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# BEYOND BLOOD

Gold, conflict and  
criminality in West Africa

MARCENA HUNTER

NOVEMBER 2022





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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANEEMAS	Agence Nationale d'Encadrement des Exploitations Minières Artisanales et Semimécanisées (National Agency for the Supervision of Artisanal and Semi-Mechanized Mining)
ASGM	Artisanal and small-scale gold mining
CAR	Central African Republic
CCMSR	Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic)
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
FACT	Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad)
GATIA	Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies)
HCUA	High Council of Azawad
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jamā'at Nuṣrat al-Islām wal-Muslimīn
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
VDP	Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland)



Malian soldiers transport suspected Islamist rebels. Since 2016 there has been a growing gold rush in northern Mali, increasing instability and violence. © *Pascal Guyot/AFP via Getty Images*






# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2008, gold mining has exponentially increased in Burkina Faso. The vast majority of artisanal gold mining in the country is informal and unlicensed. © Universal Images Group via Getty Images





**W**hile gold is often referred to as a blood mineral due to its role in conflict financing, the relationship between the gold sector, instability and violence is far more nuanced, with complex regional dynamics. In the gold production hub of West Africa, where artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) is pervasive, an increasing tide of insecurity and violence in recent years adds to the complexity of the sector. Woven into the region's convoluted web of actors, activity and supply chains are criminal networks that link local mines to international trade hubs, exploiting the gold sector for financial gain and power. The analysis in this report demonstrates that the reality of the relationships between gold, conflict and criminality challenges the simplistic narrative of 'blood minerals' used to finance conflict, offering a far more nuanced understanding of the significance of the gold sector in West Africa. Rather, gold is closely intertwined with survival, money, power and criminality.

## **Criminality, fragility and violence**

While literature on the relationship between gold and instability has often focused on conflict financing, the interplay between gold, governance and criminality can contribute to instability and violence before any form of conflict financing takes place. Criminal exploitation of the gold sector is fostered by persistent and widespread informality, due in part to the significant barriers to entry in the formal sector, and the lack of support for informal miners and gold traders. As a result, corrupt and criminal elites in the political and business spheres can capture illicit gold flows, further contributing to community frustrations that can give rise to conflict. Limiting access to the gold sector by restricting access to mine deposits or conducting crackdowns on unlicensed ASGM can also undermine the legitimacy of state actors. Thus, efforts to stabilize West Africa must account for complex criminal interests while also addressing the long-standing grievances and expectations of local communities.<sup>1</sup> Such efforts are critical in both conflict-laden areas and stable areas to reduce the risk of conflict spreading.

Where the gold sector contributes to conflict financing in West Africa, it can vary significantly in form and value. In locations where conflict and gold mining overlap, armed groups may target the gold sector by taxing mining and trade activities, demanding payment from miners for providing security, or establishing checkpoints

along roads to mine sites and trade hubs for payment collection. Members of armed groups may also directly engage in gold mining, either for personal financial gain or to benefit the group. Yet in many regions, gold is not the primary source of revenue for armed groups; other industries like the livestock sector are also targets.

Sitting in the space between increased fragility and conflict are local self-defence and identity militia groups, which can act in cooperation or in competition with the state.<sup>2</sup> In West Africa, these groups fall on a spectrum ranging from hybrid security institutions to mafia-style protection rackets run by 'violent entrepreneurs'. There is a heavy overlap between these groups and the gold sector, with many instances of groups providing security at gold mine sites and along transportation routes. Yet, the origins of the different groups, their roles in local communities and the gold sector, and their role in conflict dynamics vary greatly.

## The economic imperative of gold

The local significance of the gold sector is complicated by the fact that it is a major economic driver and a critical source of livelihoods across West Africa, which is becoming increasingly important as other rural livelihoods become less tenable due to climate change. ASGM has attracted a wide range of actors, from local communities in need of a means of survival, to individuals seeking more lucrative employment opportunities, to relatively wealthy businesspeople and foreign investors looking to profit from semi-industrial mining. Thus, analysis of the relationship between gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa must be couched within long-term trajectories, economic pressures and political economies at the local, regional and transnational level.

Given the economic contribution of the gold sector across West Africa, it is impossible to fully capture the relationship between gold and conflict without recognizing gold's role as an instrument of peace. As environmental pressures on agriculture and livestock from climate change increase, the value of the gold sector as an economic safety net and an offset to rural exodus will likely increase. Among the beneficiaries are individuals who may have otherwise joined non-state armed groups or engaged in other, arguably more harmful, illicit activities. Further, ASGM and associated services are providing a source of income and, perhaps more importantly, hope for internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have few other options for survival. As such, the gold sector's contributions to peace and security cannot be discounted.

## Methodology: Unpacking political economies

This report examines various locations in West Africa – namely, Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire – to illustrate the intersection of gold, conflict and criminality, and explore the surrounding dynamics. Research from Niger, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Cameroon is also drawn upon for further insight.





Gold is an important sector for the Burkina Faso economy, accounting for over 80% of exports in 2020. The ASGM sector has been estimated to employ 10% of the population. © Ahmet Sami Acar/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

A political economy analysis was utilized to unpack the relationship between gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa. Political economy analysis builds an ‘understanding of the prevailing political and economic processes in society – specifically, the incentives, relationships, distribution, and contestation of power between different groups and individuals’.<sup>3</sup> The analysis considered both the locations where ASGM and violent conflict concurrently occur, as well as the broader political economies, supply chains and financial flows. Thus, supply chain mapping from selected conflict areas to African export points was also undertaken. In addition to legal frameworks, this analysis also considered other sources of legitimacy and power. This is especially critical in contexts where state authority is tenuous and alternative sources of governance, such as ethnic or tribal-based authority, hold greater sway amongst local populations.

In addition to in-depth desk research, field research was conducted at various points between January 2021 and June 2022 in Mali (Bamako), Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou, Ouahigouya, Yako, Kongoussi, Houndé, Bobo-Dioulasso, Sikasso, Gaoua, Batié and Kampti), and Côte d'Ivoire (Tortiya, Boundiali, Tengrela and Ouangolodougou). During this time, dozens of interviews were conducted with a wide range of actors, including miners, gold traders, civil society, non-profit organizations, journalists, multilateral organizations and government officials. The study also benefitted from ongoing monitoring by the GI-TOC in Guinea, Chad and Niger, and research in CAR and Cameroon in November 2021.






# DRIVERS OF FRAGILITY THE ROLE OF THE STATE

People protest against a failed military coup in Burkina Faso, September 2015. © Sia Kambou/AFP via Getty Images





**C**orruption, state mining policies and crackdowns on ASGM have increased fragility across West Africa in the political, economic, environmental, social and security dimensions.<sup>4</sup> Growing economic and environmental pressures have also increased fragility. Exponential population growth and climate change have put pressure on land and water resources, increasing environmental and social fragility and in turn agro-pastoral conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

This fragility creates environments that are readily exploited, perpetuated and exacerbated by organized criminal networks and non-state armed groups. While criminal networks may provide the financing and supply chains necessary for the gold sector to function economically for rural communities, ultimately their presence undermines governance and contributes to increased economic fragility that can give rise to insecurity and conflict.

It is also preventing West African states from realizing the full developmental and economic potential of the gold sector. ASGM activity is often unlicensed, taking place outside of regulatory frameworks. This has led to repeated attempts by governments throughout West Africa to crack down on illicit ASGM. Yet, instead of reducing criminal activity, such regulatory policies have pushed ASGM and the gold trade further into the illicit sphere. Criminal actors benefit from the fallout when miners and traders have limited access to the formal sector, or few legal options for selling gold production and securing financial support. In particular, challenges around access to finance have been cited as a major barrier to formalizing ASGM operations globally.

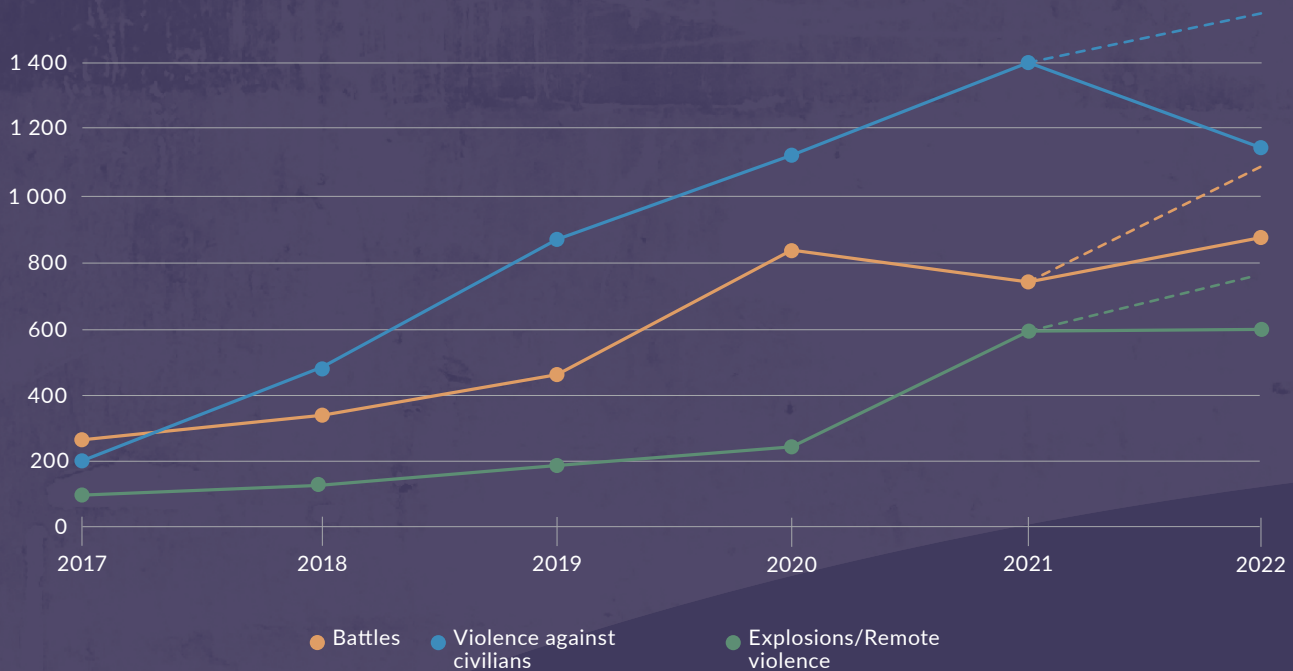
The result is a downward spiral of criminality, corruption and adverse ASGM policies, which heighten fragility and security threats.<sup>6</sup> Conflict actors can play on community frustrations to build support for their group and gain legitimacy among local populations, or to recruit members. For example, the Liptako-Gourma region, an area covering the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, is both a gold producing region and the current site of ongoing conflict. High levels of fragility, due in part to corruption, poor economic development, frustration with the state and worsening community-based conflicts, have created an ideal situation for jihadist groups to recruit new members. These same jihadist groups have also targeted the gold sector, generating significant finances from taxing the mining and trade of gold.<sup>7</sup>

Within this context, it is clear that conflict financing is part of a longer chain of factors contribution to increased fragility in the region.



## The West African goldfield landscape

Over the past two decades there has been an exponential increase in gold production and ASGM across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>8</sup> Transcending borders, the Liptako-Gourma region covers large swathes of central and northern Mali, northern and eastern Burkina Faso and south-western Niger. The region contains significant gold deposits, which have been mined by ASGM and industrial mining operations since the mid-2000s. Since 2016, Liptako-Gourma has also become a key zone of conflict and criminal activity. The Kidal region in northern Mali has also developed into an important gold production area, becoming a flashpoint of insecurity and violence.



**FIGURE 1** Violent events in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, 2017–2022.

SOURCE: ACLED

Since 2008, the Burkina Faso gold sector has seen significant growth, mirroring the rise in the international gold spot price. ASGM takes place across Burkina Faso, with the Nord, Centre-Nord, Est and Sud-Ouest regions being prominent gold production areas.<sup>9</sup> The Sud-Ouest region has been identified as having the most individuals working in the ASGM sector, with goldfields hosting tens of thousands of miners in some locations.<sup>10</sup> Only a small proportion of ASGM operations are licensed in the country, so most activity takes place in the informal sector and is vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks.

