

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS  
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2023 SERIES



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME



# MALI

HUMAN SMUGGLING RESILIENT  
IN THE FACE OF INSTABILITY

Flore Berger

JUNE 2023

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# INTRODUCTION

In Mali, 2022 was marked by high levels of political instability and insecurity, as well as growing economic hardship. The country's transition authorities have faced growing isolation internally, in particular with signatory groups in northern Mali; regionally, with Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sanctions levied in the first half of the year; and internationally, with European partners and internal organizations such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) due to the deployment of Russian private military company the Wagner Group and the imposition of restrictions on the peacekeeping mission's movements and rotations.

Meanwhile, the security situation continued to deteriorate. Central Mali saw an increase in clashes between jihadist groups and the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), along with its partners from the Wagner Group, as well as reports of reprisals against communities and blockades on villages. The north-east of the country saw further violence, with the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) increasing its activities. This can be explained partly, but not exclusively, as a result of the security vacuum created by the French withdrawal from their military bases in Ménaka in June and Gao in August, as well as the growing estrangement of the Malian transitional authorities from its international partners.

While northern and central Mali continue to be the most affected by armed conflicts, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has also heightened its activities in southern areas of the country. Attacks increased in Koulikoro, Kayes and Sikasso regions (the three southern regions of Mali), with JNIM progressively moving closer to Bamako, particularly in the second part of 2022 and early 2023. In January 2023 alone, the group claimed five attacks against border control posts and gendarmerie checkpoints in Koulikoro and Kayes regions, all between 20 and 80 kilometres from the capital. Of note is a direct attack in July 2022 on the Kati military camp, Mali's largest military base, and a key bastion guarding the capital. Noteworthy also is the kidnapping of a German priest in November 2022 in Bamako by JNIM, the first of such events since the conflict started, which adds to the pressure that the group is putting on the capital.<sup>1</sup>

Amid political instability and worsening insecurity, human smugglings trends stayed broadly stable and consistent in 2022. This underscores that smuggling networks in the region remain highly resilient, limiting the impact of state-level policy shifts, and have established connections with all armed actors in the country (state and non-state actors), allowing for the smuggling to continue. Fluctuations in the specific routes used and numbers of migrants traveling along them were nevertheless recorded, for example through Gao due to the impact of the rainy season and insecurity, and through Mauritania because of the Mali–Mauritania border closure.

The Timbuktu route remains the most popular, with roughly 600 migrants passing through each week to get to In-Khalil or In-Afarak, at the border with Algeria, or less common routes to the north-west towards Mauritania. The preeminence of the route has been broadly stable since the easing of COVID-19 restrictions led to the rebound of migration in 2021.<sup>2</sup> This can be explained by the relative calm of the security situation in Timbuktu region, and the limited security presence by government and armed groups along the roads and tracks leading north and north-west. There were some fluctuations in migrant numbers in 2022, although seasonal events, such as the rainy season, had far less impact on movement to and through Timbuktu.

Gao, which slowly re-emerged as a secondary migrant-transportation hub in the latter months of 2021, was much more impacted by insecurity and seasonal changes in 2022.<sup>3</sup> In large part, this is due to a differing profile of migrants moving through the city, with many hailing from Burkina Faso or Niger, who for the most part move through Gao on their way to artisanal gold-mining centres in northern Mali. Migrant movement via Gao has also been impacted by insecurity in central Mali – with a blockade imposed by JNIM on the town of Boni between May and September effectively cutting the road from Bamako to Gao – and in the north-east of the country, where the IS Sahel has increased its tempo of operations.



**A pickup truck with a dozen migrants leaves Gao and heads towards Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Algeria, 2020.**

© Souleymane Ag Anara

Finally, Kayes region, in south-western Mali, has emerged as an important itinerary for migrants heading north-west to Mauritania. From there, some of this flow of migrants embark from areas near the capital of Nouakchott or the northern city of Nouadhibou for Spain's Canary Islands, while others work within Mauritania or continue on overland to Morocco.

