networks have the potential to play a pivotal role in enabling Moscow and other sanctioned entities to use gold, including that mined in West Africa, by disguising the origins and ownership of gold, as well as the financial beneficiaries of gold transactions, to lessen the impact of sanctions.

INSECURITY CREATES OPPORTUNITY FOR RUSSIAN INTERESTS

Insecurity across areas of Africa has created demand for Russian PMCs as well as opportunities for Russians to build relationships with, and gain access to valuable mineral reserves in, countries where Russian PMCs are operating.⁶ In West Africa, the Wagner Group, one such Russian PMC, is reported to be currently active in CAR and Mali.

The Wagner Group has been deployed in CAR ever since President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's visited Russia in 2017. Touadéra allegedly accepted an offer of military support, weapons and training from Russia, prompting some analysts to report concerns that Russia may be attempting to gain access to CAR's minerals sector.⁷ Two Russian diamond and gold companies in CAR linked to the Wagner Group have been sanctioned by the US. These include the Russia-based M Finans, a precious-metals mining company and provider of private security services, and the CAR-based gold- and diamond-mining company Lobaye Invest SARLU.⁸ Following Touadéra's 2017 trip to Russia, the CAR government granted mining licences to Lobaye Invest SARLU, which the UN says is 'interconnected' with the Wagner Group.⁹ More recently, the UN Panel of Experts reported that observers have noted that CAR's armed forces and Russian offensives are concentrated in key mining centers and mineral-rich areas, fuelling suspicion that CAR is primarily interested in securing the country's diamond and gold wealth, which the Russians are seeking to capitalize on.¹⁰

Yet, analysts have observed that assessing the extent of the Russians' role in the minerals sector to date is difficult. While some state that Russian mining activities are sporadic and only amount to acquiring 'pocket money', others have noted that the activities are intense and systemic.

In November 2021, the Wagner Group reportedly entered Mali following a request by Bamako for private military support, although Mali has denied using Wagner Group mercenaries.¹¹ According to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), visits to Bamako by Wagner executives, as well as Russian geologists who are known for their association with the PMC, suggests that Wagner personnel may also eventually provide site security services to Russian companies engaged in mining activity. This would be consistent with alleged Wagner activity in and agreements with other African states.¹² Furthermore, with ECOWAS sanctions against Mali still in place, Bamako may find it difficult to generate the cash necessary to pay for PMC services. Security analysts have speculated that the Malian military may look to the gold sector to generate vital revenues in this regard.¹³

The presence of Russian PMCs in CAR and Mali and warm relations with the governments present an opportunity for Russia to continue to financially benefit from gold-mining operations and evade sanctions by laundering gold through transit and destination markets.

GOLD MINING IN MALI

The Malian gold sector has developed rapidly over the past two decades. The rise in production and favourable tax policies, which attracted gold imports from its West African neighbours,¹⁴ has led to a boom in gold exports. Mali is the third-largest gold producer in Africa, with industrial production reaching 63.4 tonnes in 2021,¹⁵ valued at over US\$4 billion at current gold prices.

Gold is found in both southern and northern Mali. The most productive deposits are in the Kayes region and, to a lesser extent, in Koulikoro and Sikasso regions.¹⁶ Yet, growing insecurity in Mali threatens the future of the industrial gold

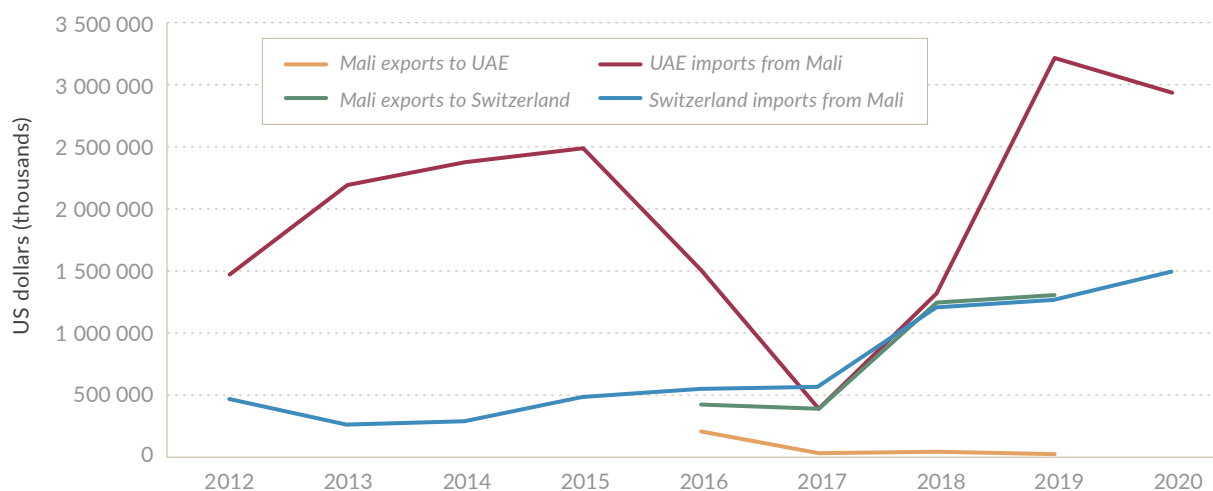


FIGURE 1 Mali gold trade with the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland.

NOTE: The discrepancy between the data tracking Malian imports to the UAE, and Malian export data to the UAE, points to a significant volume of undeclared exports.

SOURCE: UN Comtrade

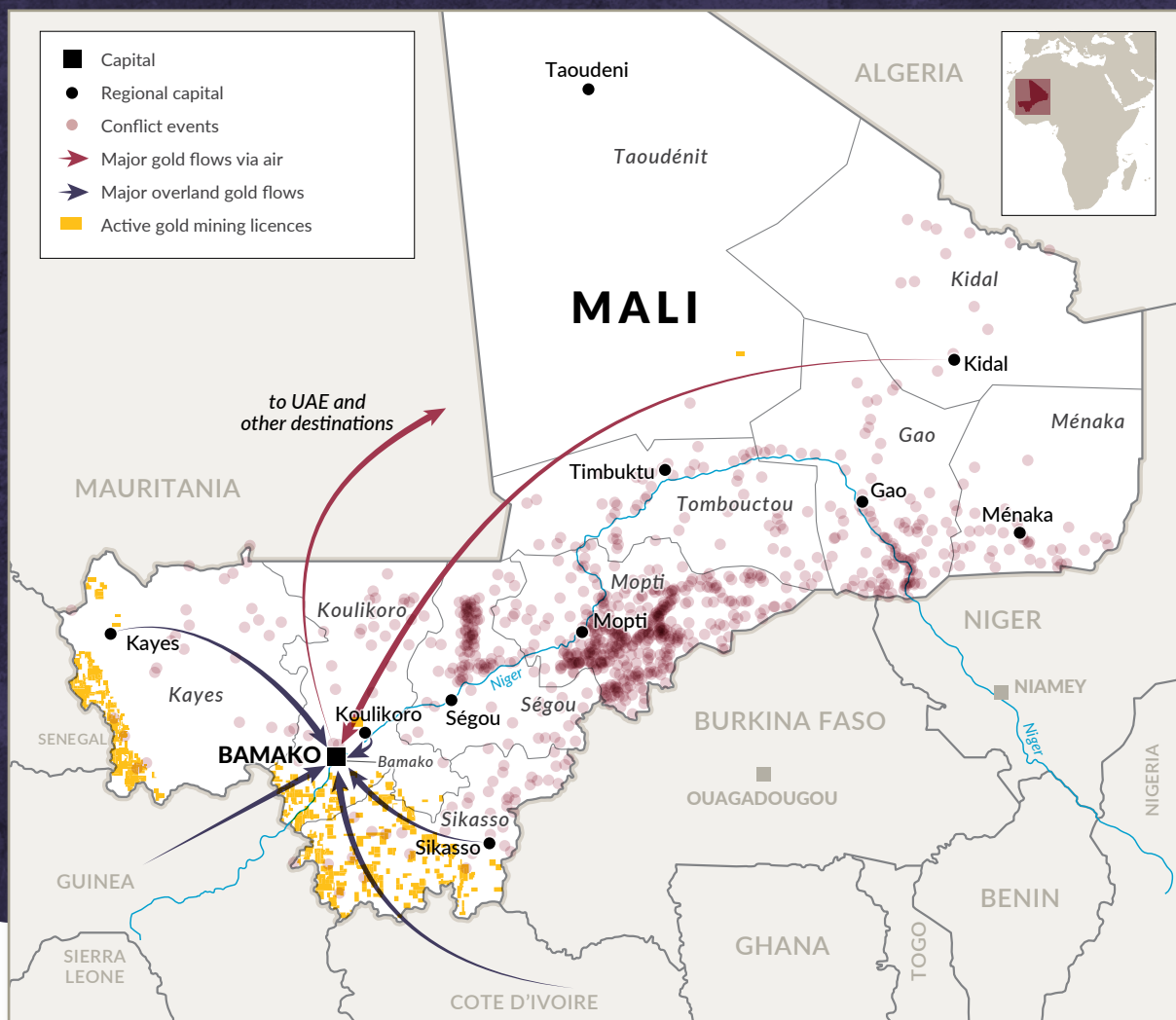


FIGURE 2 Mali's active gold mining licences, security incidents and key supply-chain routes through Bamako.

NOTE: This map does not capture artisanal gold mining sites; conflict events data includes battles, violence against civilians and explosions/remote violence from 2020 to 2022.

SOURCES: Ministry of Mines of Mali Online Repository, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

sector, with attacks by jihadist groups increasingly targeting mining companies. For most of the past two years, the Kayes region has been targeted by violent extremist groups, most notably the Macina Liberation Front (Katibat Macina). In September 2021, the convoy of a mining company, which was being escorted by Malian armed forces, was attacked on the Bamako Kayes Road, with five gendarmes killed in the assault.¹⁷ While there is currently no industrial mining taking place in northern Kidal and Gao regions, both are reported to host hundreds of informal artisanal gold-panning sites.¹⁸ In the northern Kidal region, artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) is currently reported to be controlled by the non-state armed group Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA),¹⁹ which has been increasingly absorbed by the jihadist group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) since 2021. If deemed profitable, Russian industrial-mining operations could be established in northern Mali in the near future, despite the security risks involved.

