



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

CAR THIEVES OF THE SAHEL

**Dynamics of the stolen
vehicle trade**

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CONTENTS

- Executive summary..... 2**
 - Background..... 3
 - Study scope..... 4
 - Methodology..... 5

- On the road in the central Sahel: The cars and their origins 6**

- The regional nuances of car theft..... 9**
 - Urban centres in state-controlled areas..... 9
 - Urban centres with limited or no state presence..... 12
 - Rural areas with limited or no state presence..... 13

- Next stop: Border hubs and markets..... 14**
 - Border issues 14
 - Market types 15

- Vehicle thieves of the Sahel..... 19**
 - Bandits and carjackers in contested spaces 19
 - Car launderers..... 21
 - Signatory armed groups..... 21
 - Sellers affiliated to signatory groups 22

- The role of extremist groups 24**
 - JNIM 25
 - Islamic State Sahel Province..... 28

- Conclusion and policy implications..... 30**
 - Recommendations 31

- Notes 32



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2022, two Nigerian citizens were arrested in Niamey, Niger, while trying to drive back to Nigeria in a stolen Toyota Corolla. The Corolla had a Nigerian licence plate, but police discovered that the car had recently been stolen from a Nigerian police officer. Fake military identification cards, and another Nigerian licence plate, were found in the car. The men were posing as Nigerian military officers. One had in fact been a former officer but was discharged in 2017 for desertion, and the other worked for Nigeria's correctional service. After an investigation, it transpired that the men had left Nigeria three days before the arrest, and they had driven to Niamey in a stolen Toyota Hilux. The car, stolen in Nigeria, was resold in Niamey with the assistance of a Nigerian accomplice who was later arrested. It appears that this accomplice was also involved in the theft and resale of motorbikes, and possibly of other illicit commodities such as weapons. He was found with three AK-47 rifles and 151 cartridges, along with a stolen motorbike, other motorbike parts and three wristwatches.¹

This example showcases many of the dynamics of car theft in the central Sahel region. In particular, it shows how borders are exploited by car thieves to evade law enforcement. Here, the central Sahel refers to Mali, Burkina Faso and the western part of Niger, specifically the provinces of Tillabéri and Tahoua. In this instance, cross-border cooperation between security services led to an arrest. However, car theft networks realize this is still rare, and so persist with cross-border activities to mitigate risks of detection. Given that cars are in demand and easy to resell, and can be used as a mode of transporting other goods, actors operating in the vehicle theft market often diversify across other illicit economies. Individuals with low-level official contacts, or histories of working with the state, may exploit their knowledge and contacts to produce counterfeit paperwork.

However, the implications of the stolen vehicle trade in the central Sahel are more significant than a single case may suggest. The 2012 crisis in northern Mali, its aftermath and the regional spread in the ensuing decade have contributed to ongoing violence in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and increasingly at the northern edges of West African coastal nations. Although road users in the central Sahel endured criminal behaviour and insecurity long before the onset of the present conflict, much of the current insecurity on the roads of the central Sahel is symptomatic of the conflict that has developed over the past decade. Vehicle theft is only one aspect of the insecurity experienced on roads. Robberies of passengers and their belongings, violent interrogations, abductions or killings by armed groups, as well as severe road accidents, are all unfortunately commonplace.



A second-hand car market in Cotonou, Benin, one of the key entry points for cars shipped from Europe.

Photo: Social media

Background

There are several reasons why the stolen vehicle ecosystem of the central Sahel merits better understanding and analysis. All states depend on a functioning road system to keep their economies and public services functioning, and to meet the basic needs of the population. By consequence, insurgency groups and non-state armed actors who want to counter state influence focus significant efforts on roads: destabilizing the roads and discouraging their use through attacks on road users; controlling or inhibiting access to areas through control of roads; taking the supplies they need or want from road users; or levying taxes on road users and the goods they transport.² For example, the Islamic State West Africa Province in Nigeria and Cameroon has selectively disrupted, taxed and exploited roads key to the economic activity that sustains many of the smaller and medium-sized cities in the Lake Chad region.³

The reliance of all non-state armed groups on vehicles, and the fuel that powers them, has drawn attention to the often-illicit supply chains that underpin their operations. For certain conflict actors, stolen vehicles are key to their mobility. Elsewhere in Sahelian West Africa, the stolen vehicle economy is known to have been important to armed group financing, for instance in the border region of Libya and Chad.⁴

As well as being an important sector of the central Sahel's illicit and criminal economy, vehicle crime is one of the ways in which residents most often experience instability at the hands of bandits, organized criminals and armed groups. Both cars and motorbikes are key to many residents' livelihoods, particularly for workers in the informal economy, and the theft of these vehicles has profound economic consequences.

This report aims to examine the theft and the circulation of stolen cars within the central Sahel, with a particular focus on the tri-border area of the three countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (also known as the Liptako-Gourma region). However, the report will also attempt to place this ecosystem of car theft and circulation in the context of the wider regional, and global, trafficking of cars.

Study scope

This report examines an overlapping set of processes, which are collectively described as an 'ecosystem'. This is for three reasons. Firstly, the theft, movement and (re)sale of stolen cars involves many different actors engaging in many different practices. Secondly, the trade in stolen cars intersects with other illicit and conflict economies. Thirdly, it is not just different actors but different processes at work in the circulation of stolen cars. For instance, if reselling whole stolen cars becomes too complicated, they can be broken up and sold as detached parts, which may even increase the net value of the vehicle. In essence, the report describes a disjointed, but often overlapping set of phenomena, which are highly variable and subject to regular changes.

The report argues that borders are critical to understanding the trade and circulation of stolen cars in the Sahel. Both sellers and potential buyers consider the risks associated with driving a stolen car. West African states, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, generally have the tools to identify whether a car has been stolen – that is, should officials choose to inspect it and investigate to the extent necessary, with the full range of resources at a country's disposal. In practice, the likelihood of this happening varies substantially between areas. Sellers therefore frequently resell cars across the nearest national border. The net result is that stolen cars are being swapped between countries, even if in practice it appears as a series of disjointed transactions, rather than systematic exchange.

Armed groups in the central Sahel are important actors in the stolen vehicle ecosystem. The most organized, largest scale operations appear to be run by criminal networks closely connected to northern Mali's signatory armed groups. These groups were party to the 2015 Algiers Accord, which effectively froze the secessionist conflict in northern Mali, although recent tensions risk undoing this freeze. The coalitions of signatory groups remain the most influential armed actors in northern Mali, while the Malian state has very little presence or authority in the area. This has allowed the groups and their connections to build up durable, structured transnational illicit trades, with established markets. As armed groups push state officials out of large areas of the central Sahel, it also becomes easier to keep a stolen car circulating in the same country that it was stolen in. As long as the car remains in areas with a very limited or non-existent state presence, the driver is unlikely to face any penalty.

Violent, extremist non-state armed groups – in particular Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) – play important roles in the ecosystem. JNIM and ISSP appear to have slightly different approaches to car theft and the use of stolen cars, although these distinctions should be treated with caution. Gathering evidence on their role in the stolen cars market, and how they acquire cars more broadly, is extremely difficult and highly sensitive, and many unknowns remain.

The tendency of armed groups to steal certain types of vehicles has had serious impacts on humanitarian aid, healthcare and commercial activity in the central Sahel. Humanitarian vehicles and district ambulances are desirable in the eyes of armed groups, since they are durable, high-quality four-wheel drives. Their theft has not only deprived the region of important resources, but – in the case of some humanitarian agencies – forced an uncomfortable relationship with local car rental businesses that appear to be profiting from instability.

Vehicle theft and trade is a difficult area for making realistic policy prescriptions, particularly in light of the severe instability in the region and the resource constraints of the Sahelian governments. Law enforcement has an important role to play in tackling this problem, but it is important that these efforts do not lose sight of civilians, their need for vehicles in their daily lives and the financial constraints they face.

This report will be followed by a separate publication that focuses on motorbike theft, and the use of motorbikes by armed extremist groups, to provide a more holistic assessment of the illicit economy of vehicles.

Methodology

This project is based on field research conducted in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between July and September 2022. The fieldwork consisted of a mix of semi-structured and unstructured interviews with over 65 stakeholders, and two focus groups. Of these, 20 interviews were conducted in Niger (in Niamey, Tillabéri and Birnin Konni), 15 in Mali (in Gao and Timbuktu), 19 interviews in Burkina Faso (in Kaya and Ouagadougou) and five further remote interviews with Malian respondents. The focus groups were conducted in Burkina Faso. Participants were mostly individuals working in the transport sector (i.e. drivers, mechanics, car sellers, car renters, truck drivers), but also included security professionals, law enforcement, humanitarians and conflict experts. Interview data was supplemented with a review of relevant academic and grey literature. Data on motorbike theft, trafficking and links to instability was simultaneously collected during this process for publication in a forthcoming report.



ON THE ROAD IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL: THE CARS AND THEIR ORIGINS

Across the Sahel region, the durability of a car and its capacity to run in difficult terrain are the most important considerations for most buyers. This, along with the relatively low purchasing power of many consumers, means that the general car market – and the selection of cars for theft – is dominated by a narrow subset of vehicle types. In both Burkina Faso and Niger, 95% of the cars are second-hand and imported from abroad.⁵ Data for Mali is not available, but a similar proportion is likely given the similarities in vehicle market conditions. These vehicles are imported into the country through an opaque system of shipping, which takes licit, illicit and informal forms.

