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MOTORBIKES AND ARMED GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

*Anatomy of a
regional market*

Eleanor Beevor

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Cover: Members of armed groups search motorbikes and check documents outside Ménaka, Mali. © *Souleymane AG Anara/AFP via Getty Images*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines how motorbikes are drivers of both stability and instability in the Sahel region of West Africa. Specifically, it examines how variants of motorbike crime contribute to destabilization at a local economic level and in the broader Sahelian conflict. In that regard, the practices of both motorbike theft and motorbike trafficking are examined. The involvement of the Sahel's armed groups in trafficking is closely explored, and it is argued that motorbike trafficking is critical to the operations and mobility of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel (IS Sahel).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of motorbikes to the daily life of residents of the Sahel region.¹ Motorbikes are an essential means of transport in both urban and rural settings in these three countries, and the lynchpin of many local economies. This is because they represent the cheapest, and often most reliable, means of transport for citizens who cannot or do not want to rely on public transport, or who cannot afford a car. They have very often replaced donkey carts, camels or bicycles as forms of transport, and have become a staple in business and family life in the Sahel.

Note on motorbike classification

There is no singular classification system for motorbike weights and types. Weight, engine cubic capacity, torque and horsepower all determine motorbike performance. 'Heavy' motorbikes tend to refer to higher weight motorbikes, which typically require a stronger engine and larger fuel cylinders and cubic capacity. These models tend to have stronger shock absorbers and are able to carry more passengers.

However, respondents did not refer much to specific engine sizes or technological features when discussing motorbikes, but rather to particular brands. Certain brands (particularly the larger models of the Aloba, Sanili and Hajoue brands) have gained reputations in the Sahel for durability, fuel efficiency and adaptability to rough terrain. These are, following the discourse of respondents, referred to as 'large' motorbikes. However, this is not a technical description, and is used as shorthand for the collection of brands and models known for their durability, size and other favourable characteristics. ■



Lomé, Togo – motorbikes are an essential means of popular transport across the Sahel. © Raquel Maria Carbonell Pagola/LightRocket via Getty Images

Motorbikes are much better suited to unpaved, bumpy or sandy roads than most cars. They are also more fuel efficient and easily repaired, which makes them crucial in rural settings. Certain brands of heavy or large motorbikes have become the most common mode of transport for farmers and herders in Burkina Faso and central Mali, given their ability to traverse poorly paved roads or sandy surfaces.²

Despite their essential place in domestic and economic life, motorbikes are also a flashpoint in the Sahel's landscape of insecurity. The importance of motorbikes in daily life means demand is consistently high, which in turn makes motorbikes a desirable target for thieves. Motorbike theft in the Sahel is often violent in nature, and it has hugely damaging economic consequences for citizens. The loss of a motorbike can also seriously damage a household's resilience to other shocks, particularly in an increasingly unstable region damaged by conflict.

Most notably, motorbikes have been indispensable to the violent extremist armed groups that have destabilized not only the central Sahel region, but increasingly the northern fringes of the states along the Gulf of Guinea. Much as Toyota pickup trucks became emblematic in certain conflicts³ – such as the post-2014 activities of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, to the so-called Toyota Wars between Libyan and Chadian forces in the late 1980s – so motorbikes have become in the Sahelian conflict. Propaganda images of the two main violent extremist groups in the Sahel, JNIM and IS Sahel, very often feature them astride motorbikes or on armed pickup trucks. In turn, Sahelian state authorities frequently issue press releases when large quantities of motorbikes are seized, framing such seizures as successful counterinsurgency efforts.⁴

In reality, given the scarcity of 4x4 vehicles in the region, the majority of combatants from both groups depend much more on motorbikes for their operations and daily conduct.⁵ The advantages that motorbikes present to civilians are all equally, if not more, important to armed group combatants.⁶ Motorbikes have been a near-constant presence in Sahelian armed groups' battlefield operations, with swarms of motorbikes allowing tens, or even hundreds of fighters to rapidly descend on a target location.⁷ Some of the most notorious massacres of civilians in the

Sahelian conflict featured these tactics. For instance, the January 2021 killings by IS Sahel of over 100 civilians in the villages of Tchoma Bangou and Zaroumadareye in Ouallam department, Niger, were committed by ‘terrorists arriving aboard a hundred motorcycles’, according to surviving witnesses and the local mayor.⁸ This association between armed groups and motorbikes has become so strong in the Sahel that a family that loses their motorbike to theft is often suspected of collusion with armed groups.⁹