The three main itineraries for migrants traveling from and through Mali towards Europe are relatively stable and it is unlikely that they will shift in the near future. However, the situation bears close watching, both due to the potential regional impacts of Mali's increasingly complex politics and worsening security situation, and because such dynamics could have unpredictable impacts on migration movement along one or more of the routes transecting the country.

## **Methodology**

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2022 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this brief are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the brief should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Mali and the broader region.



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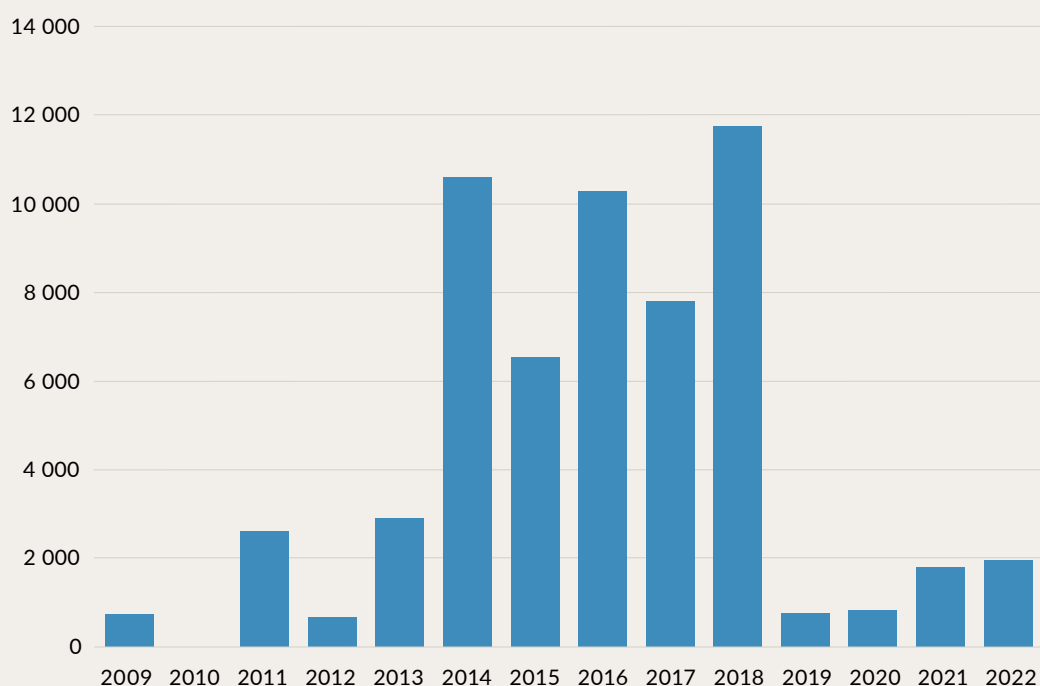
## MALI'S GROWING ISOLATION

In 2022, Mali faced growing internal, regional and international pressure and isolation. After two successful coups, in August 2020 and May 2021, led by the current president, Colonel Assimi Goïta, and failure to organize elections in early 2022 to respect the military government's own commitment, tensions rose between ECOWAS and the Malian transitional authorities.<sup>4</sup> Disagreement over the time frame for a return to democracy led to the latter imposing a series of economic and diplomatic sanctions on Mali in January 2022, including the closure of land and air borders, and the suspension of commercial and financial transactions. These sanctions were lifted in July 2022, after authorities announced that elections would be held in February 2024.<sup>5</sup>

However, the sanctions, coupled with the continued impact of COVID-19 on international logistics, and the Ukraine conflict, resulted in an inflation spike of as much as 8%, up from 2% in previous years. Price increases of key food staples such as rice, oil and flour had a particularly acute impact on many communities. The situation led to public complaints and strikes by traders, teachers and civil society at the end of 2022 and beginning of 2023.<sup>6</sup> However, it is not yet possible at this stage to link the worsening economic situation to increases in migration. The number of Malians disembarked by European states increased only slightly in 2022 in comparison to the previous year and is far below levels recorded in the mid-2010s. Nonetheless, if sustained, the situation could drive further social tensions in 2023 and push more Malians to seek work in the informal economy, including the gold mining sector, or emigrate abroad.