Most of the second-hand cars that arrive in the central Sahel region are shipped from Europe and America. They are then imported through several key ports in West Africa; the ports of Cotonou and, to a lesser extent, Lomé were described as the key entry points for cars in the central Sahel. Nigeria's attempt to protect its nascent car industry by restricting second-hand car imports has given Benin and Togo a distinct advantage in this regard.⁶ Senegal, Ghana and Mauritania are also important import destinations, from which the cars may then be moved overland. Shipping from Europe or America is mostly handled by small companies, which are often run by members of the diaspora of the destination country, or the West African diaspora more broadly.⁷

There is little data about what proportion of these cars were stolen in their country of origin before being shipped overseas. According to INTERPOL in Burkina Faso, the proportion of stolen cars has substantially decreased over the years and is now very small, thanks to a scan of the vehicle identification number (VIN) on entry. In Burkina Faso, INTERPOL said they had seized 12 stolen cars at the border in 2021, and as of July had seized a further five in 2022.⁸ However, public perception is that the actual number of stolen cars entering the region for resale is substantially higher. Second-hand cars coming from Europe are nicknamed 'Au revoir la France' ('Goodbye France') vehicles, due

to the stories of diaspora gangs in Europe stealing cars for export.⁹ Well-connected port officials and workers in Cotonou and Lomé are thought to collaborate with customs and officials across the region to clandestinely import stolen vehicles for profit. A journalist recounted the following story:

Someone I know called up and asked if I wanted to buy a nearly new car for FCFA1.5 million. He's a Burkinabè but he works in Cotonou port. Now if you buy this kind of car legally you are looking at least FCFA3 million. But according to him, he knew an agent who could sort out paperwork for me, and he would do that for less than FCFA300 000.¹⁰

It is also possible to illegally debark cars from their containers and to then drive them from Benin or Togo into Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria or other neighbouring states, without encountering a formal border check. The disputed town of Kourou, or Koualou, on the border of Benin and Burkina Faso is a well-known smuggling hotspot, through which cars used to be informally brought into Burkina Faso for resale. Due to the present insecurity and military reinforcements on the Beninois side, a large proportion of this trade has now been diverted to Togo, where the vehicles enter Burkina Faso via Cinkansé.¹¹ Even where there are formal border checks, corruption is believed to be common. It is, however, also true that there are large quantities of older cars that have not been stolen, but are sold internationally in a licit manner, even if there are informal elements to the trade.

La Casse: The market for second-hand vehicle parts

There are two key reasons for the dominance of second-hand cars in the Sahelian market. The first is the lower purchasing power of most Sahelian consumers. An NGO driver remarked that the only people in the Sahel who bought new vehicles were NGOs or government officials.¹² The second reason is concern about reparability. A car salesperson in Ouagadougou, who also works as a *démarcheur* (a fixer who identifies available cars for customers or sources a particular type of car), said that people in Burkina Faso typically look to buy vehicles manufactured late in the first decade of the 2000s.¹³ Not only are newer models more expensive, but they also have a larger number of digitized functions and parts that cannot easily be repaired with local resources.

He said that the most popular make of car from this era by far is Toyota, particularly the Highlander, Runner and Rav4 models. Mercedes and Hyundai cars of that generation are also popular. This is because these cars are known to be resilient on unpaved roads and in difficult driving conditions. However, the other key reason for their popularity is that spare parts are widely available in the market for detached vehicle pieces.¹⁴

Breaking a stolen car for parts is the lowest risk option for profitability. It is also theoretically possible to make more money selling detached pieces individually than the entire working vehicle.¹⁵ However, the illicit aspect of car and motorbike breakage is only one part of a much larger industry that



Engine parts at the Ladipo Market, Nigeria. The market for 'breakage' parts removed from stolen vehicles is considered low risk. © Jacob Silberberg via Getty Images

includes licit, informal or illicit business, and is very necessary for Sahelian road users. This industry around detached vehicle parts is known across the Sahel as 'La Casse' ('The Break'). While it typically involves breaking up vehicles for the sale of detached pieces, the same individuals will also work in repairing vehicles, especially through the replacement of broken parts.

The availability of parts in La Casse garages strongly influences the choices people make when buying both cars and motorbikes. There are officially branded, new replacement parts for Toyota, Hyundai and other common car types available to buy in the Sahel's formal car shops. However, these are subject to very high price markups and are well outside the budget of a typical car owner. New replica parts from China are also available. However, according to professional drivers and mechanics, these are widely regarded as poor quality given their propensity to break.¹⁶ This makes the availability of authentic, second-hand replacement parts critical to keeping vehicles running.

Buyer preferences are reflected in the vehicles that thieves prioritize. As we explore further below, the mode of vehicle theft – particularly for cars – varies between the Sahel's geographies, particularly according to state presence or absence. The borderlands is the region where the state is least present, instability is most acute and, accordingly, where vehicle theft and the resale of stolen cars are most common. However, the terrain of these areas is also much more challenging and roads are far less likely to be paved or in good condition. This means that vehicles with four-wheel drive capability are particularly prized, and particularly vulnerable to theft. Indeed, as we shall see, armed groups are quite selective about the cars they steal and will almost exclusively steal 4x4s. ■



THE REGIONAL NUANCES OF CAR THEFT

Car theft is perpetrated by a wide variety of actors, and there is as much variation in how theft happens. There are two sets of factors that substantially influence how vehicle theft is practised across the central Sahel: geography and state security presence. Car theft in urban settings is usually of a different character to car theft on major roads running through rural or remote areas, or between urban centres. Carjacking – the process of holding up a car and threatening the occupants into abandoning it – is more common in rural areas of the Sahel, although it can happen in urban settings as well. The relative presence, or absence, of state officials and security forces in a particular place strongly influences how theft happens. While the focus of this report is on settings with less control, it is worth taking a closer look at car theft in state-controlled settings.

Urban centres in state-controlled areas

Carjacking is not always done with the aim of stealing the vehicle. In many cases of carjacking in the Sahel – particularly in areas with a functioning state presence – the car is abandoned shortly after the theft as the passengers' belongings are the target of the act, not the car itself. Indeed, thieves often profile vehicles, using the type of car as an indicator of whether the passengers would be worth robbing. A security and logistics practitioner in Ouagadougou said of central Burkina Faso:

You are not at a major risk of being carjacked in a normal car. You won't be that exposed because you won't be assumed to be carrying very much. Whereas someone in a fancy car would be expected to have large amounts of cash. Even then, it may not be the car that's the main target. The jackers might have information on the driver, for instance that he's carrying a large amount of money. They can take that car, then abandon the car in villages or on the side of the road.¹⁷

This explanation reveals how, at least in areas with a functional state presence, thieves may consider cars too great a risk to keep, despite their high value. This also applies to carjackings on roads that run between state-controlled urban centres, even if they run through rural areas.

'People prefer to keep their lives than try to defend their vehicles.'

Although certainly not unheard of, the theft of cars in Sahelian cities under state control is perceived as being quite unusual. According to observers, there are two key reasons for this. The first is social rather than political. In cities, individuals who own cars are a minority, with motorbikes being the cheaper and much more common means of transport. Car owners are well-known in their communities, as are their respective cars, and the movements of those cars go well-observed. A journalist described:

There is a saying here: 'Your property is not only your property.' People know well what car or motorbike other people have, because they may be keen to borrow it. And so they will always recognize a particular car. Especially when you are well integrated into the neighbourhood.¹⁸

For instance, in Ouagadougou – the capital of Burkina Faso and a major urban centre under state control – car theft within the city is perceived as being relatively rare, although motorbike theft is extremely common and often violent.¹⁹

The second reason car theft is rarer in state-controlled cities is the high likelihood of being stopped by a police or gendarmerie officer. The state's capability to identify stolen cars relies on the VIN or chassis number. During production, the chassis of each car is imprinted with a registration number, which is currently 17 digits long (although significantly older vehicles may have shorter chassis numbers). INTERPOL has an international database of the VINs of cars reported stolen.

If the owner of a car in Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger has obtained the formal paperwork for their vehicle, the VIN will be listed in their ownership documents, specifically in the *carte grise* ('grey card'), the vehicle ownership certificate. In theory, police can verify ownership with relative ease if they choose to inspect a car, or if they flag a stolen car. In practice, it can be complicated for police to access INTERPOL data or other national databases as it depends on their contacts, resources, the willingness of their colleagues and the INTERPOL country office. During stops, even if the person driving the car in question has only borrowed it and does not have the requisite identity documents, police will typically seize the car until the owner comes to declare that the car is not stolen.²⁰

BURKINA FASO
Procedural steps needed to legitimately import or purchase a car (new or second-hand)
1. When a car enters the country, the VIN (or chassis number) is checked on arrival in the country against the INTERPOL international database of stolen vehicles.
2. The process of customs clearance (known as <i>dédouanement</i>) involves an initial tax at the border, followed by a secondary tax after a technical expert determines the value of the vehicle.
3. A technical expert must also issue a certificate confirming that the vehicle conforms to national standards.
4. Once all taxes have been paid, the ministry of transport will issue the owner with an immatriculation certificate, which allows the car to be put into circulation.
5. A <i>carte grise</i> is issued. The <i>carte grise</i> contains the VIN and associates that particular vehicle with its legal owner.
Procedural steps to legally transfer ownership of a car from one owner to another
The seller and the prospective buyer must go together to the police commissariat and/or the ministry of transport (depending on the national system) to inform them of the ownership transfer and to get a <i>carte grise</i> issued to the new owner.
MALI
Procedural steps needed to legitimately import or purchase a car (new or second-hand)
1. The process of customs clearance (known as <i>dédouanement</i>) involves an initial tax at the border, followed by a secondary tax after a technical expert determines the value of the vehicle.
2. A technical expert must also issue a certificate confirming that the vehicle conforms to national standards.
3. Once all taxes have been paid, the ministry of transport will issue the owner with an immatriculation certificate, which allows the car to be put into circulation.
4. A <i>carte grise</i> is issued. The <i>carte grise</i> contains the VIN and associates that particular vehicle with its legal owner.
Procedural steps to legally transfer ownership of a car from one owner to another
The seller must submit an <i>attestation de vente</i> ('attestation of sale') to their respective mayor's office along with proof of identity, in order to confirm the vehicle's new owner.
NIGER
Procedural steps needed to legitimately import or purchase a car (new or second-hand)
1. When a car enters the country, the VIN (or chassis number) is checked at the border against the INTERPOL international database of stolen vehicles.
2. The process of customs clearance (known as <i>dédouanement</i>) involves an initial tax, paid either at the border or in the INTERPOL office in the owner's city of residence.
3. Once all taxes have been paid, the ministry of transport will issue the owner with an immatriculation certificate, which allows the car to be put into circulation.
4. A <i>carte grise</i> is issued. The <i>carte grise</i> contains the VIN and associates that particular vehicle with its legal owner.
Procedural steps to legally transfer ownership of a car from one owner to another
The seller and the prospective buyer must go together to the commissariat and/or the ministry of transport (depending on the national system) to inform them of the ownership transfer and to get a <i>carte grise</i> issued to the new owner.

