RESEARCH REPORT



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A strategic criminal actor

ELEANOR BEEVOR

AUGUST 2022



JNIM IN BURKINA FASO

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to extend her sincere thanks to all those who took the time to share their knowledge for this report. Contributors have not been identified for security reasons, but they include a number of Bukinabè citizens working in humanitarian organizations, NGOs, security, civil society, journalism and research, as well as residents of towns on the front lines of the fighting between JNIM, the Burkinabè armed forces and the Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie. The author and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) would also like to extend their sincere thanks to Lucia Bird for her guidance on the project and to Paul Absalon, who kindly reviewed the report.

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Burkina Faso has seen an escalation of armed group activity over the last decade. Above, black smoke signals an attack on the French embassy in Ouagadougou, 2 March 2018. © Ahmed Ouoba/AFP via Getty Images

his report considers Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin's (JNIM) relationship with illicit economies in Burkina Faso, where it has rapidly become the dominant non-state armed group, and indeed the principal (if contested) armed presence in most rural areas since late 2020. Although armed activity in Burkina Faso can be traced to late 2015, the conflict has intensified dramatically in the last three years, creating one of the world's most severe (and most neglected) humanitarian and displacement crises.¹

Between 2020 and 2021, the number of conflict incidents more than doubled, from 643 to 1 373. The first half of 2022 has seen intense levels of violence continue, with 788 incidents recorded in Q1 and Q2.² Amid this crisis, JNIM in Burkina Faso has, for the most part, been committed to establishing its own form of Islamist governance and to expanding that governance into new areas. JNIM's own illicit activity, and its facilitation of illicit activity, must be considered in light of this strategy.

JNIM was formed in Mali in 2017 through the amalgamation of the major al-Qaedaaffiliated armed groups in the country: al-Mourabitoun, the Saharan branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Ansar Dine; and Katibat Macina. Many members of these forerunner groups had significant criminal as well as militant experience and some of these activities were cornerstones of funding for certain JNIM component groups, even prior to the Malian conflict. For instance, AQIM is thought to have made US\$91.5 million through kidnap and ransom between 2008 and 2013.³ Individuals in AQIM, such as the senior commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, were widely believed to be integral to regional trafficking of illicit substances such as drugs, and the smuggling of licit goods such as cigarettes.⁴

Because of these high-profile individuals and their apparent criminal connections, Mali and the broader Sahelian conflict became increasingly scrutinized through the lens of the 'crime-terror nexus'.⁵ Research focusing on how crime impacts – and often prolongs – conflict linked to violent extremism became increasingly prevalent in the wake of the French intervention in northern Mali in 2013, and the subsequent regionalization of the conflict.

However, crime-terror nexus analysis of the Sahel has sometimes focused on the role of jihadist groups at the expense of understanding local criminal economies. Later studies of AQIM's involvement in drug trafficking found that reports of a 'narco-jihadist nexus' were overstated.⁶ Political actors were often much more significant



Senior AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar. His and other AQIM members' central role in regional smuggling has been somewhat overplayed. © Social media players in Malian and Sahelian drug trafficking than armed groups, even if some of the latter did come to occupy niches within the drugs economy.⁷ AQIM did benefit from regional smuggling but its involvement was somewhat overplayed.⁸ Indeed, the nicknaming of Belmokhtar as 'Mr Marlboro' for his alleged involvement in cigarette smuggling contributed to sensationalizing the group's criminal connections.⁹

This report aims to contribute to the growing study of violent extremist and criminal actors who share operational spaces, and whose activities overlap,

by showing that these groups engage in criminality for reasons beyond mere selffinancing. Certainly, in the case of JNIM, its engagement with illicit economies lies at the centre of its governance strategy. By facilitating the existing illicit activities of local communities, and by opening up illicit economies to new demographics, JNIM has won the acceptance and support of many residents across its regions of influence. Indeed, many residents have become invested in maintaining JNIM's presence in the area and support them with material contributions, information and other logistical help. While JNIM can also be very violent towards civilians, it often directs this violence along the lines of pre-existing communal tensions, helping to entrench support within one side even if it alienates another. This report begins by considering JNIM's evolution in Burkina Faso and how criminal activity has formed an important part of its development. It then examines JNIM's relationship to illicit activities in which it is directly implicated (kidnapping and vehicle theft) and indirectly implicated (smuggling and gold mining) by facilitating or managing access.

These illustrate JNIM's strategic approach to crime and illicit activity – to facilitate its governance agenda as well as a source of funding. This reveals that, although JNIM may try to monopolize a particular source of illicit funding or maximize profit from it, in practice it tends to open up that source for local residents to exploit and thus garner support. Likewise, when involving itself directly in criminal activities, it generally avoids targeting the residents of the area in which it is trying to establish itself. Policymakers must consider that activities that are perceived as illicit in Western circles are cornerstones of the livelihoods of many Burkinabè, and that removing this income stream without offering alternatives will undermine attempts to curb JNIM's power in Burkina Faso. In rural areas of Burkina Faso, the informal transfer of goods between states is not viewed as particularly immoral, since the regulators of these states rarely provide positive support to residents.

A focus on terrorism naturally elicits a military response, while a focus on crime likewise prompts a law enforcement response.¹⁰ The major risk of these frameworks is that neither may be appropriate in contexts where illicit economies are the only option for residents to earn a living. At the very least, militarized responses will be ineffective – if not counterproductive – without additional efforts, such as peacebuilding and the development of alternative livelihoods.¹¹ This is not to deny the importance of transnational crime, in the Sahelian conflict or elsewhere. Illicit economies and criminal activity play a significant role in exacerbating communal violence in the Sahel, in funding armed groups, and in worsening the region's instability and humanitarian crisis. However,

jihadist armed groups are far from the only actors involved in criminality. Where they are participants in crime, they are not exclusively motivated by profit and so cannot be analyzed purely as either 'criminals' or 'terrorists'. This is well illustrated by an examination of JNIM in some of its most recent zones of operation, particularly in Burkina Faso.

It should be emphasized that this report's aim is not to determine JNIM's principal funding streams in Burkina Faso. It is outside the scope of this study to determine the financial contributions made by particular illicit economies to a transnational, loosely structured group with both local and regional sources of income. The relative importance of certain illicit activities to JNIM's finances can be speculated upon but cannot be confidently quantified. For instance, it appears that revenue obtained from artisanal gold mines (through 'taxes' or contributions from miners working there, and from its own mining and smuggling of gold) is a substantial pillar of JNIM's financing in Burkina Faso. However, the amount of money that JNIM make through artisanal mines cannot be estimated, given limited information on artisanal mining, coupled with the security challenges of researching JNIM. It is also worth noting that JNIM obtains many of its essentials in kind, either through cultivating local support or by stealing items such as fuel, food (including livestock) and medicine.