Operation Barkhane – the French counter-terrorism operation in Mali launched in 2013 – officially ended, with all forces withdrawn by August 2022.<sup>7</sup> Further, it announced the suspension of development aid to Mali – citing as a justification the alliance of the military junta and the Wagner Group.<sup>8</sup> This reflected the deteriorating relationship between France and the new military authorities, which worsened after the second coup by Malian military authorities in May 2021. In this context, Mali accused France of collaborating with jihadists, stealing natural resources and not respecting the country's sovereignty on multiple occasions.<sup>9</sup> Bamako prohibited French-funded NGOs from operating in the country.<sup>10</sup> In early 2022, the French ambassador to Mali was expelled.<sup>11</sup>





**FIGURE 1** Malians intercepted by European states.

SOURCE: Frontex

The relationship between local authorities and MINUSMA also deteriorated in 2022, with several incidents of the mission being impeded, its freedom of movement restricted and its operations openly criticized. Malian authorities suspended troop rotations between July and August 2022 and expelled the MINUSMA spokesperson.<sup>12</sup> Operationally, the mission faces ground and air movement restrictions, particularly in the north-east and centre of Mali. This has led to a decline in the mission's ability to conduct intelligence and surveillance operations (with helicopters or drones) or to conduct deterrence flights after early-warning alerts.<sup>13</sup> The uncooperativeness of Malian authorities, alongside the French pull-out and the presence of the Wagner Group, led several countries to announce troop withdrawals from MINUSMA, including the UK, Sweden, Germany, Egypt, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>14</sup>

Against this growing isolation from the region and from Western partners, Mali's transitional authorities grew closer to other partners, including Russia and the Wagner Group. While Mali has a long history of bilateral engagement and military support from Russia (and before that the Soviet Union), its engagement with the Wagner Group is more nascent, dating to December 2021. Nonetheless, Wagner's role in Mali has increased substantially and rapidly, including accompanying the FAMA on patrols and combat missions. The Wagner Group's presence coincided with increased and systematic human rights abuses, targeting especially the Fulani community, including the reported killing of 300 civilians in Moura, central Mali.<sup>15</sup>

The transitional authorities have also faced growing isolation internally, specifically with signatory groups – with the 2015 Algiers peace agreement being on the verge of collapsing. Throughout 2022, new tensions emerged, with incendiary statements made by key government figures.<sup>16</sup> Escalating tensions led the Cadre stratégique pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (Strategic framework

for peace, security and development, CSP-PSD) – which includes the Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad (Coordination of Azawad movements, CMA), involving Tuareg and Arab rebel groups, and the pro-government groups of the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d’Alger (Algiers platform of 14 June 2014, Plateforme) – to suspend their participation in the peace talks, citing the lack of political will on the part of the transitional authorities.<sup>17</sup> In early 2023, tensions continued to escalate, and in March, the military government published a communiqué accusing the CMA of various violations of the peace agreement, stating that ‘[the government] will reject any accusation which would be likely to hold it responsible for possible consequences of its violation’ – interpreted as a rather hostile declaration.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the signatory armed groups in the north, facing IS Sahel pressure, are increasingly taking an important role in protecting communities and forging alliances with other armed groups, including JNIM. The CSP conducted a large-scale securitization operation in February 2023 south of Kidal, mobilizing more than 2 500 men, a sign that both signatory armed groups are unified against threats to northern territories despite being former opponents.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the CMA announced the merger of its three components in February, unifying their armed forces under a single command to better respond to increased insecurity in northern Mali.<sup>20</sup>



A demonstrator holds a sign reading 'Down with ECOWAS' during a protest against sanctions imposed on Mali, Bamako, 14 January 2022. © Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images



## MIGRATION VIA NORTHERN MALI REMAINS STABLE

**M**ali has long been a key avenue for migrants from throughout West Africa seeking to transit north, via Algeria, or north-east through Niger to Libya. Some, although not all, have Europe as a final destination.