In Mali, gold mining has historically been concentrated in the south of the country. The Kayes region, which borders Guinea, is the main gold production area, with both industrial mining and ASGM.<sup>11</sup> The Sikasso region, on the border with Burkina Faso, has experienced an increase in gold production from both industrial mining and ASGM in recent years and is currently the second largest gold-producing region in the country.<sup>12</sup> Northern Mali has also experienced its own gold rush since gold panning reportedly began in northern Kidal in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the Kidal and Gao regions have seen an exponential increase in gold mining.



often delayed or not paid at all, put government agents in a precarious financial position. For example, in Chad's Tibesti region, there are reports of severely underfunded military personnel working in security roles for unlicensed small-scale gold prospectors with whom they share ethnic affinities to boost their income.<sup>15</sup> Certain customary and cultural practices also play a role. In some areas, payments that may be considered bribery by outsiders are a consequential and accepted norm for local communities. This is not to say petty corruption should continue unhindered, but that the wider power structures need to be assessed, especially in environments of endemic corruption.<sup>16</sup>

Corruption involving more powerful actors, including grand corruption, is arguably far more damaging and is often closely intertwined with transnational criminal networks.<sup>17</sup> There are allegations of powerful actors across West Africa manipulating financial and political power to reap illicit profits from the gold sector, with their involvement often hidden behind a network of frontmen and intermediaries. Corruption ranges from extorting ASGM miners and gold traders, to directly profiting from gold mining and trade operations (often via proxies), to allocating mining concessions or dictating mining policy in a way that leads to personal financial gain. This can blur the line between state and non-state interests, especially when financial interests supersede political or ideological interests. High-level corruption in regional trade and export hubs also enables organized crime networks to smuggle gold off the continent en masse.

Industrial gold mining companies have also played a role, with accusations that they have engaged in corruption and tax evasion. For example, in 2018 the Canadian-based mining company Kinross Gold Corp paid US\$950 000 to settle civil charges relating to charges of bribing officials in Ghana and Mauritania.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, investigations by the Burkinabé government and investigative journalists revealed that at least one industrial mine used improper accounting techniques and fiscal fraud to reduce its taxable income, paying no taxes for multiple years.<sup>19</sup> Mining company Glencore was fined over US\$1.1 billion by the US government when it pled guilty to acts of bribery and commodity price manipulation, including in West Africa. Highlighting the corrupt practices of some industrial mining companies, one US attorney described the scope of this criminal bribery scheme as 'staggering'.<sup>20</sup> Although US\$1.1 billion may seem like a significant penalty, Glencore is expected to profit US\$17 billion in 2022. Thus, some observers feel the fine is insufficient to serve as a true penalty or a deterrent to future corrupt dealings by industrial mining companies so inclined.<sup>21</sup>



## Corruption weakens the state: The case of Burkina Faso

The evolution of gold markets in Burkina Faso illustrates how corruption and criminality in the gold sector can undermine governance and weaken the state. When the gold trade was privatized in 2006, several agents who had previously worked for the government buying gold became licensed private gold buyers. These local private companies, referred to as *comptoirs*, exercised territorial control at many mining sites and secured gold supply chains via networks of gold-buying agents and by offering loans and other financial support to miners.<sup>22</sup> These *comptoirs* were well connected to political elites and engaged in illegal activities with impunity. These activities included financing and buying gold from unlicensed mines and engaging in gold smuggling. This contributed to a sense of injustice and frustration among the population, especially artisanal miners.

Following the fall of former president Compaoré in 2014, the government took action to investigate abuses and reform the mining sector. In 2015, the Agence Nationale d'Encadrement des Exploitations Minières Artisanales et Semi-mécanisées (ANEEMAS) was created with the mandate to reorganize ASGM gold markets and prevent smuggling, as well as to offer technical support to miners to minimize negative practices and impacts. Prior to 2018, weak regulation of mining licences created opportunity for exploitation and money laundering. For example, mining licences, which were often issued in the capital, Ouagadougou, were not used to mine, but to extract percentages of production and revenue from existing informal gold miners, or to expropriate land being managed by customary authorities. There is also evidence that the licences were used for money laundering, with some individuals holding dozens of mining permits without justification.<sup>23</sup>

ANEEMAS addressed some vulnerabilities that were being exploited by corrupt and criminal actors, but reports suggest that the presence of ANEEMAS is limited to certain areas, with some communities unaware of its existence.<sup>24</sup> There are also concerns that most miners do not feel sufficiently involved in the ANEEMAS mandate and perceive the agency as another competitor or a barrier to ASGM.<sup>25</sup>

## Allocation of land and mineral rights

Competition between industrial mining operations and ASGM for access to land and minerals has also increased regional tensions. Industrial mining has the potential to deliver benefits to countries and local populations across West Africa in the form of increased state revenues and promotion of responsible mining practices, among other positive outcomes. However, industrial mines are not currently delivering the same livelihood opportunities to rural populations as ASGM. In some designated areas, industrial mining companies hold concessions that grant them the exclusive legal rights to mine, thus preventing ASGM miners from working in the same area. Limiting ASGM access to gold deposits can increase fragility and sow the seeds of discontent that can lead to instability and conflict. This is especially a concern in states already facing security threats.



**The transitional council welcomes Malick Diaw, military president that came to power after a 2020 coup d'état, Bamako, February 2022.**

© Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images

Corruption can exacerbate the tensions around access to gold deposits, with personal financial interests prioritized over the interests of the state and its citizens. Corruption in the allocation of mining concessions, although rarely documented due to its clandestine nature, is believed to occur globally, including in West Africa.<sup>26</sup> For example, the award of licences for gold mining exploration, exploitation and export in Mali has been described as untransparent and heavily politicized, with relationships to political elites being instrumental to winning licences.<sup>27</sup>

To be clear, the allocation of land and mineral rights to industrial mining companies is not always linked to corrupt government actors or industrial mining companies behaving badly. However, even if fully transparent and formal procedures are followed by well-intentioned government actors and politicians, when ASGM miners are denied land access to enforce the land rights of industrial players, the outcome is often the same. There is an increase in economic, political and social fragility, and a spike in the risk of conflict as communities who feel abandoned by the state turn to non-state armed groups for support.

Thus, the tension between industrial mines and ASGM over land rights is a challenge that must be carefully navigated. Approaches that engage with and support ASGM are more likely to be effective in building community resilience, increasing economic strength and reducing threats from non-state armed groups.





Tanks in Burkina Faso containing mud from which gold is extracted at gold mine sites. © Anne Mimault/Reuters via Alamy Stock Photo

## Tensions with industrial mines: The case of Burkina Faso

In 2017, industrial mines in Burkina Faso employed 9 017 Burkinabé, of which a large majority were low-level, poorly paid positions, while over 1 million people were engaged in ASGM.<sup>28</sup> Conflict between industrial mining operations and local communities has been exacerbated by instances of ASGM operations, sometimes consisting of tens of thousands of people, being forced off land so that industrial mining operations could proceed. Local miners confirm the conflict between ASGM and industrial mines, describing little conflict among artisanal miners. Multiple ASGM miners reported how exploration teams from industrial miners had arrived on their sites and driven them off the land without compensation.<sup>29</sup>

In the city of Houndé in May 2022, significant tensions between artisanal miners and industrial mines escalated to violence following government efforts to clear ASGM miners from a Houndé gold site for an industrial mining operation. ASGM miners claimed they had been working in the area first<sup>30</sup> and the violent protest that ensued resulted in the deaths of two miners.<sup>31</sup> Similar frustrations were expressed in the north and the east of the country, with ASGM stakeholders reporting they had been pushed off land and young men leaving the country to find work in gold mines in neighbouring countries.<sup>32</sup>

The prioritization of industrial mining has left local communities feeling frustrated and powerless as there are few to no alternatives to ASGM. As such, efforts to shut down ASGM significantly increase economic fragility in the region, creating a domino effect for other dimensions of fragility. Capturing the broader sentiment, one miner said, 'Can we in such a situation fight against terrorism while we chase the sons of this country from the mining sites so that they return to the bush without having to eat, and I tell you in the bush if someone comes to offer me FCFA1 000 000 for my family and to take a weapon, I will do it.'<sup>33</sup>

## Crackdowns and legitimacy

Although the ASGM sector is vital to the livelihoods of rural communities, it is also characterized by pervasive informality and illegality, with very few ASGM miners possessing land and mining rights, or licences issued by the state.<sup>34</sup> At times, West African governments have taken a hard-line approach to unlicensed mining activity, declaring it illegal and using force to shut down ASGM sites. Yet, because gold production is often enmeshed in local communities, attempts to eradicate ASGM tend to undermine the legitimacy of local and national authorities in the eyes of locals. By depriving communities of their livelihoods and increasing economic fragility, states fuel distrust of the government and exacerbate tensions between local populations and national authorities. This is especially the case when local communities see these tactics as a bid by the government to gain control over the gold sector for the benefit of themselves, cronies or foreign-owned mining operations.<sup>35</sup>

Governments can be motivated to shut down gold mining activity to combat jihadists and other non-state armed groups, depriving them of revenues and potential recruits from gold mining sites. Yet, even

in these contexts, crackdowns have largely been counterproductive, resulting in a downward spiral of distrust, tension and violence. Non-state armed groups can capitalize on this dynamic, building up their own legitimacy among segments of the population by restoring access to gold deposits (and incomes), and protecting mining activity. Miners often side with those who hold power at the local level and enable access to gold mines, which at times can be criminal or conflict groups. In some cases, this has led gold miners to view the presence of jihadists and other armed groups as a boon, rather than a threat.<sup>36</sup>

While crackdowns on ASGM may be intended to curb criminality or combat conflict financing and other threats, the hard-line approach has more often undermined state legitimacy and strengthened criminal networks and armed groups. Consequently, interventions that engage with ASGM or use alternative approaches to put pressure on illicit markets, criminal networks and conflict financing are more likely to find success and avoid unintended long-term outcomes.

### Cracking down on ASGM: A country view

**Burkina Faso:** In 2018, the governor of the Est region ordered the closure of artisanal mining sites to cut off sources of funding for terrorist groups. Consequently, disgruntled miners turned toward jihadists, who reopened certain mines.<sup>37</sup> In Soum province, in the Sahel region, communities appear to have been brought closer to jihadists following counter-terrorism operations in early 2019, during which gold mining equipment and gold were seized by state security forces. The 2021 ban on gold mining in the northern provinces, which was imposed by the regional government in reaction to the deadly attack in Solhan, also sparked criticism that it will cause even greater economic distress among miners and local communities, which can be leveraged by jihadist groups to build legitimacy.<sup>38</sup>

**Côte d'Ivoire:** There have been efforts to crack down on illegal gold panning in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire following a series of deadly attacks by jihadist groups on Ivorian security forces in 2020. In June 2021, the government created a special group, which includes elements of the National Gendarmerie and agents of the Ministry of Waters and Forestry. Extensive operations have been launched in the area and are





An artisanal gold mining site in Mali. © Joerg Boethling/Alamy Stock Photo

currently ongoing. This has led to an exodus of clandestine gold miners to the areas of Tengrela and Boundiali.<sup>39</sup>

**Chad:** In the Tibesti region in northern Chad, the state's efforts to crack down on ASGM in the Kouri Bougoudi and Miski goldfields have diminished what little state legitimacy existed and created fertile ground for rebel groups to recruit new members and for self-defence groups to form.<sup>40</sup> In late 2018, after Chadian rebels attacked the largest goldfield in the country, Kouri Bougoudi, the government made successive attempts to stop ASGM and cut off the rebel group's source of revenue and recruits.<sup>41</sup> In October 2020, the government announced the closure of illegal gold mining sites across the country and the intent to evacuate all miners. The expulsion of miners by the Chadian army descended into indiscriminate attacks against local tribes, resulting in open conflict with local militias and self-defence groups.<sup>42</sup> Despite repeated crackdowns, the Chadian army has not only failed to make any progress in securing and controlling the goldfields, but it has fuelled recruitment into armed groups.<sup>43</sup>

**Niger:** In February 2017, the Niger government shut down the Djado Plateau goldfields citing security concerns.<sup>44</sup> At the time it was closed, the site was the largest artisanal goldfield in the country, providing livelihoods to tens of thousands of miners in nearby towns and villages that provided services to the mining operations. The closure of the goldfields, in parallel with a crackdown on human smuggling – another major source of livelihoods – had a major destabilizing effect on the region. Both events further fuelled grievances within the Tebu and Tuareg communities, and provided the impetus for a number of individuals to engage in criminal activity, in particular banditry.<sup>45</sup> For example, heavily armed Chadian and Sudanese miners, who had originally migrated to Niger to work in the goldfields, joined the region's banditry business.<sup>46</sup>






# GOLD AND CONFLICT

## VIOLENT COMPETITION FOR MONEY AND POWER

Fighters of the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad near Kidal, northern Mali. © *Stringer/AFP via Getty Images*





**T**he gold sector is undeniably a source of conflict financing in West Africa. Yet, it is more than just a source of funding. Control of gold mining areas and transportation routes is also key to securing legitimacy and exercising power over local populations, core facets of conflict dynamics. This can result in a downward spiral, with violence being a key component of efforts to secure profits, power and legitimacy.