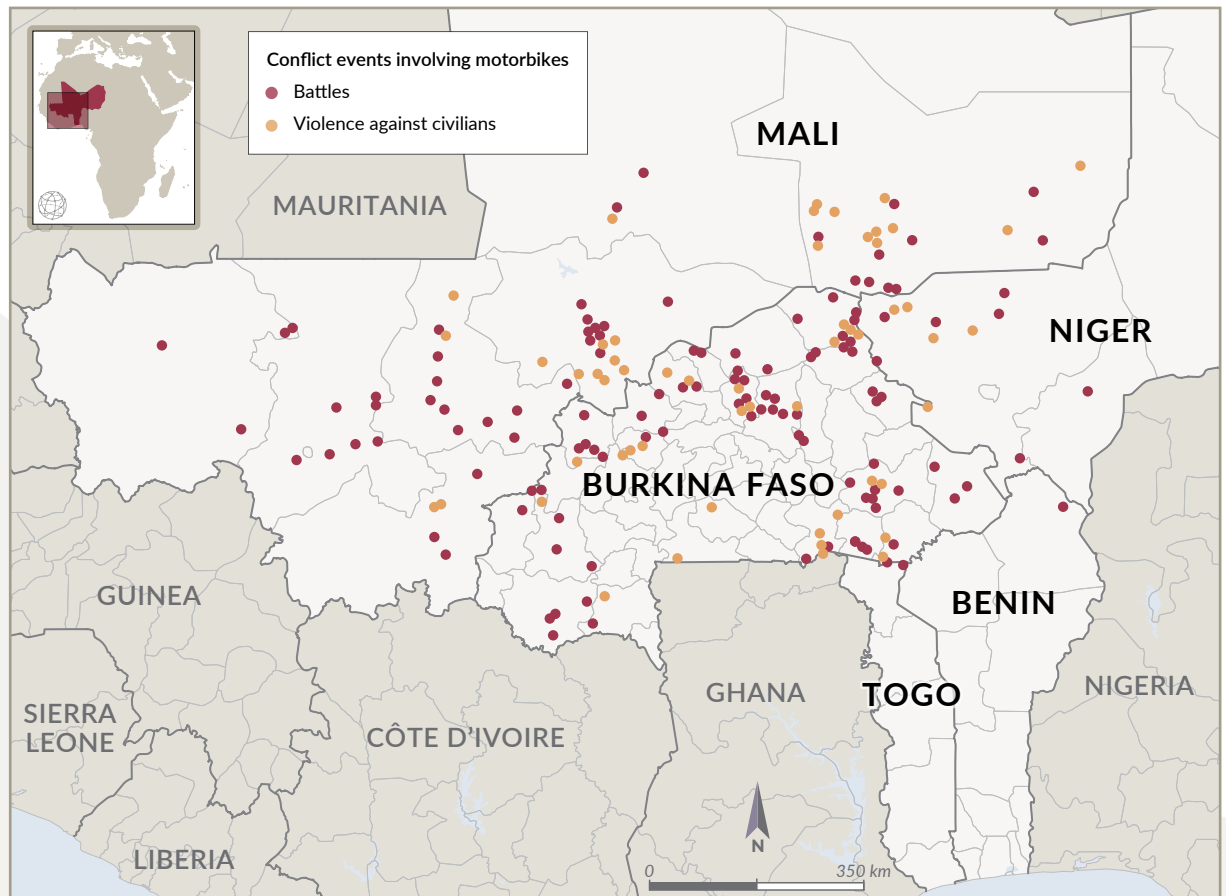


FIGURE 1 Incidents of conflict involving motorbikes, January 2019 to December 2022.

SOURCE: ACLED

Motorbikes are deeply embedded in the Sahelian criminal economy. Indeed, it appears that these trafficking networks are a crucial source for armed groups, particularly in the face of growing restrictions on the motorbike trade. Motorbikes are quite possibly one of the most widely trafficked commodities in the Sahel.¹⁰

State authorities have attempted to counter the ability of JNIM and IS Sahel ability to use motorbikes, albeit with limited success. Nevertheless, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and now most recently Benin, have relied on a range of motorbike bans: limiting the types of motorbikes that can be used in a specific area, limiting the hours in which they can be driven and/or banning the sales or imports of motorbikes.¹¹ According to data gathered by the Global Initiative Against Transnational

Organized Crime (GI-TOC), such bans have been implemented in relation to conflict across the Sahelian region since 2012, the year the Malian conflict began.

Motorbike bans are typically issued by provincial authorities and they are intended to help security forces distinguish between armed groups and civilians. Since civilians are presumed to be obeying the bans, motorbike riders in violation can be targeted in ground or air strikes. In practice, these bans have had few clear successes, and in some cases there have been severe repercussions. Lessons from other contexts where they have been tried, including the Lake Chad basin, reinforce reason for scepticism. A ban on motorbike sales in the Diffa region of Niger apparently led to an increase in youth wanting to join Boko Haram, who were offering to provide young people with the motorbikes.¹²



Ex-combatants from Boko Haram assemble a motorcycle engine as part of a deradicalization and reintegration programme. © Boureima HAMA / AFP via Getty Images

Similarly, discouraging evidence is emerging from the central Sahel. While bans can sometimes effectively limit the movements of armed groups, they come with severe secondary effects. Local economies are adversely impacted since access to markets is diminished, as is the ability to work or reach services. Naturally, this often generates resentment toward state authorities, which can be exploited by armed groups. Likewise, it does not appear that bans have substantially affected the ability of armed groups to procure motorbikes. Indeed, sales and import bans may even have encouraged motorbike trafficking.¹³

Since motorbikes are critical to economic stability, as well as the instability driven by armed groups in the Sahel, the motorbike economy merits closer inspection. It is also important to consider whether there are other ways to prevent armed groups from obtaining the motorbikes they need. This, in turn, requires an understanding of how these groups obtain motorbikes. Motorbike trafficking is a very large and underexplored pillar of Sahelian transnational crime.

This report builds on existing knowledge of motorbike trafficking, offering new data and a more in-depth analysis of how armed group purchase and use motorbikes. Drawing on this strengthened evidence base, the report contends that motorbike theft, and vehicle crime more broadly, merit closer attention as drivers of social and economic instability.



Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso - Across the region, motorbikes are a cheap, reliable means of transport for those who cannot afford a car. © Charles O. Cecil via Alamy

Methodology

This study was conducted alongside a second study on the ecosystem of stolen cars in the central Sahel.¹⁴ Over 50 interviews were conducted across three countries with individuals working in the transportation sector (drivers, mechanics, spare parts salespeople, car and motorbike dealers, rental agencies), and with experts and practitioners working to address insecurity in the central Sahel (NGO workers, security researchers, law enforcement personnel). Interviews were conducted in Mali (Gao, Timbuktu and Bamako), Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou, Kaya and by telephone with participants in Dori and Fada N’Gourma) and Niger (Tillabéri, Birmin Konni and Niamey). Further data was collected in northern Mali, northern Benin and northern Togo via key informant interviews in early 2023. Relevant literature was also reviewed, and the research drew on the GI-TOC’s illicit hub mapping initiative, which captured preliminary data regarding motorbike flows in the Sahel and littoral states of West Africa.¹⁵



THE MARKET FOR MOTORBIKES IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The motorbike market in the central Sahel is characterized by high demand and limited supply, due in part to instability, tax regimes and regulatory bans. While demand from armed groups is certainly significant, the demand from the wider population, for whom the motorbike has become an essential good, is greater. As a result, motorbikes may have become one of the most widely trafficked commodities in the central Sahel.¹⁶

Researchers trace the rise in motorbike ownership in the Sahel to the early 2000s, when there was a rise in the import of Chinese and Indian motorcycles.¹⁷ These motorbikes came in a variety of makes and models that were significantly more affordable than those made in Japan, which had previously been the principal models available in the region. The lower price of motorbikes relative to cars, their fuel efficiency and the ability of certain models to traverse poor road or off-road conditions were all appealing to local buyers.¹⁸ Moreover, in the context of rapid but unregulated urbanization, motorbikes allowed residents settled on the outskirts of cities to travel rapidly to where they needed to be, even when heavy traffic posed a challenge to movement in cars. In rural areas, motorbikes, especially large motorbikes, can travel on surfaces that cars often cannot, and can help fill gaps left by public buses or emergency service vehicles.