In part, Mali's significance in migration dynamics is simple geography, given its size and long borders. However, movement via the country has also been eased by policy approaches, in particular the freedom of movement enjoyed by citizens from ECOWAS states. Moreover, a number of longstanding smuggling routes and networks exist, making sourcing of mobility options relatively straightforward for many migrants, although the ease of travel differs substantially between the two main northern smuggling hubs: Timbuktu and Gao.

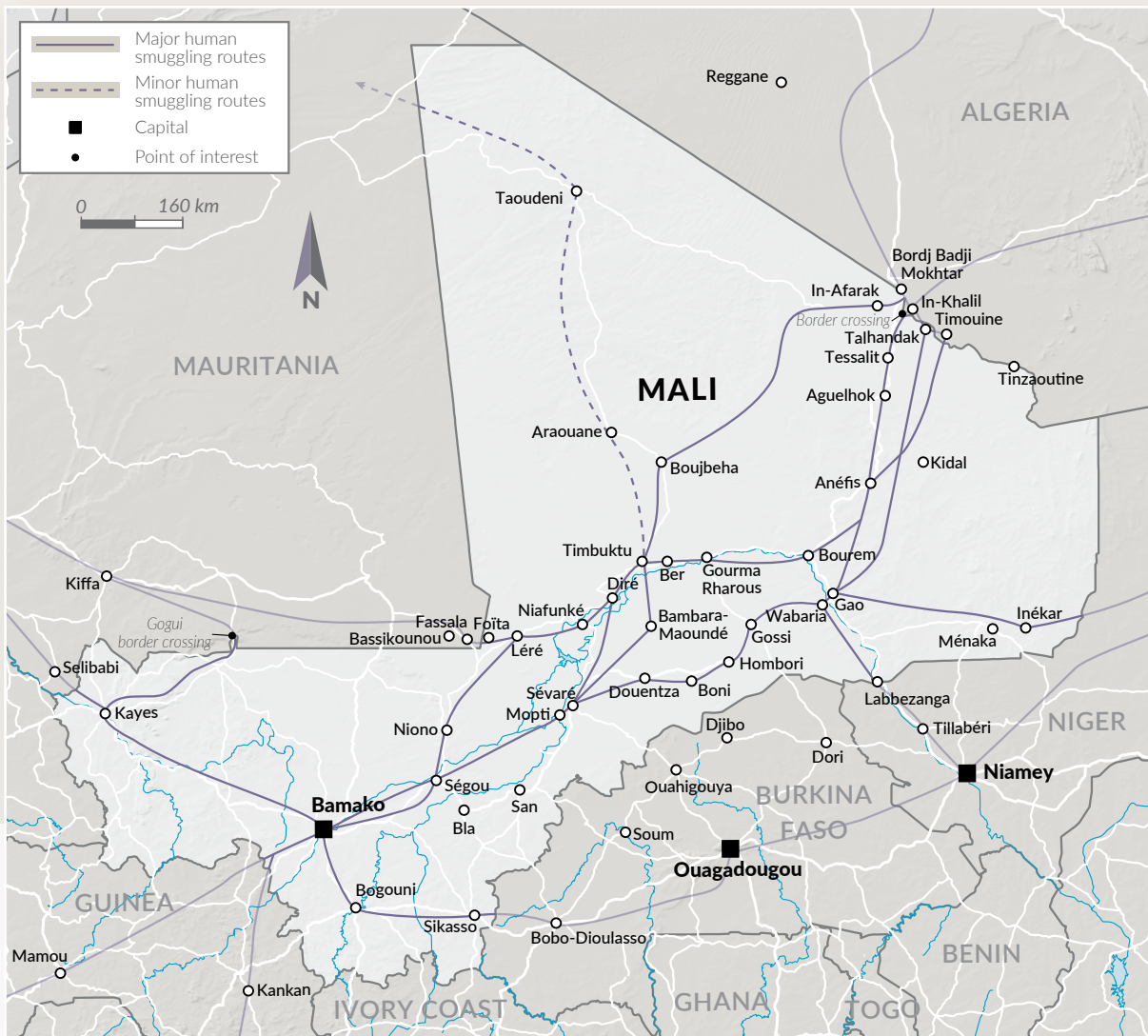
### Timbuktu: Most stable and active hub