It is not only non-state and jihadist groups that financially benefit from the gold sector. State actors, criminal actors, and identity militias and self-defence groups also profit from the gold sector, with their relationships defying a simple friend-foe dynamic. For example, political authorities from Bamako are reported to have invested in gold mining in Kidal, fully aware that gold mining and transport are financially benefitting conflict actors in the area through their informal taxation systems.<sup>47</sup> The involvement of different actors in the Kidal gold sector illustrates how the drive to maximize financial gains and illicit networks can transcend political and ideological differences, with actors working in parallel, or even collaborating, to maximize profits. Thus, control over the gold sector has devolved into a violent competition between different sets of actors for money and power.



## Conflict finance: targeting and taxing gold

The extent to which conflict actors derive revenues from the gold sector varies greatly across West Africa. In some regions experiencing conflict, other sectors and illicit activities can be more significant sources of funding.<sup>48</sup> In Mali, for example, the cattle rustling economy, which has received far less international attention, has been a key source of conflict financing.<sup>49</sup> In addition, a myriad commodities – including cannabis resin, cigarettes and smuggled foodstuffs – transit the areas under armed group control and serve as sources of protection payments. Furthermore, too much instability can disrupt ASGM, and therefore the revenue flows to armed groups. For example, as of December 2021, miners were no longer working near Ouahigouya and neighbouring towns in northern Burkina Faso because of the security threats.<sup>50</sup> Gold therefore needs to be seen as part of broader conflict economies, rather than singled out as a ‘blood mineral’.

Where armed groups are profiting from the gold sector, most of their revenues are derived from taxation or charging for protection services. Jihadist groups often claim the mandatory payments as a form of *zakat*. *Zakat* is an Islamic financial obligation to donate a proportion of wealth each year to charitable and religious causes. While guides usually peg *zakat* at 2.5% of wealth accumulated over the year not used towards living expenses, at gold sites the percentage demanded by jihadist groups has been reported to be closer to 10% of all income. For instance, in 2019, jihadists affiliated with JNIM were reported to be levying protection fees on gold miners in the Est region of Burkina Faso and in the Kidal region of Mali.<sup>51</sup> In the Burkina Faso provinces of Séno and Soum, groups of gold miners have paid jihadist groups to guard sites.<sup>52</sup> Jihadists based in Nigerien villages in Sirba (near Burkina Faso) chased away security so that they could take over security services and fee collection at the mining sites.<sup>53</sup>

Income streams are reportedly not limited to informal mining operations. In Mali and Burkina Faso, there are allegations that some local mining companies have reached arrangements with jihadist groups, allowing them to access gold sites and ensure protection of transport vehicles to and from gold-mining areas.<sup>54</sup>

Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso.  
Jihadist groups reportedly  
control gold sites in northern  
areas of the country. © Issouf  
Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images



## Armed groups in West Africa

Since 2016, the Liptako-Gourma and Kidal regions have faced a rising tide of insecurity and violence, where the jihadist groups ISGS and JNIM are currently prominent. In early 2020, negotiations between authorities and JNIM in Burkina Faso resulted in a temporary calm and a decline in fatalities in some areas. However, these were limited to patchy, local accords and a breakdown in negotiations led to a resurgence of JNIM activity by the end of 2020.<sup>55</sup> In response, state forces increased counter-insurgency operations, which in turn drove up political violence. Jihadist militants increased attacks on civilian populations, while fighters from the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP) violently targeted civilians suspected of supporting jihadists. Meanwhile, resurgent military activity in Mali in the latter half of 2021 pushed militants across the border into Burkina Faso, further exacerbating political violence in the country.<sup>56</sup>

Northern Mali is facing increased security threats. In the Kidal region, CMA was by far the dominant force as of 2021, with the GATIA forces having only a limited presence.<sup>57</sup> Violence has exponentially increased in the Gao and Kidal regions, fuelled by conflict between ISGS, CMA, JNIM, the Malian state and its alleged Russian allies, and resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians since the start of 2022.<sup>58</sup>

**Jamā'at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn (JNIM)**, also known as *Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans*, was formed in 2017 through the merger of Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun and the Sahara branch of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>59</sup> JNIM has significantly expanded its geographic zone of operations across the Sahel since its founding, waging a sustained campaign of violence against civilians, local security forces, international militaries and UN peacekeepers.<sup>60</sup> Circumstantial evidence indicates JNIM affiliates were responsible for the June 2021 Solhan massacre – the deadliest attack in Burkina Faso to date.<sup>61</sup> Levels of violence have remained high in Burkina Faso, with JNIM identified as the most violent group in the country. JNIM activity has been concentrated in the north and east of Burkina Faso, although there are reports of



JNIM, the dominant non-state armed group in Burkina Faso.

*Photo: Social media*

attempts to expand within the country and beyond its borders.<sup>62</sup>

**Katiba Macina**, also known as *Front de Libération du Macina*, has Malian origins and is currently the most active group within JNIM. Katiba Macina has promoted itself as a protector of the Fulani community, weaponizing Fulani pastoralist grievances.<sup>63</sup> Originally Katiba Macina aimed to re-establish the Islamic Republic of Macina,<sup>64</sup> but there are now calls for a global jihad, with the group's activities stretching beyond central Mali.

**Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)**, also known as IS Sahel and the Greater Sahara faction of Islamic State West Africa Province, is active in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. ISGS exploits community conflicts, offering protection to historically marginalized groups, or an alternative to the state where there are power vacuums.<sup>65</sup> By 2019, ISGS had grown exponentially and carried out some of the deadliest attacks ever perpetrated against Burkinabé, Malian and Nigerien state forces, becoming the dominant force in the Liptako region. In 2020, however, ISGS was under significant pressure from local state and international forces, and facing conflict with the JNIM. In response, ISGS resorted to excessive attacks on civilians in areas under its influence and tried hard to bring the local population to heel.<sup>66</sup> ISGS is currently the deadliest jihadist group in the Sahel, attacking civilians and village leaders.<sup>67</sup> Following the death of its leader in

August 2021, ISGS reportedly appointed younger and more violent commanders to leadership positions.<sup>68</sup>

**Ansar Dine** was created in 2011 following a split from the Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA).<sup>69</sup> Ansar Dine vigorously enforces Sharia law in the areas under its control. Following the death of its founder in 2017, there is reported to be an increase in internal disorganization and a decline in activities, with speculation that militants may have left to join JNIM or ISGS.<sup>70</sup>

**Coalition des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA)** is mainly formed of the independence rebel groups MNLA, High Council of Azawad (HCUA) and one of the factions of the Arab Movement of Azawad.<sup>71</sup> MNLA has been consistently weakened by internal strife and attacks by jihadist armed groups. As a result, MNLA has been increasingly marginalized within the

CMA in favour of the HCUA, which operates across central and northern Mali. There are allegations that the HCUA maintains close ties to Ansar Dine.<sup>72</sup> In July 2022, the CMA issued a communiqué critical of the Malian government and accusing it of abandoning the 2014 Algiers peace agreement, a sign of rising tension and increased risk of political and military escalation between northern ex-rebel groups and the state.<sup>73</sup>

**Groupe d’Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA)**, formed in 2014, is a self-defence group which supports the Malian government in its fight against ISGS and JNIM.<sup>74</sup> GATIA is a member of the Plateforme, a pro-Malian government group formed in 2014. GATIA is present in the Ménaka region, but it has more recently focused its activities in the Gourma region, where the group has faced accusations of engaging in criminal activity.<sup>75</sup>

Taxation and protection fees (including *zakat*) are not always viewed as oppressive by the local population. Local gold miners can see these practices as democratizing access to gold mine sites previously controlled by actors with powerful political connections. Protection may even be solicited by miners, sometimes in response to crackdowns on ASGM by the state, such as the democratization of land access by JNIM in areas of Burkina Faso.<sup>76</sup>

However, the refusal to make payments can have dire consequences. In June 2021, in the deadliest attack to date in Burkina Faso, insurgents attacked the gold-mining community of Solhan, in the Sahel region, killing at least 132 civilians. It is reported that jihadists targeted the site after Koglwéogo, a local self-defence group, secured the mine site and refused to pay protection fees or any other payments to the group.<sup>77</sup> The attack on Solhan served as a warning to other gold mine sites. In the Tillabéri region of Niger, communities are increasingly resisting the predatory collection of protection fees, but such resistance has been met with violent reprisals by jihadist militants. For example, in December 2020, villagers in Mogodyougou beat two ISGS tax collectors to death and, in response, ISGS killed more than a dozen people.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond financing, in some locations across West Africa, gold sites can also be used as recruiting and training grounds for jihadist groups.<sup>79</sup> In Burkina Faso, where jihadist groups have managed to gain control over gold mining sites, they can recruit new members and access explosive materials.<sup>80</sup>



## Taxation and protection fees: A country view

**Burkina Faso:** Jihadist groups are also reported to control gold sites in northern Burkina Faso, with areas such as the northern town of Goussourougou under jihadist control. According to a gold buyer in Ouahigouya, 'there, the state rules don't apply, their rules do'.<sup>81</sup> There are also limited reports of jihadists engaging directly in the gold trade. It was reported that around Djibo, in the Sahel region, jihadists are buying gold and providing funds to buyers to buy gold on their behalf.<sup>82</sup>

**Mali:** Several gold mining sites in the Kidal and Gao regions are reported to be directly controlled by the CMA, elements within the larger Plateforme group and JNIM, all of whom tax miners for access to various locations in exchange for security.<sup>83</sup> For example, elements associated with both JNIM and ISGS are reported to have been active at the I-N-Tillit-Nord gold site, near the border with Burkina Faso.<sup>84</sup> In the Kidal region, control of goldfields plays a significant role in conflict financing and power dynamics. The stalled peace process and limited return of Malian state authorities combined with the October 2021 departure of French troops enabled the CMA and JNIM to achieve de facto autonomy over the Kidal region. The CMA has been the dominant force in the area, with control of gold mines and the subsequent financial flows reported to be integral to funding the group's expansion strategy.<sup>85</sup> At sites controlled by the CMA, miners are required to pay a fee in exchange for protection, access to water and food, and the right to set up encampments at gold mining sites. Over the course of 2021, JNIM succeeded in absorbing certain elements within the CMA and is now reported to be the more powerful group throughout much of the Kidal region, save for certain towns and cities.<sup>86</sup> Interviews with stakeholders active in the Kidal gold sector report that there is no presence of JNIM on gold mine sites, but it is widely speculated they are financially benefitting from the gold sector as a result of their relationships with the CMA and taxation in the area.

**Niger:** Jihadist groups seeking to exploit the ASGM sector have also spread to Niger, with both ISGS and JNIM active in the Tillabéri region.<sup>87</sup> In particular, gold mining sites in the departments of Torodi and Tera have a jihadist presence, including efforts to enforce taxation and protection fees.<sup>88</sup>



Gold processing in Burkina Faso. © DeAgostini/Getty Images

## Mercury, cyanide and explosives

Mercury, cyanide and explosives play a key role in the West African gold sector, used to reach gold deposits and extract gold from ore. Burkina Faso is a key hub in these regional supply chains, with many flows crossing through the country.<sup>89</sup> The use of chemicals, specifically mercury and cyanide, to process gold-bearing ore enables higher rates of gold recovery, thus increasing gold production and potential revenue flows. It is reported that there is a growing use of cyanide in northern Mali, which is more effective for extraction than mercury.<sup>90</sup> Also, according to the UN Panel of Experts on Mali, armed groups in Kidal have forced the indigenous local populations around Intahaka to adopt the use of mercury and cyanide, which was previously opposed by the local population.<sup>91</sup> In northern Mali, actors from Niger, Chad and, to a lesser extent, Sudan, are heavily involved in cyanide processing.<sup>92</sup>

Because explosives are also useful to armed groups to inflict violence, the flow of explosives to mine sites thus creates opportunity for conflict groups to access explosives and train recruits in their usage.<sup>93</sup> In a June 2022 operation covering West and central Africa, INTERPOL seized more than 170 kilograms of explosives,<sup>94</sup> and in a December 2020 operation covering West Africa and the Sahel, INTERPOL seized more than 40 000 sticks of dynamite – all intended for gold mining.<sup>95</sup>

## Intertwining criminal networks: Convergence of illicit activities

The presence of conflict actors at gold mine sites can lead to gold flows and related economic activity becoming intertwined with existing or emerging illicit markets, such as drug trafficking and people trafficking. Criminal networks play a critical role in spreading and perpetuating regional insecurity from illicit hubs, further increasing regional insecurity. In Kidal, it is reported that mining equipment is purchased using finances generated by illicit markets, including 'drug money'.<sup>96</sup> Migrant smuggling, specifically the transportation of Malian nationals from southern Mali toward Algeria, has also become increasingly intertwined with ASGM economies in the Gao and Kidal regions.