FIGURE 1 Steps needed to legally import or purchase a vehicle in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

These factors make it difficult to discretely steal a car and resell it – at least within an area where someone might recognize it, or where there is a risk of being reported or inspected. However, it is still possible to profit from cars stolen within state-controlled cities. For instance, if the car could be rapidly moved to a garage, it could be repainted or the VIN could be altered by changing the appearance of a particular number.²¹ However, reselling that car for use in a state-controlled area would still be risky without documents to match that VIN. Obtaining these would require a complicit official who could obtain vehicle documents from various offices in a corrupt manner – an option that interviewees agreed was plausible, but would not be open to all car thieves, since they might not have the necessary connections.²² This is still believed to happen in a number of places. A garage owner in Niamey said that ‘those who were supposed to help’ combat the problem of vehicle theft were in fact complicit in the disguising and reselling of stolen vehicles, implying that state officials abuse their position to profit from this.²³

Another option is to break up the car to resell as detached pieces, which people working in the transport sector largely agreed is the lowest-risk option for managing a stolen car in a state-controlled town or city.²⁴ The final option would be to move the car out of the city for resale in a distant area, or over the border as fast as possible – prospects that will be covered in later sections of the report.²⁵ Nevertheless, most interviewees seemed to think that the risks of car theft in state-controlled cities were rarely worth the rewards.

Urban centres with limited or no state presence

In the parts of the Sahel where authority is contested between the state and armed or criminal groups, vehicle crime is much more prevalent in urban centres. Both cars and motorbikes are vulnerable. In Mali, in both Gao and Timbuktu, residents agreed that night-time car theft was a common occurrence, and one that could not be resisted without the risk of severe violence. This is particularly the case for those who drive at night, although parked vehicles were also perceived as vulnerable to theft. A professional driver in Gao said:

The thieves sometimes have ‘master keys’ to open the vehicle. Usually it is during the night, very late. Sometimes vehicles are stolen during the day from car parks. In all these cases, there is rarely any violence or physical aggression. Because here in Gao, if you feel that vehicle thieves are in your garage at night, you don't go out. If you go out, you will be killed. That's why people prefer to keep their lives than to try to defend their vehicles.²⁶

In cities with little or no state presence, there is much less risk for those engaged in theft of both cars and other goods. Residents confirmed that vehicles were sometimes violently held up for the sole purpose of stealing the passengers' belongings. This is typically common in the hold-up of public transport vehicles, both inside and outside of the city.²⁷ However, if the car is high-value or a 4x4, it will most likely be taken.²⁸ There are a variety of networks in these areas to which stolen vehicles can be resold, many of them well-organized and operating in well-known markets. Residents do sometimes attempt to recover their vehicles, and may be successful with the right connections, but all of these recovery attempts are made through informal networks without assistance from the state.



The terminal at Lomé, Togo, for used cars from Europe. © Joerg Boethling via Alamy Stock Photo

Rural areas with limited or no state presence

Similarly to cities with a limited state presence, road users on rural roads with little or no state-presence face a substantial threat of robbery – of their possessions, their vehicles or both. Not only do these areas experience a great deal of car theft, but they are also destinations for cars that are stolen in state-controlled areas, including from cities. A former Nigerien INTERPOL officer in Niamey said that cars stolen in the city are rapidly driven out of the city in order to avoid detection. They are frequently taken to peripheral or remote areas for the same reasons that car theft in such areas is often met with impunity. For instance, he suggested, a stolen car from Niamey might be bought by a salesperson in Bankilaré in the Tillabéri region, where a buyer could go several years without encountering checks from state officials.²⁹

In the tri-border area of the central Sahel, where state control is absent and armed groups are very active, those who engage in car theft tend to be well-informed about movements on the road. According to a former car thief who has stolen cars in the Tillabéri region, gangs of thieves have informers who position themselves at the exits or toll booths of regional towns, so as to see what vehicles may be worth robbing or stealing. They will then phone a criminal gang or armed group positioned along the road further out of town, who will rob or carjack the vehicles of interest. Motorbike users are equally vulnerable, particularly if they are driving expensive or desirable bikes.³⁰

Occasionally, elaborate robberies are planned, and these stories can be very revealing of broader trends in the car theft ecosystem. A freelance driver in Tillabéri described how, during the 2020 elections in Niger, he had been working for

the National Electoral Commission (NEC). Another driver had been driving some election officials in a 4x4 vehicle through Abala, in the northern band of the Tillabéri region. The car was attacked by armed men on motorbikes, who threatened the driver and told him to call his office, tell them that the car had broken down and demand that they send another vehicle to help him. When a second driver drove out to assist, their car was also attacked and both 4x4s were taken. The first driver had by then been shot and seriously wounded. The NEC sent a further small vehicle (a Toyota Corolla) to assist, which was reportedly of no interest to the armed men, and they allowed the party to leave in it and take the wounded driver to the clinic. The NEC had reportedly requested an armed escort for the original car, but were turned down by the authorities in Abala because of the high probability of an ambush.³¹

This story illustrates a number of consequential tendencies within the Sahel's car theft ecosystem. Firstly, state authorities can be unwilling to defend road users in areas where they might face attack. However, it is also important to reckon with the fact that state officials and their vehicles are the primary targets of extremist armed groups, the key perpetrators of attacks on road users. This means that travelling with an escort to try and ensure safety may have the opposite effect. In this story, it is not entirely clear whether the carjackers were criminals or non-state armed group combatants. As we will explore further, while the two types of actors are often distinguishable (at least to victims of vehicle theft), it can also be very hard to identify who is behind a carjacking. Finally, the incident again demonstrates what kind of cars are most desirable for armed groups, and most vulnerable to theft.



NEXT STOP: BORDER HUBS AND MARKETS

The relative expense of cars means that buyers tend to be cautious about purchasing risky vehicles, even when car prices are very low (possibly because they were stolen). Both buyers and sellers want to be confident that the risks of driving a stolen car in their circulation areas are low. It seems that the most common way vehicle traffickers try to mitigate these risks and inconveniences is to resell the vehicle outside of the country it was stolen in, typically over the nearest national border. This does not eliminate the risks and inconveniences to both buyer and seller. All states covered in this report have an INTERPOL office, and are (in theory) able to access the international database of stolen vehicles and run VINs against it. In practice, accessing the database is reportedly not always easy for officers, particularly in less connected areas. Nevertheless, taking the stolen vehicle across a border to be resold does substantially reduce the chance of either law enforcement or the owner actively looking for it. This approach is evidenced both in the location of key markets known for reselling stolen vehicles, and in the known routes that stolen vehicles take.

Border issues

Borders inhibit and demotivate law enforcement efforts to track down stolen vehicles. Certain Sahelian border regions remain difficult to access and, as a result, are often neglected by states. In addition, armed group activity in several border regions (and particularly Liptako-Gourma) has forced out state presence. As a result, there is little to discourage or inhibit a trade in stolen vehicles. Even where state presence remains, the heavy security challenges that they face mean that vehicles are unregulated and vehicle crime is barely addressed. An NGO worker based in Dori, Burkina Faso, said that he frequently saw cars with Mauritanian, Nigerien, Nigerian, Togolese, Malian and Beninois plates circulating in the city for months at a time.³² A former United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) staff member in Kidal noted the same phenomenon of cars with plates from all over the region freely circulating.³³ Given the rife insecurity in Dori, security forces were unsurprisingly preoccupied, and therefore neglected to conduct any checks on vehicles or enforce vehicle registration. In the case of Kidal, there is no state presence that is able to exercise authority vis-à-vis the signatory groups, hence the lack of regulation.

Unsurprisingly, this influences the positioning of stolen vehicle markets. Indeed, it appears that there are certain border crossing points at which vehicles stolen in one country often enter the neighbouring



The Niger–Nigeria border point at Birnin Konni. Reselling a vehicle outside the country it was stolen in is seen as a risk-mitigating factor. © Lattons via Wikimedia Commons

country to be resold. The general flows of stolen vehicles, and stolen vehicle parts, ultimately represent an exchange over borders, even if the transactions themselves are not always direct swaps. As a garage worker in Timbuktu described it: 'It is the vehicles stolen in Niger that are sold in Mali. It is the network of vehicle thieves in Gao who sell to Niger.'

It is not clear if major vehicle trafficking networks facilitate large-scale 'swaps' of cars stolen in one country for cars stolen in the neighbouring country. A former INTERPOL commissioner alleged that Nigerian gangs would exchange cars stolen in Nigeria at the border with Niger for cars stolen in Niger.³⁴ In practice though, systematic, direct swaps may be rarer than ad-hoc bartering at the border, or independent transfers across the border to individuals within the same network. Gangs may arrive over the border, sell their vehicles and use the proceeds to buy vehicles stolen in that country, which they will then take back over the border to resell there.