Likewise, the report does not attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis of JNIM's illicit activities. For instance, a number of illicit economies and trafficked commodities in the Sahel are beyond the scope of this report, including strategic goods such as arms. (This is also because there is not currently evidence of JNIM playing a significant role in the arms trade in Burkina Faso.)¹²

The purpose of this report, rather, is to illustrate how JNIM leverages illicit economies to serve strategic and governance purposes. JNIM's role as a criminal actor in Burkina Faso will be depicted in broad strokes. Given that in Burkina Faso and elsewhere JNIM is made up of a diffuse, diverse set of actors, with multiple groups (*katiba*, plural: *kata'ib*) and subgroup (*markaz*, plural: *marakiz*) operating across different contexts, there will unquestionably be exceptions to the patterns being described. In certain areas, it is very difficult to distinguish JNIM's activity from that of loosely connected, or entirely distinct, criminal gangs and bandits. Some *kata'ib* will be far less motivated by ideological or governance aims than by opportunities to profit or settle local scores.

Likewise, it must be remembered that the group conducts itself differently depending on how secure it feels in a particular area. While JNIM combatants tend to pander to popular demand when first implanting themselves in an area, their treatment of residents can become significantly harsher and more restrictive over time – in regulating social behaviour as well as people's involvement in illicit activity. However, JNIM's approaches to criminality in different parts of Burkina Faso are consistent enough to treat it as a cohesive strategic criminal actor with aims beyond mere profiteering.¹³

Beginning with the evolution of JNIM as a criminal actor in Burkina Faso and the historical context, this report will then examine four illicit and criminal activities in which JNIM in Burkina Faso is involved – smuggling of commodities, kidnapping, gold mining and the stolen vehicle market. In each of these fields of activity, JNIM's consideration of governance and its own popular appeal will be outlined, showing the strategic limits that combatants tend to place on their criminal practices. Likewise, the report will highlight how many of these illicit sectors are not of JNIM's creation, but rather pre-existed the group and remain cornerstones of local economies, as well as key livelihoods for certain communities. Where Jihadist armed groups are participants in crime, they are not exclusively motivated by profit and so cannot be analyzed purely as either 'criminals' or 'terrorists'.

Key armed groups in Mali and Burkina Faso



Fighters of the armed group Ansar Dine in northern Mali. © Romaric Hien/AFP via Getty Images

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM): A jihadist armed group formed in 2017 in Mali from the union of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Saharan branch, al-Mourabitoun; Ansar Dine; and Katibat Macina. JNIM has regional ambitions and continues to expand through recruitment, acceptance-building and through co-opting and cooperating with smaller armed groups.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS): A jihadist armed group created in 2015, when an offshoot of al-Murabitoun led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi declared allegiance to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). After an initially cooperative relationship with the al-Qaeda-aligned JNIM, clashes between the two groups began in 2019 and 2020, in both Burkina Faso and Mali, and their relationship remains acrimonious in 2022. Al-Sahrawi was killed in an airstrike under Operation Barkhane in 2022, and the current group leader is unknown.

Ansarul Islam: A Burkinabè jihadist armed group that originated in the north of the country, with significant support from Katibat Macina (one of the forerunner groups of JNIM). Ansarul Islam has cooperated closely with JNIM (and its forerunners) from its first attack on Burkinabè soil in 2016, and over time appears to have been quasi-absorbed into the JNIM coalition, albeit with no official announcement.

Katibat Macina: A central Malian jihadist group that joined the JNIM coalition in 2017. Given central Mali's proximity to Burkina Faso, Katibat Macina is the most influential of JNIM's components in Burkina Faso and was a critical support for Ansarul Islam's development. Katibat Macina and its leader, Amadou Kouffa, have focused their recruitment efforts and rhetoric on Fulani grievances and intercommunal struggles in central Mali.

Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP): A volunteer force created by decree in 2020 by the government of former president Marc Roch Kaboré. In order to supplement an overstretched national army, the VDP are recruited to work in their home areas, and are given a weapon and a short period of training by the state. They are meant to report to and cooperate closely with the armed forces and to supply them with intelligence, although in practice the armed forces do not always have the capacity to take the lead role in frontline fighting.



FIGURE 1 Network of jihadist actors in Mali and Burkina Faso.

THE EQUITION OF JUNION MAL AND BURKINA

A mass protest against former president Blaise Compaoré. After his ousting in October 2014, Burkina Faso began experiencing the jihadist violence seen in neighbouring Mali. © Lougri Dimtalba/Andalou Agency via Getty Images

Burkina Faso has seen an extraordinary escalation of armed group activity over the last decade, and particularly since 2019, when local armed groups intensified their actions. Incidents of armed conflict more than doubled between 2018 (253 incidents) and 2019 (646 incidents). A further doubling occurred between 2020 (643 incidents) and 2021 (1 373 incidents).¹⁴ In parallel, violence also soared in central Mali and particularly in the Mopti region bordering Burkina Faso. The first six months of 2022 suggest that this year will see higher levels of violence to 2021, with 788 events recorded already – more than half of the 1 373 incidents recorded in 2021.¹⁵



FIGURE 2 Conflict incidents and conflict-related deaths in Burkina Faso, 2016–2021.

SOURCE: ACLED data



parts of the south-west, and in the

Centre-Nord region.

FIGURE 3 JNIM's evolution in Burkina Faso.

and Malian armed

groups.



FIGURE 4 Map of armed clashes involving JNIM and ISGS, Q1 and Q2 2022.

SOURCE: ACLED data

The roots of JNIM in Mali

It is worth briefly considering JNIM's origins and operations in Mali, in order to contextualize its strategic ambitions. As mentioned, JNIM was the product of a 2017 union in Mali between Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, Katibat Macina and the Sahara-Sahelian branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). JNIM's strategic aims were a continuation of AQIM's - to undermine regional governments by fighting state forces and to foster their own form of Islamist governance in an expansionist fashion.¹⁶ Key to that strategy is winning acceptance among local communities before implementing harsher forms of religious rule. The founding parties of JNIM agreed to make Ansar Dine leader lyad ag-Ghaly the head of JNIM, with Katibat Macina's leader, Amadou Kouffa, as deputy. It appears, though, that the founders recognized the advantages of granting a large degree of autonomy to mid-level local commanders, particularly for advancing al-Qaeda's expansionist ambitions.¹⁷ This has enabled broad recruitment: although JNIM is often thought to be dominated by ethnic Fulani (and indeed, Fulani occupy a large proportion of their ranks) it is one of the rare armed groups that has proven capable of recruiting from several different ethnic bases.

By allowing zonal commanders to cater to local circumstances and priorities, JNIM is able to recruit multiple interest groups under a shared coalition.¹⁸ For instance, in 2019 and 2020, Katibat Macina's Amadou Kouffa was instrumental in destabilizing central Mali's Mopti and Ségou regions, which he was able to do by latching on to Fulani grievances over access to land.¹⁹ This has led to widespread inter-communal violence, largely along ethnic lines, but was also an effective recruitment tactic, at least in the short term. Nevertheless, local *kata'ib* and their zonal sub-units, or *marakiz*, maintain semi-regular contact with JNIM's higher command structures – a relationship that the upper echelons cultivate through material and tactical support.²⁰ Central Mali remains highly unstable due to intercommunal violence between JNIM units and local hunters' associations (some of which have morphed into larger armed groups such as Dan Na Ambassagou). Temporary truces have brought periods of calm to local areas but these have proven very difficult to maintain. However, JNIM has continued to expand its area of activity in Mali, particularly in Ségou, and towards the southern regions of Koulikoro and Sikasso.

