

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL PARKS IN ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND
INSTABILITY DIALOGUE

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INTRODUCTION

The Illicit Economies and Instability Dialogues are integral to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s work in West Africa. The Dialogues are an opportunity for experts in illicit economies, civil society organizations, regional government representatives, foreign policy and development officials, external experts and stakeholders to discuss contemporary, policy-relevant themes on the intersections between illicit economies, conflict and instability in West and central Africa. The Dialogues are supported by and co-hosted with the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.

This Dialogue, the second in the series in the region, focused on protected areas in West and central Africa as geographic spaces of growing concern given the increasing encroachment of violent extremist groups, and the illicit economies transiting and based within these biospheres. In particular, the conference focused on the role of national parks in the potential southward movement of violent extremist groups from Sahelian states into coastal countries. Participants discussed how these armed groups engage with illicit economies in these areas.

A particular focus was the presence of elements of Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and to a lesser extent of Islamic State of the Great Sahara (ISGS), in the W-Arly-Pendjari biosphere, otherwise known as the WAP complex, in the tri-border area between Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger. These armed groups – particularly JNIM – have integrated themselves not only into the parks, but also into local societies and illicit economies. As such, there has been increasing concern about how these armed groups are taking advantage of illicit economies to fund and supply their efforts but also to enhance their attempts at local governance.

The presence of armed groups has turned some of the region's national parks into no-go areas for state and civil society actors, with the exception in some areas of military forces and park rangers. The WAP complex is especially challenging since it stretches through border zones of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin. However, other national parks in West Africa are of similar concern, including Comoé National Park (Côte d'Ivoire), Bouda Ndjida National Park (Cameroon) and Sambisa and Dansadau forests (Nigeria). In addition to armed clashes, tensions between state actors and communities have also been a driver of support for violent extremist groups and illicit activity.

The Dialogue built on research conducted by the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa into illicit flows and armed groups in the WAP complex and Comoé National Park. A discussion paper laying out preliminary findings of the research into the WAP complex – conducted in partnership with the Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local, a social science research centre based in Benin – was shared with all participants and discussed.

The Dialogues aim to enhance the links between the research and policymaking communities, strengthen civil society coalitions, and reinforce policymaking and the interventions of the development community. This report provides an overview of the discussions, addresses key themes and draws out the potential implications for regional and international actors seeking to engage in programming in these contexts. The Dialogue was hosted under the Chatham House Rule, where comments cannot be attributed.



WHAT MAKES NATIONAL PARKS SO VULNERABLE?

There are a number of reasons why national parks tend to become hotspots for illicit activity and why armed groups, including violent extremist groups, congregate there. The first is that these are remote, often wooded or forested areas that provide numerous sites for armed groups, smugglers or traffickers to hide. As a result, the parks can serve as a refuge for groups with few options for places to base themselves or store their goods.

This use of national parks as a refuge and storage site has been seen in several parts of West Africa. Katiba Macina, a JNIM subgroup, established a presence within the Boucle du Baoulé National Park in Mali, near the Mauritanian border. The Sambisa Forest in north-east Nigeria is a well-known refuge and operational zone for Islamic State's West Africa Province, and forests across the north-west of Nigeria – including Kamuku, Dansadua and Sububu – operate as bases for a large number of bandit groups, and areas for holding hostages and stolen cattle. Similarly, the Burkinabe portion of W national park in the WAP complex has been used to keep hostages kidnapped by JNIM, as the area is out of reach for state forces and hostages can easily be concealed from aerial patrols.

Such rear bases can be essential when armed groups are under increased pressure from military offensives in front-line areas of operation. For example, in 2022, the Niokolo-Koba National Park in south-eastern Senegal was fingered as a potential refuge for separatist fighters from the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, MFDC) who have lost ground to Senegalese military troops since early 2021.¹ The park is only 400 kilometres from the Casamance region, which has been rocked by insurgency since the early 1980s, sustained in part by finances flowing to MFDC rebels from cannabis and timber trafficking.

National parks tend to have limited state presence even when fully operational. In these remote areas, small state posts that can easily be overpowered are the norm since much of the work of guarding protected areas is left to rangers. For example, the relatively well-resourced Niokolo-Koba National Park, which stretches over 913 000 hectares, is patrolled by 164 rangers.² Rangers, although armed, also typically operate in small bands and with limited firepower, and, on occasion, they have been successfully chased out of national parks by armed groups. This is the case on the Burkinabe side of Parc W, whereas on the Nigerien side, rangers are increasingly limited in what they can do.