Timbuktu remained Mali's most important hub for human smuggling activities thanks to the relatively stable security situation in the area and its direct route to the Algerian border. After a halt in early 2020 as a result of COVID-19 mobility restrictions, a rebound in September of that year, and a steady increase in 2021, the number of migrants transiting the city stabilized in 2022.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, interviewees reported slight variations in numbers at different points in the year. The period from January to May was the busiest, with an estimated 800 migrants per week on average moving through Timbuktu, a third more than reported flows in December.

These numbers decreased during the rainy season, between June and September. However, in the final months of 2022 a slight rebound was recorded, with between 650 and 700 migrants reported to be moving in a given week.

Most migrants transiting Timbuktu were West African, including Malians, Guineans, Gambians and Ivorians. The vast majority of West Africans head north to Algeria, according to a local contact. In contrast, only half of the Malians travelling continue to the border, with the rest looking for economic opportunities in Timbuktu, Gao or Kidal regions. A minority head to the north-west to Mauritania.

Despite border closures linked to ECOWAS sanctions between January to July, the nationalities of migrants travelling to Timbuktu, their itineraries and the modes of transportation used did not change.



**FIGURE 2** Human smuggling routes through Mali, December 2022.

Long-distance bus companies linking regional capitals to Bamako, such as Air Niono, Sonef, Nour and African Tours Trans, continued to operate despite the closure, unloading passengers right before the Malian border, asking them to cross by foot, and then picking them up on the other side. For those travelling by car or on small private buses, borders could also be crossed easily via small unguarded roads or by bribing border authorities.

Once in Bamako, migrants either travelled to Timbuktu using commercial bus companies, by minibus or in 4x4s, the latter being much quicker but also more expensive. During the rainy season, boats from Sévaré to Timbuktu were also used. Most migrants arriving in Timbuktu were already in touch with smuggling networks, which send them information by text message or WhatsApp on how best to get there.

Upon arrival in Timbuktu city, *passeurs*, the colloquial name in the Sahel for transporters involved in human smuggling, wait for migrants and drive them directly to homes owned by smugglers, many of which are in the neighbourhoods of Abaradjou, Koiratawo and Hamabangou. Migrants typically stay in these safe houses for between 24 and 48 hours before being transported north to the Algerian border.



A group of migrants, dropped some 10 kilometers from the Algerian border, walk towards Bordj Badji Mokhtar, June 2022. © Souleymane Ag Anara

According to an interviewee, between 10 and 15 people (mostly Malians) are in charge of the activity and are nicknamed 'Rasta', 'Kadafi' or 'Japonais'. No competition between smugglers was reported. Smugglers work with Arab or Tuareg *passeurs*, many of whom are also involved in driving goods, along with people, on northbound routes to Algeria. Usually, transporters carry migrants in pickup trucks, which usually accommodate 30 people.

Several routes can be used to reach the Algerian border but all lead to In-Afarak or In-Khalil, which takes about two days of travelling. Once the pickups have reached these border towns, they drop the migrants five to 10 kilometres away from the border itself, often at night, and point them in the direction of Borg Badji Mokhtar, the first major town on the Algerian side, and instruct them to start walking.