Jihadist violence emerges in Burkina Faso: Ansarul Islam (2013–2016)

The development of jihadist violence in Burkina Faso followed a different trajectory to that of Mali. Burkina Faso did not experience the jihadist violence that troubled its neighbour until after the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré, who is often said to have had an informal non-aggression pact with Malian armed groups.²¹ Nevertheless, before Compaoré's fall in October 2014, a Burkinabè jihadist group by the name of Ansarul Islam was beginning to form. Ansarul Islam was conceived by Boureima Dicko (better known as Ibrahim Malam Dicko), a former radio preacher and founder of an



Violent clashes among armed groups in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have led to internal displacement. © Giles Clarke/ UN OCHA via Getty Images

> Islamic preaching organization called al-Irchad in the northern province of Soum. Al-Irchad's strength lay in its condemnation of social and class injustices, meaning that it won and retained significant local support even as its religious rhetoric became more radical. For example, al-Irchad denounced traditional marabouts (chaplains) for charging substantial amounts of money to perform marriages, as well as inequality between the Fulani and the Rimaibé (who are the descendants of Fulani slaves).²²

> By 2013, Malam Dicko had fallen out with established Islamic leaders in Soum and had travelled to Mali, where he entered a militant training camp and grew close to Amadou Kouffa's Katibat Macina.²³ Dicko eventually returned to Burkina Faso, and it appears Katibat Macina and AQIM lent him substantial support in establishing Ansarul Islam on Burkinabè territory. For instance, Ansarul Islam's first attack in Burkina Faso was on 26 December 2016 against a military outpost in Nassoumbou, in which several Katibat Macina cadres are also believed to have participated.²⁴ AQIM is believed to have provided further technical training to Ansarul Islam, including in the use of improvised explosive devices.²⁵ Although in Burkina Faso the Fulani and Rimaibé also comprised a large proportion of Ansarul Islam, Dicko's class-based mobilization allowed him to appeal to other ethnic groups as well.²⁶ Malam Dicko is widely believed to have died in 2017, at which point he was succeeded as leader of Ansarul Islam by his brother Jafar.²⁷

Establishment of JNIM in Burkina Faso and cooperation between al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated groups (2017 to mid-2019)

As in Mali, JNIM began consolidating its presence in Burkina Faso from 2017 onwards, both through local recruitment and through cooperation with and quasiabsorption of local jihadist armed groups or subgroups. The result has been a coalition of armed groups and subgroups with a high degree of local autonomy but which maintain regular contact with and support from the Katibat Macina in central Mali. Unlike in other parts of the world, Islamic State-affiliated combatants in the Sahel cooperated with al-Qaeda-affiliates between 2017 and 2019. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (or ISGS, as it is commonly referred to, although the group has not formally adopted it) was an offshoot of the Malian jihadist group al-Mourabitoun, which declared allegiance in 2015 to the Islamic State.²⁸ Ansarul Islam incurred losses to ISGS in the form of mass defections in 2018, which may have been spurred by sympathies for ISGS's more radical agenda and more violent approach to establishing control.

Ties and clashes fuel surge in violence (mid-2019 to present)

Clashes between ISGS and the JNIM and Ansarul Islam factions began sporadically in mid-2019, concentrated in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.²⁹ By early 2020, these had escalated to frequent bouts of violence and evolved into major territorial struggles throughout that year in the tri-border area, and the eastern and northern regions of Burkina Faso. While only one clash between JNIM and ISGS was recorded by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) in 2019, this rose to 54 clashes in 2020 and a further 22 occurred in 2021 (by which time JNIM had gained the upper hand in most of Burkina Faso, although ISGS maintained its presence in the tri-border area).³⁰ In 2020, it was already extremely difficult to distinguish Ansarul Islam activity from JNIM. However, the fact that clashes between Ansarul Islam and ISGS became frequent in 2020 situates the group within JNIM's sphere of influence at the time.³¹

Ansarul Islam emerged weakened from its clashes with ISGS in 2019, which may have encouraged the group to forge closer ties with JNIM. There is little documentation of how the relationship between Ansarul Islam and JNIM changed throughout 2020 and 2021, but attacks by the two groups have become essentially indistinguishable. JNIM now claims attacks from units in areas that were previously Ansarul Islam strongholds, which suggests the latter has been effectively absorbed into the JNIM coalition.³² Ansarul Islam's independent communications had always been sporadic,

which may have meant an official announcement of the union of the two groups was deemed unnecessary.³³

Throughout 2020 and 2021, JNIM-affiliated groups reversed many of the territorial losses to ISGS, particularly in the Est region of Burkina Faso, where it effectively replaced ISGS as the dominant armed actor in the zone. Through a series of battles with JNIM in 2021, ISGS in Burkina Faso has been increasingly confined to the Oudalan and Seno provinces within

> Jean-Claude Kassi Brou, former president of the ECOWAS Commission, at a summit on the political situation in Burkina Faso, Ghana, February 2022. © Nipah Dennis/AFP via Getty Images



the Sahel region, and with a more limited presence in Soum and Yagha. It has been unable to make and hold significant territorial gains despite regular clashes with JNIM. By contrast, JNIM has consolidated its presence in the Est, Nord and Centre-Nord regions and has substantially increased its activity in Cascades, Hauts Bassins and Boucle du Mouhoun in the course of the past year.

In the present day, JNIM in Burkina Faso follows the example set by its Malian counterparts by granting substantial autonomy to its zonal commanders. However, both Malian and Burkinabè senior commanders continue to influence and support these zonal units. As well as providing regular material and tactical assistance, these commanders appear to have been quite successful in persuading local units to follow the broader JNIM strategy – cultivation of acceptance, recruitment and subsequent expansion. Observers describe JNIM-affiliated combatants integrating themselves in a new area by offering local young men a gun, a motorbike or bicycle, and a small amount of cash in exchange for their help – an offer that can be appealing in a place with few other opportunities for making money.³⁴

Similarly, it appears that JNIM units in Burkina Faso have – for the most part – imbibed the regional JNIM strategy of creating radical Islamist governance. They do this by appealing to local needs and grievances, and often manage to cultivate a high degree of acceptance in a particular area, which allows them to act as a legitimate authority in many residents' eyes. Despite achieving hegemony over large areas of Burkina Faso, it is not essential to the JNIM governance strategy to have a monopoly of force over a particular territory. Rather, units seek to win enough local support that the population chooses to cooperate with them as opposed to other armed or political actors.

JNIM in Burkina Faso has also imitated its Malian counterparts in using illicit economies to win local favour, as well as for profit and finance.³⁵ However, only certain types of criminality help to further JNIM's governance agenda. While combatants could theoretically profit from almost all criminal activities, or could monopolize the most lucrative areas, they typically show a more discerning approach, at least early on in their relations with local communities. In certain areas, JNIM has effectively liberalized illicit activity by upending pre-existing social hierarchies that excluded people from profiting from a particular criminal enterprise. This, in turn, cultivates acceptance, as explored further below.