Market types

Not all of the stolen vehicle markets are fixed, physical spaces. Indeed, very large, well-established stolen vehicle markets, such as Ber in Mali, are the exception rather than the rule. Rather, most research participants described places where trade takes place on a semi-regular or regular basis.³⁵

There is substantial overlap between the licit trade of second-hand vehicles and the stolen vehicle market. Garages can gain a legitimate front by dealing in both and therefore serve as more discrete sites for stolen vehicle 'markets'. Certain places may simply have well-known people who deal in stolen vehicles and who can arrange the purchase with the customer by phone. This also means that the presence of some of these markets is contested, and difficult to verify. The markets identified in the Sahel have been mapped and labelled according to the following categories, although some markets represent more than one category:

- Consolidated, stable, controlled market
- Permanent, relatively open market
- Cross-border transit or exchange hub (fluid, informal)
- Unconfirmed market (clandestine, temporary or possibly out of use)
- Vehicle 'laundering' hub (a point at which fake vehicle documents, plates and so on can be obtained, or a vehicle can be disguised by altering the VIN)

It is helpful to consider geographic differences not only in terms of how and where vehicles enter the central Sahel, but also the distribution of different types of illicit markets. The stolen vehicles market of the upper Sahel (northern Mali and Niger, and the northern edge of Burkina Faso) has some distinguishing features from that of the lower Sahel (central and southern Burkina Faso and Niger, and southern Mali). The more open, permanent markets for stolen vehicles are more common in the upper Sahel (particularly northern Mali and, to a lesser extent, northern Niger), given the quasi-absence of the state in many parts of the region. The lower Sahel, meanwhile, tends to feature more clandestine markets or systems of purchase, and a higher demand for counterfeit ownership documents or other 'laundering' services.

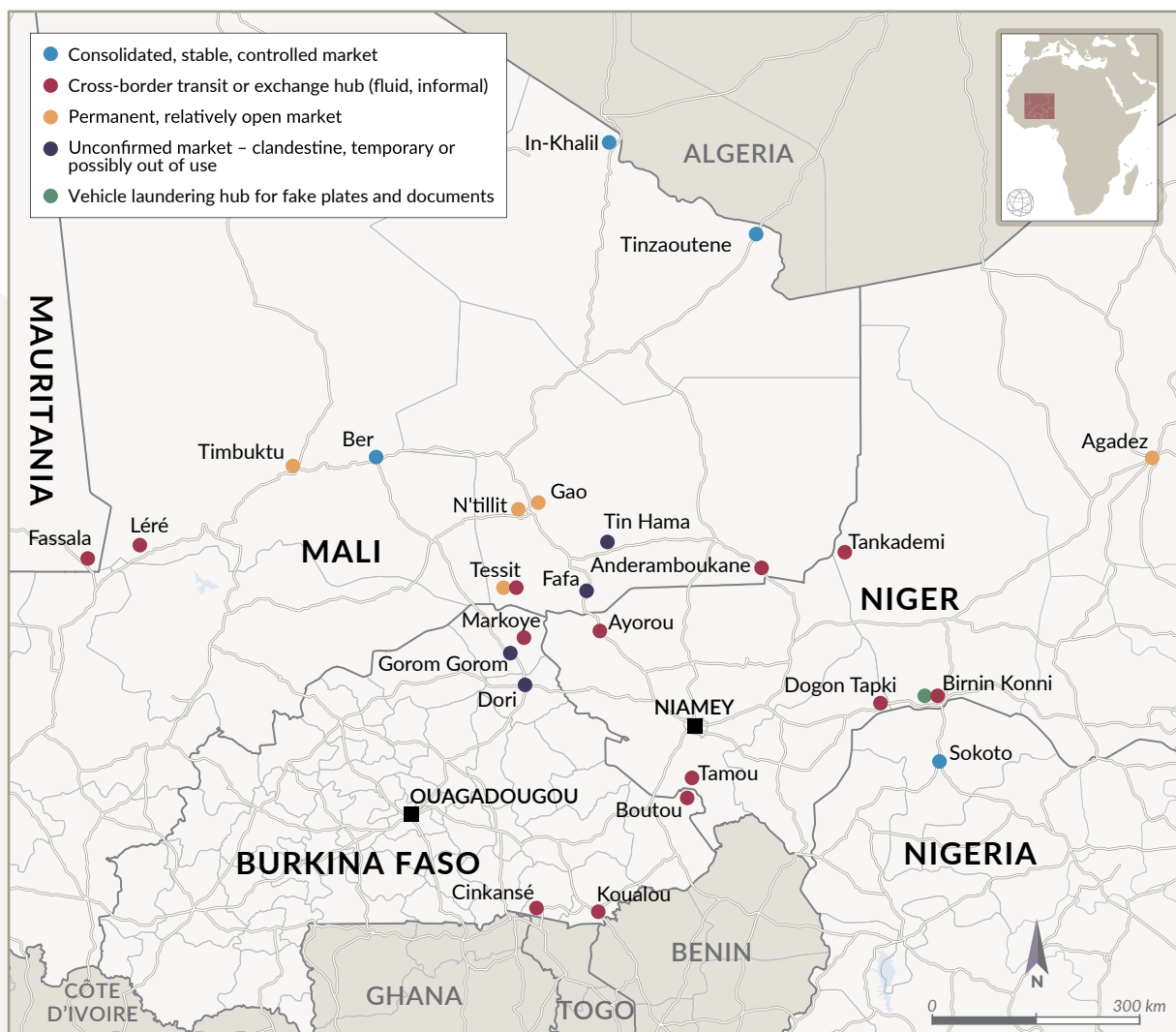


FIGURE 2 Hubs for buying and selling stolen cars in the Sahel.

Market dynamics: Northern versus southern Sahel

The secessionist histories of northern Mali, and to a lesser extent northern Niger, have enabled illicit and criminal actors to operate very openly, given the lack of state authority. This has led to better established, and more hierarchical, markets and networks for illicit goods. Ber in northern Mali is the only node in the stolen vehicles ecosystem that was cited as a stolen vehicle market by almost all participants. Overall, markets in the northern zones of the Sahel are far less clandestine, and given the lack of state presence, there is much less need for laundering hubs to produce documents for stolen vehicles. Unconfirmed markets in the northern Sahel are likely to have been shifted by instability, rather than any pressures to conceal their activities.

Ber is a vast fixed market for stolen vehicles. In addition, Ber acts as a regional stockage and redistribution hub, which directs flows of stolen vehicles across multiple border transit points. The openness and fixity is possible because the town is heavily controlled by Malian Arab networks with close links to both signatory and violent extremist armed groups. One car rental agency promoter described how the Ber network manages regional supply and demand:

Banditry linked to robberies is frequent on the road to Léré near the Mauritanian border, with intense cross-border activity of stealing luxury vehicles in Mauritania for transport to Ber. People from Timbuktu go to Ber to buy luxury cars. These are cars stolen in Mauritania. Also, 4x4 cars stolen in the region often cross the border mainly to Niger. The sales network is organized from Ber, which is the meeting point between Timbuktu–Mauritania and Algeria. It is from Ber that the stolen vehicles change trajectories and it is also from there that other criminal flows transit to take various routes in the Sahel.³⁶

It appears that the market for stolen vehicles in Ber is also highly regulated by the networks running it, and through violence if necessary. A market trader in Timbuktu stated that: ‘Even if your car is stolen, you can’t go and get it in Ber, otherwise you risk your life. What people do, if they spot their vehicle stolen or robbed in Ber, they contact well-known people in town. And these people bring your vehicle back without any problem.’

Other hubs in the northern band of the Sahel are also relatively permanent, even if they do not compare to Ber in terms of size and regional influence. In-Khalil, another well-known trafficking hub for arms, is a widely known cross-border transit hub for stolen vehicles. Vehicles sourced from Libya’s second-hand or stolen car stocks transit into Algeria via Ghat, and from there into Mali via In-Khalil or Tinzaoutene, on into Niger via Agadez.

The southern zones of the Sahel have, until very recently, had more consistent, although still patchy, state influence. There are numerous well-known cross-border transit hubs for smuggled and trafficked goods, including some that had next to no state presence for extended periods. However, none of these became consolidated, established markets in a comparable fashion to those in northern Mali. The most well-known example is Koualou/Kourou, a town on the border of Burkina Faso and Benin in dispute given that both states withdrew their forces from the area while the settlement was being



An officer of Nigeria's Federal Road Safety Corps checks vehicle documents. Forged documents are used in car laundering. © FRSC

decided. Smuggling of fuel – as well as other commodities such as cigarettes and medicines – via Koualou/Kourou was particularly prolific, but stolen or undeclared second-hand vehicles were also frequently imported from coastal states.

As of December 2021, Benin has reinforced the areas around Koualou/Kourou. But even prior to this reinforcement, Koualou/Kourou had never developed into the consolidated, static market for trafficked goods in the manner of Ber due to the state influence nearby. Since the reinforcement, much of the vehicle traffic coming from coastal states into the landlocked Sahelian states has been diverted to other cross-border transit hubs. Cinkassé in Togo is one point where observers have noticed an increase in second-hand, potentially stolen vehicles. Tamou, near Niger's border with Burkina Faso, has also become an active hotspot for trafficking of motorbikes, as well as detached car parts.

It is also notable that the only known vehicle laundering hotspots are present in the southern zones of the Sahel. The only permanent hub identified during this research was Birnin Konni, on the border of Niger and Nigeria. Birnin Konni is a border crossing point for many of the vehicles moving northwards from the well-established stolen vehicle market of Sokoto in Nigeria. However, it is also the best-known site for obtaining false papers, driving licences and falsified Nigerian licence plates or documents, which can then be used to legitimate a stolen car in Niger, Burkina Faso or elsewhere in the region. Observers in Birnin Konni implied that local state officials were aware of this trade, but that it was still conducted in a semi-clandestine fashion, in large part to avoid being extorted for bribes by those same state officials. It is likely that this logic applies to a number of the lower Sahel's cross-border transit hubs or semi-clandestine markets, which explains why they are less consolidated than in the northern Sahel. However, as instability endures and state authority wanes in the lower Sahel, these hubs may begin conducting business more openly. ■



VEHICLE THIEVES OF THE SAHEL

Like the patterns of car theft, the type of actors involved also varies with geography and political control. This discussion is predominantly focused on car thieves and their networks in zones with less state control.