Rangers, state officials and others aiming to restrict residents' access to national parks are often enormously unpopular locally. The colonial origins of national parks and the continued efforts to exclude people living on their outskirts from accessing their natural resources mean that many residents are unsupportive of how the parks are managed. This resentment is especially acute when important cultural or ritual sites, or sites of historical memory, are within the park's boundaries but people are kept away from them. This is the case in the Burkina Faso part of the WAP complex, where the predominantly Gourmantché residents have been prevented from accessing historical and ritual sites inside the park, which has negatively affected their social cohesion and their view of national parks as an endeavour.³

As a result, communities around national parks may be more susceptible to offers from alternative governance actors, including violent extremist armed groups. These offers are especially attractive if they allow people to engage in illicit but profitable economies freely. JNIM has been known to put forward this offer in the Est region in southern Burkina Faso, telling residents that if they cooperate with them and obey their rules, JNIM will expel state officials and rangers from the area, leaving them free to use the national park and its resources. Often this



is framed in religious terms, with JNIM saying that the park is God's creation, so residents cannot be excluded from it legitimately.

Similarly, many economic activities producing revenue for violent extremist groups are illegal under national laws. However, rural communities across swathes of West Africa often depend on informal or illicit practices. Communities often do not perceive informal economies as illicit and welcome the opportunity to operate with fewer restrictions in areas under armed group influence and diminished state control. Further, communities do not necessarily resent paying taxes to armed groups, including violent extremist groups, that allow them to pursue such activities.

A case in point is fuel trafficking in the areas surrounding the WAP complex, which is seen as greatly benefitting communities since usually there aren't any petrol stations near villages and towns around the biosphere, and petrol in the available stations is sold at a far higher price than the more abundant smuggled fuel. There is no single discernible taxation system between armed groups and fuel traffickers; rather, the formality of taxation appears to vary between time and place. In the early stages of JNIM's establishment in the Burkina Faso portion of the WAP complex, they seemed to have an informal relationship with fuel traffickers, asking for fuel contributions in exchange for protection or for their efforts keeping state officials and rangers out of the park. More recent evidence suggests that JNIM instituted a series of checkpoints on the road between Koualou/Kourou, Nadiagou and Pama, along which numerous smugglers – and particularly fuel smugglers – are known to travel, and demanded contributions. It is not clear whether these checkpoints have endured, although usage of this road has declined.⁴

A final reason that national parks are attractive sites for armed groups and criminal actors is the abundance of natural resources, either for profit or subsistence. Although it often appears that the lack of securitization is the primary driver for armed groups to establish bases in biospheres, the longer they continue to operate in the parks, the more likely they will start exploiting the natural resources available. This is in line with evidenced trends in the intersection between conflict actors and illicit economies, where lengthy geographic overlays encourage the increased entrenchment of the former into the latter.⁵

Artisanal gold mining is a sector where residents have often tried to profit from inside national parks given the limited state presence, for instance in the Niokolo-Koba National Park. Whether conflict actors are drawing resources from gold mining in national areas remains contested in some contexts, including in the Comoé National Park and in north-west Nigeria, where the bandits' relationship with gold mining is unclear.

In other contexts, including Burkina Faso, violent extremist groups try to win local support by easing access to artisanal mines for residents. By pushing out private actors or self-defence groups that have prevented or monopolized artisanal mine access, they allow residents to access the site in an unrestricted, risk-free fashion. These approaches tend to gain these groups substantial sympathy. This was the case in the Dida Forest protected area in Burkina Faso, near the Ivorian border, where Dozo hunters who had been controlling access to the mine were pushed out with force and threats from JNIM, leaving residents free to exploit mining sites unrestricted.⁶ However, given the lack of state presence, even residents who do not sympathize with the armed groups have little choice but to comply with their rules.

Similarly drawing on biosphere resources, JNIM is known to hunt animals for meat consumption in the WAP complex, and poaching is itself an economic opportunity. The Bouba Ndjida National Park, close to the borders with Chad and Sudan in north-eastern Cameroon, has long experienced a high incidence of poaching by armed groups, predominantly by the Sudanese Janjaweed launching cross-border incursions. The elephant population has significantly diminished following acts of poaching orchestrated by cross-border criminal groups. Although data on elephant poaching across the country is hard to come by, according to park officials, approximately 480



elephants were killed in Bouba Ndjida between 2003 and 2021. Criminal networks can also operate independently of armed groups: valuable substances such as ebony wood are exploited by transnational criminal actors. In Bounkani, Côte d'Ivoire, mostly foreign networks have worked in conjunction with corrupt park officials to illegally cut ebony wood and export it, mainly to China.