Kidal is a key transit zone for migrant smuggling, with networks based in Gao and Timbuktu using itineraries that pass through the Kidal region to transport migrants to Algeria.<sup>97</sup> Criminal groups exploit migration flows to gold fields by using them to disguise the movement of irregular migrants or taking advantage of migrants, who become victims of trafficking and forced labour.<sup>98</sup> Armed groups are also known to engage in recruitment and training at gold mine sites.<sup>99</sup> Recent reports indicate that





some migrants transiting through Kidal have been forced to work at various gold mining sites.<sup>100</sup> There have also been reports of child trafficking for labour in the gold mines in Gao and Kidal, a trend exacerbated by school closures due to conflict, insecurity, Covid-19 and teachers' strikes.<sup>101</sup> However, more recent interviews with stakeholders active in the Kidal gold sector indicate that there are no women or children present at gold mine sites. Thus, further investigation is needed to determine potential levels of child labour at gold mine sites in the region.

**Armed group fighters in Ménaka, Mali, November 2020.** © Souleymane Ag Anara/ AFP via Getty Images

## Local legitimacy: Identity militias and self-defence groups

Over the past decade, local self-defence groups and identity militias in West Africa have increased in number and strength. Identity militias are 'groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion, or, in exceptional cases, livelihood'.<sup>102</sup> These groups are often referred to as 'tribal', 'communal', 'ethnic' or 'local' militias and act in pursuit of local goals, resources, power, security and retribution. Self-defence and militia groups can fill governance vacuums, providing valuable security where government capacity or will is lacking. However, such groups can also exercise vigilante justice or act as 'violent entrepreneurs', engaging in criminal activity and enforcing power through violence. The roles and activities of identity militias and self-defence groups can evolve with changing political and security dynamics, especially the increasing threats from state and non-state actors.

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and northern Côte d'Ivoire, self-defence and identity militias have a direct relationship with the gold sector, providing security for mine sites and at times gold shipments, including at unlicensed sites. Due to the



largely informal and unlicensed nature of ASGM across West Africa, this can also implicate the groups in illicit networks. Two self-defence groups prominent in the ASGM sector are the Dozos, which operate predominantly across southern Mali, southern Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire, and the Koglwéogo, which operate primarily across northern and eastern Burkina Faso.<sup>103</sup>

The leaders of Dozo fraternities are perceived to have close ties to state actors in the areas they operate, described as 'state-backed militias' in some contexts.<sup>104</sup> Historically, members of Dozo fraternities have primarily been from the Mande ethnic group, but members are now permitted from various ethnic groups, including the Peuhl (also known as Fulani).<sup>105</sup> Dozos carry traditional small-calibre hunting weapons, as well as multiple amulets believed to make them invincible. In southern Mali, Dozos play a key role in securing gold mine sites and are paid either in cash or with a portion of the extracted gold.<sup>106</sup> For several decades, Dozos have been employed by the Tomboloma, an unofficial mining police that represent village chiefs and site owners at mining sites, and who are paid with unofficial taxes collected from miners.<sup>107</sup> Dozos are also active in the Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire gold sectors.

The Koglwéogo originated in the Mossi Plateau in the 1990s in response to increasing insecurity and the unreliability of security forces. Since then, the Koglwéogo have expanded both in numbers and geographic reach, spreading across the Centre, Plateau-Central, Centre-Nord, Centre-Est and Est regions with the support of traditional local authorities. Branches are concentrated in smaller towns and rural areas. Ranks have swollen as insecurity has escalated: as of 2020, there were an estimated 4 500 Koglwéogo groups with up to 45 000 members.<sup>108</sup> Koglwéogo groups also enjoy significant community legitimacy and political connections, including connections with local customary leaders. Sometimes the leader of a Koglwéogo group is also the village chief.<sup>109</sup>

In Burkina Faso, the role of self-defence groups, including the Koglwéogo, was formalized in 2020 with the establishment of the VDP, which officially made them an element of state security, paid by the state.<sup>110</sup>

## **Countering terrorism: Self-defence groups collaborate with governments**

Self-defence groups and identity militias have become important actors in anti-terrorism strategies in West Africa, providing protection and security to local communities where the state is not able.<sup>111</sup> Struggling to secure isolated territories, governments – both regional and external actors deploying peacekeeping operations – are increasingly relying on self-defence groups for 'counterterrorism' and security operations. In 2017, through its fighting force in northern Mali, France supported and cooperated with the GAITA self-defence group to combat jihadist groups.<sup>112</sup> In the Sikasso region of Mali, Dozos are solicited by authorities to give early warnings of terrorist threats.<sup>113</sup> In the Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso, the Koglwéogo are heavily involved in the fight against terrorism alongside authorities.<sup>114</sup>

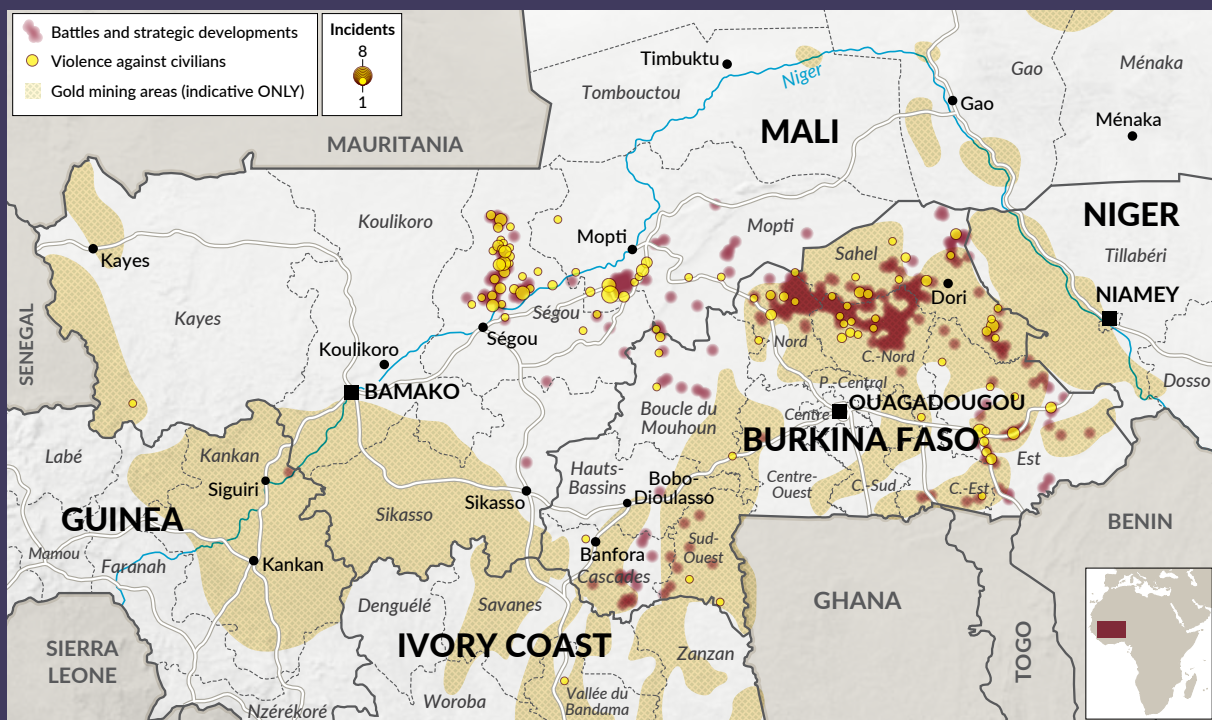
The involvement of self-defence groups and identity militias in counterterrorism operations puts members in significant danger, especially given that they tend to be poorly equipped and supported by the state. In addition to clashing over control and taxation of gold mining sites in Burkina Faso, the Koglwéogo's involvement in state counter-terrorism efforts has made them an even greater target for jihadist attacks. The high rate of fatalities amongst the VDP, which predominantly includes Koglwéogo, highlights how volunteers have taken a prominent position

on the front lines in the fight against jihadist groups. As of June 2021, 66 VDP members had been killed in attacks by jihadist groups, compared to 15 members of the regular armed forces.<sup>115</sup> Dozens of VDPs have been killed since June 2021, including 41 VDP members in a single attack in Loroum Province, Nord region in December 2021.<sup>116</sup>

## Unintended outcomes: 'Violent entrepreneurs' and vigilante justice

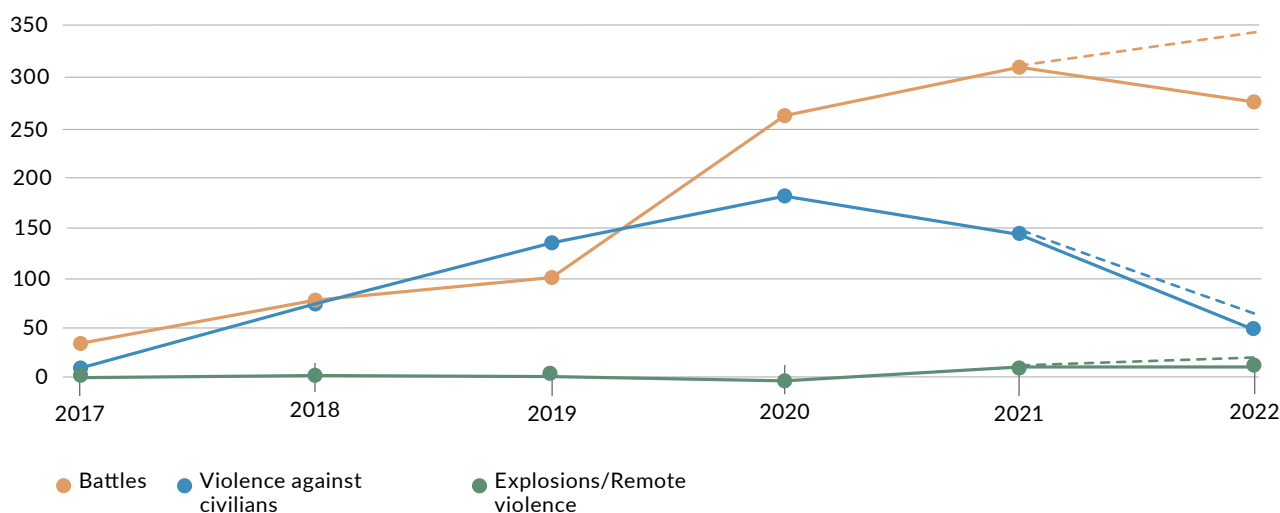
The rising power of self-defence groups has resulted in other unintended outcomes, namely some groups morphing into mafia-style 'violent entrepreneurs' and an increase in vigilante justice. The term 'violent entrepreneur' refers to the use of organized violence to achieve social, financial or political ends.<sup>117</sup> In the gold sector, this often manifests in groups extorting ASGM operations for protection payments.

The politicization of identity militias and their engagement in larger security strategies increase the risk that they will evolve into mafia-style groups that operate as violent entrepreneurs – a shift that can be seen in northern Côte d'Ivoire and northern Burkina Faso. In contrast, Dozo groups in southern Mali and Burkina Faso, which reportedly maintain traditional roles and activities, have not commercialized violence and gold mine security to the same extent. Yet, given the diversity of groups, more targeted analyses are needed to assess the extent to which various groups may or may not have evolved into violent entrepreneurs.



**FIGURE 3** Violent incidents involving Dozo, Koglweogo and VDP, January 2020–September 2022.

SOURCE: ACLED, author's data



**FIGURE 4** Violent acts involving communal militias, March 2020–March 2021.

SOURCE: ACLED

Identity militias and self-defence groups have also carried out vigilante justice. One of the numerous examples in recent years came in early 2019 at the Kangaba gold mining zone in the Koulikoro region in Mali, where Dozos killed several individuals suspected of banditry.<sup>118</sup> In northern Côte d'Ivoire, Dozos heavily involved with the gold sector are described as 'indulging in acts of violence' such as forced imprisonment, beating or intimidation.<sup>119</sup> Koglwéogo groups have also increasingly taken justice into their own hands in Burkina Faso, pursuing criminals and bandits, as well as jihadists, at times inflicting violent punishments.