While an estimate of the total scale and profits of regional motorbike trafficking is beyond the scope of this report, participants interviewed agreed that the sector was highly profitable, and that the phenomenon was extremely widespread.¹⁹ For example, police in Cinkassé, on the Togolese border with Burkina Faso, estimated that every year at least 3 000 motorbikes are trafficked across that border alone. They also estimated that only 45% of the motorbikes in circulation in Burkina Faso and Togo would have been formally taxed and registered after import.²⁰ However, distinguishing the licit from illicit trade of motorbikes is also difficult, given the scale of the trade as a whole and the limited regulations placed on motorbikes within many Sahelian states.



A motorbike repair shop in Burkina Faso. Demand for motorbikes is high in the region. © Jon Rosenthal via Alamy

Where do the motorbikes come from?

Data on the country of manufacture of the motorbikes exported to the Sahel is inconsistent, although China, Vietnam, India, Indonesia and Turkey are believed to be among the most important producers. For instance, popular brands such as Apsonic ‘Aloba’ and Sanili motorbikes – now targeted by sales and import bans in Burkina Faso – are of Chinese origin.²¹ However, for the purposes of examining the scale of the legitimate trade in motorbikes and the routes they take to reach the central Sahel, re-export data is more revealing.

In 2021, the most recent year for which a large dataset was available, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso declared imports of 309 221 motorbikes.²² The true number of imports is likely to be significantly higher, given unreported data and the likely scale of the illicit trade. Of the three countries, Niger is by far the largest importer, which is explained in large part by its proximity to Nigeria – one of the largest re-exporters in the region and the biggest single contributor of motorbikes to the three countries.

Import country	Total units imported
Burkina Faso	57 892
Mali	16 882
Niger	234 447
Total for the three countries	309 221

Main exporter/re-exporter to Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger	Traded motorcycles in 2021 (units)
Nigeria	195 738
Benin	70 303
France	15 876
Mauritania	14 352
Niger	4 510
Senegal	3 570
Togo	764

FIGURE 2 Motorbike import volumes and export countries in the Sahel.

SOURCE: UN Comtrade, 2021, HS good category 8711, exports and re-exports

Given that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are all landlocked, prices for a wide variety of consumer goods are substantially higher here than in coastal states, a fact which has led to the development of numerous smuggling routes and well-known hubs for purchasing illicit goods.²³ This price differential also applies to motorbikes. In Togo, the size and expected growth of the regional market for motorbikes is illustrated by the Chinese company Dayang having built a motorbike assembly plant in the town of Notsé, in central-southern Togo, in 2016. This is expected to help meet demand both in Togo and in neighbouring countries.²⁴

In 2021, Benin was a major importer of motorbikes in its own right. However, new taxes were imposed in 2022, including a higher VAT rate (which motorbikes had previously been exempted from)²⁵ and on all imports that use QR codes and GPS in their debarkation controls, which included most motorbike shipments.²⁶ According to motorbike traders in northern Benin, this has affected their business and incentivized people to buy motorbikes in neighbouring countries, and then often smuggle them back to Benin. As one trader put it:

For example, if I go to Nigeria to work, I can buy a motorcycle with the money I earned on my way back to Benin. Say I buy one for CFA300 000 [about €450], and I drive it to Djougou. Once in Djougou, I can easily sell it to someone I don't necessarily know. I can resell it at CFA350 000 [€530] and make a margin of CFA50 000.²⁷

From licit to illicit supply chains



The port of Cotonou is a major regional re-exporting hub for motorbikes imported from overseas. © Fawaz Tairou via Wikimedia Commons

The dynamics surrounding motorbike availability and pricing in the Sahel raises the issue of motorbike trafficking. Most of the motorbikes trafficked in the region are diverted from licit imports. However, it is exceptionally difficult to encapsulate all the motorbike trafficking processes because there is no single point at which motorbikes are diverted for illicit trade.

In Benin, while the new taxes may have decreased the desirability of Cotonou port for trading motorbikes, (by comparison to other regional ports such as Lomé), motorbikes for both the licit and illicit markets still enter the port. A motorbike dealer in Cinkassé, Togo, surmised that ‘most of the imported motorcycles come from the port of Cotonou via channels that only the big traders who work at the port can tell us about. Some also come from Nigeria via Benin’.²⁸

Motorbikes coming from Nigeria can either pass directly over the northern border into Niger to reach the Sahel, or they can move into Beninese territory, where they can be loaded onto pirogues and taken upstream on the River Niger, from points such as Kandi, Malanville or Segbana.²⁹ From there, they may be diverted towards Burkina Faso, or will continue northwards through Niger, to Niamey, other Nigerien towns, or further north into Mali.

The diversion of illicit motorbikes from legal motorbikes at the point of import also seems to be the case in Lomé, Togo. As vehicle salesperson explained how this is done:

Motorcycles in containers always pass through official channels. The problem is that the actual quantity of goods is not declared. For example, out of 100 motorcycles loaded for Burkina Faso, around 60% are declared, and therefore pay customs duties.

Generally, motorcycles bound for Burkina Faso arrive from Lomé without being cleared through customs. The goods spend a few days in a warehouse in Cinkassé. Meanwhile, the importers in Cinkassé enter into negotiations with customs officials for false declarations.³⁰

Past the port, the onward trafficking networks can be roughly categorized into two broad types. The first are organized, networked traffickers who tend to smuggle several tens of motorbikes across borders at any one time. The second are smaller-scale operations, in which individuals or small groups of individuals drive motorbikes across borders to take advantage of price differentials, or of increased value driven by scarcity.

Organized motorbike trafficking networks

Lomé is another significant site for motorbike imports, and again there are likely different points of diversion from the licit supply chain. It appears that local networks work with importers who are often members of a diaspora group with connections in their home country. A motorbike trader in Cinkassé who admitted to trafficking motorbikes across the border to Burkina Faso described the process:

We mainly take these engines from Lomé via a subsidiary of the Indians based in Lomé, then load them onto our trucks and transport them to their destination. On the way, we pay the security forces and generally our cargoes are not searched, as we have a solid network all along the route.