The vulnerability of national parks in becoming hubs of illicit economies was highlighted by the GI-TOC's hotspot mapping initiative, which mapped 280 illicit hubs across West Africa, Cameroon and the Central African Republic.⁷ This initiative identified 14 national parks across the region that operated as hubs of illicit economies.

In half of the identified national parks, illicit economies were determined not to play a significant role in fueling regional instability – ranking 'low' on the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), a quantitative metric that assesses the relationship between illicit economies and instability in each hub. Among these national parks, flora crimes were the most commonly detected illicit economy, featuring in parks in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Ghana.

Illicit economies in the remaining seven national parks were identified to play significant roles as vectors of conflict and instability (scoring medium or, in three cases, high on the IEIM). These included a number of forests in Nigeria, the Comoé National Park and the WAP complex. The illicit gold trade, kidnapping for ransom and arms trafficking were commonly detected illicit economies in national parks in West Africa. This is noteworthy given the strong links identified between these illicit economies, and conflict and instability.



FIGURE 1 National parks, reserves and forests in West Africa identified as illicit hubs.

NOTE: Although not included in this map, several other broader crime zones also incorporate one or more national parks, reserves or forests that may be sites of illicit activity.

THE EXPANSION OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS INTO COASTAL STATES

Observers of the Sahelian conflict had long been concerned about the expansion of violent extremist groups into coastal West African states, and a resultant overspill of violence and instability into these countries. In 2019, extremist groups started violent incidents in the coastal states, which continued across Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin in 2020 and 2021. These initial incidents have been followed by more consistent violence in 2022.

There has been a particular escalation in Benin in the W and Pendjari national parks, although the state, partly through African Parks Network, retains a greater presence in Pendjari. The group with the most considerable presence in Benin is JNIM, linked to incidents in Alibori and Atacora departments. ISGS has also claimed incidents in Alibori on its official media sites. However, its presence is believed to be much smaller, and it has faced substantial violence from JNIM, which aims to prevent it from becoming a rival in the area.

This rivalry between JNIM and ISGS tends to have disastrous consequences for civilians. As was seen in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin since mid-2019, and in central Mali since 2019, overlapping spheres of operation are more likely to lead to an uptick in violence, with drastic humanitarian impacts. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data shows a marked acceleration in incidents of organized political violence attributed to JNIM or ISGS in northern Benin since November 2021. Although the violence is sporadic rather than linear, ACLED data highlights an overall increase in violence targeting civilians in Alibori in 2022. This is in line with conflict trends in the region, where civilians have increasingly become the targets of attacks.

HOW DO VIOLENT EXTREMISTS WORK WITH ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN NATIONAL PARKS?

Illicit economies were a phenomenon that pre-existed instability and the presence of violent extremist groups in West African national parks. Although the overarching structure of most illicit economies remained unchanged following the arrival of armed groups into national parks, their involvement at different points in the supply chain can drive an amplification of the illicit ecosystem. Armed groups and violent extremist groups engage with illicit economies in a number of ways. In some cases, they attempt to gain local support by facilitating peoples' participation in illicit economies. In others, they will seek to gain revenue by taxing illicit activities. Finally, they may be direct participants, either buying illicit products or stealing and dealing in them.

Where armed groups become consumers in the illicit supply chain, the spike in demand can drive up profits, making some illicit economies more lucrative. This has reportedly occurred with fuel trafficking in northern Benin in the areas surrounding the WAP complex, where swelling demand has increased black-market prices.

In a smaller number of cases, the involvement of armed groups in the criminal ecosystem appears to have driven the market's evolution into more harmful manifestations. Cattle rustling has been a longstanding phenomenon in the areas surrounding the Comoé National Park. However, the theft of entire herds of cattle, which poses an existential threat to livelihoods, has been a dynamic observed only since the reportedly growing influence of armed groups in the area in recent years. While it remains unclear whether armed groups are behind this shift, a number of close observers of dynamics in the region believed this to be the case. The insertion of armed groups into pre-existing cattle-rustling dynamics has driven a drastic escalation of the illicit economy and associated violence in northern and central Mali, and north-west Nigeria from the early 2010s.