Vigilante justice can take on an ethnic component and exacerbate local tensions. In Burkina Faso the launch of the VDP programme has further escalated conflict as pre-existing ethnic tensions are becoming intertwined with the political and economic agendas of conflict actors in eastern and northern Burkina Faso. While neither JNIM nor the Koglwéogo groups are ethnically based groups, they are perceived to represent the interests of certain ethnic groups. Koglwéogo recruitment appears to heavily favour sedentary, well-connected members of the population and discriminate against pastoralists and nomads who are not as well connected to villages and village authorities.<sup>120</sup> Thus, Koglwéogo are perceived by some as protecting Mossi interests. At the same time, JNIM has exploited Fulani pastoralist grievances to recruit members, leading to stereotypes conflating Fulani ethnicity with armed group membership. Fulani pastoralists have been the frequent victims of VDP attacks and tensions between the ethnic groups

have increased in some communities.<sup>121</sup> Data on attacks perpetrated by the VDP have shown that 89% of their attacks against civilians in 2020 were against Fulani civilians.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, there are also examples of Fulani Koglwéogo groups and members who have had positive experiences, reflecting the diversity of self-defence groups and the need for nuanced analysis. For example, a Fulani Koglwéogo member in the Hauts-Bassins region reported that the village decided to form a self-defence group due to the high rate of robberies and lack of action by the army and police. Membership includes all the ethnic groups in the village. This member, who is involved in monitoring local gold mining and trade, reported that miners provide support, including bags of ore to process occasionally.<sup>123</sup>

Since 2016, the expansion of vigilante committees in Niger's Tillabéri region has also compounded local ethnic tensions.<sup>124</sup> In 2017, the border strip between the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions in Niger and the Ménaka region in Mali experienced one of the most intense periods of intercommunal violence between pastoralist communities. In 2018, the conflict escalated further when Niger outsourced security in the border area to Malian-based self-defence groups, which French forces also engaged with in an ad hoc alliance. Violence increasingly took on inter-communal and inter-ethnic dimensions, subsequently enabling ISGS to exploit grievances and mobilize a greater number of recruits and militants.<sup>125</sup>



## Reigning supreme: The case of Dozos in northern Côte d'Ivoire



Dozos gather to support an opposition leader in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire. © Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images

In northern Côte d'Ivoire, Dozos are described as 'reigning supreme over gold panning sites',<sup>126</sup> with miners reporting that Dozos are the only armed groups found on gold sites.<sup>127</sup> Dozos are reportedly paid a fee for every gram extracted (FCFA250–500 per gram), as well as fixed fees for each well dug on site in some locations.<sup>128</sup>

Dozos have been closely associated with ASGM in Côte d'Ivoire since it began in earnest in the north of the country in 2002. During the political crisis between 2002–2011, gold mining and trade morphed into organized criminal operations. At this time, Dozos were associated with and regularly fought alongside the Forces Nouvelles (FN) rebel group and, later, the Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles, which was created in March 2011 by President Alassane Ouattara. The Dozo are accused of committing serious human rights abuses during this period, including arbitrary and deliberate killings and acts of torture and ill-treatment.<sup>129</sup> While the political-military conflict ended in 2011, ASGM has continued in the northern region and is the main economic activity for some communities.

Now widespread and ubiquitous in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Dozos are heavily involved in providing security at gold mine sites, appearing to enforce the will of the highest bidder and using violence to establish authority. Violent punishments are reportedly carried

out for theft, aggression or crime around and on gold panning sites, with repeat offenders reportedly summarily executed and then buried in the bushes. Offences include the refusal to pay taxes imposed by the land chief on gold mining activity and production. It is reported that in some cases, it is enough for a wealthy individual to make a paid complaint for the Dozos to act.<sup>130</sup> In some cases, Dozos have allegedly transformed into armed militias, which are funded by and report to certain political leaders, carrying out traditional security and defence missions devolved to the military, police and gendarmes.

Yet, there are also some in northern Côte d'Ivoire who assert that not all Dozos can be blamed for the bad actions of a few. In fact, there are reports of individuals falsely claiming to be Dozo members in order to extort miners and traders for payments. Dozo groups are trying to protect against this by enforcing the use of identity cards.<sup>131</sup>

Since 2021, Dozos have also been tasked with securing abandoned mine sites in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire following government initiatives to crack down on illicit mining in the region. This raises the possibility of Dozos themselves engaging in clandestine gold mining in the area, a risk that requires further investigation and monitoring to confirm or dispel.<sup>132</sup>

## When protection becomes deadly: The case of Dozo and Koglwéogo groups in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, Dozos and the Koglwéogo have become more involved in providing security at gold mine sites since the 2014 ousting of Compaoré. Local actors, such as mining committees and pit owners, collaborate directly with Dozos to ensure protection at the gold sites. Likewise, the Koglwéogo have become a key element of governance and security provision across the ASGM sector in areas they are active. In the Sahel, Centre-North and East regions, the Koglwéogo are employed by mine owners or committees as security forces at ASGM sites, carrying out security operations in the mines and making arrests.<sup>133</sup> The protection of gold sites in the current security environment in Burkina Faso can be deadly. The June 2020 attack on the Solhan gold mine targeted the headquarters of the VDP members responsible for protecting the site, following the arrest of two gold miners suspected of belonging to terrorist groups.<sup>134</sup>

Some Koglwéogo groups are suspected of being associated with private comptoirs seeking to retain control of the illicit gold trade in Burkina Faso.<sup>135</sup> The illicit seizure of gold sites has fuelled violence and conflict in some instances. For example, it is reported that in 2015, a Koglwéogo group in Soum province secured gold sites belonging to an official from the former ruling elite. This reportedly triggered a chain of events that would lead to conflict between the Koglwéogo and Oumy Boly, a future military leader of Ansar Al-Islam.<sup>136</sup> From 2016 to 2017 in Soum, Ansar Al-Islam fighters clashed violently with Koglwéogo groups for control of gold mining sites, particularly in the Kéréboulé region. Gold miners reportedly supported jihadists against the Koglwéogo, who had seized the Kéréboulé site in 2016.<sup>137</sup>

The expansion of the Koglwéogo in the south of Burkina Faso has been opposed by Dozo groups.<sup>138</sup> In the Hauts-Bassins region, for example, attempts since 2015 to set up Koglwéogo groups have provoked fierce resistance from Dozos, and occasional clashes, such as in Solenzo and Karankasso-Vigué.<sup>139</sup>

## Nascent security threats in West Africa and beyond

Southern Mali, southern Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire have not been plagued by the same levels of violence seen in other areas of Mali and Burkina Faso, but the regions are facing increasing security threats.

There has been an increase in jihadist activity in the Malian regions of Kayes and Sikasso since 2020, although activity is still low compared to that in the central and northern regions of the country.<sup>140</sup>



Since late 2018, there have also been reports of jihadists attempting to expand their presence and establish strongholds in the Hauts-Bassin, Cascades and Sud-Ouest regions of Burkina Faso.<sup>141</sup> Following a temporary lull in 2020, there has been an increase in attacks since the end of 2021. Economic hardship, food insecurity and competition over land and water resources have contributed to a parallel increase in armed criminality and intercommunal violence in the provinces. While the vast majority of those living in the area rely on subsistence farming, decreased rainfall due to climate change is making agriculture increasingly difficult. As such, the gold sector is an increasingly attractive and important livelihood option in the region.<sup>142</sup>

Additionally, on the Ivorian side of the border there has been a spate of attacks on military posts since 2020, including those located in Kafolo and Kolobougou. The government has strengthened its surveillance and eviction action, and efforts to combat illicit trafficking and gold panning, particularly in the areas of Téhini, Doropo, Bouna and the Comoé National Park.<sup>143</sup> While the park is host to a wide range of flora and fauna, it is also known to possess significant gold reserves.<sup>144</sup>

Although jihadist groups are increasingly operating across the regions highlighted, there are very limited reports, which require verification, of them controlling mine sites or deriving notable profits from the gold sector in these areas. Two reasons given for the difficulty jihadist have faced with establishing bases in the southern parts of Mali and Burkina Faso is lower support from local populations, and the presence of Dozos.<sup>145</sup> If ASGM operations can carry on working, there is little incentive for miners and local communities to ally themselves with jihadists, as this could only cause them trouble. This highlights the important role the gold sector and access to mine sites play in allaying or fuelling community and individual grievances. Government authorities must tread carefully when it comes to land and mineral rights to avoid fuelling grievances.

ASGM and mining rights must be at the centre of stabilization programming in these regions. This is key to marginalizing the worst and most harmful criminal offenders, while not unintentionally increasing barriers to entry to the formal sector for informal actors.<sup>146</sup> 'Blood gold' narratives must be avoided, especially when there is no current evidence of conflict actors controlling gold sites or profiting from the gold sector. Rather, policymakers ought to strongly consider the implications for security and other dimensions of fragility in order to avoid exacerbating community grievances and an already tenuous security situation. This will benefit from putting in place conflict de-escalation and resolution mechanisms and building community resilience.<sup>147</sup>

## CASE STUDY

### The Tibesti region, northern Chad

The Tibesti region in northern Chad is also heavily impacted by the confluence of gold, conflict and criminality. Kouri Bougoudi, the largest goldfield in the Tibesti region, experiences regular outbreaks of violence due to deep-rooted sources of tensions between ethnic groups, political grievances and competition over resources. The Tibesti gold sector is an increasing security threat due to the Libya-based Chadian rebels who share community and political ties with groups involved in gold mining, and a concentration of armed criminal actors in the area. However, gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi also provides essential livelihoods and economic opportunities for local populations in an otherwise marginal and impoverished region.<sup>148</sup>

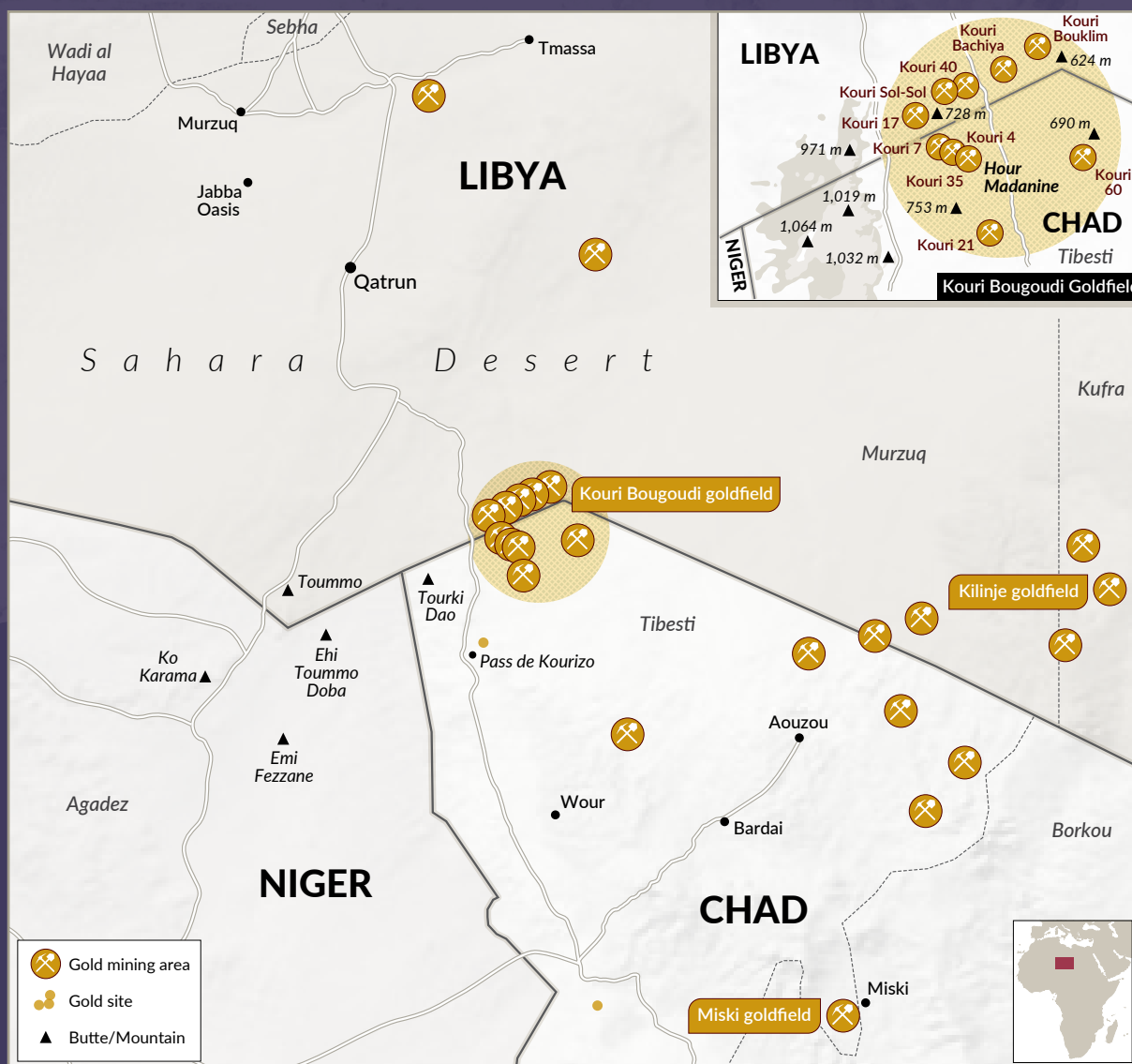
In turn, the evolution of events in the Tibesti region underscores several key themes: government policy fuelling grievances and increasing fragility, the importance of gold as a local livelihood, the emergence of self-defence groups and the strengthening of regional organized crime networks.