On the question of whether the motorcycles comply with customs and regulatory standards to be sold on the territory, we don't try to find out. We pay the lowest price and we choose the supplier with the capacity to sell us a large quantity, because we don't want to come back every time as it would be too visible. We sell motorcycles in Burkina Faso and Niger.³¹

Similar dynamics, particularly the concealing of large numbers of motorbikes in trucks, have been seen elsewhere in the Sahel. The photo on page 11 shows a truck seized in Ayorou, north-western Niger, by customs, who found 40 motorbikes and 34 engines hidden under bags of rice.³²



A truck containing bags of rice concealing smuggled motorbikes, seized in Niger in July 2021. Photo: Tillabéri Police Department

Smaller-scale motorbike trafficking

An 'ant trade' is a common phenomenon for transporting all types of smuggled goods across the borders between the landlocked Sahelian states and their coastal counterparts.³³ Motorbikes are important in the study of this illicit trade as a whole: they are not only a commodity, but also a means of transporting the driver (known as a *transporteur* or *passeur*) and small quantities of smuggled goods.³⁴ These goods include fuel, cigarettes, medicines, clothing and other mundane goods, arms, and a variety of other objects. Motorbikes allow smugglers to avoid main roads where they may be stopped by authorities and risk arrest or having to pay bribes.³⁵ Smugglers may also choose to sell on their motorbikes, perhaps to an individual client who has requested it.

The 'ant trade' is well-placed to meet the diffuse demand for motorbikes in the rural Sahel. Given that motorbikes, particularly those sold to rural communities, are well-adapted for unpaved terrain and are in such high demand, there is no need for prospective sellers to rely on known hubs for motorbike trafficking, even if they offer conveniences. Observers in Kompienga, Burkina Faso, and in the Gourma region of Mali confirmed that motorbikes can be bought at a multitude of village and small-town markets, and that there is no need to travel to cities to buy one.³⁶



GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MOTORBIKE THEFT

Given the lower value of motorbikes relative to cars, motorbike theft is often perceived as merely a form of vehicle crime, even petty crime, and therefore less significant than car theft. However, the impact of motorbike crime on Sahelian residents can be profound. If a motorbike is central to the livelihood or mobility of an individual or a household, theft can seriously damage their capacity to respond to other economic or political shocks. As the negative consequences of motorbike bans become more evident, similar impacts can also stem from theft. Motorbike crime can also be very violent and have traumatizing effects on the victim. For this reason, it is worth examining this other variant of motorbike crime and the networks that perpetrate it. However, the ways in which these networks operate varies by geography.

Motorbike theft in cities

Unlike cars, motorbikes are highly vulnerable to theft in almost all parts of the Sahel. In large, fairly stable cities, the theft of cars is relatively unusual, for several key reasons. Firstly, because car ownership in the Sahel is not nearly as common as motorbike ownership, cars are more easily identified. Interviewees agreed that because there was a culture of borrowing and sharing property in the Sahel, residents of a neighbourhood would be well-attuned to who owns which cars, since they might like to borrow them.³⁷ While this does not necessarily stop an urban car thief, it does mean that the thief runs a high risk of being seen and challenged as they leave the neighbourhood. By contrast, individual motorbikes are far more numerous and far harder to distinguish, and a thief will have a better chance of absconding with one without being noticed.³⁸

Secondly, it is significantly easier for police to determine whether a car has been stolen if they stop it for inspection. Each car is imprinted with a vehicle identification number (VIN) on the chassis during manufacture. This is recorded when a driver obtains their licence and ownership documents for the car in question. INTERPOL also maintains an internationally accessible database for law enforcement, containing the VINs of cars reported as stolen. In practice, there are numerous loopholes in the system that make driving a stolen car quite possible. However, in Sahelian cities

that are still administered by the state, there is a perception that being stopped by a police officer and having your vehicle checked is a distinct risk.³⁹ Even if the police frequently do not check the VIN or the validity of the drivers' documents, the risk is still substantial enough to deter many from knowingly driving stolen cars, certainly within the city in which they have been stolen.⁴⁰

Motorbikes are a different matter. Because motorbikes are far more numerous than cars all around the region, they are far less easy to monitor and to distinguish, both for local residents and for law enforcement. Likewise, police are generally less suspicious of motorbikes circulating without licence plates. This is partly because license plates take time to obtain, when the owner chooses to do so.⁴¹ A mechanic who broke up stolen motorbikes for the spare parts market confirmed that there was no market for the licence plates of stolen motorbikes, since the licence plates themselves were too easy to trace, and it was a far lower risk to drive without one.⁴²



Motorbikes in the Theatre Populaire district of Ouagadougou, known for its vehicle and parts shops. Reportedly, stolen motorbikes are frequently taken to shops here for modification and resale, even though most businesses in the area serve the licit market. *Photo: Eleanor Beevor*

As a result of these factors, investigating motorbike theft is extremely difficult, and made more so by its commonality. The net result is a perception that police will do little to try and recover a stolen motorbike, perhaps unless it is an unusually expensive model.

Even within state-controlled cities, motorbike theft is not only common, but often very violent. One resident of Ouagadougou stated that although he knew of very few examples of a car being stolen within the city, motorbike theft was a constant occurrence and a friend of his had been facially disfigured during a violent attempt to seize her motorcycle.⁴³

Motorbikes stolen within cities can be profited from in several ways. The bike can be taken to a garage to be rapidly repainted or modified, in order to sell it on whole. Garages or mechanics who mostly work in the licit market may occasionally take on jobs modifying stolen motorbikes for resale. However, breakage of motorbikes for the spare parts market is the lowest risk option. There are numerous garages within major cities that are willing and able to break up motorbikes for parts, but they will insist on buying the bike at a much lower price than its market value if it is stolen.