Delays in departure can occur if a migrant cannot pay. The lack of financing is, in part, a strategy to mitigate the risks of extortion while in transit, which are widespread. It is hence better for migrants to travel with minimal cash. Once in Timbuktu, most receive intermittent transfers of funds from their families, via mobile money (typically Orange Money) or other online money-transfer platforms. Interviewees also reported that money might be transferred directly from their families to the *passeurs*, especially when another family member has already used their services.

In 2022, the journey from Timbuktu to In-Khalil or In-Afarak ranged in cost between FCFA75 000 and FCFA80 000 (€115–€120). However, prices tended to vary and less-informed migrants or anglophone migrants could pay up to FCFA150 000 (€230).

While most migrants travelled towards the Algerian border, interviewees also reported that another route, linking Timbuktu to the Western Sahara through Taoudenni and Tindouf in Algeria, was emerging. The intended destination for those on the Mauritanian route was typically Spain's Canary Islands. Migrants were mostly groups of Syrians, Bangladeshis or Pakistanis. They hired their own vehicle and driver in Timbuktu, typically paying around FCFA150 000 (€230).

Armed groups operating along the route from Timbuktu to Algeria, whether signatory groups – such as the CMA and Plateforme – or violent extremism organizations (mostly JNIM) were involved either directly (in transportation) or indirectly (in taxation) in human smuggling in the region. Despite the involvement of different armed actors, no group sought to monopolize the market, and more generally they did not openly fight each other, creating a favourable environment for the movement of people and goods. Rather, the majority of attacks recorded between Timbuktu and the Algerian border were JNIM attacks against either FAMA or MINUSMA forces.

## **Rainy season and insecurity impact movement through Gao**

Unlike the stable migration dynamics in Timbuktu, the situation in Gao in 2022 was marked by substantial fluctuations in the numbers of migrants passing through, both because of level of insecurity and the impact of the rainy season.

Mobility dynamics in Gao are characterized by mixed migration flows, the town being a seasonal migration hub. Interviewees distinguished between economic migrants (also called 'long-term migrants') who intend to travel to Algeria to reach Europe, and seasonal migrants who are part of the local fabric of transborder economic opportunities, especially around artisanal gold mining. From January to May, more than three-quarters of all migrants transiting through Gao were Nigeriens and Burkinabés coming to work in the artisanal gold mines in Gao and Kidal regions. The remainder were economic migrants, from Mali, Guinea, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon and Nigeria, aiming to cross the border. However, economic migrants can make up a third or more of the flow of migrants during the rainy season as seasonal migrants are less likely to travel during this period.

While the first five months of 2022 were relatively stable in terms of migration, the June to September period saw a sharp decline in numbers – which were reduced by 50% according to one interviewee. In part, this is because the rainy season started in June, leading many Burkinabé and Nigerien seasonal migrants to stay in their home countries to work in agriculture. The rainy season also impedes movement to the artisanal gold mines, given the often poor roads to the sites and impact of mud slides sparked by heavy rains. Mining operations are also affected, to a degree, by the weather, impacting the demand for miners.

In addition to the rains, movement of migrants to Gao was impeded by a worsening security situation in the region. In particular, the route between central Mali and Gao was cut by JNIM, which imposed a blockade between the end of May and September on Boni, a town on the RN16 national road. Migrants travelling north from Bamako to Gao were blocked in Douentza, a town 90 kilometers west of Boni. Alternate itineraries were used – for example, through Bambara-Maoudé, Timbuktu, Gossi and finally Gao – but during the rainy season, use of alternate roads became mostly impracticable for all vehicles except 4x4s. The blockade affected mostly economic migrants who typically travel first to Bamako before heading towards Gao.