Since January 2022, Mali has been facing its own economic sanctions, with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) closing all land and air borders to the country,²⁰ and the freezing of Mali's assets held by the Senegal-based Central Bank of West African States. The sanctions are already being felt. As of February 2022, Mali had defaulted on FCFA54 billion (US\$93 million) in interest and principal payments, according to the West Africa monetary union's debt agency UMOA-Titres.²¹ The sanctions will not only prevent Bamako from being able to pay the state's debt, they will also leave the country unable to pay for internal operations, including military operations.²² Sanctioned actors may therefore look to criminal networks to launder gold and money – while this can legally be done – in order to allow them to access markets in the UK, EU and US that have imposed sanctions against Russian entities.

ILLICIT NETWORKS LINKING WEST AFRICA AND RUSSIA

Sanctions regimes implemented by the UK, the EU (as well as Switzerland), the US and others are quickly cutting Russian entities out of international financial and gold markets. For example, LBMA rules state that gold trades cannot be conducted with any entities that will violate any EU, US, UK or any other relevant, economic and/or trade sanction lists.²³ Yet, it is secondary sanctions – economic restrictions imposed on third parties who transact with sanctioned entities – that may be even more painful for Russia and its allies. Thus, even if transactions take place or assets are held outside the jurisdiction of a sending state, states can take action against a third party that transacts with a sanctioned actor if they hold assets or do business in the jurisdiction of the sending state.²⁴ Sanctioned entities may still be able to access gold markets in states that have not adopted sanctions regimes, but the fear of violating secondary sanctions is likely to have a chilling effect on the formal gold sector more broadly, deterring gold buyers from buying Russian gold.

This is where criminal networks step in. By disguising the origins and ownership of gold, as well as the financial beneficiaries of gold transactions, Moscow and other

sanctioned entities may be able to evade sanctions. While gold-mining operations in West Africa controlled by, or benefitting, sanctioned Russian entities tend to be industrial operations, they could make use of existing illicit supply chains linked to ASGM or establish new routes.²⁵ Alternatively, sanctioned Russian entities could utilize private planes to fly gold directly from West African producer countries to Russia or other destination countries, a tactic that has been used by other illicit actors and countries seeking to evade sanctions in the past.²⁶

In attempting to assess supply chains and the methods that sanctioned Russian entities may use to move and launder gold from the West African countries in which they are operating – most prominently, CAR and Mali – the movement of gold via established illicit supply chains and on private aircrafts should both be considered.

GOLD-SMUGGLING ROUTES OUT OF CAR

The high degree of scrutiny of CAR's gold sector, makes it likely that actors seeking to disguise the origins of gold produced in the country would smuggle it over international borders, including into Cameroon, rather than mis-declaring the source of direct exports.

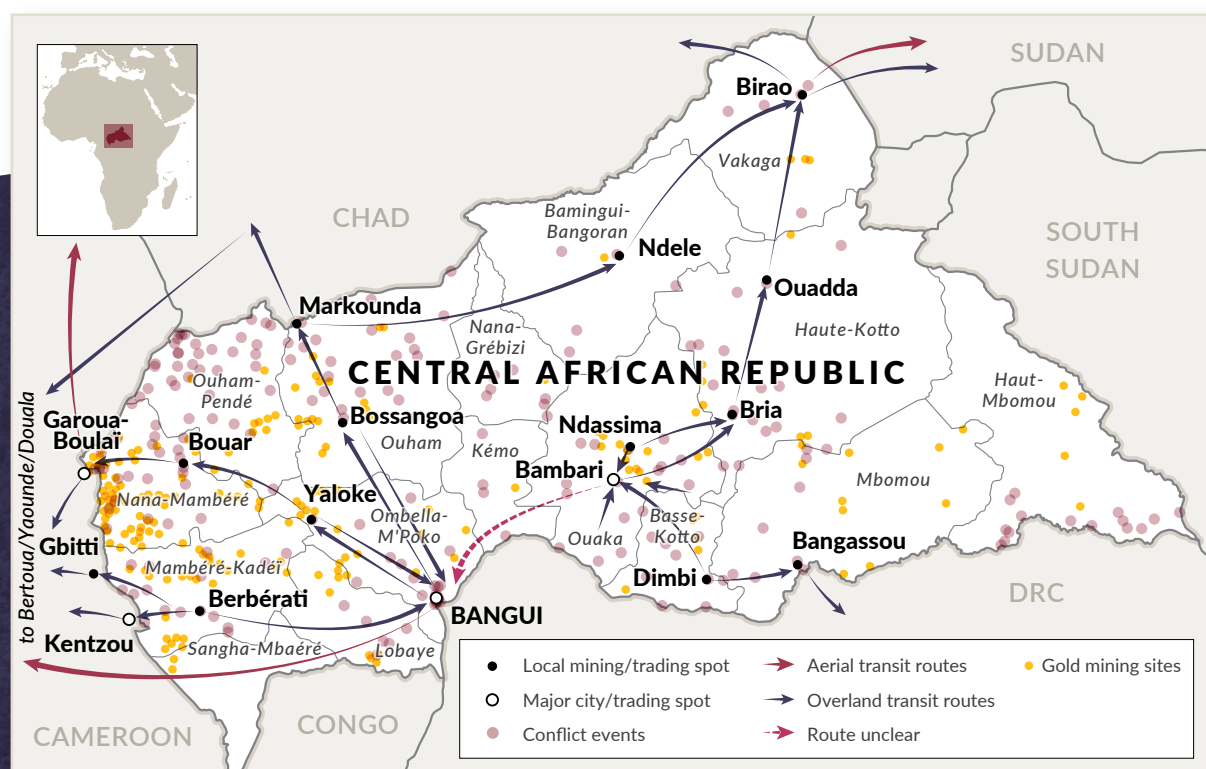


FIGURE 3 Central African Republic's gold mining sites, security incidents and key supply-chain routes.

NOTE: Conflict events data includes battles, violence against civilians and explosions/remote violence from 2020 to 2022.

SOURCES: Alexandre Jaillon and Guillaume de Brier, Mapping Artisanal Mining Sites in the Western Central African Republic, IPIS and USAID, November 2019; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

Companies owned and operated by Chinese nationals are also significant players in the CAR gold sector, and their exporting techniques highlight how sanctioned Russian entities may try to launder gold produced in the country.²⁷ Many Chinese-owned companies operate semi-mechanized gold mines throughout western CAR and enjoy high-level political protection.²⁸ Some Chinese mining operations are even thought to be engaged in large-scale gold smuggling, with several sources declaring that gold is smuggled by Chinese nationals from CAR to Cameroon.²⁹ These companies are reported to pay a symbolic amount of export taxes in Bangui on a small portion of the gold produced and smuggle the rest of the gold over the border to Cameroon.³⁰ From the border areas, gold is moved to Yaoundé and Douala, from where it is exported to China.³¹ Research on gold supply chains linked to small, mechanized gold operations owned or operated by Chinese nationals in West Africa indicates that these operations often fly gold directly to China.³²

Most other illicit gold flows run through Cameroon towards the UAE. Research conducted by the GI-TOC between 2020 and early 2021 found that gold from western CAR is predominantly smuggled over the border to Cameroon or transported to Bangui and smuggled out through the airport. From eastern Cameroon and Bangui, the majority of gold is allegedly moved to Douala and flown out to the UAE through Douala airport.³³ Gold from rebel-held zones in eastern Cameroon is reported to leave the country via Bangui or else is smuggled to neighbouring countries via terrestrial routes (including routes to Sudan) or using small clandestine aircraft.

GOLD-SMUGGLING ROUTES OUT OF MALI

Research conducted by the GI-TOC between 2021 and early 2022 indicates that the bulk of gold produced in Mali through ASGM is transported to Bamako. Gold produced in southern Mali is transported to Bamako by road, while gold produced in the north is transported to the capital by air, sometimes using MINUSMA flights.³⁴ While a small amount of gold is transported to European or Asian countries, most of the gold passing through Bamako (produced in Mali or smuggled in overland) is transported to the UAE.³⁵ Interviewees noted that smaller amounts of gold are smuggled out of Mali to neighbouring countries, such as Guinea, before being exported to the UAE.

UAE: A GOLD-LAUNDERING HUB

As the current destination for most illicit gold flows out of CAR and Mali, the UAE is likely to play an important role in the ability of entities to evade sanctions. The UAE, specifically Dubai, is a dominant player in global gold and financial flows,³⁶ linking African gold flows to Russia and the rest of the world. Most gold produced by ASGM is reportedly transported to the UAE,³⁷ where it is traded and moved into broader global gold markets, including Switzerland and the UK. The UAE has sent mixed messages regarding their stance on Russia, voting in favour of the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine after abstaining from the UN Security Council resolution.

In March 2022, the UAE was added to the 'gray list' of the Financial Action Task Force, following a 2020 mutual evaluation that found weaknesses in the regulation of the gold trade and significant trade-based money-laundering

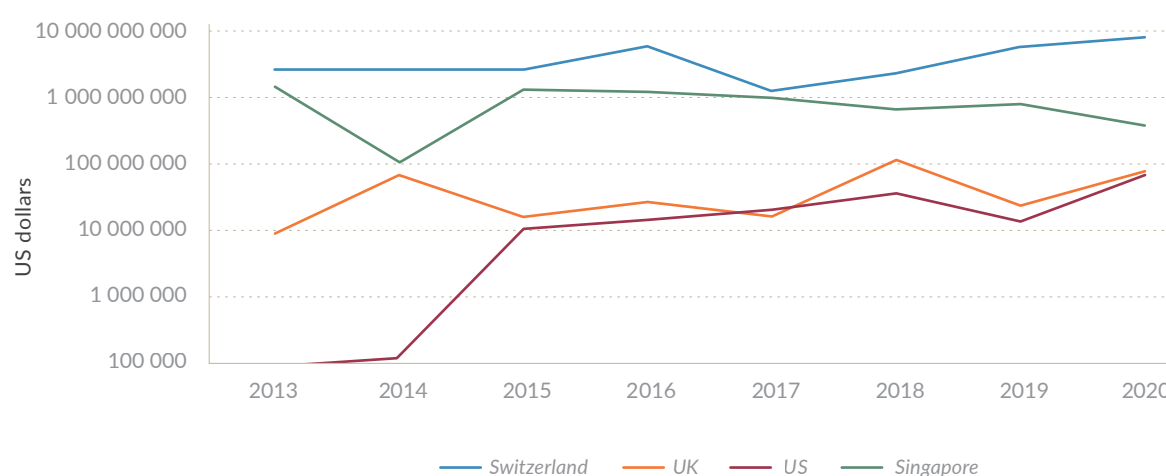


FIGURE 4 UAE gold exports to countries that have imposed sanctions on Russian actors.