An interviewee who works in the breakage of motorbikes for spare parts confirmed that he frequently broke up motorbikes with no documents, which he knew were probably stolen.⁴⁴ As a result, he would buy the motorbike for a much lower price than its market value. For example, if someone brought a relatively new light motorbike to be broken up, he might buy it for CFA150 000, even though its market value could be up to CFA1.3 million. He explained that, given that the thief had not lost any money obtaining the bike, they could afford to sell it for far less than it was worth, and that minimizing the risk to themselves allowed thieves to do this on a regular basis.⁴⁵

He added that, when thieves did want to sell on a stolen motorbike at a price closer to its market value, without breaking it up, there is a trick they use to minimize the risk. Once stolen, the thieves take the bike to a public car park. In Ouagadougou, the car park of a major public hospital was one such venue. In collusion with the parking attendant who guards the parked vehicles, they park the motorbike and leave it there for a long period of time, which could be six months or longer. Police might do some initial investigations for a stolen motorbike, particularly a high-value one. However, by the time the motorbike is taken out of the car park to be resold, police are very unlikely to still be looking for it.⁴⁶

Theft and resale in conflict areas

Identifying trends between conflict and motorbike theft is extremely difficult due to the lack of data on stolen motorbikes. It is not clear whether conflict increases demand for stolen motorbikes, or whether conflict facilitates or hinders the trade in stolen motorbikes. However, it seems the trade in stolen motorbikes certainly continues amid conflict. A garage worker who breaks up stolen motorbikes in Ouagadougou confirmed that there is a cross-border trade in stolen motorbikes, saying: 'There are a lot of bikes being sold onwards, they go to Mali. I don't know much about them, but I know that the bikes are taken north by Burkinabès and then delivered to Malians. I can't tell you how many, but it's a lot of them.'

He was unwilling to discuss this further, and other interviewees said that they were unaware of how this flow of motorbikes worked, although they tended to agree that it existed. It is not clear how organized this trade is and whether the participants have particular relationships with armed groups. However, it is notable that any route through northern Burkina Faso into Mali would take the riders of stolen motorbikes through very unstable territory. If this trade does continue at scale, its means of adaptation are an important avenue for further research.



Members of the Malian military patrol a checkpoint. © Joerg Boethling via Alamy

This dynamic of taking stolen vehicles across borders is very common in the Sahel. Given the higher probability of a car theft being detected by police, or by the owner's social circle, cars stolen in one Sahelian country are typically taken over the nearest regional border to be resold there. The net effect is of a series of 'swaps' of stolen vehicles across borders, even if in practice it works as a series of independent trades.⁴⁷

The lack of regulation and documentation of motorbike ownership, however, means that avoiding detection is less likely to be the primary motivating factor. More likely, the northwards transfer of stolen bikes largely reflects the demand coming from Mali, although the identity of the recipients is unclear. In the course of this research, no evidence emerged that suggested extremist armed groups were purchasing stolen motorbikes or stealing them themselves on a significant scale. Rather, they predominantly use trafficking networks to obtain new bikes. Nevertheless, some participants believed it would be quite possible for armed groups to begin buying stolen motorbikes should circumstances favour them doing so.

In more unstable parts of the Sahel that have a lower level of state presence, motorbike theft may be rendered easier by the proliferation of weapons as a result of the conflict. While vehicle theft has historically been conducted with greater openness and impunity in the northern Sahel (specifically northern Mali and parts of north-western Niger), this openness may spread as state presence is increasingly repelled from the central Sahel.

Young people who are able to obtain weapons find themselves with an opportunity to make large sums of money through stealing vehicles. A motorbike repair mechanic in Timbuktu recounted:

The actors behind motorbike theft are from all communities – blacks, Arabs and Tuareg. For me, the motorbike thieves are small groups of bandits in town. I think it's an organized network. The thieves are young people who are armed – often former fighters in the ranks of armed groups. Others steal the weapon of their brother, a member of an armed group, to steal motorbikes in town. Or whatever weapons they can find.

There was a case where bandits tried to hold up a vehicle of soldiers on patrol. There was an exchange of fire and the bandits fled, and the soldiers recovered a weapon. After investigations, it turned out to be an army weapon. Investigations into the weapon revealed the bearer of the weapon. It was the soldier on leave. When questioned he said that his weapon had been stolen from his home.⁴⁸

He added that, like in state-controlled cities, it was not only the thieves themselves responsible for perpetuating motorbike theft, but garages and mechanics that dealt with the stolen motorbikes:

I also recognize that there are motorbike repairers who are motorbike robbers. Some of them are in complicity with the young robbers of the city. A stolen motorbike is difficult to find. The fronts, tyres, colours and shop fronts are changed to such an extent that you cannot recognize your own motorbike.⁴⁹

The broad market dynamics of stolen motorbikes are difficult to elucidate. Part of the reason for this seems to be the diffuse, informal nature of many of the resales of stolen motorbikes. Given the relative ease of reselling a stolen motorbike, and the lack of documents that accompany them, a large, organized network and infrastructure is unnecessary.

For stolen motorbikes, there appears to be less reliance on known markets for resale compared to cars, which tend to be sold at some recognizable markets.⁵⁰ Some motorbikes are available to buy in certain known stolen vehicle markets, such as Ber in Mali. However, the networks stealing them do not necessarily need to take them this far, although they may choose to do so for convenience or other benefits. A motorbike seller in Gao said:

The sale circuit is not elsewhere, the stolen motorbikes are sold here. The robbers on the roads might leave to sell these motorbikes in other localities, and often these motorbikes can end up in Ber to be resold. Like the vehicles, the old stolen motorbikes are detached and resold to motorbike parts dealers throughout the region.⁵¹



Stolen motorbikes often end up in markets such as this one in Ouagadougou.
© Robert Burch via Alamy

Some interviewees also added that, unlike stolen cars, stolen motorbikes would typically be sold on for a price near their market value as long as there was no immediate risk. This is because less suspicion is attached to an undocumented motorbike and it is less likely to be inspected. Buyers will often buy a bike without knowing it is stolen, as many motorbikes lack documents. With a car, a buyer would expect a substantial reduction in price if there was a risk it was stolen, since they assume they will be shouldering some risk themselves, or that they will be forced to drive in areas where they are unlikely to be checked. For a motorbike, sellers apparently avoid raising the suspicions of the buyer by lowering the price if they are selling it on whole.⁵²



ARMED GROUPS AND MOTORBIKES: THEFT AND TRAFFICKING

The conflict in the Sahel region raises the question of how non-state armed groups, specifically JNIM and IS Sahel, affect and exacerbate motorbike trafficking dynamics. How do they obtain their motorbikes, in what quantities and at what price? The importance that armed groups attach to motorbikes is revealed by interviewees. A radio host living in Djibo, northern Burkina Faso, said:

During the peace agreements between the state of Burkina Faso and Ansarul Islam during the Roch presidency in 2020, when the terrorists entered the town of Djibo, the first thing they bought were motorbikes. In one day, the Ansarul men bought at least 45 motorbikes.⁵³

JNIM and IS Sahel impact motorbike trafficking in two key ways. The first one is inadvertent. The destabilizing effect of their violence is partly to blame for the rise in motorbike prices across the Sahel. This is due to the growing difficulty and danger of transporting motorbikes to sell, and also because of growing restrictions on which motorbikes can be sold in the region. All interviewees agreed that prices for motorbikes had risen significantly in recent years, with some variance between location and motorbike type. While Beninois respondents attributed the price rise predominantly to increased customs duties,⁵⁴ respondents in Mali said that the key reason was the destabilization of Burkina Faso, and to a lesser extent western Niger. In Burkina Faso, motorbike bans have been cited as substantially raising prices by reducing availability.

As a result of the higher risk of the theft or hijacking of motorbikes being transported, as well as more general insecurity on roads, prices have substantially risen, both on the licit and illicit markets. It is difficult to discern the price differential between licit and illicit markets due to the range of different motorbikes available and the fact that demand may eclipse concerns about price for at least some buyers. This in turn may discourage traffickers from passing on the price differential to the buyer. There is also a seasonal element to motorbike pricing (both on the licit and illicit markets), since motorbikes are less useful on rough terrain during the wet season, leading to decreased demand. A motorbike trader in Cinkassé, Togo, said of present prices:

The prices of motorbikes sold without taxes during the dry season can vary between CFA400 000 and CFA500 000 [€590–740] if it has travelled over 200 kilometres prior to the sale. This is for Hajoue, Sanili and Aloba motorbikes [the types favoured by armed groups, but also by the population at large, particularly in rural areas].

If it has driven less than 120 kilometres the price is CFA500 000 to CFA600 000 [€590–890]. However, if the brand is otherwise unavailable in the area in question the prices can rise higher, maybe to CFA600 000 or CFA700 000 [€1 180]. If you buy these motorbikes with taxes the prices will be more like 425 000 to 500 000, although there may be additional charges if tax costs are passed on to the buyer.⁵⁵



Scene from a JNIM motorbike training session. Motorbikes are critical transport for armed groups in the Sahel, which purchase them in large numbers. Photo: Twitter

Almost all interviewees consulted agreed that prices for motorbikes, both large and small, had risen substantially in recent years, and particularly in the past two years, depending local availability. A Malian respondent said that a heavy motorbike could be bought for CFA450 000–550 000 (€680–840) prior to about 2019 (he was unsure if this was inclusive of taxes or the price of an illicit motorbike), but that now costs were closer to CFA600 000–800 000 (€915–1 200).⁵⁶

The second way in which violent extremist groups impact motorbike trafficking is through their substantial role as buyers of trafficked motorbikes. Armed groups in the Sahel seem to have a constant shortage of motorbikes, which they are extremely dependent on for their operations. An NGO security manager pointed out that in propaganda videos, it was not unusual to see three combatants on a motorbike designed for two.⁵⁷ While two combatants on a single motorbike can be tactically advantageous (since one can drive and one can wield a weapon), higher numbers sharing a bike could be interpreted as a shortage of motorbikes. This, coupled with the fact that motorbikes are easily damaged in accidents, firefights or on difficult road conditions means that armed groups need to acquire large numbers of bikes on a regular basis. This is especially so if they are recruiting. JNIM has been known to offer motorbikes to youth in Burkina Faso, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire as an incentive to cooperate with the group.⁵⁸

JNIM therefore purchases large numbers of new motorbikes from several sources and receives regular consignments of these new motorbikes all around the Sahel. Less data was found on IS Sahel's supply chains for motorbikes. Prior to their rupture with JNIM, they were known to periodically share suppliers, but their present supply source is unknown. It is assumed to be materially smaller than JNIM's larger, better established supply chain, though to what degree is unclear. All interviewees consulted agreed that most of the motorbikes that JNIM and IS Sahel obtain are brand new. Alobal, Sanili, Haojue, Kasea, Bajaj, Boxer and TVS branded motorbikes were



Armed groups clash in the Gao region, Mali. Photo: IS al-Naba publication

widely cited as the choice of armed groups, reportedly due to their durability and strong shock absorbers, their large fuel cylinders and their ability to transport up to three or even four people.⁵⁹

This is not to say that JNIM or IS Sahel do not steal motorbikes, or do not buy stolen motorbikes. However, theft of motorbikes by these armed groups appears to be opportunistic rather than systematic. They are known to engage in petty motorbike theft. For example, armed actors believed to be affiliated to JNIM stole a motorbike from an NGO compound in Solenzo, Burkina Faso, in September 2022, and in the same month stole two other motorbikes from NGO staff on the road between Kaya and Barsalogho.⁶⁰ In Niger, IS Sahel has stolen numerous motorbikes from civilians – something that was reportedly sanctioned by their then leader Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, who permitted his combatants to seize goods as war bounties.⁶¹

Nevertheless, the general tendency to buy new motorbikes rather than to steal them reflects JNIM's strategic restraint in regard to certain forms of criminality. In order to not damage their governance agenda, the group typically avoids stealing from the civilian communities that it seeks to win over.⁶² However, the fact that they need particular types of motorbikes for their operations is likely also a significant influence in their choice to buy new. IS Sahel has fewer restraints on its fighters' comportment towards civilians, and so it is possible that they engage more widely in motorbike theft. However, data to confirm this assumption was not found.