Between September and December, a slight increase in migrant movement through Gao was reported, due to the end of the rainy season. Seasonal migration slowly increased after September and is expected to continue in early 2023 as it is a good period for both economic and seasonal migrants, so numbers should resume to the levels seen in early 2022 (between 1 500 and 2 000 migrants per month).

When in Gao, there are multiple routes for economic migrants to reach the Algerian border. Main routes go through Tangara, Anéfis and In-Khalil. Groups also stop in Talhandak, a hub in northern Mali. Some cross directly from there to Timouine, while others move along the border and continue to a crossing point near In-Khalil. *Passeurs* ask prices varying from FCFA30 000 to FCFA40 000 (€45–€60). In addition, there are multiple informal checkpoints operated by armed groups along the way where migrants are expected to pay between FCFA5 000 and FCFA10 000 (€7–€15) to pass. Unlike in Timbuktu, many armed actors operate on the route between Gao and the Algerian border, with no clear divisions on who controls what, and in a constantly evolving and much more contested environment. Migrants explained having to pay multiple times to the different groups that maintain informal checkpoints at the entry and exit of towns along the way, all claiming to ‘control’ the area.



## ROUTES FROM SOUTH-WESTERN MALI

**T**he West Africa component of the Atlantic route, from Mali to Mauritania to the Canary Islands, also remained active, following a constant rise in movement along this route since 2019.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, arrivals to the Canary Islands were diminished by almost 30% in 2022, the first year since 2019 where an important decrease has been registered.<sup>23</sup> The decrease in migrants arriving from Mauritania was particularly substantial, with 218 disembarked in 2022 compared to 2 000 in 2021, a decline claimed by Spanish authorities to have resulted from heightened police operations and improved international collaboration.<sup>24</sup>

The number of Malians moving through Kayes region towards Mauritania, however, increased in 2022, as the border point of Gogui reopened, allowing for legal passage between the two countries. The route remains safer than the one through Gao or even Timbuktu, and mostly ethnic Bambara and Soninke from Kayes region are more closely connected with Malian–Mauritanian networks. The vast majority of those travelling the route are young men, pushed by economic hardship as well as social pressure to leave the country and be successful abroad. Some of this is fuelled by the false promises of those who have already made the journey, including some who would have since become involved in smuggling networks. These promises involve inflated work circumstances and accommodation conditions in Mauritania, as well as the chance of success in crossing to the Canaries.

Malian migrants cross into Mauritania, the first leg of the route, in both formal and informal ways, depending on whether the border with Mauritania is open or closed, and whether official documentation can be procured. For migrants crossing the border legally, the first step involves taking a regional bus linking Bamako to Nouakchott. These buses cross the border at the Gogui port of entry, which is to the north-east of the city of Kayes. Malians do not need a visa to enter Mauritania, only a pass (*laissez-passer*), which costs FCFA500 (€0.76) and is applied for and delivered at the border.

Migrants had to rely heavily on smugglers in the first half of 2022, with the border between Mali and Mauritania closed until 20 June due to COVID-19 restrictions. Because of this, most transit by migrants across the border occurred irregularly. The key hub for irregular movement from western Mali into Mauritania is Sélibaby, north-west of the city of Kayes. To reach Sélibaby, migrants coming from Mali either follow dirt roads along the Senegal River and cross directly in Mauritania or follow the main road (RN1) and go through Senegal first, following the road from Kayes to Diboli, Gouraye and Sélibaby.





Men wait at a bus station for cross-border transport to resume in Bamako, January 2022.

© Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images

An important smuggling network based in Sélibaby drives migrants using small buses or 4x4s following the border with Senegal all the way to Rosso. They are then taken north on the N2 to Nouakchott. Transiting using irregular means is expensive: the price of the journey from Sélibaby to Nouakchott varies between FCFA150 000 and FCFA200 000 (€229–€305), whereas legal transit involving commercial busses from Bamako to Nouakchott costs roughly 10 times less.