SOURCE: UN Comtrade

risks.³⁸ This means that the UAE will now be subject to greater oversight and will be required to implement an 'action plan' to demonstrate 'a sustained increase in effective investigations and prosecutions of different types of money laundering cases consistent with UAE's risk profile.'³⁹ One element of the action plan is to proactively identify and combat sanctions evasion.⁴⁰ Regulation of the gold sector will play an important role in these efforts.

CONCLUSION

Sanctions regimes instituted in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine give new meaning to Russian diplomacy and the growing presence of Russian actors in West

Africa's gold sector. The presence of Russian gold-mining operations and PMCs in West Africa, as well as Russia's warm relations with regional governments, raises concerns that the gold sector could be an avenue to raise funds and launder gold to evade sanctions imposed against Moscow and other actors. The situation in West Africa is further complicated by the current ECOWAS sanctions against Mali and the country's currency shortage, as well as security risks in CAR and Mali. Thus, there is reason to re-examine and continue to monitor Russia's presence in the West African gold sector, as well as the role that criminal networks may play in disguising the origins of the gold and thus enabling sanctions evasion.

2. Violence surges as criminal networks spread to new territories amid economic downturn in Jos, Nigeria.

The central Nigerian city of Jos and its surrounding areas have been experiencing a resurgence of violence since 2021. A spike in criminal activity in Jos, partly attributable to increases in unemployment and economic hardship,⁴¹ is one key driver behind this explosion in violence, with fatal incidents linked to illicit markets, including cattle rustling, arms and drug trafficking, and kidnapping for ransom, doubling between 2020 and 2021.⁴²

An increase in inter-communal clashes, driven partly by the growing operations of rural based militias in peri urban areas of Jos, has further contributed to escalating violence. In the most recent episode, at least four people were killed in two separate incidents involving Christians and Muslims in February 2022.⁴³ These incidents are part of a cycle of attacks and reprisals that have intensified over the past year.

Like the rural based militias, criminal networks have also expanded their territories of operation, and have spread throughout urban Jos. One community leader noted that 'ten years ago we didn't have many criminal groups in this area but today they are too many for me to count.'⁴⁴ During election periods, these criminal work on behalf of political actors to disrupt rallies, fuel violent protests, and intimidate or even kill opponents. For example, the Jos East local

government chairperson of the Action Democratic Party was shot dead on 2 November 2017 in what was generally believed to be a politically motivated murder.⁴⁵ In a more recent incident, also believed to be politically motivated, on 31 May 2021, the aid of Governor Ortom of Benue State was shot and killed in Jos.⁴⁶

Jos first emerged as a hub for illicit markets, and became notorious for its rampant communal violence, between 2001 and 2018. Large-scale violent clashes between Christian and Muslim communities escalated,⁴⁷ and Boko Haram terrorists targeted the city between 2010 and 2015, with a series of bombings sparking reprisals and further polarizing Christian and Muslim communities. Although violence was ameliorated through government and community responses, which contributed to a decrease in conflict- and crime-related deaths in the city between 2018 and 2020, this proved to be a temporary lull.⁴⁸

Violence is likely to escalate further in the lead-up to the 2023 elections, as political actors instrumentalize criminal networks to intimidate, threaten or harm political opponents. Criminal network composition maps onto Jos' religiously segregated social and political landscape – political instrumentalization therefore risks feeding into longstanding conflicts and escalating communal tension.

VIOLENCE AND CRIME EXPERIENCE A RESURGENCE IN JOS

The spread of criminal networks to a greater number of the city's neighbourhoods has caused a major spike in violent crime since 2021. The Emani National Crime Survey, a crime-perceptions survey commissioned by the GI-TOC in November 2021, found that respondents ranked Jos North as the local government area (LGA) with the highest levels of criminal activity in Plateau State, and fourth highest in the country.⁴⁹ All of the residents of Jos North LGA who participated in the Emani survey reported that violence has increased in the city in the last five years.

Data from Nigeria Watch, a civil-society organization that tracks violence in Nigeria, illustrates the spike in crime-related violence in Nigeria since 2020. According to Nigeria Watch, there were 68 crime-related deaths in Jos North between 2018 and 2019. The number of crime-related deaths has increased significantly, almost doubling over the last two years, with 126 deaths recorded between January 2020 and December 2021. Similarly, the number of people killed in incidents involving cattle grazing and land-related issues almost tripled between 2018 and 2021, from 36 to 99.⁵⁰

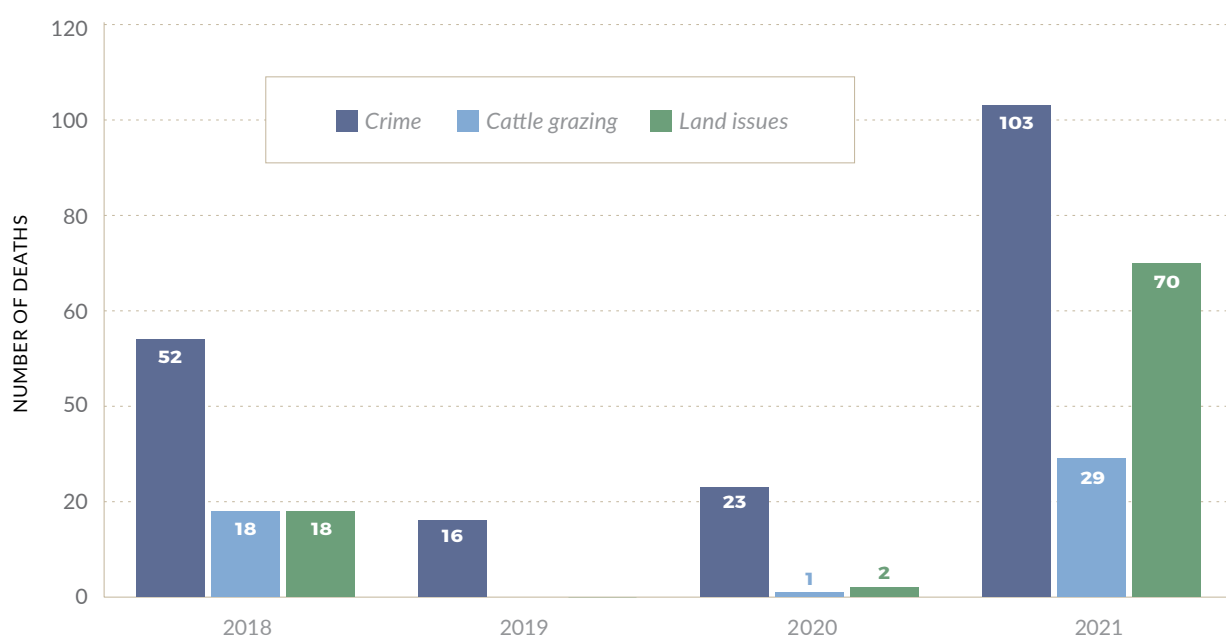


FIGURE 5 Deaths related to crime, land issues and cattle grazing in Jos North, 2018–2021.

NOTE: 'Crime-related deaths' are defined as deaths that result from violence perpetrated while committing a criminal activity.

SOURCE: Nigeria Watch

The resurgence in violence in Jos since 2021 is due primarily to the fact that many members of the communities have resorted to joining street gangs, cult groups and armed militias that engage in myriad illicit economies from drug trafficking, arms trafficking and armed robbery to cattle rustling and kidnap for ransom.⁵¹ The increase in the prevalence and spread of criminal networks in Jos is to a large extent a result of the recent countrywide rise in poverty levels, unemployment and inflation.⁵² COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as the significant hit to the economy as a result of the oil price slump, were a contributing factor to Nigeria's deepest recession in two decades in 2020.⁵³

URBAN CRIMINAL GANGS SPREAD TO NEW TERRITORIES

The sharp increase in the volume of illicit activities carried out by criminal networks, in addition to their geographic

expansion, has been notably felt by members and leaders of the community in Jos, who testify to the heightened instability in the city and surrounding areas.⁵⁴ One resident of Gada Biyu, a Christian suburb south-west of the city centre with a strong presence of cult groups, observed that 'ten years ago we only used to hear about cultism from a distance, but now there are many of them living among us.'⁵⁵

Two criminal networks play a prominent role in recent incidents of violence in Jos: cult groups, which are found mainly in Christian neighbourhoods, and Sara Suka street gangs, which are typically embedded within predominantly Muslim communities.⁵⁶ The composition of most criminal networks reflects the religious segregation of neighborhoods in Jos, and groups are typically religiously homogenous (see Figure 6).