Many national parks are bisected by well-established trafficking routes, particularly when positioned on or across national borders, presenting porous opportunities for cross-border smuggling. For example, the WAP complex straddles borders dividing the landlocked Sahelian states from the coastal states.⁸ In the latter, goods are significantly cheaper due to a combination of port infrastructure and subsidies on essential commodities such as fuel. This has led to a long, well-established smuggling ecosystem in which the WAP complex serves as a comparatively safe route for small bands of smugglers to pass through on motorcycles.⁹

These pre-existing illicit economies were effectively exploited by violent extremist groups wishing to establish a presence in the WAP complex and became an instrument to advance their governance agenda. For example, JNIM works as a facilitator of illicit economies, including smuggling a wide range of commodities. JNIM has reportedly built a relationship of mutual assistance with small-scale smugglers operating throughout the WAP complex, moving licit and illicit goods from coastal countries into Burkina Faso, where prices are higher. The key service that JNIM offers smugglers is protection and access. This can be done directly, for instance, by escorting convoys through the park or informing their combatants that these individuals will be making the journey and should be let through, or indirectly, by helping to keep state officials and security forces out of the complex. While JNIM benefits by gaining supplies from smugglers, most critically fuel, the smugglers enjoy greater freedom and lower risk to their operations, due to the diminished state presence across the WAP complex, particularly in Parc W and Arly.

More broadly, JNIM operates directly in some illicit economies, particularly in kidnap for ransom, cattle theft and vehicle theft. JNIM has also used the WAP complex as a storage site for weapons stolen during raids on the military. These activities have surged in Burkina Faso with JNIM's growing territorial influence.



Kidnapping for ransom should not be confused with the rise in abductions by JNIM, which spiked fourfold between 2020 and 2021 in Burkina Faso. These abductions were particularly common in areas where Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (VDP) units clashed with JNIM, indicating that the creation and expansion of VDP were key drivers of this surge in abductions. These abductions are typically focused on information extraction and intimidation rather than profit generation. However, both types of hostages have been kept inside the WAP complex to prevent them from being discovered by the state or others who may report them. Notably, reports of abductions by armed groups in northern Benin have been growing through 2022.

In many incidents of kidnap for ransom and vehicle theft, a degree of strategic restraint towards residents is also often exercised by JNIM in Burkina Faso. JNIM will typically target foreigners for kidnap for ransom and will tend to steal high-value cars belonging to NGOs or ambulances belonging to state health centres rather than the ordinary vehicles of civilians. This is largely because of a need for 4x4 vehicles, particularly in complex territories. However, when they seize vehicles from residents, such as truck drivers transporting goods such as fuel or food, they will typically release the driver unharmed.

Cattle theft appears primarily done on JNIM's behalf by intermediaries, so JNIM does not obstruct its governance agenda by engaging in crimes that the residents would disapprove of. JNIM in Burkina Faso should therefore be assessed as a strategic participant in crime: its engagements with illicit economies are driven not only by profit but also as part of governance agendas.

One of the most significant revenue streams for armed groups seems to be the acquisition of cattle through herders' payment of zakat, or almsgiving, to use national parks for grazing and subsequent sale of cattle in urban markets. The payment of zakat in cattle is legitimated partly on religious grounds but also on the grounds that the herders can access the WAP complex for grazing their animals without the risk of being arrested or fined by rangers. Some actors reported a fee paid by cattle grazers to JNIM elements to access grazing within the WAP complex (calculated at CFA2 000, or approximately €3, per cattle head).



THE CHALLENGES OF A RESPONSE

Government responses to violent extremists and illicit actors in national parks are exceptionally difficult to get right. This is especially so in the WAP biosphere, given the need to work across multiple national borders and to harmonize countries' approaches to ensure an effective response. Counterinsurgency efforts in the Est region of Burkina Faso, including the WAP complex, in 2022 have not made a substantial difference. There are myriad reasons for the failures, but key is that populations are unconvinced that government forces are willing or able to protect them. This substantially impacts stabilization efforts.

At present, governments not only suffer from a lack of legitimacy among many of their citizens, but they are also unable to offer security to those willing to comply with state authority. Although governments in the region recognize the importance of collaboration with communities around protected areas, the latter will only be willing to cooperate if they feel protected. This is because many villages and towns around the parks are threatened by extremist groups with violent consequences if they cooperate with government agents.