In urban centres that are state controlled, the perception among all research participants was that car thefts are relatively rare, so thieves who succeed in stealing cars must either conceal them (either by hiding the car or changing its appearance and/or VIN) or take them out of the city as fast as possible. Urban car thieves appear to be fairly specialized. Not all are well-connected, although some may have connections to low-level officials who can assist with falsifying documents. They are likely to have contacts with garages and/or mechanics who can disguise the vehicle, or networks outside of the city (typically in border areas) that will resell the stolen cars either over the border or in a peripheral area of the country.

Bandits and carjackers in contested spaces

It is difficult to produce a typology of gangs found on Sahelian roads – particularly in areas with little or no state presence – because these structures are fluid and frequently overlap with each other. Motivations for those involved in stealing vehicles are predominantly financial, although a Nigerien researcher argued that it also represents a means of protest and rebellion for frustrated youth who lack opportunities.³⁷ However, vehicle theft networks vary in complexity. The least complex form of these gangs is *coupeurs de route* ('cutters of the road'), who are just as likely, if not more, to steal belongings rather than vehicles. More specialized vehicle theft gangs are nebulous and may be better characterized as temporary but frequent partnerships between different sets of actors. These actors include not just car thieves and hijackers, but also drivers, garages, mechanics, fixers, traders and occasionally armed groups as well.

Coupeurs de route is a term often used to denote small bands of lightly armed men who attempt to steal vehicles or passengers' belongings. A Nigerien researcher suggested that *coupeurs de route* are often unemployed young men, many of whom are unable to make a living from traditional livelihoods, such as herding or farming, because of instability and drought. This, in his view, leads to a generalized sense of injustice, which in itself can be a motivator for car or motorbike jacking.³⁸ Observers say that *coupeurs de route* tend to only have one or two firearms between them, and will rarely number more than five people. Others may hold bladed weapons. They will typically intimidate and threaten passengers into giving up their property, although they may also use violence.³⁹

There is a variant of the *coupeurs de route* groups that is more specialized in car theft and well-integrated into wider networks that process and resell stolen vehicles. This is a small segment of a more complex, transnational network dealing in stolen vehicles. This type of gang is particularly evident in northern Mali, in the regions of Gao and Timbuktu. Residents of the area describe gang members as predominantly Arab and Tuareg, and many believe they are closely associated with separatist or pro-Azawad armed groups. As a result, according to residents, they avoid stealing the vehicles of Arab or Tuareg passengers, which they are able to do by staying well-informed of movements on the road. These gangs carry firearms and are viewed as being willing to use violence, and so people typically do not attempt to resist. Drivers will typically tell their passengers to comply with the thieves' orders.⁴⁰

Interviewees frequently referenced the Tuareg or Arab identity of these gangs, as well as their connections to northern Mali's signatory armed groups. As evidence, participants tended to cite the fact that victims of vehicle theft are sometimes able to get their vehicles back by approaching well-connected Tuareg or Arab individuals for help. (It should be noted that although the roles that these individuals play are interesting in their own right, the ethnic stereotypes in conflict settings should be met with care. That these Tuareg or Arab individuals can help with finding cars is not proof that they, their associates or their ethnic fellows stole them.)

On the subject of vehicle recovery, several interviewees relayed stories like this one from a car rental agent:

'At the beginning of this year, I was going to Tessakane, towards the commune of Toya, and six kilometres from the commune of Kabara, four individuals were sitting next to a motorbike waiting for me. They stopped me and took the vehicle (it was a vehicle belonging to a consultancy firm that had been hired by the MINUSMA to take agents to Tessakane). My brother called a man, who is an Arab from Ber, to explain the theft, and told him the place and the date. He promised to find the vehicle. Within 24 hours he called us to come and collect the vehicle from a place outside the town.'⁴¹

It was emphasized that as long as someone could identify the time and place of the robbery, well-connected Tuareg or Arab individuals would be able to identify who was responsible and would negotiate the return of the vehicle. This is possible because gangs and armed groups occupy known sections of key roads.⁴² It is not clear whether this option is available

to all, or only those with key connections. However, this phenomenon does illustrate the relative permanence of these gangs, and the extent and organization of their network. This permanence is further demonstrated by the fact that certain rental agencies can evade being targeted by these gangs, and even by other armed actors. A Tuareg businessman and owner of a vehicle rental agency in Gao said he ensured the safe passage of his vehicles along affected roads by negotiating with car thieves and other armed groups. In his words:

'The most dangerous roads are Gao-Ansongo, Gao-Gossi, Gao-N'tillit-Ménaka. When you take these roads with a 4x4 in good condition, be sure that you will not come back with your 4x4 safe and sound! I, however, like many of the businessmen here, have developed my own resilience. So I negotiate the road with the armed groups who control these roads. The armed groups have divided up the areas for each. If you want to rent 4x4 vehicles, you have to go under the protection of these groups. They protect your vehicles and the drivers are safe. As long as you have the protection of the leaders of the armed groups or if you are a member of the family of one of these leaders, it's fine. My vehicles can't be touched!'⁴³

This has substantial implications for the local economy, local power dynamics and even humanitarian activity. Some humanitarian organizations that work in the area and need to traverse these roads have ceased using official NGO vehicles because they tend to be relatively new four-wheel drive cars that are highly desirable to thieves. Indeed, some NGO staff report that the only means of ensuring safe passage is to use rental agency vehicles. In some areas, some NGO staff opt to change rental cars once they cross a certain point, because different rental agency bosses assure protection in different areas.⁴⁴

Similarly, local businesses often come to rely on rental cars from well-connected agencies.⁴⁵ The net result is that well-connected car rental agencies form local monopolies, limiting opportunities for others to create jobs in the transport sector. A secondary impact may be that the transportation industry at large becomes a source of financing for armed groups. If armed group members (or bandits with links to them) become positioned to either provide protection on roads (in exchange for payments) or to consistently profit from car theft, roads will be sites of enduring instability. Even in the event of a conflict resolution process, such entrenched criminal economies will prove difficult to disentangle, and they may persist independently of political reconciliation.

Car launderers

The driver of a stolen vehicle has the option to take it to a 'car laundering' hub where fake licence plates and papers can be obtained. Birnin Konni, located on the border between Niger and Nigeria, is one known example. Here, it is possible to obtain Nigerian licence plates coming from the stolen vehicle market in Nigeria, as well as – reportedly – a *carte grise* and an Economic Community of West African States driver's licence, with these documents tailored to match the chassis number of the car. The plate can reportedly be obtained for as little as FCFA10 000, and the documents for FCFA1 500.⁴⁶ As a result, a car stolen in Niamey, for example, can be rapidly fitted with new Nigerian plates and false documents for very little money.

Our research was not able to identify other such laundering hubs, but it is unlikely that Birnin Konni is the only one. Other practitioners are likely to be operating more discretely.

These forms of laundering will not occur in all hubs. As mentioned, not only will officials occasionally supply false documents, but sometimes importers or car salespeople will have their own means of arranging these. Others in the car laundering network include mechanics and garage workers who may be able to alter the VIN or the appearance of the car. In areas with very limited state presence, or effective state absence, such documents may never be necessary.

Signatory armed groups

A high degree of organization in the stolen car trade is currently only evident in the northern regions of Mali. However, this organized stolen car trade can serve as a case study of how local economies adapt to instability, albeit in ways that can also exacerbate instability and local resentments. There are geographic reasons that car theft gangs have become so elaborate in northern Mali. Four national borders (Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Mauritania) are easily reachable, and an extreme paucity of state presence, coupled with the long history of transnational illicit activity – itself facilitated by secessionist armed groups – have all helped to entrench sophisticated criminal economies. The long-standing illicit economies moving between Libya, Algeria and northern Mali have also contributed to the durability of these networks. Finally, separatist regions are often exceptionally dependent on transnational criminal networks and illicit economies, given the reluctance of formal suppliers to work with authorities there. In the case of the Azawad region of northern Mali, familial connections between signatory armed groups and their political affiliates, and criminal networks, have led to the latter becoming embedded in the region.⁴⁷

The signatory groups comprise two broad groups of combatants under the umbrella structure of the Cadre Strategique Permanent. These are the pro-federalist Plateforme coalition and the pro-independence Coordination of Azawad Movements, which was previously a coalition of secessionist groups that announced their merger in February 2023. These groups have long had a critical, albeit indirect, role in sustaining criminal networks.

As the most influential armed actors in northern Mali, and as beneficiaries of the local illicit networks run by their close connections, they can serve as guarantors to these networks, supporting them with an implicit threat of violence against potential disruptors. Given the lack of state authority, the civilian population has little choice but to live according to the rules of these networks. The implicit guarantees of security by the signatory groups have allowed vehicle crime networks in northern Mali to become well-established, to the point that these networks can serve as known, permanent buyers for the vehicles stolen by bandits in the area, or further afield in the Sahel.

Sellers affiliated to signatory groups

The profiles of the organizers and sellers behind stolen vehicle markets in northern Mali are elusive. However, as with other sectors of organized crime in northern Mali, they tend to be individuals who have acquired a niche in a particular illicit sector, and who have obtained a degree of protection from one of the signatory armed groups or armed group factions. The signatory armed groups have clashed over trafficking competition post-2015 but have also negotiated settlements between themselves that implicitly delineate control over certain trafficking routes. In turn, sellers and organizers of illicit networks will offer support – either financial, practical or political – to the armed faction that protects them. For instance, Lamhar Arab drug traffickers in the Gao region have been known to cooperate with both the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the extremist Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa in exchange for protection of their routes, and have provided fuel and other goods to their armed backer of choice.⁴⁸

It is likely that this dynamic of traffickers patronizing their protectors is replicated in the stolen car ecosystem of northern Mali. However, the stolen car trade is less profitable than drug trafficking, and so sellers and organizers may be less influential, and may require intermediaries when brokering their protections. Individuals selling the stolen cars in northern Mali typically manage the business themselves through specialized networks. However, they also offer support to the armed group faction(s) that they are affiliated to, and which they call on for protection as needed. These allegiances may shift in different circumstances.