JNIM AS A CONTEMPORARY CRIMINAL ACTOR IN BURKINA FASO

Artisanal gold miners work in Yatenga province, Burkina Faso. © Universal Images Group via Getty Images

llicit economies in Burkina Faso are not always open to everyone, nor are they riskfree. As shall be explored in this section, JNIM often acts more as a strategic enabler of criminal activity than a direct participant. Nevertheless, it benefits both financially and socially from this indirect role. For the most part, JNIM is generally careful to avoid undercutting its governance agenda by engaging in violent crime against local populations. At least, it typically avoids committing crimes towards individuals who the combatants in question would see on a regular basis or who are members of communities they believe that they can win over.

It is critical to recognize that – for a significant majority of Burkinabès – smuggling and other non-violent illicit activities are not considered criminal behaviours, since they do not harm the local population, and are among the few sources of income and affordable goods in certain areas. Criminals, in the popular imagination, are those who commit violent or damaging crimes against ordinary people – bandits, thieves, car-jackers, kidnappers and so on. JNIM is thus, for the most part, careful to avoid being directly associated with such individuals within the areas it is trying to govern. Where it does implicate itself in such criminal activity, JNIM tends to do so discreetly or to direct these activities towards communities it is already out of favour with. Criminal gangs living in JNIM-controlled zones often leave their localities before committing crimes, since they would likely face reprisals from combatants if they harmed local residents whom JNIM was trying to win over.³⁶ JNIM is prepared to benefit from such activities so long as they do not impact its local reputation.

It must be said that the situation is more complicated in highly contested, unstable areas. In areas where JNIM is well established as the dominant actor, or where it is just beginning to implant itself and seek acceptance, a discerning use of crime is more evident. In places that JNIM is in the process of destabilizing but does not yet control, bandits or other armed criminals tend to benefit from the reduced power of the state and the confusing and unpredictable atmosphere. Likewise, JNIM combatants who are inclined to commit criminal acts against civilians can take advantage of this confusion and lack of security.

This is especially so in areas that are intensely contested between JNIM and the Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP), a community-based militia system funded by the government, which is meant to collaborate with the military. Since the VDP are residents of the communities JNIM is attempting to establish control over, JNIM becomes highly suspicious of any civilian collaboration with the state. While the state, its military and its officials are legitimate targets in JNIM's doctrine, the VDP's ambiguous status muddies the water when it comes to civilians, who JNIM would



FIGURE 5 JNIM's relationships with illicit and criminal actors, and with communities in affected areas.

normally seek to win over. The VDP are JNIM's most important target in such areas, to try to ensure they do not block JNIM's access and expansion. Equally, the presence of VDP complicates JNIM's 'strategic restraint' in its criminal actions as well as its military ones.

Four examples of JNIM's relationships to illicit (or semi-licit) economies shall be considered here. Firstly, two contexts where JNIM is more of a facilitator of illicit economies than active participant (albeit with exceptions) – smuggling of commodities and artisanal gold mining. Both of these examples reveal that JNIM is willing to forgo monopolizing a source of funding in favour of entrenching its support within local communities.

Subsequently, two examples of JNIM's more direct participation in crime will be considered, namely kidnapping and vehicle theft. In these cases, a degree of strategic restraint towards local residents is also often (if not always) exercised. It is thus argued that JNIM in Burkina Faso is a strategic participant in crime, one that is willing to sacrifice opportunities for profit in pursuit of its acceptance and governance agendas.

JNIM as a facilitator

Smuggling of commodities

Smuggling is the most prolific and least understood pillar of Burkina Faso's illicit economy. Verifiable information about the specifics of JNIM's involvement in smuggling is scarce but the group is known to have installed itself in key smuggling hubs and relies on certain smuggled commodities. Smuggling and trafficking takes place across every border area of Burkina Faso but it is especially widespread across the southern border region, given that this runs along several littoral West African states (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin). All of these coastal countries, and particularly Togo and Benin, are known to be sources of goods being smuggled into Burkina Faso and other landlocked Sahelian states.³⁷



Rangers practice bush patrols at the Pendjari National Park. The national park complex in Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin is a strategic position for JNIM and an ideal crossing point for smugglers. © Stefan Heunis/AFP via Getty Images

A vast range of goods is moved along Burkina Faso's southern borders, both mundane and illegal. Household goods and prestige items such as clothing can be bought far more cheaply in coastal states, and sold for lower prices, than formally imported items. One of the most frequently smuggled commodities is fuel. Fuel, obtained cheaply in Nigeria, is moved inland via Togo, from where it is smuggled into Burkina Faso. Drugs and cigarettes are also frequently brought into Burkina Faso from the south, mostly to be exported to Europe via North Africa or to other countries in the region, and with a certain amount reserved for domestic consumption.³⁸

There are two main categories of smugglers and traffickers active in and around Burkina Faso. There are the large-scale, organized gangs who likely have elite connections and significant resources with which to operate. This type are more likely to be able to offer significant bribes to customs and security forces, which allows them to take larger loads over main roads in trucks or cars. The other type is individuals or small bands of smugglers, who tend to work in and around their area of origin and are often referred to as *transporteurs*.³⁹ They take small quantities of goods on motorbikes and drive offroad through the bush or through protected areas, in order to avoid being arrested or having to pay a bribe.

JNIM may have interactions with both types of smuggler. During a major investigation into organized fuel smuggling by the Burkinabè government in 2021, 72 people were arrested for various offences, particularly systematic payments to border guards to ensure that their trucks could cross the border unobstructed.⁴⁰ According to local media, the smuggling network in question was using specialized trucks with interiors designed to carry 2 000 litres of fuel at a time.⁴¹ At least one of the businessmen charged in the case was publicly accused of supplying terrorist groups with fuel.⁴² However, the charges he received were aggravated smuggling and endangerment of life, and a formal charge of terrorism financing was not handed down.43 JNIM certainly has a need for fuel and is likely to try to acquire it from any source with a competitive price. However, in terms of its broader agenda of governance, JNIM's relationship with the less organized smugglers - the transporteurs - is more significant. This is particularly evident in the W, Arly and Pendjari (WAP) national park complex in Est region, which extends into Niger and Benin.

The WAP national park complex serves several important uses for JNIM. It is a refuge from fighting; a storage area; a logistics base; a source of nourishment; and a site from which they can profit from several illicit economies. The park complex runs along the borders of Benin and Niger. This strategic position, coupled with the fact that it is a wooded area that is isolated from state authorities, make it an ideal crossing point for smugglers, who cannot afford encounters with law enforcement. These small-scale smugglers in the park also deal in small quantities of fuel, cigarettes, mundane goods and possibly drugs or other illicit commodities. They were operating in the WAP complex long before JNIM, and were extremely well acquainted with the trails that run through the park, as well as the locations of customs and security force posts. This, along with their ability to source vital commodities such as fuel, made them ideal allies for JNIM.