Sources of motorbikes

Most of the new motorbikes that these groups buy come from specialized motorbike traders, some of whom they buy from on a consistent basis. It also appears that mid-level commanders for JNIM organize motorbike purchases for their own regions. For instance, a motorbike dealer living near Fada N'Gourma in Est Province, Burkina Faso, reported that he had to take multiple pre-orders for consignments of motorbikes numbering in the tens from JNIM fighters.⁶³

Similarly, according to a mediator from Tillabéri who has negotiated with armed groups in the area, JNIM has used several suppliers for motorbikes in its time. According to him, in 2017 in the Torodi department, at a time when JNIM had a more cooperative relationship with IS Sahel, JNIM had reportedly agreed to jointly purchase motorbikes with IS Sahel combatants from a supplier linked to IS Sahel. However, this relationship was terminated when the supplier tried to

sell them a different brand of motorbike from the agreed one.⁶⁴ According to the mediator, JNIM continues to obtain motorbikes in the area, albeit through new suppliers. The motorbikes the combatants purchase in this area are all imported from Nigeria, and each one is worth at least about CFA500 000 (€750).⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the branch of IS Sahel currently based in northern Tillabéri reportedly obtains its motorbikes from Nigeria, where they can obtain bikes with metal frames that allow for modifications, including a mount for a 14.7mm machine gun.⁶⁶ They reportedly pay up to CFA1.2 million (€1 770). When they cannot obtain these, they buy other heavy motorbikes from dealers in Gao, Mali, or Burkina Faso.⁶⁷



Local networks reportedly supply armed groups with motorbikes. © Mike Goldwater via Alamy

How many motorbikes are JNIM purchasing?

In areas where JNIM is understood to be the dominant non-state armed group presence, the reported motorbike purchases are attributed to JNIM, although the providers of the information did not confirm the identity of the group. While it can be assumed IS Sahel have similar means of supply, no data was obtained to include an estimate of their purchasing rates.

For JNIM, data collected by the GI-TOC indicates that the group is purchasing tens, if not hundreds, of mostly new motorbikes around the region each month. There may be some seasonal variation, since motorbikes are less usable in the wet season, and purchase rates may drop accordingly. Data from law enforcement and interview data with motorbike traders was collected in different sites in Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger. At each point, there were indications that JNIM was buying new motorbikes each month, with individual motorbike dealers typically providing between 10 and 20 motorbikes to local units of armed men a month. Judging from their areas of activity, it was surmised these armed men were most likely affiliated to JNIM.

While less interview data from motorbike traders was available for Mali, residents and experts believe that JNIM units in northern Mali obtain comparable numbers of motorbikes. A Malian resident of the Gourma region who has closely observed armed groups estimated that each 'marakiz' (a command structure of local units) will order several tens of new motorbikes each month, and possibly as many as 100 motorbikes per month.⁶⁸ (Marakiz vary substantially in size, with smaller groups numbering around 100 fighters, and the largest numbering several hundred fighters. It is therefore not possible to extrapolate clear totals from this assessment.)

Data provided by the regional commissioner of police for Tillabéri, Niger, suggests that JNIM combatants in the Tamou region receive frequent deliveries of motorbikes from networks of local youths. According to the commissioner, new motorbikes are frequently delivered to armed group combatants (believed to be JNIM) via the border village of Tamou, which lies on the Niger River near Burkina Faso. On the Burkinabè side of the border, there is a JNIM base in Boutou. Tamou has been a smuggling hub for a variety of commodities (including motorbikes) since before the conflict. The police commissioner provided multiple incidents of smuggling by JNIM, which were reportedly documented by local informants but could not be independently verified.

JNIM motorbike purchases in Tamou, Niger



31 May 2022: Armed group combatants received 15 new Kasea motorcycles, delivered by young people from Tamou; the combatants gave the youths a vehicle.



12 June 2022: A dozen new motorcycles and boxes of spare parts were delivered to combatants in one of their three bases in the commune of Tamou.



15 July 2022: A column of about 40 new Kasea and Apsonic motorcycles was seen near Tamou by local police informants. The sources said the motorcycles had left for the armed group base in Boutou on the Burkina border, where they also received fuel and supplies.



24 July 2022: Two youths, one from Bountakkaré and the other from Tchala, delivered nine new SAVY motorcycles and seven new Apache motorcycles to combatants in the commune of Tamou. ■



Islamic State fighters outside of the Inates military base, Niger, December 2019.

Photo: IS social media video

If these incident records are accurate, approximately 80 new motorcycles were delivered to JNIM combatants at a single border crossing in a period of less than two months. Multiple routes will evidently be used to supply different units around the region.

The first incident documented by the Tillabéri police department at Tamou also suggests that JNIM (and perhaps IS Sahel) will obtain motorbikes through swaps of other goods, including cars. It is not clear if this is something that they do regularly, although a former INTERPOL liaison officer from Niger suggested that this may be the case. In his words: ‘Only two stolen 4×4 vehicles can be worth, even largely devalued, more than CFA20 million. This sum can be used to receive in exchange more than 40 new motorcycles, even if those are overvalued at CFA500 000 each.’

His assessment, again, is that motorbikes are significantly more important than cars for armed groups. If this is correct, and if it is true that armed groups do trade stolen cars in exchange for motorbikes, then it underscores the importance of the ecosystem of stolen vehicles when considering stabilization.

Traders surveyed in Djougou and Malanville in northern Benin in February 2023 estimated that, in their local areas, armed groups were purchasing at least a dozen new motorbikes per month. One participant living in Malanville said a dozen or more were sold there, while in Djougou a motorbike seller estimated they purchased at least 15.⁶⁹ While armed groups are at an earlier stage of infiltration in these areas than in Sahelian states, northern Benin has been operating as a source of a wide range of supplies, so some purchased motorbikes may then be moved to units further into the Sahel. Likewise, in Cinkassé, Togo, two motorbike dealers both estimated that armed groups operating in the vicinity of the town would buy around 50 motorbikes per month.⁷⁰

Less information was available on motorbike trafficking further away from the southern edges of the Sahelian states. However, large quantities of goods, including motorbikes, are known to take illicit routes northwards. Sub-routes will diverge from more established smuggling points. A former smuggler living in Niamey, who had at one point supplied armed groups with various commodities including pharmaceuticals, said that there was an established smuggling ‘highway’ route running between Nigeria and Mali, from Dogon Tapki on the Nigeria-Niger border to Tankademi in Mali.⁷¹ This was used for the smuggling of arms, motorbikes, fuel and other critical goods for the armed groups.