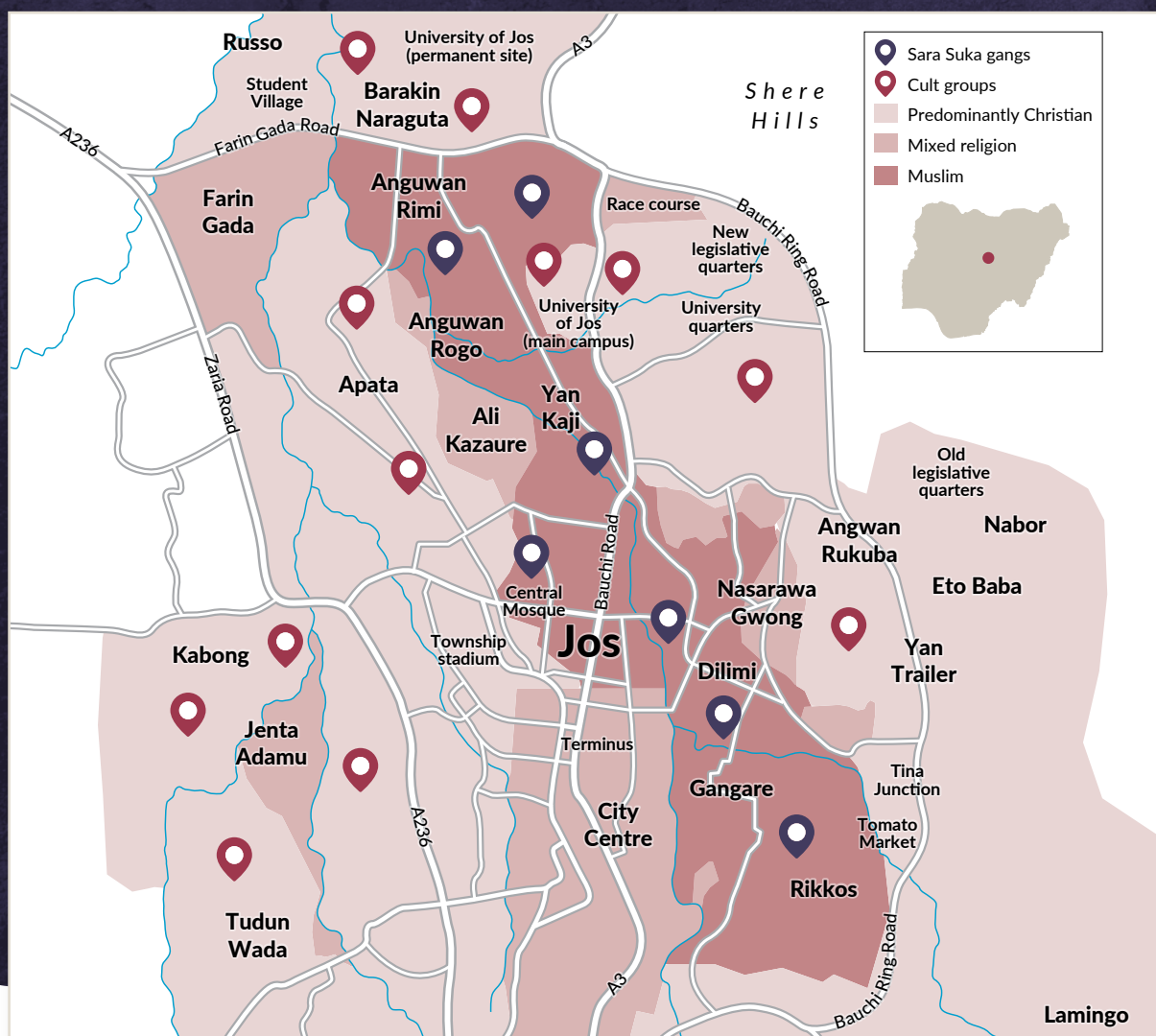


FIGURE 6 Religious divisions and criminal group territory in Jos.

SOURCE: K L Madueke, Routing ethnic violence in a divided city: walking in the footsteps of armed mobs in Jos, Nigeria. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(3), (2018), 443–470, supplemented by GI-TOC interviews with community leaders, vigilantes and members of criminal networks in Jos between November 2021 and February 2022, and media reports

Sara Suka gangs originated in Bauchi, a city 100 kilometres north of Jos, but gained popularity in Jos between 2011 and 2013, and have since spread to most of Jos's predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods.⁵⁷ While Sara Suka gangs are largely made up of boys and men between the ages of 13 and 25, some women are associated with the gangs; according to a vigilante leader, the women help in concealing drugs and weapons when security forces are on a gang's trail.⁵⁸ Some of them live in brothels, which Sara Suka members use as hideouts and for peddling drugs.⁵⁹

In predominantly Christian neighbourhoods, on the other hand, cult groups are the dominant criminal organizations. The cult groups that operate in Jos, including Black Axe, Vikings, Aye and Buccaneers, were traditionally based on university campuses, recruiting members primarily from student populations. Over the last ten years, however, cult groups in Jos have decentralized, starting to operate beyond university campuses and spreading to the streets.⁶⁰

According to a police officer, 'many cult members are non-educated individuals who have never seen the four walls of a university classroom, and some are as young as 13'.⁶¹

While originally mainly involved in armed robbery, burglary and petty theft, since 2020, Sara Suka gangs have engaged in the trafficking of drugs (including tramadol, codeine and cannabis), which has brought them into conflict with long-established trafficking networks, occasionally resulting in violence.⁶² Like Sara Suka gangs, cult groups were also originally known for armed robbery and extortion rather than drug trafficking. However, over the last five years, they have been increasingly involved in the trafficking of cannabis, tramadol and codeine.

There are varying explanations given for this shift in operations. A vigilante leader explained that 'cult groups have become involved in drug trafficking because levels of poverty have increased over the last five years, and

they are not getting as much as they used to through armed robbery.⁶³ A former cult member has explained that cult groups now engage in drug trafficking because it has become much more lucrative than it was five years ago.⁶⁴

RURAL-BASED VIOLENCE EXPANDS TO PERI-URBAN AREAS

The expansion of criminal networks' operations in the city is not the only worrying trend currently being experienced in Jos, however. Conflict and crime dynamics in Jos are currently in a period of flux, with long-standing divides between the nature of urban and rural conflict in the city breaking down. Between 2010 and 2019, the violence in the rural areas involved well-coordinated attacks and massacres by heavily armed rural-based militias, while the violence in urban Jos involved sporadic clashes between armed mobs in Christian and Muslim communities. Since 2021, however, rural-based militias have expanded their attacks to Jos' peri-urban areas. These militias are also involved in organized-criminal activities, including cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and arms and drug trafficking. The expansion of their operations to peri-urban areas is thus expected to have a significant impact on the dynamics of criminality in Jos.

Though urban and rural violence in Plateau State is often conflated, they are two distinct phenomena. While it is often the case that an escalation in rural conflict can cause tension in urban Jos, and vice versa, the issues, actors and level of sophistication of the attacks differ. Urban conflict predominantly takes place between Christian and Muslim communities, while conflict in the rural areas is typically between pastoralists and farming communities. Moreover, whereas violence in urban Jos typically takes the form of clashes between spontaneously mobilized mobs armed with cutlasses, machetes, sticks, Molotov cocktails and a few firearms, rural-based violence is in the form of well-coordinated attacks and massacres perpetrated by heavily armed militias.

However, these dynamics have been changing since 2020, as shown in Figure 7. The well-coordinated attacks that were once restricted to the rural areas have increasingly moved to peri-urban areas, and towards the city centre. Recent incidents of violence in peri-urban areas have sparked clashes in the city centre, where urban criminal networks with religious overtones play a prominent role, suggesting an increasing blurring of the spatial boundary between the well-coordinated attacks once restricted to the rural areas and the relatively more spontaneous Christian-Muslim clashes in the city.

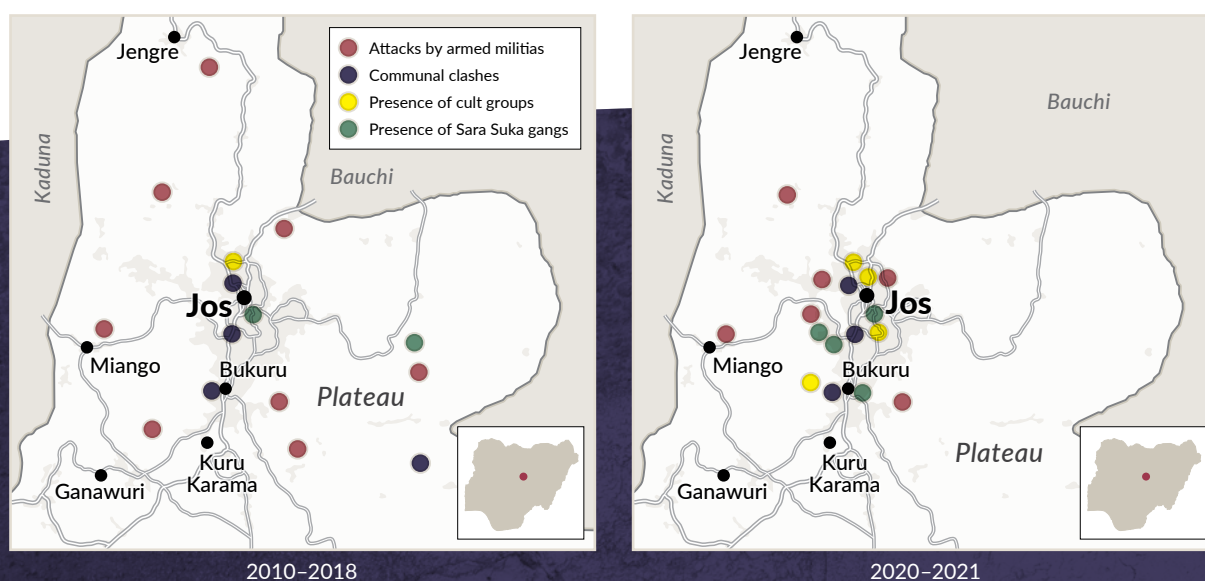


FIGURE 7 Attacks by rural-based militias and communal clashes in Jos.

SOURCE: GI-TOC interviews with community leaders, vigilantes and members of criminal networks in Jos between November 2021 and February 2022

The expansion of rural-based violence towards the city started just over three years ago when in September 2018, an attack by a rural militia left 11 dead in Lopandet Dwei, a peri-urban settlement at the southern border of the city.⁶⁵ A similar attack three weeks later left 12 people

dead in Rukuba Road.⁶⁶ The deadly attacks by urban criminal networks in the Rukuba Road area on 14 August 2021, which killed 22 passengers, largely Muslim Fulanis, marked a key turning point, as it appeared to position Fulanis at the centre of the clashes for the first time. It



A house that was destroyed in the attack on Yelwa Zangam community. Photo: Nanmwa Golok

triggered lethal reprisals by rural-based militias, who are predominantly Fulani, in Yelwa Zangam that month, as well as the killings by Fulani herdsmen in Bida Bidi and retaliatory attacks by Christian youth in February 2022. Cumulatively these have blurred the boundary between urban- and rural-based violence in Jos, all occurring within a few kilometres of the city centre.

This blurring may have implications for the actors involved in violence and crime in Jos and the weapons used, particularly because urban criminal networks have also been spreading to more rural neighborhoods. The growing overlap in operational territories of rural-based militias and urban criminal networks could enable alliances to be built between the two, which would allow urban networks access to the more sophisticated weapons of rural-based militias. Moreover, as mentioned above, rural-based militias are involved in crimes that have not historically been features of urban Jos, such as cattle rustling and kidnap for ransom. Were these crimes to spread into the city centre, this would mark a further sharp escalation in violence associated with urban criminal markets.

INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF CRIMINAL NETWORKS BY POLITICAL ACTORS

To compound the issues of criminal groups and violence is the prospect of the instrumentalization of these criminal networks by political actors. Election years see upticks in political violence across Nigeria, but particularly in Jos, which was listed as one of six areas with a high potential for violence during the 2019 elections.⁶⁷ Much of this election-related violence is perpetrated by criminal networks.⁶⁸

The proliferation of street gangs and cult groups in Jos has already increased the level of violent crime over the past year, and this is only likely to escalate further in this upcoming election year as political actors recruit these groups to attack or intimidate their opponents.