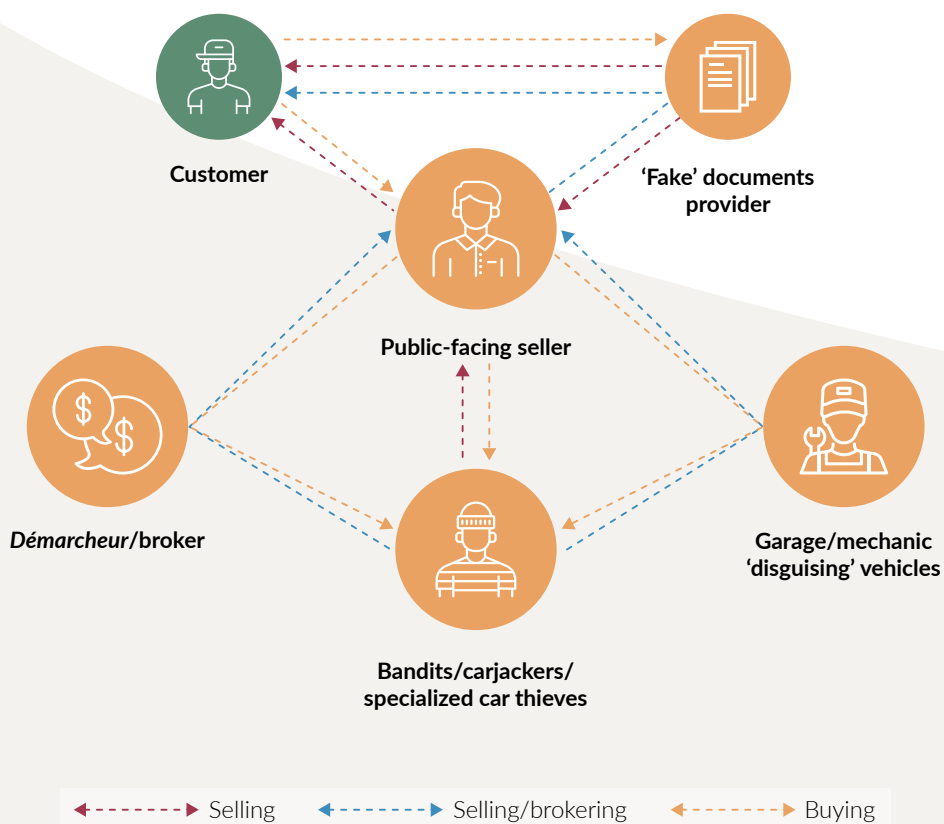


FIGURE 3 The relationship between elements of a stolen car network and their customers.



Hub caps for sale at a market. © Jacob Silberberg via Getty Images

The stolen car networks are extensive in terms of both geography and the people involved. Not all are as permanent, or as hierarchical, as those run by the signatory groups' close kin in northern Mali. However, other networks in the stolen vehicle business in the Sahel may share many of the same components. They may also need to take greater care to disguise their practice, and therefore have more semi-licit infrastructure. A former car thief in Niger emphasized that these sophisticated vehicle theft networks were far more extensive than thieves and sellers. In his words:

Stolen vehicles are a business that involves numerous people who seem far from suspicious, such as traders, garage owners and mechanics, and even political leaders, in the sense that they may benefit from the sales. Numerous garages are financed by criminal groups. This allows them to engage in some legal activity, which helps them to cover the arrival and resale of vehicles that are stolen.⁴⁹

A former INTERPOL regional commissioner confirmed:

This system also involves several intermediaries between the criminals and the buyers, so that the transactions are de-personalized, or at least do not directly involve the criminal leaders. The intermediaries, benefiting from this system, ensure discretion. They play the role of the fuse that blows to prevent the rest of the network being affected.⁵⁰

The garages, as one former car thief explained, are often sponsored by criminal networks, which allows them to run a small amount of legal business as a front, while most of their work is in disguising or breaking down stolen vehicles. They also serve as storage depots and hiding places for the stolen vehicle between the point of theft and the point of resale.

The role of intermediaries in these specialized and often transnational gangs of stolen vehicle traffickers is less clear. However, it can be presumed that they play a role similar to the *démarcheurs* in the licit trade of second-hand cars in cities: collecting stock, identifying potential buyers, arranging transfers and distribution points, and acting as a front for other organizers in the network. As a whole, the networks appear to be fairly horizontal and diffuse since multiple intermediaries and road theft gangs collaborate. However, the fact that cars are sometimes returned if the right people are asked, and the fact that 'sponsors' cover certain upfront costs (such as the running costs of garages), suggest that there are established seniors in the network who are well-connected to (non-jihadist) armed groups, at least in northern Mali.



THE ROLE OF EXTREMIST GROUPS

There are many contradicting assertions regarding the role of violent extremist armed groups, and specifically JNIM and ISSP, in the Sahel stolen car ecosystem. Some participants asserted that stolen vehicles were an important part of the ‘terrorist economy’ as groups stole cars and sold them for money or used them as an alternative currency. However, others said that vehicles, and particularly cars, were a sufficiently scarce and important commodity for armed groups that they were unlikely to part with for money alone, and not on a regular basis.

Given the lack of evidence for any permanent system of vehicle sales by extremist groups, this report contends that these armed groups do not systematically sell stolen vehicles for profit, and incidents of them doing so do not represent engrained, group-wide practices. No such incidents were confirmed during this research, although some detailed allegations were collected.

Revenue is generally not the objective of vehicle theft as far as armed groups are concerned, and incidents of extremist groups selling stolen vehicles should be seen as opportunistic. Furthermore, these groups risk undermining their relations with civilian communities, and their broader governance agenda, if they openly trade in goods stolen from those communities. This problem could be mitigated if armed groups chose to sell stolen cars to intermediaries. Some research participants alleged that this may happen but were not able to confirm specific incidents. Extremist armed groups’ reliance on vehicles for mobility is thus the most important aspect to consider from a stabilization perspective.

Many research participants asserted that bandits who steal cars sometimes sell them on to armed groups. Participants often supported this assertion by pointing to the needs of armed groups for vehicles on a regular basis, including cars they could afford to lose in operations such as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) attacks.⁵¹ Given the frequency of carjacking, and the undeniable need for vehicles among armed groups, this is plausible, although no specific incidents were identified.

JNIM

JNIM is not a significant player in the trade of stolen cars. Nevertheless, it actively engages in carjacking, particularly of NGO cars, ambulances and other 4x4 vehicles that suit its operational needs.⁵² JNIM also sends the cars it steals over borders – not out of fear that they will be traced by authorities, but rather to divert cars to operational sites where they are needed.⁵³ As such, JNIM's approach to car theft is targeted and focused almost exclusively on the types of cars that meet their operational needs. However, their targets have also changed over time, influenced both by necessity and availability.

Armed groups also prize four-wheel drive capability and durability in cars. Indeed, given the conditions they operate under, these qualities are arguably more important for them than for the general public. However, they are also interested in other qualities, namely, how well a car can be adapted for the battlefield. A mining security operative reflected on how the vehicle types stolen by violent extremist groups in Burkina Faso had changed over time. He said that in the earlier period of the conflict, it was particularly pickup trucks that they would target, and especially Toyota-branded pickups. This was because of their durability, but also because they could be modified easily to mount weapons on. However, eventually they also began targeting all hard-top cars with 4x4 capability. This was likely because they had already stolen most of the pickups stationed in their territories, and because pickup truck drivers learned not to drive in these areas.⁵⁴

Throughout the central Sahel, a notable feature of the conflict has been the widespread theft of NGO cars. Burkina Faso has been particularly affected by NGO carjacking. While both ISSP and JNIM have been implicated in stealing NGO vehicles in Burkina Faso, JNIM has done this more regularly. Moreover, the group seem to have clear operational uses for the cars that it steals. Specifically, JNIM needs cars to transport individuals and equipment for both offensive and defensive battlefield efforts. A number of anecdotes illustrate this.

In one case in February 2022, JNIM returned an NGO car it had hijacked to the NGO, based in Nouna (in Nord province). The JNIM combatants who took it informed the NGO staff that they needed the car for an operation, as well as to carry an older commander, who needed air conditioning during the journey. The car was returned about a month after the theft.⁵⁵ JNIM has tended to tolerate NGO presence and work, and has occasionally taken steps to avoid alienating them.

In another incident in 2021, after JNIM stole a car from an NGO in the Est region, it offered NGO workers a small amount of money for the inconvenience and returned their snacks before driving off in the car.⁵⁶ However, these efforts are the exception rather than the rule in JNIM carjackings.

Notably, JNIM has also become adept at stealing not only individual cars, but occasionally whole convoys. In early April 2022, a convoy of eight new UN vehicles bound for Niger was reportedly stolen on the road between Matiacoali and Kantchari by presumed JNIM combatants.⁵⁷ NGOs are increasingly avoiding driving desirable cars because of this theft.

JNIM's acuity may partly explain the notable spate of ambulance thefts in Burkina Faso's Sahel province in 2022. In an interview in May 2022, an NGO worker who monitored security incidents in the country said that eight district ambulances belonging to the state had been stolen since the beginning of the year (in Est, Nord-Est, Nord and Sahel provinces in Burkina Faso). It is not clear which



Malian police seen with MINUSMA vehicles. In 2022, a convoy of UN vehicles was reportedly stolen by presumed JNIM combatants.
© Souleymane AG Anara via Getty Images

armed group was behind each theft, but JNIM is thought to have been responsible for the majority of the thefts.⁵⁸ These district ambulances were adapted Land Cruisers and therefore met many of the vehicle criteria valued by armed groups. By stealing them, JNIM (or ISSP) not only acquired new vehicles, but also deprived the state of its role in providing healthcare to residents. This naturally had severe humanitarian consequences, including during the thefts themselves. According to a mining security supervisor, the last ambulance operating in Dori was stolen in January 2022, and a pregnant woman who was being carried to hospital in it died from complications after she was left by the side of the road. It is not clear whether JNIM or ISSP was responsible for this theft.⁵⁹

This is not an entirely new development. Bandits and car theft gangs had targeted NGO vehicles prior to the conflict, as had armed groups and vehicle theft gangs elsewhere in the Sahel.⁶⁰ However, the demand for 4x4 vehicles has led to a substantial rise in the theft of NGO cars.