Likewise, in many areas, there is little buy-in at the local level for conservation efforts in the form of national parks that restrict people's movements or economic opportunities. By extension, there is little appetite for taking risks in supporting the return of state authority. Some efforts to ensure that financing derived from tourism and hunting concessions in national parks, as is the case with Pendjari National Park in Benin, have enjoyed a degree of success in aligning the interests of surrounding communities more closely with that of park conservation. Securitization of parks, as in the case of Bouba Njida in Cameroon, has experienced a degree of success in stopping incursions by armed groups – particularly the Sudanese Janjaweed – and affiliated criminal networks. However, new armed actors may be challenging that securitization. The Mouvement Pour La Libération du Cameroun (MLC) is a relatively new armed group active in Cameroon's north-east. There is evidence to suggest that the MLC has resorted to poaching and wildlife trafficking as a source of funds. Therefore, purely securitized approaches may not be sustainable where they fail to engage with the communities living in the outskirts of the park, who have repeatedly served as guides for armed groups poaching in the biosphere.¹⁰

A common approach to illicit activities in national parks by governments has been banning certain activities or closing sites where they take place, such as artisanal mining sites. However, this approach has caused significant damage to civilian lives and has increased discontent with the government. For example, attempts to close artisanal gold mines around the Sahel region in Burkina Faso damaged the livelihoods of people who depend on the activity. Bans tend to harm local economies the most while failing to win sympathy for state presence or conservation efforts.

Widespread corruption among state representatives tasked with protecting the national parks, including park rangers, has further eroded their legitimacy and undermined the response to illicit economies. For example, a 2019 investigation into illegal gold mining in the Niokolo-Koba National Park resulted in the arrest of Ghanaian and Chinese nationals, the director and deputy director of the park, and other regional government officials for their involvement in the activity.¹¹ The challenges facing state representatives posted to areas in and around national parks in resisting established networks of corruption enable these to become further entrenched.

Illicit supply chains that move through national parks provide food, motorcycles, fuel and other supplies to the war economy across the Sahel region, as well as, increasingly, the northern areas of coastal states. However, efforts to cut such supply chains have proven unproductive in other regions of West Africa, as clandestine activities have displaced themselves around restrictions and bypassed bans imposed by governments. In some cases, actions taken to enforce such bans have resulted in the marginalization of some communities, including



in Burkina Faso, which has, in turn, operated as a driving force for recruitment. In the Lake Chad region, the ban on producing some foodstuffs to prevent flows to Boko Haram resulted in significant deprivation among communities, which in turn worked as a driver for recruitment into the group.

The other factor that is a persistent challenge to policymakers is the livestock economy present around national parks. As climate change puts greater pressure on tensions between pastoralists and agricultural livelihoods, pasture land is increasingly scarce and national parks become an attractive option.¹² A generalized suspicion by the security services towards Fulani and pastoralist communities, and a history of discrimination against them, has the unfortunate potential to exacerbate tensions as the military is drawn in to respond to violent extremism. Attempts to regulate the cattle market could be seen by herders as further evidence of discrimination, particularly if it is accompanied by unjust or violent behaviour towards them from the security services. This could have several different consequences, including pushing herders further towards illicit or informal economies to avoid regulation, or to increase narratives of discrimination that violent extremist groups often exploit.

This raises the question of what can be done to balance the need to respond to insecurity, maintain conservation and biodiversity in the region's national parks, meet the needs of local populations and win their trust.



POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

There is growing tension between the critical environmental role of biospheres in West Africa (in preserving the region's remaining fauna and flora and, by extension, maintaining an obstacle to desertification) and their role at the core of an unprecedented security challenge. While some actors argue that communities in the areas surrounding the parks require greater access to forest resources and posit that states should consider declassifying portions of protected areas, others claim that this would undermine environmental goals and that once states start declassifying land, this would lead to a loss of protected spaces.

There is widespread recognition that military responses are insufficient in meeting the conjoined challenges of armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa's national parks. There is an evident need to provide further opportunities for people living around national parks. However, given the severe instability in many of these areas, it is unrealistic to depend on the formal sector and it is impossible to guarantee the security or the functioning of a business. The question is whether states can maintain their presence in national park areas long enough to ensure the departure of violent extremist groups and stabilize the area to the degree that opportunities increase. Given that the Sahelian conflict is taking place across multiple fronts and placing severe strains on conventional military forces, this is unlikely for the time being.