JNIM and the transporteurs in the park forged a relationship that appears to be based on mutual assistance. The transporteurs were keen to assist JNIM by showing them police, army and customs posts since JNIM proceeded to attack the posts and drive them out.⁴⁴ Given that the purge of state forces from the area made the work of smuggling much easier, the *transporteurs* have an incentive to ensure JNIM remains the dominant actor in the area. They are thus reportedly happy to supply them with fuel, food, vehicle parts and other materials they might need. (How and if JNIM pays for these goods is not known, but it is likely to vary.) From this relationship, JNIM not only gains a steady supply of goods to meet its needs but also forges links with the local communities in the park.⁴⁵ Since most of the smugglers are

residents, local communities share in the benefits of the smuggling economy. Not only is smuggling the main source of livelihood for many residents, but it also provides access to goods at more affordable prices. For example, residents living near smuggling hubs on the Benin border can buy fuel from roadside sellers for 250 CFA per litre, instead of 650 CFA per litre at the petrol station.⁴⁶

As a result, many observers of the situation in the national parks stress that, even though JNIM likely obtains some funding from the smuggling, they probably do not 'tax' smugglers systematically for the right to bring in their goods, at least not yet.⁴⁷ Since both the smugglers and JNIM have an interest in maintaining each other's presence, many informants believed that smugglers might offer contributions in exchange for particular services; for instance, JNIM might provide security (against bandits or security forces that they might encounter) for a particular smuggling convoy. In this sense, JNIM is not a direct participant in smuggling but instead provides protection for the routes. There are no doubt exceptions to this rule. Some observers speculated that JNIM would in fact benefit from recruiting smugglers in order to bring their suppliers in house.⁴⁸ However, JNIM's principal role in illegal goods trafficking has so far been that of an enabler and partner, benefitting from the protection money levied on smugglers.



Petrol on sale near Dano, Burkina Faso. One of the most frequent smuggled commodities in the country is fuel, obtained cheaply in Nigeria. © Ute Grabowsky/ Photothek via Getty Images

JNIM's role in smuggling in the tri-border area: Looking ahead

JNIM's influence may substantially change the routes, and therefore scale, of smuggling in the Est region in the near to medium term, depending on how much control it can exercise over the major roads in northern Benin as it entrenches itself there. There are two main roads which cross the Burkina Faso-Benin border and run through parts of the WAP complex. The Route Nationale 18 in Burkina Faso is completely under JNIM control south of Pama, all the way to the Beninois border and the disputed town of Koualou. Currently, JNIM do not have fixed checkpoints along the roads they control in Est region but they maintain a permanent presence on the road and perform ad hoc inspections. At present, they do not ask for any payments, although they have been reported to take certain goods that they need from road users, such as motorbikes.⁴⁹ Koualou's disputed status, with both Benin and Burkina Faso claiming sovereignty, has allowed it to become a major smuggling hub since neither country can place their security services in the town.⁵⁰

Beninois troops are enforcing the north of the country, including the main roads, for the time being. However, were JNIM to expand its control over the road network, even if only at certain times, it could allow larger vehicles with contraband goods to use it to enter Burkina Faso. The other main road, going through Diapaga into Benin, is even more vulnerable since it is deeper inside the WAP complex, which extends into Benin by way of Pendjari National Park. Togo may eventually face a similar challenge on the road that runs between Kompienga in Burkina Faso and Dapaong. If JNIM is able to eventually take control of major sections of the transnational roads, for at least some of the time, in the coastal states it could rapidly increase the volume of contraband moving across the border, and may be able to formalize taxation from smugglers, thus scaling up its own financing.

Artisanal gold mining and smuggling

In Burkina Faso, artisanal gold mining appears to be an important source of revenue for armed groups. However, it is also a critical means to JNIM's end of gaining local acceptance, and JNIM's management of artisanal mines goes far beyond efforts to finance their activities. It is true that competition over profitable mine sites appears to have sparked some of the worst incidents of violence during the conflict so far. For instance, the attack of 5 June 2021 in the village of Solhan by an unknown jihadist armed group, which killed up to 160 people, is thought to be linked to armed group competition over a gold mine.⁵¹ However, the broader relationship between JNIM and artisanal miners tends to be a mutually beneficial one that is not characterized by violence. This relationship is rooted in JNIM's ability to remove pre-existing systems of control over mining sites, and to offer a wider set of artisanal miners more appealing terms than their predecessors.

The state is rarely capable of policing mines directly, which opens up a substantial opportunity for private security. These security providers are also made to manage conflicts on the mining site between miners. In Burkina Faso, this is a role that is often assumed by armed gangs, or by traditional hunting associations, such as the



Dozo or Koglweogo. They may be paid by the mine proprietors, landowners or concessionary companies for this, or they may simply take and maintain control of a mine. They also often operate with the oversight of a local state official. However, these arrangements can lead to grievances.

Landowners or providers of more sophisticated mining equipment can demand significant shares of the gold extracted.⁵² During the Compaoré regime (1987–2014), these stakeholders were typically state-sanctioned concessionary companies. This led to many people being evicted from their land (on which they only had customary tenure) and hired in precarious roles as labourers, or being excluded altogether from any opportunity to mine (a factor that created grievances against the state that could later be exploited by armed groups). Likewise, private security providers – whether Dozo, Koglweogo, VDP or a private company – typically operate with the oversight of a local state official, who demand that control is exercised over who has access to the mine. This can lead to frustrations among residents excluded from the opportunity to mine.⁵³

Artisanal mines, therefore, had a tendency to replicate and exacerbate existing social hierarchies – enriching those who already had resources, while excluding poorer residents from the lion's share of profits. While a number of concessionary companies who were dependent on Compaoré's patronage networks left after his removal in October 2014, the situation did not necessarily improve for ordinary miners. The Kereboulé mine in Soum was seized by the Koglweogo defence militia in 2016 after the concessionary company left, but they continued to exclude residents and would-be artisanal miners from working there.⁵⁴ When the site was eventually attacked by presumed Ansarul Islam combatants in October 2016, there was strong suspicion that local communities had supported the attackers, or at the very least were sympathetic to their actions.⁵⁵

A mining stie in Yatenga province. Artisanal gold mining is an important source of revenue for armed groups and a means to gain local acceptance. © Universal Images Group via Getty Images JNIM appears to rely on revenues from artisanal gold mining to a significant extent in Burkina Faso, even if its role in mining is only supervisory. A more recent example of JNIM's subversion of the previous hierarchies governing artisanal mines can be seen in Cascades Province in the south-west. A number of gold mines in the Dida forest, near the border with Côte d'Ivoire, had been controlled by Dozo hunters, who similarly used their role as security providers to restrict access to the mines. They also accepted contributions from miners in exchange for their provision of security on-site. However, when JNIM arrived in the area in mid-2021, it made clear that it would allow people to exploit both the protected forest and the gold mines as they saw fit. The miners would give JNIM representatives periodic contributions from the gold that they extracted, but JNIM would give unfettered access to the mine. JNIM simultaneously began targeting Dozo homes and individuals, which caused them to flee. Once in control of the mining sites, JNIM asked for lower contributions from miners than the Dozo had done in exchange for security provision.⁵⁶ This is seen by many of the miners as a fair contribution towards maintaining JNIM's dominance in the area, and thus ensuring peoples' continued access to the mine.⁵⁷