NGO vehicles have also been regular targets for armed groups in Mali and Niger, which has come to be a severe constraint to humanitarian access. As described earlier by the car rental agent, in northern Mali the regularity of car theft has given rise to a highly politicized vehicle rental economy, in which the vehicles of certain car rental companies are left unscathed by armed groups. According to some NGO workers, certain NGOs have become unwilling participants in this network. Given the high probability of being carjacked on some roads leading to communities in need of aid, NGOs are sometimes forced to choose between either using these car rental agencies or not accessing the area in need.⁶¹

JNIM's hijacking of trucks

JNIM also frequently hijacks trucks and fuel tankers. These cases offer a point of comparison to car thefts to demonstrate the broader impact of vehicle hijackings on local economies. A focus group of truck drivers who had been impacted by these hijackings was held in Kaya, Burkina Faso, on 13 July 2022 to examine these attacks. Quite often, JNIM steals trucks carrying key goods such as food or fuel. JNIM typically releases the driver unharmed after the driver has driven the truck to a remote location in the bush.

The drivers are occasionally, but not always, allowed to leave with their trucks; if not, they have to make their way to help on foot. Several research participants were asked whether JNIM sells the trucks afterwards, either whole or for parts and scrap metal. Respondents said that this was very unlikely, and there had been no sightings of JNIM selling trucks or vehicle parts, and certainly not on a systematic basis. More likely, they felt, there was 'a graveyard of abandoned trucks in the bush'. This is particularly common in Burkina Faso, where JNIM and ISSP units depend on such thefts to resupply themselves.

These hijackings have a severe impact on the local economy and on the lives of the truck drivers. Truck drivers often operate as freelance workers, hiring out themselves and their trucks to people needing to move goods. If their truck is stolen, their livelihood is taken from them. Regular hijackings of trucks, along with generalized threats against movement, have led to a dearth of movement along major axes, which has severely impacted the supply of food and essential goods to regional towns.

The Burkinabè armed forces have attempted to escort convoys of civilian suppliers along these roads, but a number of these convoys have been subject to devastating attacks. In practice, the army is unable to guarantee a convoy's security without aerial support, meaning that most truck drivers would prefer to move unescorted, or ideally to avoid driving along those roads at all costs. All of the 10 truck drivers in the focus group in Kaya said that they were now effectively unemployed, either because their trucks had been taken by armed groups, or because they were too traumatized by what they had experienced on the roads to resume work. ■

JNIM does not, however, appear to be involved to any significant extent in the commercial trade of stolen vehicles. Most participants consulted for this research agreed that JNIM is predominantly looking to meet its own operational needs when it steals vehicles, not to profit from reselling them.

There may be occasional exceptions to this rule. For instance, a car stolen from an NGO in Markoye in January 2022 (an area that has both JNIM and ISSP activity) was later found in Tessit, Mali, in the possession of a car dealer who sold cars in Gao.⁶² Many stolen cars were also reportedly found by Malian armed forces during operations in the Serma Forest in Douentza in June 2022, although it is unclear whether these were for JNIM's own use or for sale.⁶³

JNIM has been known to divert the cars that combatants steal elsewhere in the region, including across borders, presumably to meet operational needs there. For example, in June 2022, a car was stolen during an attack by JNIM on the Karma gold mine, around 20 kilometres from Ouahigouya. It was then found by Malian soldiers in Ségou later that same month.⁶⁴ It is, however, difficult to say how widespread this diversion is.

Islamic State Sahel Province

It is difficult to attribute activity to ISSP with a high level of confidence. This is because ISSP occupies a smaller territory than JNIM and is more active in zones that are highly contested, and which have seen activities by both groups in recent months. In 2022, the Gourma region of the tri-border zone was heavily contested by ISSP, and their presence in departments such as Ansongo and Ménaka is well-established.⁶⁵ A greater involvement of extremist combatants in the stolen car market has been described in these areas, and it is on these grounds that the tentative distinction between ISSP and JNIM is drawn. Some of the known hubs for buying, selling and moving stolen vehicles across borders fall predominantly within the ISSP sphere of influence, such as Tessit, N'tillit, Anderamboukane, Ménaka, Tin Hama, Fafa and the areas around Tankademi in Niger.⁶⁶

There is no evidence to suggest that ISSP 'taxes' the sale of stolen vehicles. However, an individual with close connections to armed groups active on the border of Mali and Niger alleged that some ISSP combatants sell on some of the vehicles they have stolen.⁶⁷ They reportedly charge fixed prices, depending on the quality and condition of the car. They also adjust the price depending on the buyer. According to him, they will sometimes sell to fellow ISSP combatants for between FCFA500 000 and FCFA3 million (roughly €1 000– €5 000), and this is typically for the purpose of eventually buying new vehicles themselves. Commercial vehicle dealers or unrelated community members are charged a much higher price, which can reach up to FCFA7 million (about €10 700) for a car.

The most frequent buyers are reportedly Arab traders from the Gao region, or a small number of buyers from Western Sahara. According to this individual, if there are more than 10 cars to be sold at any one time, they are sold to the Sahrawi buyers for between FCFA4 million and FCFA5 million each (about €6 000– €7 500), a lower rate than other car dealers are offered. ISSP commanders may also sometimes choose to sell a car or motorbike at one of the regional markets on a more ad-hoc basis.

However, other participants could not confirm this information, and some said that it was unlikely that ISSP would be selling vehicles that it would have use for itself, particularly while they were in the process of expanding and consolidating their control in the tri-border area.⁶⁸

Offensive uses of stolen cars and VBIED attacks

Cars are quite rarely used in attacks by both JNIM and ISSP, with motorbikes being the far more common mode of transport for combatants during attacks. Pickup trucks are periodically used in attacks, since it is possible to mount heavier weapons to the back of them.⁶⁹ Observers remarked that incidents involving hard-top cars were much rarer, although not unheard of.⁷⁰ For example, in Bourganza, in the Centre Nord region of Burkina Faso in May 2022, a stolen car with improvised armour was deployed in a complex attack by JNIM against a military detachment.⁷¹

Several participants suggested that the theft of branded NGO vehicles or ambulances was an especially dangerous phenomenon since these cars (and particularly the ambulances) would allow combatants to enter secured areas without suspicion and to mount attacks. This concern is not unmerited: 'fake' UN vehicles with UN logos painted on them were used during the 2018 bombing of the Gao airport.⁷² However, it does not seem armed groups in possession of these vehicles have used this strategy in



Vehicles disguised with fake UN livery have been used in VBIED attacks on airports in Mali. © MENASTREAM

recent years. For instance, in the attack on Koutoukalé prison in Niger in 2019, a vehicle stolen from an international NGO was among the three used in the offensive. However, the NGO vehicle was not used to enter the prison under false pretences; the convoy was visibly heavily armed.⁷³

Stolen vehicles – including NGO vehicles – have been used in VBIEDs or suicide attacks, for instance in an attack in Arbinda, Burkina Faso, in 2019. Nevertheless, VBIED attacks are not a hugely common phenomenon in the Sahel. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 11 VBIED attacks involving cars and one involving a motorized tricycle occurred in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2014 and 2022.⁷⁴ A head of security for a commercial mining operation who has worked across the Sahel remarked that, at least in Mali, there were significantly fewer VBIED incidents than there had been cars stolen.⁷⁵ Altogether, this suggests that armed groups need the cars much more for mobility than they do for VBIED attacks. This partly reflects the largely rural geography of the Sahelian conflict. Armed groups have predominantly sought to keep the state out of rural areas that they are able to control, rather than trying to make enduring offensives into cities. ■



CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This report has outlined the myriad ways in which the theft and smuggling of cars, and their exchange and resale, affects daily life and contributes to instability in the central Sahel. This is a set of complex, overlapping phenomena that have severe impacts on the lives and livelihoods of residents, especially in areas where there is little or no state presence, and where armed groups and bandits make road usage extremely dangerous.

In at least some cases documented here, car owners have felt the need to choose between paying armed actors for protection and having their cars stolen. The longer these 'theft or protection' economies are able to develop, the harder they are likely to become to dismantle, since participants will have less incentive to take part in peace or stabilization efforts. While JNIM and ISSP have not so far attempted to monetize stolen vehicles in a significant way, their frequent thefts of 4x4 vehicles and trucks, as well as their violence against road users, have dramatically diminished peoples' ability to travel. In turn, this has seriously damaged local economies and livelihoods.

Unfortunately, there are major structural factors that have led to the de-prioritization of the stolen vehicle trade as a site for policy action. Firstly, Sahelian states do not have capacity to control many of the peripheral territories where armed and criminal groups operate, and where vehicle theft is most acute. What presence they do have is understandably focused on immediate security threats. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that, while vehicle theft can have a devastating impact on peoples' lives, traders of stolen vehicles and parts (particularly vehicles stolen abroad or in neighbouring countries) do not see their business as immoral. There is sometimes a disinterest in the origin of the vehicles or parts (as long as it does not carry major risk), as well as a recognition that most customers cannot afford new, or even licit second-hand vehicles. Some participants reacted angrily when asked about the stolen vehicle trade. One vehicle parts salesperson in Birnin Konni told a field researcher:

People are selling babies and organs within 10 kilometres of here! You and the authorities should be more concerned about this than my honest business. I am burdened by customs levies on each of my trips to Sokoto, and by some police officers who take my parts in exchange for letting me sell.