The co-option of criminal groups by political actors has been a source of violence and instability in Jos for the past 15 years. In 2008, violent post-election protests led, according to a security expert, by 'party loyalists who were essentially criminals and hoodlums working for politicians' spiralled into large-scale clashes that lasted two days and resulted in 700 deaths.⁶⁹ The 2015 elections were also marred by large-scale violence, in which 800 people were killed.⁷⁰

The 2019 elections marked a contrast to precedent in the absence of deadly clashes. However, the atmosphere was very tense with a visible presence of members of cult groups and Sara Suka harassing residents to vote a particular candidate in several communities, including Gada Biu, Angwan Rukuba, Angwan Rogo and Nasarawa.⁷¹

In the lead-up to the 2023 elections, this intertwining of criminality and religious affiliation risks feeding intergroup violence. Moreover, the religious homogeneity of Sara Suka and cult groups, enables politicians to use religious affiliation to enlist their support and loyalty. In turn, criminal networks working for political interests use their religious affiliation to gain local legitimacy and enjoy a high degree of impunity in their illicit activities.

CONCLUSION

The resurgence of violence in Jos since 2021 is due in large part to a spike in criminal activity, in turn triggered by a significant economic hit suffered by the population. However, not only have the illicit operations of criminal networks in urban Jos intensified, but rural-based militias have also shifted their attacks towards peri-urban areas of the city. The case of Jos demonstrates that economic downturns have a particularly consequential impact on conflict-affected areas and can contribute to escalating crime and violence by further destabilizing livelihoods and forcing more people into illicit activities, including

involvement in criminal networks. Moreover, in settings characterized by conflict-induced segregation, criminal affiliation can map onto group identities, feeding into longstanding conflicts, driving instability and blurring the boundary between criminality and conflict. In the run up to the 2021 elections, criminal networks with ethnic and religious overtones risk being instrumentalized to intimidate, threaten or harm political opponents. To be effective, responses to violence and crime ought to take into account the manner in which economic shifts, organized crime, violence and politics intertwine in conflict-affected settings.

3. A reported coup attempt brings to the fore how cocaine trafficking continues to shape Guinea-Bissau's politics.

The Bissau-Guinean government has officially stated to the media that an armed attack on the government building in Bissau on 1 February is linked to the country's lucrative cocaine transit trade.⁷² The three arrests made following the incident, have shone the spotlight on a long-standing protagonist in Guinea-Bissau's cocaine politics: Admiral Bubo Na Tchuto. Yet in Bissauan political and civil society circles there are rumblings of unease and uncertainty regarding the exact nature of the February attack.⁷³ Why the incident failed, the identity of the well-armed assailants and their motives are shrouded in mystery – as explored in greater detail in the GI-TOC's earlier article, 'A very strange coup attempt'.⁷⁴

According to government statements, three men were arrested in connection with the attack – Tchuto, former navy chief Tchamy Ialá and an aide, Papis Djeme. This is not the first time these figures have been fingered as threats by the political establishment. On 12 February 2021 President Embaló reported an attempted coup to journalists, and Tchuto was named as the ringleader by the press, supported by Ialá.⁷⁵ There were no ensuing arrests, and the nature or indeed veracity of the alleged coup attempt remains unclear.

The arrest of these three individuals – all previously convicted in a New York court for conspiring to traffic drugs following a US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) sting operation in 2013,⁷⁶ and some of them more recently implicated in cocaine trafficking investigations in Bissau – would at first sight appear to underscore

connections to the cocaine trade. Their notorious past involvement in cocaine trafficking would also make them perfect scapegoats for the government – if the intent was to posit cocaine as the motive for the 'coup'.

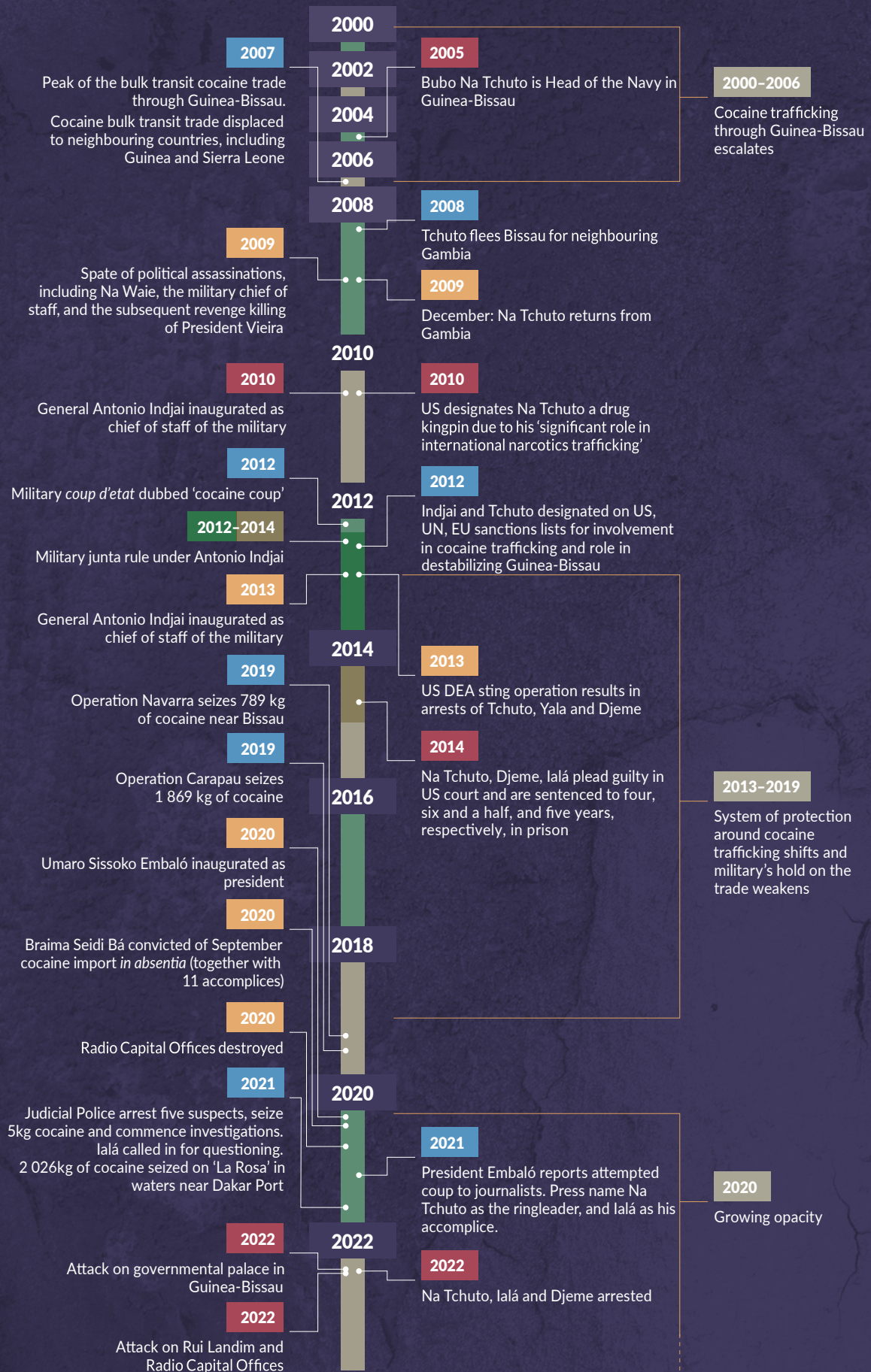
Whether these men were genuinely behind the attack or were wrongfully arrested, Guinea-Bissau's murky cocaine politics helps contextualize the unfolding events.

THE EVOLUTION OF COCAINE POLITICS IN GUINEA-BISSAU

Tchuto's involvement in the country's cocaine trade can be traced to his time as the head of the navy in the early 2000s, a period when the cocaine trade through Bissau escalated under political and military protection and Guinea-Bissau rose to notoriety as a transit country on international cocaine trafficking routes between producing countries in Latin America and end markets in Europe.

By 2007, cocaine trafficking through the country had reached its peak, senior military figures had gained control over the bulk transit trade, syphoning off a large share of profits,⁷⁷ and state involvement was brazen.⁷⁸ The degree of state penetration in drug trafficking was evidenced by a sketch found during a 2007 Judicial Police raid in which 635 kilograms of cocaine were seized. Five names were legible on a whiteboard: João Bernardo Vieira, then president, Tchuto, and three other senior political and military figures.⁷⁹ Tchuto was one of only two named individuals to survive the subsequent spree of political violence that engulfed Bissau.

KEY EVENTS RELATING TO BUBO NA TCHUTO AND COCAINE POLITICS IN BISSAU



The year 2007 marked the end of the bulk transit trade. Strong evidence suggests that the military began stealing from the Latin American traffickers, leading them to shift their operations to neighbouring countries.⁸⁰ This displacement of the cocaine transit trade drastically diminished the profits available to the military from cocaine trafficking. This fed into wider political tensions within the elite, leading to a number of high-profile assassinations, including the murder of Na Waie, the military chief of staff, and the revenge killing of President Vieira in 2009.⁸¹

Having fled Bissau for Gambia in 2008 in murky circumstances (some alleged that he was behind a failed coup attempt), Tchuto returned from exile the following year, entering the country disguised as a fisherman. In April 2010, the US designated Tchuto a drug kingpin because of his 'significant role in international narcotics trafficking'.⁸² This appeared to have had little impact on his domestic influence, and he was reportedly present at that month's controversial inauguration of General Antonio Indjai as chief of staff of the military.⁸³

Competition for control of the cocaine trade was reportedly an important factor behind the 2012 military seizure of power, led by Indjai, and dubbed the 'cocaine coup' by some.⁸⁴ Indjai joined Tchuto on the sanctions lists of the UN Security Council, EU and US for his involvement in cocaine trafficking and his role in destabilizing Guinea-Bissau since the 2012 coup. Indjai has reportedly remained close to Tchuto, and was named by a government spokesperson following the February incident.⁸⁵

Once in power, starved of alternative sources of revenue by sanctions, and desperate for bigger returns from cocaine trafficking, the military, led by Indjai with Tchuto at his side, was drawn into the US DEA sting operation in 2013.⁸⁶ The climax of that operation, which resulted in the arrests of Tchuto, Ialá and Djeme (but not Indjai, who had been the DEA's main target) spooked traffickers and triggered a further decline in the cocaine transit trade in Guinea-Bissau. Tchuto, Ialá and Djeme returned to Guinea-Bissau after serving their US prison terms; all three were placed under arrest once again following the February incident.

In the years following the DEA operation, the high-level protection around cocaine trafficking shifted as the military's hold on the trade weakened. However, since the coming to power of the current administration

in February 2020, and the partial exile of a prominent cocaine trafficker, Braima Seidi Bá, following his conviction *in absentia* in Bissau courts, the power-play between actors in the country's cocaine markets seems to be once again in flux.⁸⁷ Yet Tchuto appears a resilient player in the country's cocaine politics.