Little information is available about JNIM's particular methods for selling mined gold and smuggling it out of the country. However, it is likely that JNIM, and the miners working at these sites, rely on the smuggling systems that predate their presence in the area. Gold that is artisanally mined in Burkina Faso is bought by traders based near the sites who then sell it on to secondary traders, many of whom are based in Mali, Benin or other neighbouring states.⁵⁸ These tradespeople will then sell it on again to buyers based in regional capitals, who in turn export it to buyers abroad, most often in Dubai.⁵⁹ Each buyer pre-finances the previous one in the supply chain, but the chain is sufficiently long and complex that buyers further up the chain can avoid verifying the source of the gold. As a result, the fact that JNIM is profiting from artisanal mining is unlikely to deter buyers abroad under the current legislative framework.

We should not take for granted that JNIM will maintain this populist approach to mine management. JNIM appears to rely on revenues from artisanal gold mining to a significant extent in Burkina Faso, even if its role in mining is only supervisory. Given the relative ease with which gold can be managed at source, JNIM could become more ruthless in its approach to gold extraction, particularly as it becomes better implanted in the zone.

The Coalitions des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), an alliance of armed groups in northern Mali, offers a glimpse of how trajectories can change. CMA did not initially place restrictions on artisanal mining in its area of control, but began to introduce regulations and charges in January 2018 as more and more people arrived to mine. CMA claimed these were to ensure security, but they were accused by many of trying to profit from miners.⁶⁰

For now, however, JNIM appears to be displaying a strategic patience when it comes to gold. Its agenda of gaining popular acceptance currently outweighs the desire for profit. Given that the aim of JNIM's upper echelons is to establish stable jihadist governance, it is possible that artisanal miners will retain a broadly favourable position within JNIM's systems, at least compared to previous arrangements, even if some of their current freedoms are later curtailed.

JNIM as a direct actor in illicit economies

Kidnapping

JNIM's kidnappings for ransom need to be considered alongside the group's more frequent abductions of people they are suspicious of. While JNIM combatants tend to want to win local support rather than force compliance, they are also highly sensitive to any attempts to undermine them, either through civilian collaboration with the state and military, or through customary authorities resisting their control. The creation of the VDP in early 2020 heightened suspicions, given that the VDP were being recruited from communities JNIM was attempting to govern, and that the VDP subsisted on contributions from those home communities, as well as from the state. One of the ways in which JNIM attempts to identify and intimidate possible collaborators is by abducting those people whom they are suspicious of, often for a short time. This section will compare the kidnap for ransom (typically of foreigners) with the (often, but not always) temporary abductions of Burkinabè (and sometimes other African) nationals.

Kidnapping by JNIM is not a new phenomenon. Kidnapping was likely the most profitable source of funding for some of JNIM's forerunner groups, particularly AQIM. Several high-profile kidnappings of foreigners have occurred in Burkina Faso since Ansarul Islam and JNIM's predecessors became active there in 2015. In 2015, a Romanian security guard was abducted from a mining site near the Malian border, an incident that was claimed by al-Mourabitoun.⁶¹ In 2016, an Australian couple were kidnapped in Baraboule, also close to the Malian border. The woman was freed a month later, but the man remains in captivity, as does the aforementioned Romanian security guard.⁶² Two travellers, a Canadian and an Italian, were kidnapped in 2018 near the border with Benin, after which they were taken to northern Mali, although they escaped a year later.⁶³ The details of ransoms paid or demanded in these cases are not publicly known. However, observers tend to agree that ransoms or concessions (typically in the form of prisoner exchanges) were the aim of these abductions.



An Australian hostage speaks with former Burkinabè president Roch Christian Kaboré days after her release, February 2016. © Ahmed Ouoba/AFP via Getty Images



Two hostages, a Canadian and an Italian, after their release by UN peacekeepers, March 2020. © Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images

A more recent spate of kidnappings of foreigners in Burkina Faso has refocused attention on the issue. An Indian national was kidnapped in Gnagna Province in late March 2022, and later released. An American nun was taken by armed men from her convent in Yalgo, Centre-Nord, on 5 April 2022, 64 while a Polish national was abducted in Kantchari, Est region on 27 April 2022.⁶⁵ Kidnappings are especially challenging to analyze since their resolutions tend to remain secret, given the controversy of paying ransoms to jihadist actors. However, it is almost certain that their captors (which, in all three cases here, are believed to be JNIM) have sought to obtain either a ransom for their release or a prisoner swap.⁶⁶ This would be in keeping with JNIM's approach to other recent kidnappings of foreign nationals. For instance, JNIM reportedly demanded US\$1.5 million for a South African national kidnapped from a gold mine at Inata in 2018.⁶⁷ Two Chinese nationals, abducted in June 2021 in Torodi, Niger, near the border with Burkina Faso (a zone with a significant JNIM presence) were reportedly released after a ransom was paid.68

These incidents indicate that JNIM in Burkina Faso, much like its counterparts elsewhere in the Sahel, kidnaps foreign nationals in an opportunistic fashion, for financial or strategic ends. At present, it is unlikely that kidnapping represents a major proportion of JNIM's financing in Burkina Faso. Indeed, if the 2018 abduction of the Canadian and Italian tourists in Est region is indicative, potentially valuable foreign hostages may be transferred to JNIM strongholds in Mali until ransoms or swaps are arranged.⁶⁹ However, it is probable that JNIM in Burkina Faso will continue to kidnap foreigners, and they may go on to expand their efforts given AQIM's past successes obtaining valuable ransoms.

JNIM may be cooperating with other criminal actors in the kidnapping process. A Burkinabè expert on the conflict considered the case of the Polish national who was abducted in Kantchari in April 2022, and identified three probable scenarios.⁷⁰ JNIM is ostensibly in control of Kantchari and the dominant armed actor in the zone, although there are also numerous criminal actors and smugglers operating there. Firstly, the Polish national may have been stopped and abducted at a JNIM checkpoint on the road. The second possibility is that he came across a band of criminals, who kidnapped him because they know JNIM benefits from the kidnap of foreign hostages, and transported him to JNIM. This speaks to the close, mutually assistive nature of JNIM's relationship with many criminal groups. In this scenario, JNIM may have paid the criminals for their help or reimbursed them in some other manner. The third scenario is that the victim was seen earlier in his journey, and so either JNIM or the aforementioned gangs were tipped off about his presence.