When the border was reopened, many started crossing from the Gogui border post again, while undocumented migrants kept using smugglers. An interviewee noted that an average of 1 500 migrants were crossing at Gogui per month – double the number passing through Nioro du Sahel, a town one hour away from the border, before June.

Once in Mauritania, networks involved in moving migrants do not necessarily transport them only to embarkation points to reach the Canary Islands. Networks are also active in providing migrant labour within Mauritania, including in Sélibaby, usually in construction or trade, and in Chami, a town between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, where many work in artisanal gold mining.

Some migrants nevertheless aim to cross to the Canary Islands, mostly from Nouakchott or Nouadhibou. As of December 2022, almost 15 682 migrants had reached the Canary Islands. Not all of these departures left from Mauritania, however, with some departing from Morocco, Western Sahara and Senegal. However, according to Spanish border police, Malians usually represent about 5% of the total arrivals, with about 80 Malian migrants on average disembarking in the Canaries per month.

Prices for the sea crossing vary, with some interviewees reporting costs of less than €1 000, but the majority noting prices between €1 200 and €1 400. Those steering the boats are often Senegalese but only rarely members of a smuggling network. 'It is too risky, so they ask one of the migrants to drive the boat and manage the journey,' said a GI-TOC contact who followed such a journey personally.

Finally, some migrants prefer working in Chami, Nouakchott or Nouadhibou until they can earn enough money, and then continue overland towards Western Sahara or Morocco. According to an interviewee in Nouadhibou, about one-third of migrants want to cross directly from Nouadhibou, but the remainder continue north overland. Smugglers are also involved on this route. An interviewee based in Nouadhibou estimated the passage from Nouadhibou to Morocco to cost around €500, with variations depending on the demand. In some cases, smuggling networks in northern Mauritania are reportedly connected with smuggling networks in Western Sahara and Morocco who also organize maritime crossings to the Canary Islands.



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## CONCLUSION

**M**igration dynamics in 2022 underscored the resilience of smuggling networks in Mali. Despite high levels of insecurity, political instability and isolation, and border closures, the movement of people did not stop. This can be explained in terms of the adaptability of smuggling networks, the trust that prospective migrants place in them, as well as the draw from the narrative of success created among migrant diasporas. Despite being aware of the challenges, obstacles and risks along the route, migrants interviewed throughout the year all wanted to ‘give it a go’. This outlook relies in large part on the reassurance they receive from people within their communities or even families that it is worth trying and that they are going to be successful.

Nevertheless, mobility has been restricted at times, especially due to the poor quality of the roads, heavy rains and shifts in local security dynamics, more so than because of the general deterioration of the security situation and political isolation.

Politically, there is likely to be continuity in the international and regional isolation of Mali, as well as growing turbulence as legislative elections are scheduled to take place in October 2023 and presidential elections in early 2024. While stakeholders’ attention will be on elections, violent extremist groups show no signs of reducing their activity and might capitalize on the election year. Meanwhile, the peace process and the relationship between the authorities and the signatory groups show no sign of improvement, with some local interviewees fearing a resumption of hostilities given the developments throughout 2022.

The security situation is hence likely to continue to steadily deteriorate, with armed groups consolidating power bases in northern and central Mali and expanding towards the southern regions. Moreover, with high inflation, coupled with fewer economic opportunities compounded by Mali’s isolation from regional and international partners, more social turmoil can be expected. In November 2022 alone, six different unions announced strikes because of the lack of government progress on promises made earlier in the year, and many Malians have expressed their distress at the economic situation.

Even in the face of such a worsening context, it is the GI-TOC’s assessment that the number of migrants moving to Gao, Timbuktu and Kayes is likely to remain stable or increase in 2023. Moreover, as economic hardship is a key driver of migration, this year could see higher numbers of Malians trying to find work in the informal economy (for example, artisanal gold-mining sites in the north) or by going to work abroad, either as seasonal migrants in neighbouring countries (Mauritania, Algeria and Morocco) or trying to reach Europe.

## Notes

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