A WEB OF COCAINE CONNECTIONS: POST-2020 DYNAMICS

Recent investigations into cocaine trafficking continue to point to the same set of protagonists in Bissau's lucrative cocaine markets. Law enforcement and civil society stakeholders in Bissau report that Ialá was allegedly implicated in Judicial Police investigations into cocaine trafficking in October 2021. That investigation was triggered by reports that two individuals had been kidnapped. Preliminary investigations revealed that the kidnappings were linked to the cocaine trade: the victims were in possession of cocaine stolen from their military partners, and had been kidnapped as a result. On 26 October, the Judicial Police seized 5 kilograms of cocaine, and detained five people on suspicion of drug trafficking, organized crime, money laundering and kidnapping. Ialá was called in for questioning. The kidnapping victims also reportedly pointed to General Indjai's alleged involvement in the incident.⁸⁸

Those 5 kilograms seized in possession of the kidnapped victims are believed to be part of a far larger consignment. The subregional network believed to be behind this consignment is also suspected to have coordinated other bulk imports in the region, including one that led to a seizure of 2 026 kilograms of cocaine on the vessel *La Rosa*, in waters off Dakar in October 2021.⁸⁹

The trial of the five men arrested in connection with the October incident, who remain in jail, started in February. The investigation has reportedly been divided into two strands, each led by a separate prosecutor. The first focusses on the kidnapping victims, the second on the broader investigation into the other individuals arrested, and the wider implications. The former, which concerns small fish unconnected to the state, may progress. However, the latter may well implicate members of the military and is almost guaranteed to stall. Notably, the Attorney General, Bacari Biai, appointed to the role in November 2021 is unlikely to take any steps that would displease the political establishment.⁹⁰



The governmental palace in Bissau. An armed attack on the building in February has been linked by the Bissau-Guinean government to the country's cocaine trade. Photo: AFP via Getty Images

IN THE WAKE OF THE FEBRUARY ATTACK: POLITICAL REPRESSION ESCALATES

While the nature of the February incident remains murky, the administration has clearly leveraged the attack for two purposes. Firstly, by arresting three men long linked to the cocaine trade, the administration has positioned itself as a bulwark against cocaine trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. This rhetoric is not borne out by practice: law enforcement focus on cocaine trafficking has waned under the current government.⁹¹

Secondly, the administration has escalated repression of critical voices, framing this crackdown as part of the required investigation into the attack. This has led a number of organizations, including the International Federation of Human Rights, to express concern over the 'deteriorating security situation in Guinea-Bissau and its impact on human rights defenders, independent media and civil society organisations'.⁹²

Similarly, on 7 February, the Bissau-Guinean Human Rights League issued an open letter expressing concerns regarding the escalating crackdown on critical figures in the wake of February's attack. The letter, sent to the UN Secretary-General, the President of the Commission of the EU and the President of the African Union warns that the country's democratic journey 'has been heavily compromised since the installation of the current political regime, whose main purpose is the gradual confiscation of fundamental rights and freedoms ...' It highlights how the authorities are deploying 'illegal methods', including kidnapping, and assaults on journalists and other critical voices.⁹³ Opposition political figures have been among

those targeted as part of the investigation, while the administration has been at pains to stress that the military, behind the four successful coups in Guinea-Bissau's history, was not involved.⁹⁴

The investigation into the attack is being spearheaded by the Interior Minister and the military, with Biague N'Tam, chief of the armed forces, at the head.⁹⁵ This runs counter to the legislative framework, which stipulates the investigation should fall within the mandate of the Judicial Police, who appear not to be taking an active role.⁹⁶

The military have searched citizens' houses at night, allegedly for evidence of involvement in the February attack. Attacks on critical voices have spiked – on 7 February, armed men (wearing military uniforms) attacked the house of outspoken political analyst Rui Landim, using live ammunition and tear gas.

On the same day, armed assailants attacked Radio Capital's offices in Bissau leaving at least four people injured. The broadcaster is highly critical of the current administration.⁹⁷ Landim, and speakers on Radio Capital, had labelled the February attack as stage-managed by the current administration.

The attacks on Radio Capital are an eerie echo of events in Bissau following Embaló's coming to power in 2020. On 28 February 2020, the day after the president's self-inauguration, the national broadcaster was suspended. In July 2020, Radio Capital's offices were vandalized by men allegedly commanded by Embaló's head of security.⁹⁸

Although Fernando Vaz, government spokesperson, issued a statement shortly after the attacks on Radio Capital and Landim pledging to investigate the perpetrators, such investigations, if launched, are unlikely to yield results.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

According to the manner in which government couched its statements and made the arrests, February's attack on the government building was the latest in a long line of political upheavals linked to cocaine trafficking. Yet the motivations

for, and sequence of events during, the attack remain shrouded in mystery.

What is clear is that the incident has triggered an escalating crackdown on critical voices in Guinea-Bissau. While it is crucial to gain greater clarity around the incident, investigations should be pursued in line with the country's legislative framework, and without constituting an attack on social and political space.



4. The Organised Crime Index Africa 2021 underscores differing relationships between certain illicit markets and instability.

The Organised Crime Index Africa 2021 provides an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between illicit economies and conflict dynamics. The findings of the 2021 Index show that countries exhibiting the highest levels of criminality are overwhelmingly those experiencing conflict or states of fragility.¹⁰⁰ Of the 10 African countries with the highest criminality scores, the majority are enduring conflict or other forms of violence, such as insurrection, terrorist activity or civil unrest.¹⁰¹

West Africa and the Sahel face a high threat from criminal markets, with over three-quarters (77.6%) of citizens residing in countries with high rates of criminality, according to the Index.¹⁰² Across the continent, only East Africa, with a score of 5.66, has higher levels of criminality than West Africa (5.47), a reflection of the broad range of illicit markets and criminal actors operating throughout the West African region.

Furthermore, despite some hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would impede organized-criminal activity, criminality levels in Africa have actually increased (by 0.20). In West Africa, as many countries have become less peaceful,¹⁰³ criminality levels in the region have increased in the time since the publication of the 2019 Organised Crime Index Africa, albeit marginally (by 0.19). This is in line with continental trends.¹⁰⁴ The availability of data two years apart, in the form of the 2019 and 2021 indexes, offers insights into the potential causes of heightened levels of criminality on the continent. In West Africa, the continued growth of the cocaine trade, which increased by 0.80 between 2019 and 2021, is a clear driver of greater criminality. Indeed, the pandemic is considered to have aided the drug trade in the region. Drug traffickers in Niger, for example, fearing being targeted by armed groups in southern Libya, have taken advantage of the reduced number of vehicles travelling across the Ténéré Desert to increase their flows.¹⁰⁵

The Index findings also provide a new framework for exploring the long-researched relationship between instability and conflict. It has been well established that illicit economies contribute to long-term enabling environments for instability by prolonging conflict and eroding government responses to violence. In places where conflict, instability and illicit economies are entrenched, development and political power deficits often arise, which

can perpetuate the cycle of crime and conflict.¹⁰⁶ The metrics for criminality that the Index provides point to a statistical underpinning for this relationship, demonstrating a strong negative correlation between criminality and peacefulness, as measured by the Global Peace Index (GPI) (see Figure 8). In other words, the less peaceful a country, the more likely it is to be plagued by high levels of organized crime.¹⁰⁷

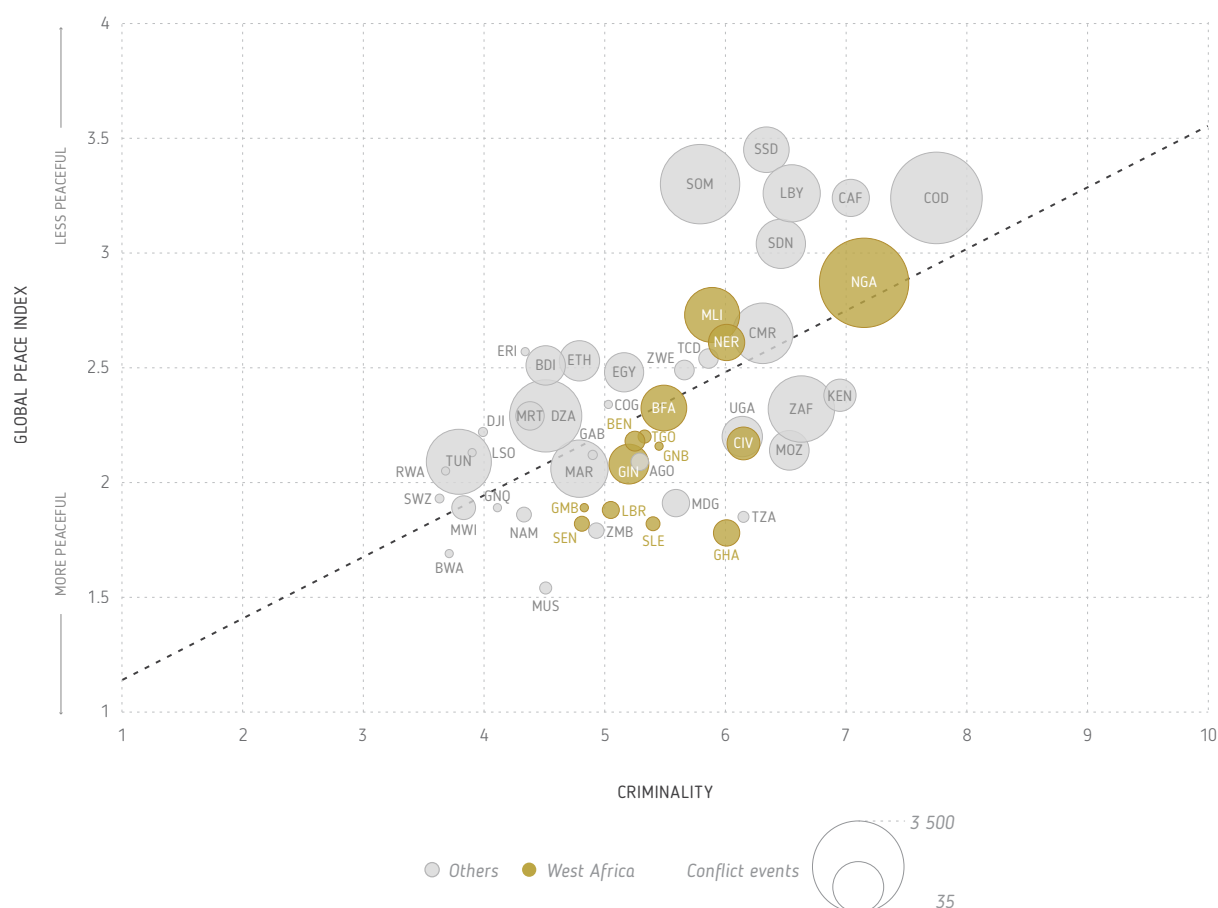


FIGURE 8 Relationship between criminality and peacefulness.