#### 2012: The onset of instability

Following news of gold finds in mid-2012, mass migration to the Tibesti region triggered violent tensions between the local Tebu communities and gold miners coming from outside the region.<sup>149</sup> The Tebu felt themselves to be the victims of an invasion following mass migration to the area, and perceived the passive attitude of the authorities as a sign of complicity with the gold miners. Distrust was heightened by the fact that many of the newly arrived gold miners belonged to the ethnic group of then-president Idriss Déby, exacerbating pre-existing intercommunal tensions and stoking local hostility to the Chadian authorities.<sup>150</sup>

In 2018, a self-defence committee formed to represent locals in Miski, asserting that locals would continue fighting to stop the government from seizing what they saw as their gold.<sup>151</sup> In response, the Chadian state carried out air strikes and blocked access to the area. As a result, Miski experienced heavy clashes that lasted until late 2019, when an agreement was signed to ensure a more consensual exploitation of gold resources. However, in September 2020 the self-defence committee of Miski withdrew from the agreement and in October 2020, the Chadian government ordered the closure of illegal gold mining operations and the eviction of illegal gold miners.<sup>152</sup>

Conflict financing also contributes to instability. The Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT) and Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR) currently constitute the main Chadian rebel groups. These rebel groups have strong ties with artisanal gold mining, as well as human trafficking and drugs and arms trafficking in the wider region.<sup>153</sup> FACT, composed largely of Tebu members, has mostly been based in Libya since it was established in 2016.<sup>154</sup> In April 2021, FACT entered Chad through its northern border with Libya and carried out the most serious rebel incursion into the country since 2008. FACT fighters took control of key towns in the area, with ensuing clashes resulting in the death of President Déby.<sup>155</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Gold mining areas in northern Chad.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Risk Bulletin 2, November 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/weaobs-risk-bulletin-2/>

In May 2022, the Chadian government reported that fighting between miners had left around 100 people dead, but details around the event remain murky. In response, the state has suspended all gold mining activities in Kouri Bougoudi.<sup>156</sup>

The large number of economically vulnerable young men also creates ample opportunity for armed groups to recruit new members. Although, at the same time, the gold sector is also providing livelihoods to young men who might otherwise be tempted to join armed groups or more violent forms of criminal activity. FACT and the CCMSR have adopted a system of 'committee' (*lajna* in Arabic) to collect funds and recruit new fighters at gold sites. These trips are usually informed by contacts in the goldfields who scout potential recruits and gauge interest. Once there are enough interested recruits, committee members travel to goldfields across the Sahel-Sahara, as far as Tchibarakatene and Djado in Niger, to interview potential recruits. They then transport enrolled members back to southern Libya (typically Sebha or Jufra).<sup>157</sup>



## Criminal convergence

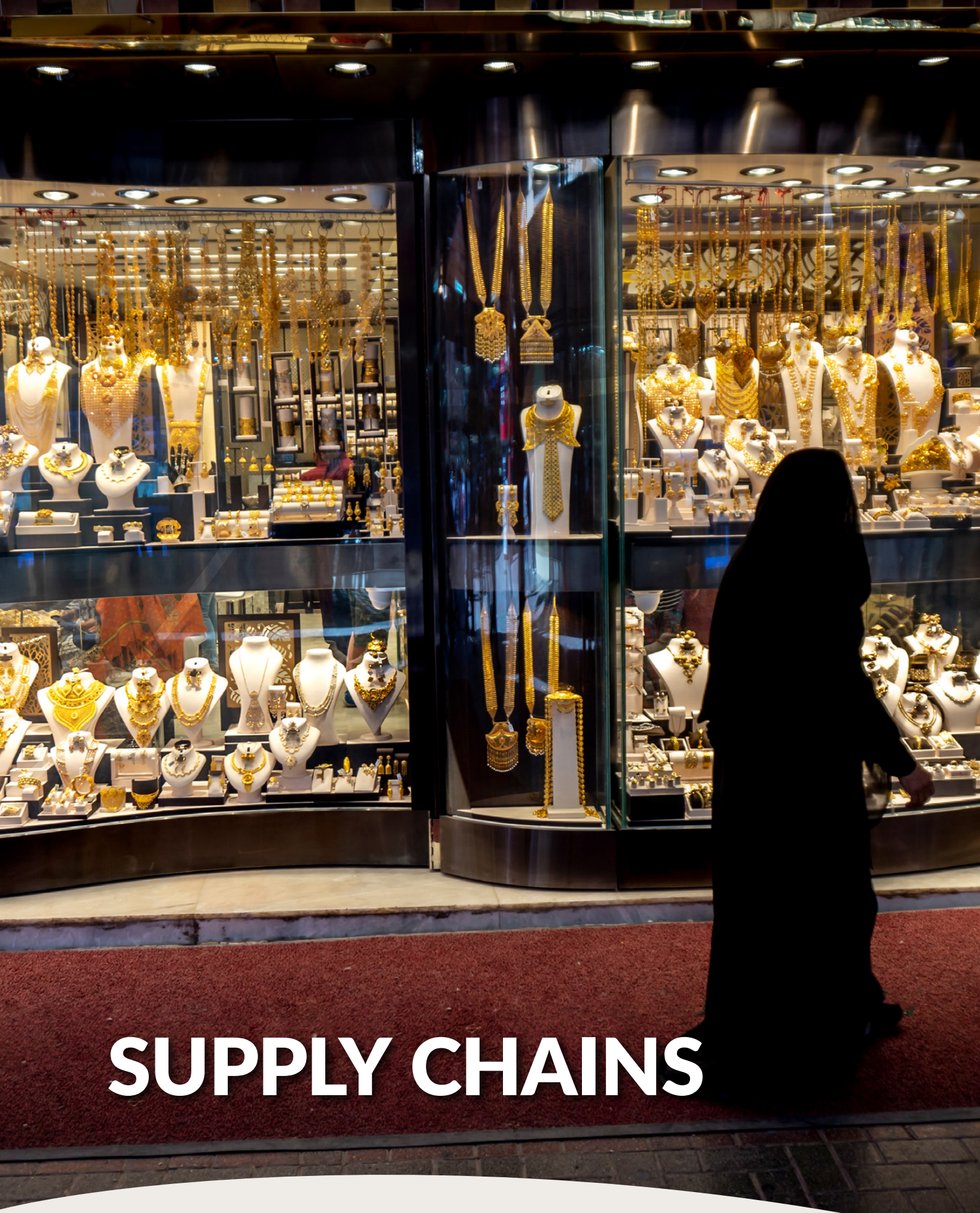
Kouri Bougoudi is a major regional hub for poly-criminal armed groups involved in the smuggling of fuel and food staples, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and armed banditry. Demand for weapons among criminal networks and the gold mining community has grown at the goldfield in response to rising insecurity and criminality.<sup>158</sup> The marked increase in out-of-work Chadian fighters, due to the Libyan peace process, has further heightened insecurity in the Sahel. Seeking out new revenue streams or to solidify existing ones, Chadian fighters are increasingly targeting criminal economies and flows in the region, including gold supply chains, which over time could result in the gradual shift of the epicentre of organized crime from southern Libya to the Tibesti region.<sup>159</sup>

Kouri Bougoudi is also a major human smuggling transit point, with migrants travelling to northern Chad in search of economic opportunities at the goldfields before continuing their journey to Libya or Europe.<sup>160</sup> A lack of regulation or law enforcement in the Kouri Bougoudi goldfields puts migrants, particularly those who travel on credit, at great risk of human trafficking and forced labour. Many migrant smugglers have taken on the role of mine recruiters across the country, offering prospective miners the option to travel on credit. The smugglers are then paid by the gold site owners, who employ the miners as indentured labour, requiring miners to repay transport costs before they can start earning a wage. Such labour agreements are often highly exploitative, with workers being exchanged between gold site owners.<sup>161</sup>

## Gold flows from Tibesti


Gold from the Tibesti region is either transported south to N'Djamena or north to Libya. In Libya, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces maintain control over the primary gold trading towns. By 2017, Qatrun in southern Libya had overtaken Sabha as the largest gold trading hub, with traders from Benghazi, Tripoli and Dubai present. Previous research indicated the UAE was the ultimate destination for gold flows from the Tibesti region.<sup>162</sup> In 2016, the UAE imported 81 tonnes of gold from Libya, making it the largest source of African gold that year. While exports have decreased since then, with the UAE only declaring official gold imports of 2.4 tonnes in 2021. These trade figures are likely to include gold mined in Kouri Bougoudi.<sup>163</sup> More recent trade data indicates gold is also flowing from Libya to Turkey, which now may be a primary destination.<sup>164</sup> Gold is also used as currency on the goldfield to purchase essential supplies, including food, water and equipment, or illicit commodities such as drugs and weapons.<sup>165</sup>





# SUPPLY CHAINS

A gold shop in Dubai. The city is a popular destination market for gold mined in West Africa. © berni0004shutterstock

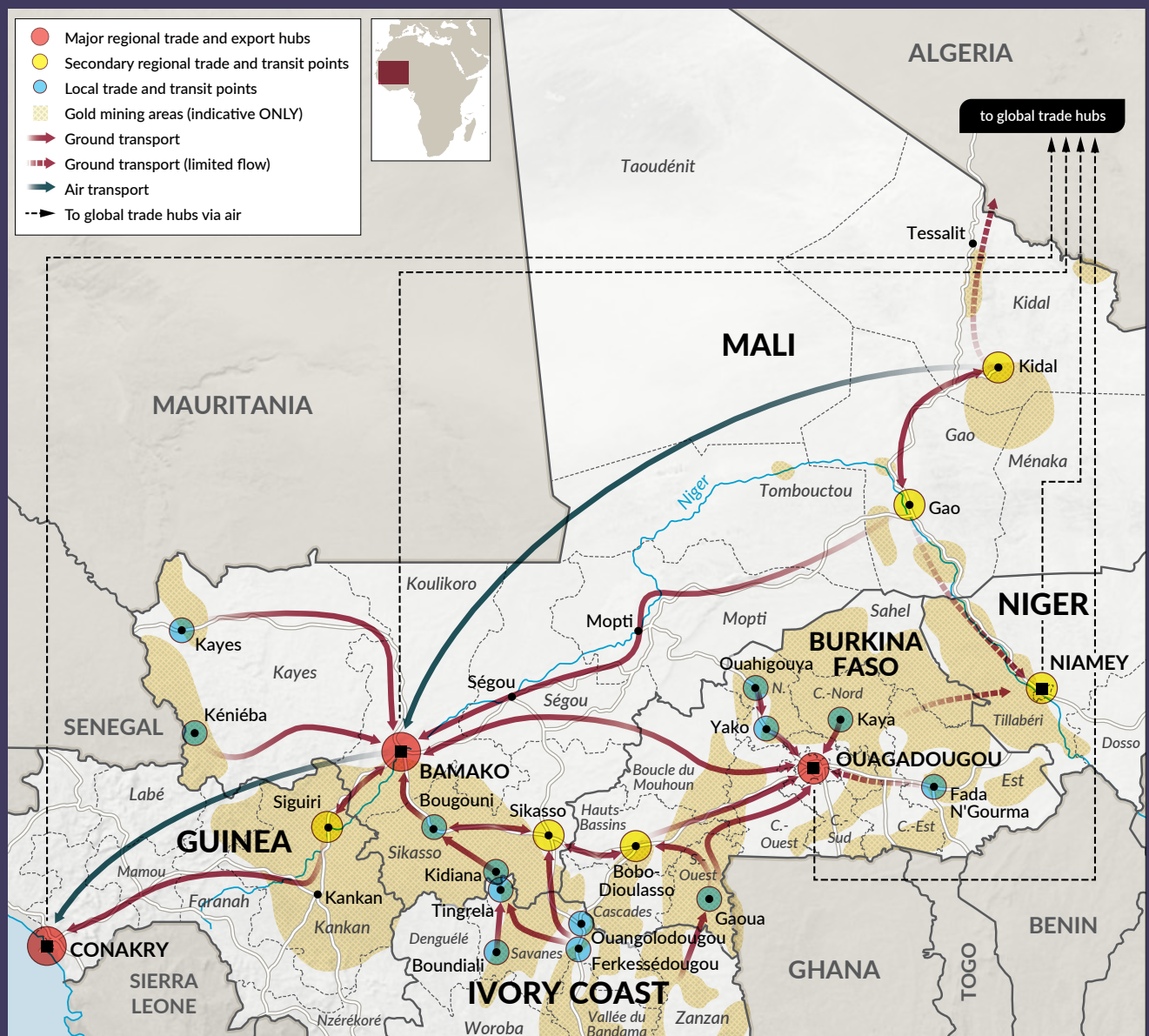


**T**ransnational organized crime networks play a critical role in the downward spiral of fragility, insecurity and conflict in gold production regions. The power players who are the most influential and benefit the most from the illicit gold markets are often based in the regional trade and export hubs, far from mine sites impacted by conflict. While gold supply chains may follow numerous routes from mine sites across West Africa, gold increasingly consolidates near regional export hubs. The gold trade binds together interests at the centre of the state with those in the geographic and governmental periphery. Thus, it is important to map the supply chains, financial flows and networks that link mine sites to regional transit and trade hubs in order to identify pressure points where interventions for curbing criminality and conflict may be most effective.