The Polish national was freed from captivity and handed over to government representatives on 24 June 2022. The exact circumstances of his release have not been made public, although the government spokesperson said that the Ministry of Defence was involved in liberating him.⁷¹

Comparing the abductions of foreign hostages with the abductions of Burkinabè or other African nationals sheds light on JNIM's broader aims. As can be seen in the map, there is a strong geographical



FIGURE 6 Abductions and armed clashes between the VDP and JNIM, Q1 and Q2 2022. SOURCE: ACLED data

overlap between abductions and clashes between the VDP and JNIM, which supports the assessment that a majority of these abductions are carried out to maintain control rather than for profit. Indeed, the number of abductions in 2021 rose significantly, with 258 abductions in 2021, compared with 61 in 2020 and 55 in 2019.⁷² While the VDP were created by decree in January 2020, units were not formed until later in the year, and more units were established in 2021. It is thus reasonable to draw a connection between the creation of the VDP and the rise in abductions by JNIM in these locations.

A further breakdown of the demographics of kidnappees lends further credence to this view. As seen in Figure 7 on the following page, showing abduction victims in Burkina Faso, residents with no particular association are the most common victims of abduction by JNIM, making up 42 out of the 78 cases seen in the first six months of 2022. Of those 42 incidents, at least 13 saw the victims released shortly afterwards – a figure that could well be higher in practice.⁷³ According to interviews, these victims are typically interrogated about their activities and given the chance to explain themselves. If their explanation is satisfactory, JNIM may release them without charging a ransom.⁷⁴ However, there are also numerous examples of suspects being indefinitely detained or killed.⁷⁵





Religious leaders are often the subject of suspicion if they are seen to diverge from JNIM's religious doctrine and so are often targets for abduction, with three such incidents recorded so far in 2022. State employees, and sometimes private contractors building infrastructure or providing other services, are likewise seen as bringing unacceptable state influence and a competing source of service provision. Nine incidents in 2022 involved state employees, constructors and health or other service providers.

The second most common victims are truck drivers, with 12 of these incidents recorded by ACLED in the first half of 2022. However, out of these 12 incidents, only four of the drivers were not confirmed to have been released shortly afterwards. According to truck drivers who have been victims of such temporary abductions, the drivers themselves were not the primary target, and the militants were chiefly interested in seizing the goods being transported.⁷⁶ At least three tankers of fuel were seized in the course of the abductions recorded by ACLED during this period, as were truckloads of essential goods such as rice, and the trucks themselves were seized in at least eight of the 12 incidents.

One incident, in which at least one of the vehicles was spared, involved local communal transport trucks. Two local drivers and their vehicles were abducted near Matiacoali in Est region. Both drivers were released two days later, but only one vehicle, which had been filled with cigarettes, was confiscated. JNIM forbids smoking in areas under its control, and so would be able to justify the seizure on religious grounds. A longer-term data disaggregation would be needed to establish whether drivers local to areas that are controlled by JNIM are treated differently to truckers moving on the main roads between major cities. However, this discerning approach would be consistent with JNIM's general prioritization of maintaining its governance, as opposed to seizing any opportunity to make a profit. This is further supported by the fact that truck drivers' families have not been asked for ransoms in exchange for their release, as far as is known.

NGOs are also frequently affected by these short-term abductions. Since JNIM tends to tolerate at least some humanitarian activity, NGO vehicles encounter its militants on a semi-regular basis. JNIM tends to be more trusting of individuals with Fulani or Muslim names. If JNIM militants become suspicious, either of the whole team or a particular individual, they will detain or abduct them until they are reassured that the NGO workers do not mean to interfere with JNIM activity.⁷⁷ Typically, negotiations ensure that NGO workers are eventually freed without a ransom payment. However, in complicated circumstances this can take weeks or even months.

The most complex cases are invariably those where the NGO worker was seen in the company of a state official or employee, or was abducted alongside them. This is seen by JNIM as possible collaboration with the state, whose presence is not tolerated. This is evident in the different treatment of abducted state officials. Most are not released, and are presumed to be indefinitely detained or dead. For instance, the mayors of Markoye and Gorgadji were abducted in March and May 2019, respectively, and have not been seen since.⁷⁸

This is to say that kidnap of Burkinabè nationals by JNIM for ransom appears to be rare. There are a few examples of it happening; for instance, a wealthy cattle breeder was abducted near the Ivorian border by armed men thought to be connected to the local JNIM *katiba* in November 2021. He was reportedly released several days later after paying a ransom of 6.2 million CFA (approximately 9 500 euros).⁷⁹ However, it appears that, generally speaking, JNIM avoids upsetting residents by mimicking the behaviours of bandits who engage in kidnap for ransom. This kind of banditry is considered the work of criminals by Burkinabè, and JNIM would risk seriously undercutting its broader objectives if they engaged in this regularly.

Vehicle theft

Vehicle theft is an extremely common crime across the Sahel, particularly in contested and unstable zones where it is hard to distinguish regular criminal from armed group violence. However, one of the more puzzling phenomena in Burkina Faso is a highly targeted type of carjacking, which is directed upon international NGOs and district health authorities because both drive hardtop, four-wheel drive vehicles (such as district health-authority ambulances). In the first three months of 2022, at least four NGO 4x4 vehicles were stolen, and the number of thefts has reportedly increased in the second quarter.⁸⁰ In April 2022, a convoy of eight UN Development Programme vehicles was seized by armed men between Matiacoali and Kantchari.⁸¹ These thefts are widely believed to be the work of JNIM, both because they tend to take place in areas under its control and the fact that JNIM's presence in Burkina Faso is far larger and more complex than other armed groups, meaning it has more substantial logistical needs.⁸² Kidnap of Burkinabè nationals by JNIM for ransom appears to be rare. JNIM would risk seriously undercutting its broader objectives if they engaged in this regularly.



Four-wheel drive vehicles pertaining to international NGOs and district health authorities are prime targets for vehicle theft. © Demark/Shutterstock It appears that JNIM has a substantial need for this type of vehicle and, unlike smuggling, the group is often directly involved in targeted vehicle theft. Interestingly, in Burkina Faso, hardtop four-wheel drive vehicles have not been used to mount attacks – JNIM fighters sometimes use pickup trucks for this purpose but most often motorbikes are used.⁸³ In Mali, branded NGO or UN vehicles are the preferred tool in attacks involving vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), since they attract less suspicion in built-up areas. For example, the bombing of Gao airport in 2016 was carried out with a fake UN vehicle – a 4x4 that had been painted white and branded with UN lettering.⁸⁴ However, VBIEDs have not yet been a feature of the conflict in Burkina Faso.