SOURCE: Organised Crime Index Africa 2021; Vision of Humanity (Institute for Economics and Peace); Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

WHAT IS THE ORGANISED CRIME INDEX?

The Organised Crime Index, now in its second iteration, captures levels of organized crime ('criminality') and levels of resilience to organized crime ('resilience') in 54 countries across Africa.

The Index draws on expert assessments to create two headline scores: criminality and resilience, each measured on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is good and 10 is bad for criminality, and vice versa for resilience).

The criminality score is based on two sub-components: criminal markets and criminal actors. There are 10 criminal markets assessed under the first sub-component: human trafficking, human smuggling, arms trafficking, flora crimes, fauna crimes, crimes related to non-renewable resources, the cocaine trade, the heroin trade, the cannabis trade and the synthetic-drugs trade. Four types of criminal actor are also captured in the Index: mafia-style groups, criminal networks, state-embedded actors and foreign actors.



The resilience component comprises 12 'building blocks' of resilience: political leadership and governance, government transparency and accountability, international cooperation, national policies and laws, judicial system and detention, law enforcement, territorial integrity, anti-money laundering, economic regulatory capacity, victim and witness support, prevention, and non-state actors.

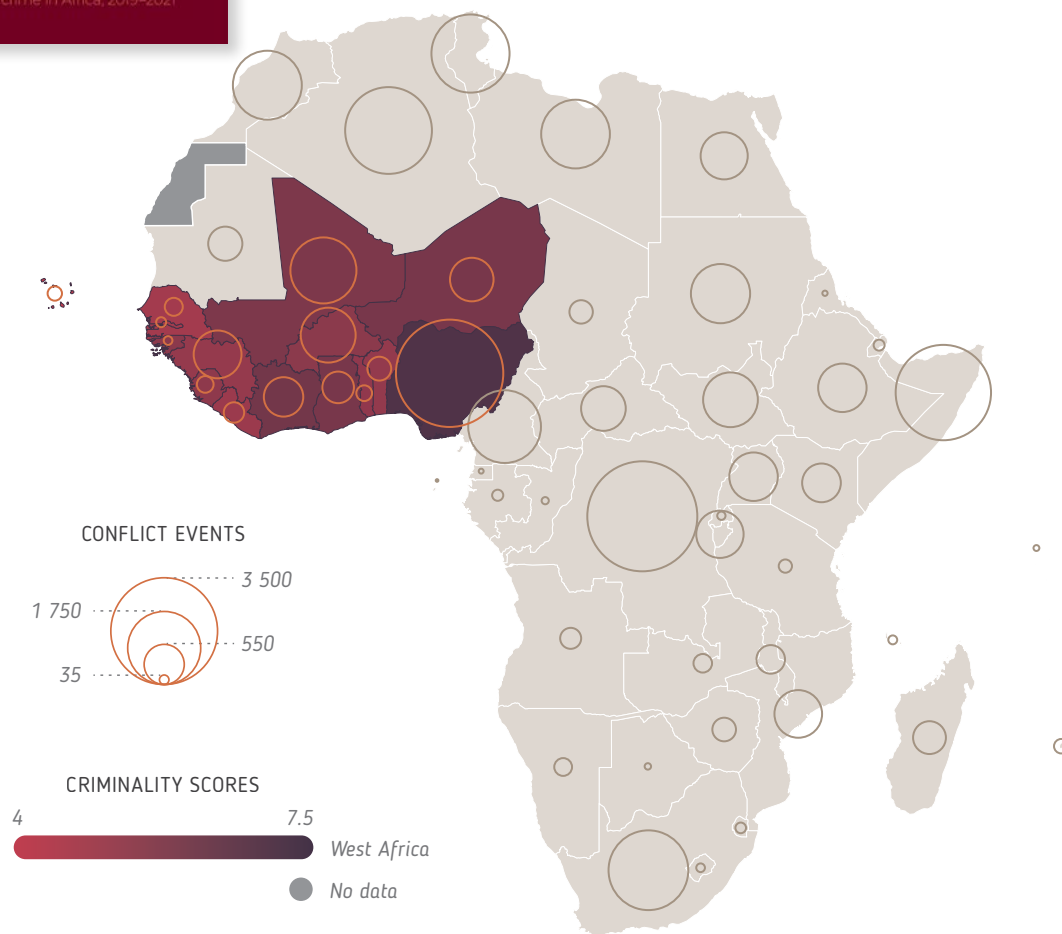


FIGURE 9 Conflict events and country criminality scores across West Africa.

SOURCE: Organised Crime Index Africa 2021 and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ILLICIT-MARKET TYPES AND CONFLICT

Not all criminal markets have the same relationship to conflict and instability. Although certain forms of organized crime have clear and unambiguous links to instability, the impact of other illicit economies on conflict dynamics may be more indirect; and in the case of some illicit markets, there may be no discernible link at all.

The global results of the Index show that most criminal markets have some negative correlation with peace

and stability, as measured by the GPI. However, arms trafficking (-0.68) and human trafficking (-0.64) stand out as markets with particularly strong relationships with conflict and instability. This becomes even more marked when considering only the 54 African countries included in the Index, in which arms trafficking and human trafficking illustrate particularly strong negative correlations with peace (-0.82 and -0.69, respectively). However, while it is clear that a relationship exists between the two illicit markets and instability, the nature of this relationship differs significantly between countries.

Accelerant illicit markets: Arms trafficking

The arms-trafficking market is a prime example of an accelerant illicit market – i.e., a criminal market that fuels armed violence and conflict, contributes to the fragmentation of conflict, increases the number of criminal

groups involved, and heightens the role of violence as a vehicle for market control.¹⁰⁸ Reflecting this, the West African countries that scored highest for arms trafficking are all epicentres of violence in the region.

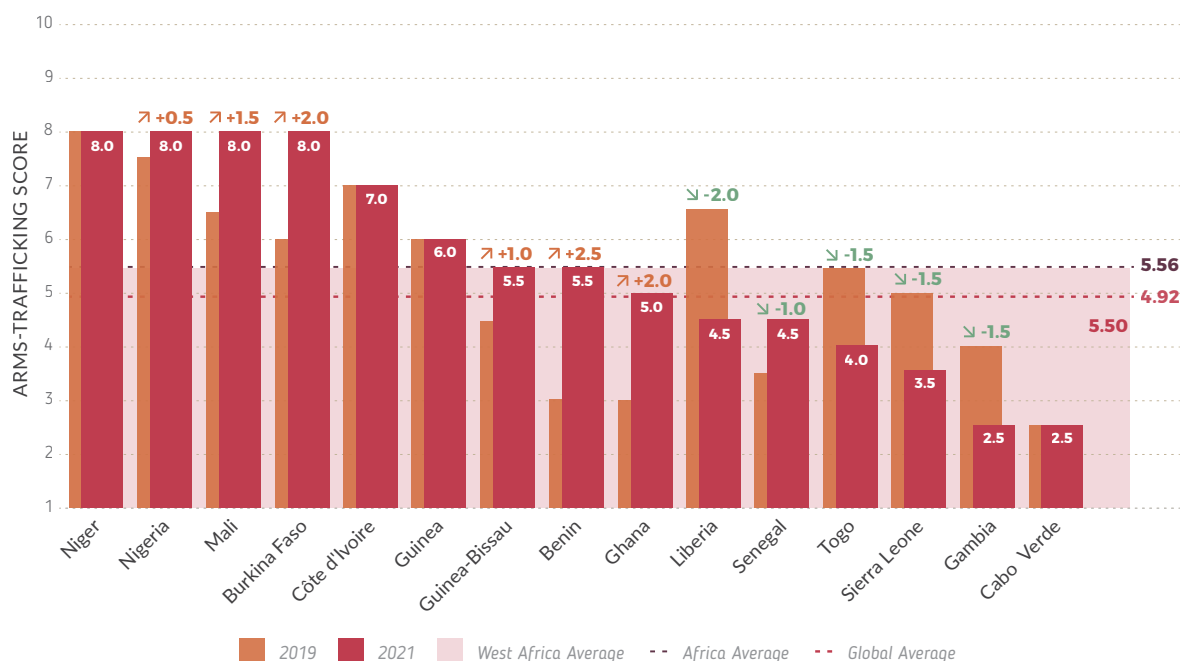


FIGURE 10 Arms-trafficking scores by country, West Africa.

SOURCE: Organised Crime Index Africa 2021

There is a pervasive arms-trafficking market across West Africa, which has an average Index score of 5.50 (above the global average score of 4.92).¹⁰⁹ While low scores for arms trafficking in many of West Africa's coastal states – including Gambia, Cabo Verde and Sierra Leone, for example – bring down the regional average (East Africa, Central Africa and North Africa all have average arms-trafficking scores greater than the West African average), the nevertheless elevated score is driven overwhelmingly by Nigeria and the Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, all of which scored 8 on the arms-trafficking indicator.

Arms trafficking both exacerbates conflict and grows as a consequence of conflict, rising insecurity and the increase in the number of armed actors involved. In Mali, since 2016, as armed groups (including jihadist groups, armed militias and other non-state and state actors) have proliferated throughout the country, the arms-trafficking market has expanded markedly.¹¹⁰ This is reflected in the Index rankings, with Mali scoring 6.5 for arms trafficking in

2019 and 8 in 2021. Weapons stock circulating throughout the country is replenished by new materials looted from military supplies, leaked by corrupt elements of the Malian armed forces or smuggled into the country. The influx of a number of new weapons from Libya in 2021, tracked in the northern town of Ber (which operates as an important hub in the trade), put paid to the growing theory that new weapons were no longer being trafficked from Libya.¹¹¹

In Nigeria, rising insecurity has also fuelled demand for arms – both by criminal and conflict actors involved in banditry, kidnapping, robbery and oil-related violence, and by communities and vigilante groups who use them for self-protection. Index scorings show a more minor increase in the arms-trafficking market in Nigeria – from 7.5 in 2019 to 8 in 2021 – than in Mali. Many weapons in circulation in Nigeria are legitimately procured but diverted into the illicit market from national stockpiles.¹¹² Heightened demand has driven the expansion of a burgeoning local arms-manufacturing market, further swelling the stocks of weapons in circulation.¹¹³

Conflict expands some illicit markets: Human trafficking

Human trafficking, the highest-scoring criminal market in West Africa (at 6.17),¹¹⁴ typically grows in conflict areas, as people displaced by conflict experience heightened vulnerability to exploitation in contexts that constitute trafficking, including forced labour, sexual exploitation

and forced marriage.¹¹⁵ Human trafficking experienced an overall, albeit minor, increase across West Africa between 2019 and 2021 (+0.33), according to the Index. In Niger, which is among the highest-scoring countries for human trafficking in West Africa, the Index marked a minor increase (+0.5) between 2019 and 2021 as trafficking networks consolidated their operations regionally.