## **Regional hubs: Bamako and Conakry**

Bamako is a dominant regional hub that has historically offered more favourable gold export terms than its neighbours, attracting gold mined domestically as well as from neighbouring countries.<sup>166</sup> Bamako is also home to a significant gold market, with buyers who are wealthy and possess high levels of liquidity (cash on hand). Bamako reportedly hosts nearly 140 *comptoirs*, but very few are formally registered, facilitating the laundering of gold into global supply chains. Gold prices in Mali are reported to be equal or above those offered elsewhere in West Africa.



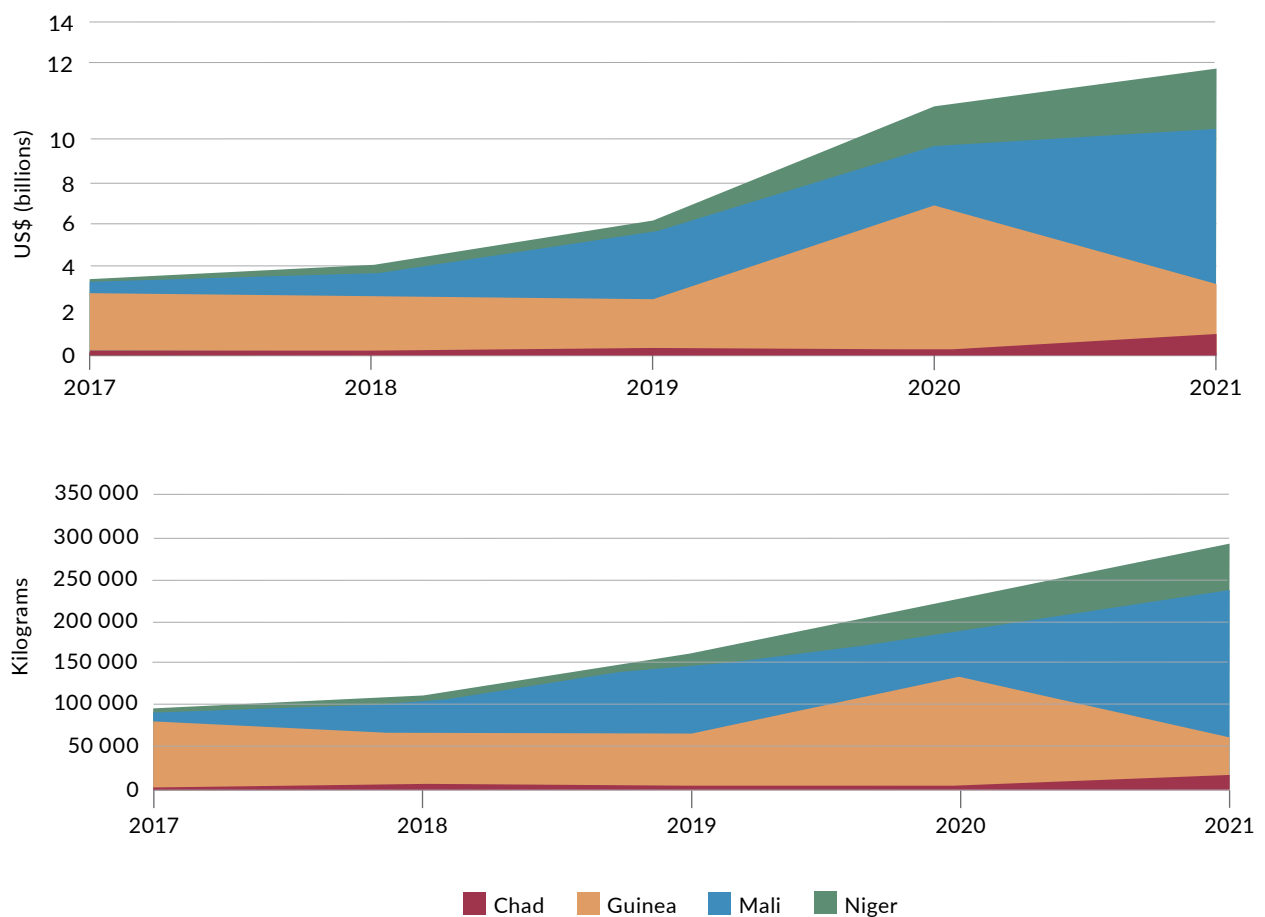


**FIGURE 6** Gold supply chains in West Africa.

There are also reports of significant gold flows between Mali and Guinea. Flows to Guinea are driven by demand from buyers in Conakry who order large quantities of gold from their Malian counterparts. Favourable currency and tax policies also make Guinea an attractive export destination – Guinea levies a 0% tax on gold exports. However, currency differences also fuel gold flows in the opposite direction. Guinean traders who want to take advantage of foreign exchange rates may bring their gold to Bamako and sell it to the gold traders for US dollars.<sup>167</sup> Before returning to Guinea, they exchange the US dollars for CFA francs, and then for Guinean francs, making a small profit on each exchange. Gold mined in eastern Guinea is also reportedly transported to Bamako for sale due to its proximity – a relatively easy drive of three to four hours from local trade hubs such as Siguiri.<sup>168</sup>

From Bamako, most gold is reportedly trafficked to Dubai. Formal export procedures require gold traders to declare gold exports to customs authorities. However, very few traders declare the full amount of gold exports, significantly under-valuing gold exports to avoid taxes. A common practice is for gold buyers to use gold profits to buy goods in Dubai, which they then import to Mali. This practice enables traders to avoid the risks of travelling with cash, repatriation procedures and losses on currency exchanges, while creating an additional income opportunity.<sup>169</sup>

The recent political upheavals in Mali appear to have had little impact on gold smuggling. Despite the change in government and replacement of customs officials, corruption is still facilitating gold smuggling out of Bamako airport. Multiple airlines are still servicing Bamako, providing transport options to Dubai, as well as direct flights to Turkey, another suspected destination for illicit gold flows. According to a security agent, some known gold traders make regular fortnightly trips with gold destined for Dubai.<sup>170</sup>



**FIGURE 7** UAE gold imports from West Africa, 2011–2020 (by value and weight).

SOURCE: UN Comtrade

## Gold pricing

Gold prices at mine sites across Mali and Burkina Faso are relatively high, generally 80–95% of the world spot price. As of February 2022, gold prices in northern Côte d'Ivoire (FCFA15 000 per gram) were significantly lower than those in Mali (FCFA30 000–45 000 per gram), which drives illicit gold flows from the country to Bamako. This makes it difficult for formal gold buyers to compete with the illicit market. For example, a Burkinabé gold buyer reported that the price of gold in the local market was FCFA35 000 per gram, while ANEEMAS offered a price of FCFA25 000 per gram. However, the actual price paid for gold may be far lower because it is widely reported that buyers rig weighting scales or underestimate gold purity. For example, buyers might show a gold nugget weighs 6 grams when it actually weighs 8 grams, or estimate purity at 20 carats when it is actually 22 carats.



© De Agostini/Getty Images

## Mali

Gold mined in the Kidal and Gao regions is consolidated by local traders or large miners who buy gold from smaller mining operations before transporting it to Bamako or, to a lesser extent, overland to Niger and Burkina Faso.<sup>171</sup> While gold can be moved via road, traders avoid the overland route because of the danger presented by armed groups on the road. In the absence of a regular flight from Kidal to Bamako, gold collectors utilize the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali plane to transport gold.<sup>172</sup> At times, transporters will not be told they are carrying gold but are simply entrusted with delivering a parcel to take to a specific individual in Bamako.<sup>173</sup>

Gold mined in southern Mali (i.e. Sikasso, Koulikoro, Kayes) is transported via motor-bikes, public transport or personal vehicles towards Bamako, where it is sold to gold traders. Gold is sold either to local licensed collectors or to other intermediary collectors or jewellers. Some traders are financed by private or foreign operators.

Some gold is also smuggled to Burkina Faso. For example, in the Sikasso and Kenieba regions, there are significant gold flows smuggled to Burkina Faso due to the heavy presence of Burkinabé investors in the area. These gold flows are consolidated in Ouagadougou and, to a lesser extent, Bobo-Dioulasso before they are smuggled to Mali or directly out of Ouagadougou off the continent.<sup>174</sup>

There are also reports of large comptoirs working directly with refiners in Dubai to process and sell gold.



## Burkina Faso

Ouagadougou is the primary destination for gold flows from Burkina Faso, with Bobo-Dioulasso serving as a secondary gold hub. In Ouagadougou, gold will be melted into bars before it is smuggled either directly out of Burkina Faso or via Mali. There are also limited reports of gold being smuggled via Togo, but this flow seems to have largely subsided. Most gold from Burkina Faso is destined for Dubai. The official figures for gold exports from Burkina Faso to the UAE, which are miniscule compared to the reported ASGM gold production estimates, suggests that most ASGM gold produced in Burkina Faso is smuggled out of the country.

Burkina Faso gold flows are heavily dictated by financing arrangements, with ASGM investments premised on the condition gold miners are required to sell gold to financiers. Financing arrangements can stretch across broad geographic distances and across borders. For example, it was reported that buyers in the northern city of Ouagadougou may finance mining operations near Bobo-Dioulasso, in the south of the country. Burkinabé gold buyers are also reported to be financing operations in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal. Burkinabé gold miners and buyers transport their gold to Bobo-Dioulasso or Ouagadougou to fulfil financing agreements with larger, powerful gold traders.<sup>175</sup> Gold is then moved out via regional hubs, either back through Mali via Bamako or directly out of Ouagadougou.

The disruption of gold mining and gold supply chains due to insecurity and violence within Burkina Faso has driven Burkinabé financiers to increasingly look to neighbouring states to meet demand for gold feedstock. Instability in Burkina Faso is also pushing some Burkinabé artisanal miners to seek work at ASGM sites outside the country, and then to bring gold back to Burkina Faso.

## Côte d'Ivoire

Gold from northern Côte d'Ivoire flows to Mali and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso. Most of the gold mined in the Tortiya, Boundiali, Tengrela and Ouangolodougou areas is taken to Bamako.<sup>176</sup> The gold is mainly trafficked through the Kadiana-Bougouni-Bamako route.


At 45–60% of the world spot price, gold prices offered in northern Côte d'Ivoire are significantly lower than those offered in Mali and Burkina Faso. This is a major driver of gold smuggling to Mali, with Malian buyers in the region rushing to take advantage of the favourable profit margins.<sup>177</sup> Malian, Guinean and Burkinabé traders have reportedly established gold purchasing counters in local towns where, as of February 2022, they were buying gold at FCFA15 000 per gram. They are then able to sell the gold for FCFA 30 000 per gram to Malian gold buyers, who will take the gold to Bamako and sell it for FCFA45 000. Self-financed miners will also reportedly take gold to Mali to take advantage of the higher prices. Once the gold is sold, the money is often repatriated via mobile transfers.

Although Burkinabé have a large presence in northern Côte d'Ivoire, operating as financiers and miners, there are mixed reports about whether they are sending their gold to Burkina Faso or straight to Bamako. Gold mined in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire is reported primarily sold in Burkina Faso, with a smaller portion transported directly to Mali.<sup>178</sup>



# INSTRUMENT OF PEACE

Panning for gold in Burkina Faso. © Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images



**D**iscussions about the relationship between gold and conflict often overlook the role of the gold sector as an instrument of peace. A strong, sustainable and responsible ASGM sector has the potential to reduce regional fragility across all dimensions: political, economic, environmental, social and security.

ASGM is a source of critical livelihoods for many rural West African populations, providing a means of survival and hope for many people, including IDPs. West African states face increasing environmental and social pressures. For example, climate change and population growth are factors that contribute to land use conflict between agriculturalists and pastoralists because they reduce the space available for livestock and complicate transhumance migration routes.<sup>179</sup> As a result, the importance of the gold sector as an economic safety net for vast segments of West African rural populations is only expected to increase, creating an opportunity for the sector to act as an instrument of peace.