Enhancing trust between representatives of the state and communities in the areas surrounding the national parks is central to strengthening the perceived legitimacy of states. Addressing endemic corruption challenges and discriminatory approaches to Fulani communities must be a key pillar of such attempts. Longer-term development responses that seek to strengthen the provision of essential state services to populations in the areas surrounding the park, such as water and power, could be partnered with more short-term 'quick fix' development responses, such as fixing potholes in road infrastructure. Although these initiatives do not offer holistic responses to the challenges faced by such communities, they provide opportunities for the state to quickly re-establish itself as a service provider.

More may be achievable with greater coordination between neighbouring countries. Efforts such as the West African Coastal Initiative and the Accra Initiative provide potential platforms for coordinating short-term responses and defensive measures, although a lack of funding so far hampers results. Joint operations are another vector for cooperation, as are intelligence-sharing mechanisms. More ambitious programmes could include multicountry efforts to create stable zones, providing a refuge for displaced persons and an incubator for licit economic opportunities.

The question remains about how to respond to the region's illicit economies knowing that they aid armed groups and violent extremists but are also essential to local populations. An approach could be a distinction between illicit economies necessary for residents, such as fuel smuggling, and dealings in illegal and potentially dangerous products, such as drugs or arms. A softer approach to intervention could be taken for the more necessary and less harmful commodities. However, it is, unfortunately, true that fuel is critical to the operation of violent extremist groups. If a more ambitious effort to inhibit fuel trafficking is implemented, it must be accompanied by support for the populations affected. Not only must they be able to ensure they have reliable, licit fuel supplies, but cash subsidies or other forms of compensation must be offered to help populations adapt to higher prices.

It was widely recognized that, particularly given the impacts of climate change, the needs of pastoralist communities for grazing land were set to become increasingly acute and must be central to durable responses seeking to secure stability across West Africa. Approaches considering how cattle could be further enabled to



graze sustainably in national parks without damaging the biosphere were identified as a promising avenue for further research.

The conservation process can also be significantly more inclusive and a vector for opportunities. These opportunities must, however, offer residents immediate forms of support rather than an assumed long-term benefit from tourism revenue (which has dried up due to insecurity). Conservation organizations have experimented with a variety of community projects in West Africa. However, to dissuade people from participating in illicit economies or cooperating with violent extremist groups who promise higher incomes, these projects will need to provide a substantial and regular income to their participants.



Notes

¹ See Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, As Casamance rebels are weakened, is the Niokolo Koba National Park a potential fallback zone?, Risk Bulletin, Issue 5, GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-005/03-casamance-rebels-weakened-niokolo-koba-fallback-zone.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Approaches to community access to national parks vary significantly between jurisdictions, with some regulatory frameworks, including that of Benin, enabling a degree of access to some areas.

⁴ GI-TOC, Friend or foe: Armed groups and the political economy of violence in national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, forthcoming (2023).

⁵ Summer Walker and Mariana Botero Restrepo, Illicit economies and armed conflict: Ten dynamics that drive instability, GI-TOC, January 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-economies-armed-conflict/>.

⁶ Eleanor Beevor, JNIM in Burkina Faso: A strategic criminal actor, GI-TOC, August 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/jnim-burkina-faso/>.

⁷ For more details regarding the hotspots initiative and its methodology, see: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africa-illicit-hub-mapping/>.

⁸ GI-TOC, Friend or foe: Armed groups and the political economy of violence in national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, forthcoming (2023).

⁹ Compared to the main roads crossing the southern border of Burkina Faso, where the chances of encountering a state checkpoint are much higher.

¹⁰ Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Is wildlife crime in Cameroon's Bouba Njida National Park financing an emerging separatist group in the north?, Risk Bulletin, Issue 5, GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-005/02-wildlife-crime-in-cameroon-national-park-financing-separatist-group.html>.

¹¹ Abdoulaye Barro, *Exploitation illégale d'or à Bandé Ethiess, la Gendarmerie de Kédougou arrête 20 personnes*, Sudestinfo, 3 June 2019, <https://sudestinfo.com/exploitation-illegale-dor-a-bande-ethiess-la-gendarmerie-de-kedougou-arrete-20-personnes/>.

¹² Further, many residents living around national parks use cattle as assets instead of putting significant funds they may have obtained into bank accounts. However, the fact that the cattle market is cash-based presents an opportunity to launder money gained from criminal activities.