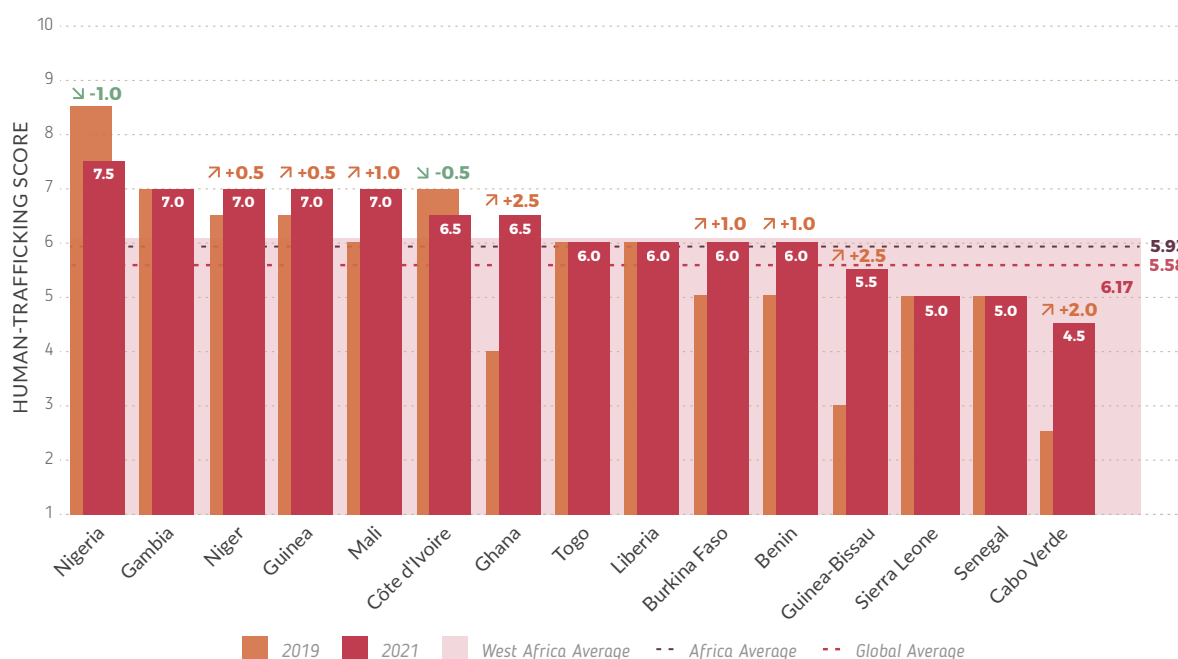


FIGURE 11 Human-trafficking scores by country, West Africa.

SOURCE: Organised Crime Index Africa 2021

Conflict zones often 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. In the context of human trafficking, conflict acts as an amplifier of pre-existing trafficking practices, and only to a lesser extent does it create new forms of demand for the services of trafficked persons.

The trafficking of children into combatant roles, or into service roles to conflict actors, as has occurred in relation to some armed groups operating in northern Mali, is often highlighted as a 'new form' of trafficking in conflict contexts.¹¹⁶ However, the recruitment of children into combatant roles typically builds on practices that preceded conflict. For instance, in the Central African Republic (CAR) – which is estimated to have one of the highest levels of human trafficking globally (the market ranked 7 in 2019 and 7.5 in 2021, according to the Index) – all armed groups use children in their ranks. However, long before the outbreak of the civil war in 2012, several thousand children were present not only in rebel groups but in the CAR state army. The intensification of the

conflict triggered armed groups to massively escalate the recruitment of children; however, this was a pre-existing practice perpetrated not only by armed groups but by the state, which built on long-standing practices of child labour in non-combatant contexts.¹¹⁷

Tenuous relationships between instability and illicit markets

While there are numerous different forms of organized-criminal activity with strong links, whether direct or indirect, to conflict and instability across West Africa and the wider continent, the Index demonstrates no obvious connection between some criminal markets and conflict dynamics.

Two criminal markets for which the Index shows no statistically significant relationship to the GPI are the cannabis trade and the illicit wildlife trade.¹¹⁸ Cannabis is cultivated across large parts of West Africa, including in countries such as Sierra Leone and Gambia which are relatively peaceful states in the African context, ranking respectively 39th and 46th continentally on the

GPI.¹¹⁹ Likewise, the illegal wildlife trade is highly pervasive in a number of comparatively stable countries, such as Senegal and Ghana (and to a somewhat lesser extent, Togo and Liberia).¹²⁰

There are clear cases where both markets have been clearly linked to the financing of armed groups or to otherwise perpetuating instability – such as between the illicit wildlife trade and armed groups in the DRC, or the cannabis markets and separatist rebels in the Casamance

region of Senegal. However, when Index scores for these two markets are analyzed across West Africa, or indeed across Africa as a whole, there is no clear correlation with instability.

While the nature of the relationship between illicit markets and instability is dependent on a wide array of factors, the high degree of legitimacy typically enjoyed by both cannabis and illicit wildlife markets among local communities is likely to be one contributing element.

CONFLICT AND RESILIENCE TO ORGANIZED CRIME

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Index results show that those African countries facing significant levels of conflict, violence or other political, security and social pressures have far lower levels of resilience to organized crime, as evidenced by the moderately strong correlations between resilience and state fragility (-0.63) and resilience and peace (+0.51).¹²¹

In conflict settings, it could be the case that state attention is diverted to war efforts, which inevitably leaves social, economic and security institutions weakened. Similarly,

in conflict settings, when there is a dispute over territory or resources, territorial control and social cohesion are likely to be diminished. All of these circumstances can lead to an overall decline in resilience to organized crime. In West Africa, four of the five lowest-scoring countries for resilience (Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Niger) are all experiencing conflict or political upheaval.¹²² Indeed, since 2020, all four countries have experienced either coups or attempted coups. In Burkina Faso, which experienced one of the steepest decreases in resilience between 2019 and 2021, as shown in the indexes, the state lost control of swathes of territory to violent-extremist groups.¹²³

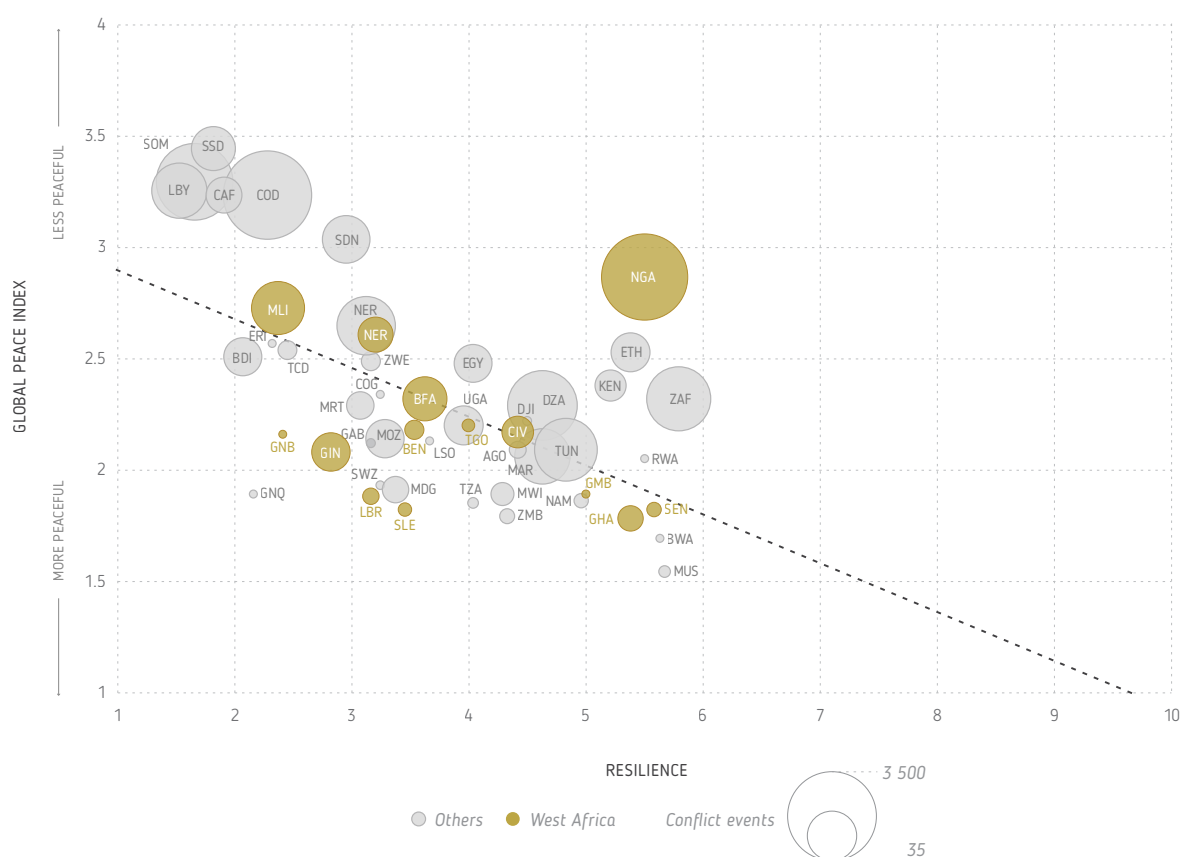


FIGURE 12 Relationship between conflict and resilience to organized crime.

SOURCE: Organised Crime Index Africa 2021; Vision of Humanity (Institute for Economics and Peace); Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

CONCLUSION

The results of the 2021 Organised Crime Index provide a new lens for analysing the relationship between criminality, violence, conflict and instability. The findings support existing research tracking the myriad ways in which criminal markets and conflict can feed into each other, but also underscore the importance of distinguishing between markets. Narratives surrounding the nexus between crime

and conflict are often oversimplified, pointing to a clear linear correlation. Instead, it is important to recognize that not all illicit flows have the same relationship to conflict, and that even where the two phenomena grow in parallel, causality differs and should not be assumed. Stabilization responses, in turn, must be crafted accordingly and should prioritize addressing those illicit economies that are particularly destabilizing, such as arms trafficking.¹²⁴

Notes

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