The perception of state officials as unwelcome and perhaps predatory is common in West Africa.⁷⁶ This makes for a difficult basis for prescribing policy since there are few easy responses that are realistic within current state capacities. However, there are certain levers for addressing the factors that contribute to instability.

Recommendations

- **Ease access to existing vehicle registration databases for officers around the region, and simplify the process of legally importing vehicles and acquiring paperwork.** One of the challenges of this research was establishing the correct legal procedure for legally importing a vehicle, acquiring the necessary documents and then reselling the vehicle. Different participants gave different responses about the necessary steps. This is partly the result of the requirements from multiple law enforcement agencies, regional bodies and national offices. It appears that officials in different areas of the same country have varying understandings of the procedure, and also do not have the resources to, for instance, check or update existing digital databases of vehicle ownership. Some participants alleged that some procedures in investigations – for instance, acquiring an INTERPOL check of a VIN number – cost money, although it is not clear whether this is an official policy or a bribe demanded by a particular official. Finally, getting a car legally imported and officially registered is an expensive, time-consuming process for buyers. This increases the appeal of the illicit market, but also of intermediaries who offer bureaucratic services, some of which are illegal or facilitate further illegal activity. States should make the official procedure as simple and inexpensive as possible, and use public information campaigns to clarify what the legal procedure is, which fees are legitimate and illegitimate to charge, and how consumers can protect themselves from illicit actors in the vehicle market.
- **Enhance cross-border cooperation between law enforcement services to combat vehicle crime.** Given the significance of borders in regional car theft, it is clear that theft networks rely heavily on the frequent lack of cross-border cooperation between different countries' law enforcement services. Enhancing cooperation, and simplifying the systems for alerting neighbouring states about stolen cars, could substantially inhibit commercial car theft.
- **Where possible, invest in infrastructure that will reduce the risk of vehicle theft.** Vehicle theft is a particular risk on poor quality roads since slow-moving vehicles are more easily attacked by bandits or armed groups. There is also a seasonal element to vehicle theft. According to a seller of detached vehicle parts in Gao, carjacking is substantially more frequent during the rainy season since vehicles are moving exceptionally slowly and are easily attacked. Investing in well-surfaced roads, particularly in areas that are threatened by instability but still accessible, will improve the resilience of local people and economies, since their movements are less likely to be disrupted. In cities, investing in safe, well-functioning public transport systems will also decrease reliance on vehicles that are vulnerable to theft, and so decrease theft as a whole. This will have other important benefits, including public health benefits from a reduction of fumes from cars and motorbikes.



NOTES

- 1 Case information provided to the GI-TOC by a Nigerian diplomatic source, by email, October 2022.
- 2 For example, see: Peer Schouten, *Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 2022; Ibraheem Bahiss et al, Rethinking armed group control: Towards a new conceptual framework, ODI, April 2022, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/115751/1/Weigand_rethinking_armed_group_control_published.pdf.
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- 5 Godwin Ayetor et al, Vehicle regulations in Africa: Impact on used vehicle import and new vehicle sales, *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 10, 100384.
- 6 Abel Ezeoha et al, Second-hand vehicle markets in West Africa: A source of regional disintegration, trade informality and welfare losses, *Business History*, 61, 1, 187–204.
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- 8 Data provided by INTERPOL, Burkina Faso, 18 July 2022.
- 9 Interview with a security researcher and consultant in Bamako, 22 September 2022, by phone; Interview with an NGO security advisor based in eastern Burkina Faso, 11 September 2022, by phone; Interview with a mechanic working in La Casse, Ouagadougou, 17 July 2022.
- 10 Interview with a journalist working for an independent media outlet, Ouagadougou, 11 July 2022.
- 11 Interview with an NGO security and access analyst based in eastern Burkina Faso, 22 October 2022, by phone.
- 12 Interview with an NGO driver, Ouagadougou, 14 July 2022.
- 13 Interview with a car *démarcheur* and salesperson, Ouagadougou, 18 July 2022.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Interview with car mechanics working in La Casse, Ouagadougou, 19 July 2022.
- 16 Interview with two professional drivers and mechanics, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 17 Interview with a security and logistics operative in the transport sector, Ouagadougou, 12 July 2022.
- 18 Interview with a journalist working for a state-run news outlet, Ouagadougou, 10 July 2022.
- 19 Interview with a journalist working for an independent media outlet, Ouagadougou, 11 July 2022; Interview with a *démarcheur* fixer working in second-hand car sales, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 20 Interview with a journalist working for a state-run news outlet, Ouagadougou, 10 July 2022; Interview with a security logistician in the transport sector, Ouagadougou, 12 July 2022.
- 21 Interview with a driver for an NGO, Ouagadougou, 16 July 2022. Altering VINs can be done in a more organized manner, such as by acquiring legitimate VINs at car auctions or imitating VINs belonging to similar models of cars. (See: Leonid Lantsman, 'Moveable currency': The role of seaports in export oriented vehicle theft, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 59, 2, 157–184; Mikel Longman, The problem of auto theft, in Eric Stauffer and Monica Bonfanti (eds), *Forensic Investigation of Stolen-Recovered and Other Crime-Related Vehicles*. Academic Press, 2006, pp 1–21. However, there is no evidence that this is being done at scale within the Sahel region.
- 22 Interview with intermediaries for garages selling second-hand cars, Ouagadougou, 16 July 2022.
- 23 Interview with a garage owner in Niamey, 28 July 2022.
- 24 Interview with a garage owner in Niamey, 28 July 2022; Interview with garage workers specializing in the breakage of cars, Ouagadougou, 17 July 2022.
- 25 Interview with a *démarcheur* fixer working in second-hand car sales, Ouagadougou, 17 July 2022; Interview with a second-hand car salesperson, Ouagadougou, 18 July 2022.
- 26 Interview with a professional driver, Gao, 19 August 2022.

- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Interview with the owner of a car rental agency, Timbuktu, 19 August 2022.
- 29 Interview with a former INTERPOL director in Niamey, 28 July 2022.
- 30 Interview in Niamey with a former car thief with connections to armed groups, formerly active in Tillabéri, 25 July 2022.
- 31 Interview with a freelance 4x4 driver working for government and NGOs, Tillabéri, 27 July 2022.
- 32 Interview with an NGO worker based in Dori, 24 October 2022, by phone.
- 33 Interview with former MINUSMA staff member who had previously been based in Kidal, Tillabéri, 28 August 2022.
- 34 Interview with former police commissioner for INTERPOL Niger, Niamey, 25 July 2022.
- 35 These 'markets' are best known for selling stolen cars rather than motorbikes. Static markets for stolen motorbikes were not identified during this research. This is probably because motorbikes are easily disguised and a lower-risk commodity that can be moved and sold in peer-to-peer networks. A forthcoming GI-TOC report on motorbikes will explore this issue further.
- 36 Interview with a car rental agency promoter, Timbuktu, 13 August 2022.
- 37 Interview with a researcher for a think-tank based in Niamey, Niamey, 28 July 2022.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Focus group with truck and public transport drivers, Kaya, 10 July 2022.
- 40 Interview with a victim of vehicle theft, Gao, 21 August 2022.
- 41 Interview with a car rental agent, Timbuktu, 13 August 2022.
- 42 Interview with a car rental business owner, Gao, 19 August 2022.
- 43 Interview with a Tuareg car rental agency owner, Gao, 19 August 2022.
- 44 Interview with the director of the Gao office of an international NGO, 21 August 2022.
- 45 Interview with a professional driver, Gao, 18 August 2022.
- 46 Interview with an NGO worker formerly based in Birnin Konni, Tillabéri, 28 August 2022.
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- 48 International Crisis Group, Drug trafficking, violence and politics in northern Mali, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotraffic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>.
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- 50 Interview with a former INTERPOL liaison officer, Niamey, 27 July 2022.
- 51 Interview with an aid worker based in northern Mali, 26 December 2022, by phone.
- 52 International NGO Safety Organisation, January 2023 – NGO incidents overview, January 2023, <https://sway.office.com/o41dcATqBoA0Eg6b>.
- 53 Interview with a security officer for a mining company whose company vehicle was stolen by JNIM in Burkina Faso and was found in central Mali, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 54 Interview with a security officer for a commercial mining operation, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 55 Interview with an NGO security practitioner working in Ouahigouya, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 56 Interview with an NGO security practitioner in Ouagadougou, 16 July 2022.
- 57 Interview with a former UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs staff member in Burkina Faso, 25 May 2022, by phone. Incident confirmed in telephone conversation with an NGO security and access coordinator in the Est region, 28 May 2022.
- 58 Interview with an NGO worker in the Est region, 14 May 2022, by phone. Increase in ambulance thefts confirmed in an interview with a journalist from an independent media outlet, Ouagadougou, 11 July 2022.
- 59 Interview with a mining security supervisor, Ouagadougou, 12 July 2022.
- 60 Interview with a Burkinabè government advisor, Ouagadougou, 10 July 2022.
- 61 Interview with an NGO security officer in Gao, 18 August 2022; Interview with a car rental business owner, Gao, 19 August 2022.
- 62 Interview with an NGO security and access advisor based in Dori, Ouagadougou, 15 July 2022.
- 63 Interview with an NGO security and access advisor based in Mopti, 27 June 2022, by phone.
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- 68 Interview with an aid worker based in north-eastern Mali, 26 December 2022, by phone.
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- 71 Interview with a Burkinabè broadcast journalist covering the conflict, Ouagadougou, 12 July 2022; *Burkina Faso: L'armée saisit un blindé des terroristes et en neutralise une trentaine à Bourzanga*, Burkina24, 21 May 2022, <https://burkina24.com/2022/05/21/burkina-faso-larmee-saisit-un-blindé-des-terroristes-et-en-neutralise-une-trentaine-a-bourzanga>
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