So far, it seems that JNIM in Burkina Faso use these vehicles primarily for their own logistical needs. According to observers of the security situation, JNIM frequently redirects supplies across the country to bases where they are needed. Four-wheel drives are extremely useful for moving food supplies, water, fuel or senior commanders, across the country particularly in areas with poor roads. The redistribution of stock is particularly key for weapons stolen from police and army posts. When they are not needed by the *marakiz* who seized them, they are redirected towards bases with greater need. For instance, heavier weaponry stolen in Est region is believed to be moved northwards into areas with greater military engagement, such as Markoye and Mansila.⁸⁵ Some observers suspect JNIM elements may also sell excess weaponry on the black market.⁸⁶

It is possible that some of these vehicles are sold on for a profit after use. Stolen vehicles are thought to be a regular means for JNIM to raise funds in Mali, although

it is less certain that this is being replicated in Burkina Faso. One expert interviewed said that in northern Mali it was not uncommon for residents to buy expensive vehicles at low prices from AQIM and their affiliated groups, many of which had been stolen elsewhere in the region.⁸⁷ These sales help to win favour locally and still represent a profit since the vehicle was not paid for in the first place. Typically, stolen cars are sold outside of the country from which they were taken. Mauritania and Algeria are common destinations for stolen vehicles from Mali and elsewhere in the region. Should JNIM operatives decide to sell on the black market in Burkina Faso, they would find it easy to do so. In northern Burkina Faso, large amounts of fuel and vehicles are thought to pass through Goroum Goroum and Tin Akoff near the Malian border, a possible black market destination for cars stolen in-country.⁸⁸ They may also choose to strip vehicles or break them down into parts to sell on, particularly if they wish to avoid being detected. However, at present, observers of the situation believe that the vehicles being taken by JNIM are primarily being taken for their own logistical use.⁸⁹

Vehicle theft in this manner does have some implications for JNIM's governance. JNIM is fairly tolerant of humanitarian work in its territories in Mali and Burkina Faso; allowing access as long as the NGO in question does not work with the local state and follows their rules of conduct and dress. In some cases of NGO vehicle theft, JNIM fighters have offered a small amount of money as compensation for taking the car, or have indicated that they will eventually return it. In one case near Nouna, Boucle du Mouhoun in February 2022, JNIM combatants informed an NGO that they needed to borrow their vehicle for an operation and to transport one of their older commanders, since the car had good air conditioning. They returned the car to the NGO about a month later.⁹⁰ Such gestures are the exception rather than the rule, however, and it is clear that their need for the vehicles outweighs any concerns over how this might undermine humanitarian work, or in the case of ambulances, the ability of the district to deliver emergency healthcare. However, this is a strategic cost JNIM is prepared to bear, since it ultimately wants to cease all state service provision.

With regard to the theft of vehicles belonging to Burkinabè civilians, JNIM's actions show some variance. However, while there have been incidents of vehicle theft from civilians, it appears to be limited to serving JNIM's logistical needs, and so far they do not appear to be systematically stealing civilian vehicles for profit or for resale. As mentioned in the section on kidnapping and temporary abduction, truck drivers are among the most regular victims. In these incidents, a truck's contents appear to be the primary target, but the truck itself is also usually taken, if only for ease of transporting the goods in it.

Some drivers reported being told, at gunpoint, to drive the truck to a location and then were made to get out and walk back to the road, leaving the truck behind. One driver did report having his empty truck taken by armed men in Barsalogho in December 2021.⁹¹ However, other observers have described incidents in which JNIM emptied the goods on the road and left the truck behind.⁹² What happens to the truck itself is most likely decided according to circumstances, and JNIM appears to believe that this will not damage their broader acceptance strategy so long as they release the drivers. In practice, drivers whose trucks are stolen by JNIM face severe ramifications, since the vehicles are their means of livelihood.⁹³ However, since truck

It appears that JNIM has a substantial need for four-wheel drive vehicles and the group is often directly involved in targeted vehicle theft. drivers tend to reside in major transport hubs that JNIM does not control, it may not have substantial ramifications on their efforts to win acceptance in rural areas.

So far, there is no evidence to suggest JNIM steal civilian cars or motorbikes on a regular basis, or at least not directly. There are anecdotal reports that suggest they sometimes refrain from taking desirable vehicles that belong to civilians. A security practitioner described an incident in which a 4x4 owned by a foreign mining company was stolen in Centre-Nord in April 2022, but another belonging to a civilian that was parked nearby was not taken.94 This may reflect the broader discernment between foreign and national citizens, with the latter's sensibilities being frequently considered. This said, JNIM in other parts of the Sahel - particularly Mali - are believed to frequently acquire vehicles from gangs who specialize in carjackings. Civilians who do not have extensive security protection can expect to be carjacked if they drive a 4x4 through certain parts of northern or central Mali, and these stolen cars are often sold on to armed groups.95 Residents in state-controlled areas of Burkina Faso emphasize that cars are rarely stolen in Burkina Faso and then resold in the country itself.⁹⁶ Given the fairly frequent checks conducted by police on vehicles in these areas, driving a stolen car is widely seen as not worth the risk. However, in areas where state presence is extremely limited - particularly those areas controlled by JNIM - there is potential for a trade in stolen vehicles, including motorbikes, to grow, including across borders.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, appointed by the military junta as Burkina Faso's interim president after the January coup d'état, arrives at his first cabinet meeting, March 2022. © *Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images*

his report has given a profile of JNIM's criminal activity in Burkina Faso, showing that illicit economies are an essential component of JNIM's efforts to win acceptance in the communities it seeks to govern. Studies of the crime-terror nexus often focus on how crime contributes to the financing of armed groups and terrorist activity, but this is only one part of the picture. This report shows that financing is far from the only reason for armed groups to engage with the criminal economy.

JNIM in Burkina Faso appears to be engaged in a delicate balancing act in which it consciously limits the profits it could theoretically make from illicit activity, in favour of winning local support. By opening the way for residents who were previously excluded from illicit economies, and by facilitating and protecting those already taking part, JNIM should be seen as an enabler of crime as much as it is a participant. While the group will engage more directly in certain types of crime, including acts that harm civilians, the evidence presented here suggests that it strives to limit the impact of this crime on the residents of the areas it is trying to govern. For this reason, JNIM should be viewed as a strategic criminal actor, sacrificing potential profits for its wider strategic goals.

Recommendations

Donors, policymakers and government actors must not assume that violent extremist groups are in control of transnational crime or illicit activity in the spaces in which they operate. As has been demonstrated here, JNIM's role is often that of a facilitator rather than a controller of illicit economies. JNIM's sources of funding are amorphous and highly flexible, and it is misleading to suggest that depriving JNIM of its direct access to illicit economies will automatically deter its violent activity.

- The role of crime as a revenue stream for violent extremist groups such as JNIM should not obscure its additional importance in governance strategies – doing so risks making responses counterproductive.
- Efforts to respond to conflict actors and illicit economies must recognize that illicit activity is often the only available income for many Sahelian communities. Attempts to inhibit a particular illicit economy will generate resentment that can be exploited by violent extremists, unless alternative means of livelihood are provided. In Burkina Faso, the primary goal of interventions should be to counter growing instability. Where curbing illicit economies does not align with this goal, these may need to be tolerated in the medium term.
- The government of Burkina Faso should try to regulate and secure artisanal and small-scale gold mining sites, and ensure that local residents are given fair access. It should also provide adequate security for miners, and take greater measures to ensure their wellbeing in mining sites. These steps will help to reduce the appeal of JNIM's offer to intervene in the governance of artisanal mining sites.
- The governments of Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire should develop long-term, durable strategies for protecting main border roads. Preventing JNIM from gaining control (even partial or temporary) of those access points would pre-empt a substantial increase in the volume of smuggled and trafficked goods moving northwards from the coastal states, and to an increase in revenue in the form of payments for transit.

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