There are examples of the ASGM sector contributing to decreased rates of violence and security risks across West Africa. ASGM is an attractive income opportunity, offering an alternative option for individuals who may otherwise engage in crime or armed violence. For example, in the Kidal region, some members of armed groups such as the CMA and Plateforme have laid down their arms to devote themselves to gold mining.<sup>180</sup> In northern Côte d'Ivoire, community members and those working in the gold sector report that an increasing number of ex-bandits are now working in the ASGM sector as gold washers.<sup>181</sup> In Chad, where formal economic opportunities are scarce, the gold sector is reported to not only provide direct employment, but also increase the number of jobs in ancillary economies.<sup>182</sup>

Conversely, removing gold as a livelihood can drive a spike in other, more violent, illicit economies. For example, after the government officially closed the Djado Plateau in 2017, banditry intensified across areas of northern Niger, with reports that highway bandits who had been mining for gold had returned to banditry.<sup>183</sup>



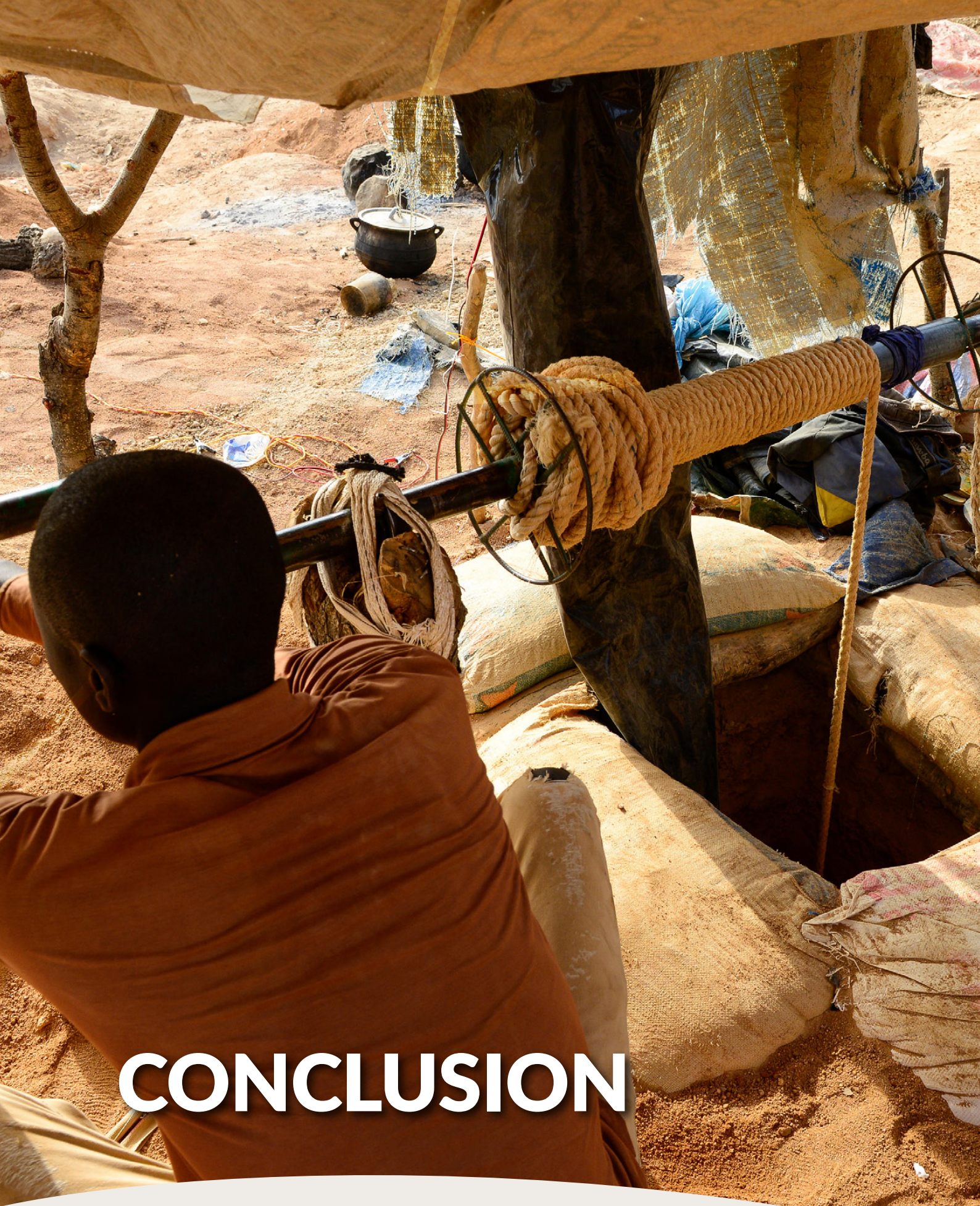
ASGM is also providing a critical livelihood for Burkinabé IDPs. According to the UN, more than 1.5 million people have been forced from their homes, often fleeing with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Most of the displacement has occurred in the Sahel, Centre-Nord and Est regions.<sup>184</sup> IDPs fleeing violence have settled in ASGM communities in other parts of Burkina Faso and neighbouring states.<sup>185</sup> As of December 2021, it was reported that in northern regional capitals, 80 out of every 100 IDPs were engaged in the ASGM sector in some form.<sup>186</sup> Burkinabé IDPs have also sought refuge in Côte d'Ivoire and are reported to be working in ASGM sites there.<sup>187</sup> Beyond providing a means of survival, ASGM is described as giving IDPs a source of meaning and hope for the future where little other exists.<sup>188</sup> The importance of the ASGM sector in this regard cannot be understated.

The ASGM sector can also be incorporated into disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, the willingness of some former rebels to work in the gold sector appears to have facilitated the DDR process there.<sup>189</sup> In contrast, in the Tibesti region of northern Chad there has been a failure to recognize the potential of the ASGM sector as a tool for reintegrating Chadian rebels who previously fought as mercenaries in Libya's civil war.<sup>190</sup> This is a missed opportunity to capitalize on existing economic structures. Moving forward, a credible and inclusive DDR programme paired with the regularization of gold sector could help to demobilize armed groups, prevent further recruitment, and provide alternative, legal livelihoods for individuals who might otherwise turn to organized crime.<sup>191</sup>



Burkinabé IDPs in a shelter in Tougbo, Côte d'Ivoire. © Sia Kambou/AFP via Getty Images






# CONCLUSION

An artisanal gold mining camp in Burkina Faso. © Joerg Boethling/Alamy Stock Photo





**T**he relationship between gold and conflict in West Africa is far more complex than the narrative of ‘blood minerals’ suggests, stretching far beyond mine sites both in time and space. Criminal networks play an important role in this relationship, increasing regional fragility and driving insecurity risks. Yet, the gold sector is also an important source of livelihoods across the region that will only become more critical as environmental and social pressures increase. Thus, it is critical to also recognize ASGM’s potential as an instrument of peace. These dynamics create a sector where survival, conflict and criminality are closely intertwined. As such, interventions that aim to mitigate the role of gold in fuelling conflict must go beyond conflict financing and account for the long-term trajectories of local and regional political economies.

Criminal networks undermine efforts to establish responsible practices, support development and address security risks. While criminal networks can provide the financing and supply chains necessary for the gold sector to function as a livelihood activity, their presence ultimately undermines the development potential of the ASGM sector and increases fragility, insecurity and conflict. Thus, effective responses also need to address transnational criminal networks, targeting bottlenecks and influential players in gold supply chains, as well as in other related illicit financial flows.

To sufficiently respond to these different factors, multi-pronged approaches are recommended, both in areas currently impacted by open conflict and in those facing nascent threats and increasing levels of fragility.<sup>192</sup>

## **Recommendations**

### **Adopt mining policies that support ASGM development**

Mineral policies that have disparate impacts on the ASGM sector, including crackdowns and limitations on land and mineral access, have proven to increase fragility and the risks of insecurity and conflict. Rather, mineral policies must strike a balance between better regulation and improved security of the gold sector, while ensuring there are feasible pathways for ASGM miners to legally operate and for ASGM to deliver economic benefits for communities.



This requires national frameworks that recognize ASGM as a legitimate economic activity, provide the legal and regulatory mechanisms for it to operate successfully, and provide developmental support. To enable and encourage stakeholders in the ASGM sector to engage with the formal economy, bureaucratic hurdles must be reduced as much as possible. Miners and traders also need clear incentives to engage with the formal sector, both in the immediate and longer term. Furthermore, increased direct engagement with ASGM stakeholders is needed to build the relationships necessary for greater uptake.

Tensions between industrial mining operations and ASGM will also need to be addressed. There is a pressing need to identify realistic and practical solutions that allow for peaceful coexistence. The complex and long-term task of addressing regulatory frameworks for land rights in many areas of West Africa is a key element of this. In parallel, industrial mining operations must move beyond security approaches to build a relationship with the ASGM sector. Legal pathways for coexistence are also needed.

### **Consider the role of identity militias and self-defence groups security strategies**

The prominent and growing role of self-defence groups and identity militias in the gold–conflict relationship is creating challenges that need to be closely monitored. The groups can play a positive role, maintaining peace and filling security vacuums left by the state. However, acting as security providers can significantly increase safety risks for members, making them targets of jihadists and other conflict groups. This is especially the case when groups are formally identified in security strategies, but do not receive adequate training, equipment or support. On the other hand, when identity and self-defence groups become politicized, engage in violent vigilantism, or evolve into mafia-like groups and violent entrepreneurs, they can increase fragility and fuel insecurity.<sup>193</sup> Thus, despite their value to state security strategies in the short term, militias may ultimately undermine rule of law and state legitimacy when states legalize or legitimize groups without protecting human rights or responding to criminality.<sup>194</sup> As such, policy responses and security interventions should be informed by the role of self-defence groups and identity militias in state security strategies and the gold sector. These are complex and multifaceted dynamics that need to be considered on a local level, as the character and actions of groups significantly vary.

### **Focus enforcement efforts on bottlenecks and influential actors in illicit gold supply chains**

Addressing criminality and widespread impunity in the gold trade is necessary to combat illicit gold flows and conflict financing. To have the greatest impact and avoid unintended harms, it is necessary to target the most harmful actors and to provide alternatives to informal actors who may rely on criminal actors for financing or purchasing gold. Thus, more resources must be dedicated to targeting key actors, financial flows and transit points in illicit gold markets. Tailored responses and

effective policing at bottleneck points in supply chains, such as trade and transit hubs and international airports, will have a greater impact on illicit gold and financial flows.

Due to the transnational nature of gold supply chains, and the high likelihood that high-level actors will conduct activities and have assets in various jurisdictions, increased coordination across states linked by gold supply chains are also needed. Outside of West Africa, international gold trade hubs and key trade partners could increase surveillance and regulation on gold imports, further increasing pressure on illicit supply chains.

## **Encourage 'lean-in' due diligence in sourcing gold**

Many current standards, guidelines and regulations in the mineral sector encourage private sector actors to act responsibly in sourcing gold from ASGM, including in conflict and high-risk areas. These 'lean in' due diligence practices encourage gold buyers to support good practices, as opposed to cutting off supply chains as part of de-risking strategies.<sup>195</sup> To make progress on these efforts, greater engagement with ASGM stakeholders – both miners and gold traders – is needed to assess the feasibility of requirements, the best practices for implementation and the ways to positive outcomes for source communities. If certification regimes are overly complex or set unattainable standards for many ASGM stakeholders, it will prevent them from engaging with the formal sector and push them to illicit gold markets, increasing fragility and conflict risks.

NGOs and development organizations can also support ASGM stakeholders to better understand responsible sourcing requirements and meet standards. In addition, they can assist by conducting research on supply chains, political economies and impacts of responsible sourcing standards on the sector and local communities, as well as engaging in outreach that aids in shifting public perceptions about the sector and the risks of engagement versus non-engagement.

## **Include the gold sector in security and peace strategies**

The gold sector should be included in security strategies and peace operations, both as an economic resiliency strategy for IDPs, and as part of DDR processes. Including the gold sector can simultaneously address conflict drivers and the impacts of conflict on the gold sector, while supporting sustainable economic and social opportunities. By recognizing ASGM as a critical livelihood and economic driver – rather than just a source of conflict financing – local, national and international stakeholders will be better positioned to incorporate gold into security and stabilization strategies. Dealing with the involvement of conflict actors (both state and non-state) requires discussions about the promotion of alternative livelihoods and reconciliation, as well as access to gold deposits and rents. Importantly, efforts must include training and capacity support for local communities and ex-combatants. This also requires strong situational awareness of networks, activities and power dynamics.



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