Judging from the high proportion of motorbikes diverted to illicit trade at import, and JNIM and IS Sahel's greater reliance on illicit channels, it is likely the motorbikes they buy are largely trafficked and untaxed. However, this does not mean that all their current suppliers began importing motorbikes illegally. Often, their suppliers are motorbike traders whose home areas fell under JNIM control. Although they may initially be reluctant to work with armed groups, some motorbike traders admit that supplying armed groups is undeniably good business and that they will not willingly cease trading with them. A motorbike seller based near Fada N’Gourma in Burkina Faso said:

I can't stop this work because I feed my family with this job. I admit that I supplied motorcycles to the Islamic State Sahel group and the group of Cheick Mouslim [an Ansar ul-Islam commander] in Fada N’Gourma. They occupy my area of intervention and so I was obliged to sell them these motorcycles. For me, it is more profitable to work with these armed groups because they do not negotiate the price and pay the money on the spot. I can even borrow money to buy more motorcycles. In their areas I don't pay taxes and my goods are safe.⁷²

Other motorbike sellers in newly affected areas suspect that they may be selling motorbikes to armed groups, but insist they cannot do otherwise. A motorbike seller in Djougou, northern Benin, said:

Sometimes there are foreigners who come from Bassila, Ouaké, Parakou, Tanguieta and Natitingou. They buy two to four motorcycles sometimes. I don't care what they want to do with it. As long as I am paid, for me it is a good deal. Since the state has increased the price of customs, the sale of motorcycles has decreased. So if we can have customers like these all the time, it would be better for us. The main thing is to sell and to be able to feed ourselves. We suffer too much.⁷³



MOTORBIKE BANS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Motorbike bans are often justified on the grounds that they are temporary, that they do not affect all bikes, and that they prevent armed groups from using motorbikes to conduct attacks. Since armed groups often move in quite large groups of motorbikes, up to several tens at a time, the logic is that air or ground patrols will be able to see, and confidently engage these motorbike riders during a ban, since they will not be civilians.

Types of bans and local responses

A data collection exercise by the GI-TOC found that since 2012 (the onset of the Malian conflict), there have been a total of 43 motorbike bans in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso that were related to the conflict in the Sahel. These bans vary in nature but tend to typically outlaw the circulation of motorbikes (or two-wheeled and three-wheeled vehicles) in a particular administrative area between certain hours. These do not include more general curfews, such as that in place in the city of Menaka, which forbids all vehicle circulation in town during night hours.⁷⁴ More recently, Benin has also made use of motorbike bans in its northern provinces affected by armed groups. In February 2023, Coby and Matéri municipalities in the country's north-western Atakora department banned circulation on motorbikes between 9pm and 6am until further notice, and on 17 February, Tanguiéta municipality followed suit.⁷⁵

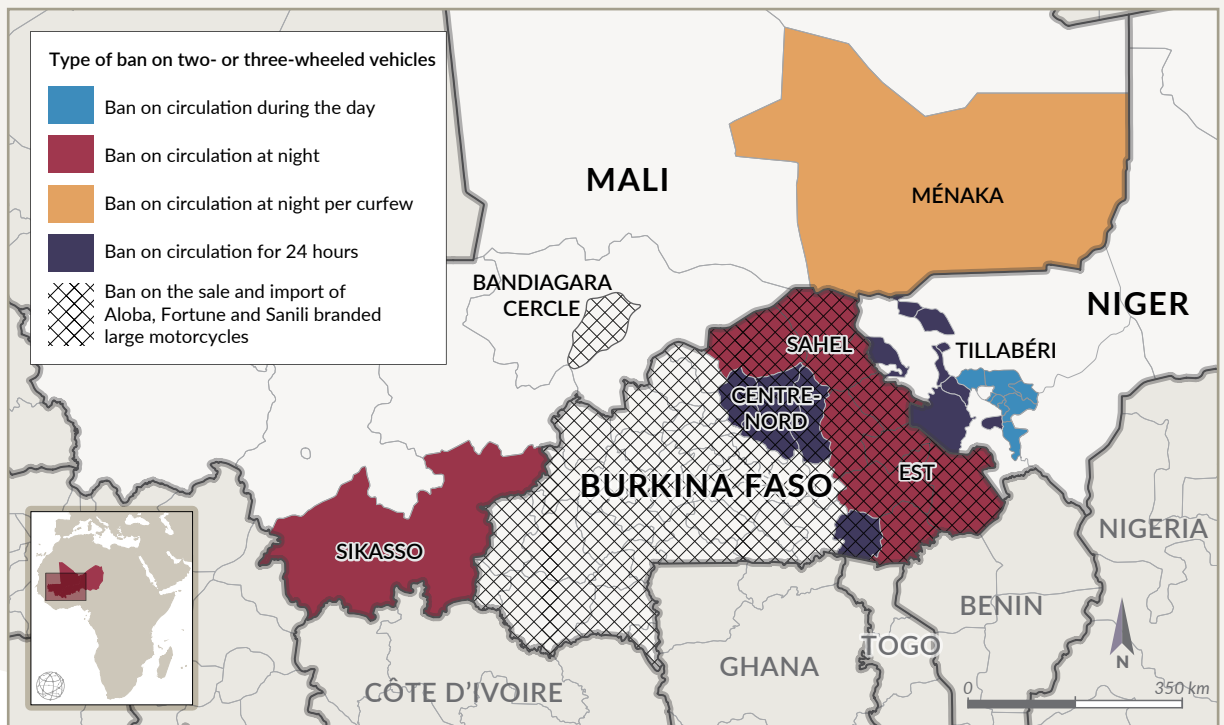


FIGURE 3 Motorbike bans in the region.

However, many bans are also, either formally or in practice, only targeting the types of motorbikes that armed group combatants tend to ride. These are designated by brand rather than technical specification. The brands Aloba (a subsidiary make of Apsonic), Hajoue, Sanili and Boxer are those most commonly sought out by armed groups and as a result, they are the brands usually singled out for bans. For instance, Bandiagara Cercle in Mali issued a new ban on the sale of large cylinder motorbikes in May 2023.⁷⁶ According to observers, however, this ban is informally enforced more widely across the Mopti region since soldiers will habitually stop and arrest anyone riding this variety of motorbikes.⁷⁷ Burkina Faso implemented a national ban on the import and sale of ‘Aloba and equivalent’ motorbikes in June 2020, which remains in effect.⁷⁸



FIGURE 4 A communiqué issued about the 2022 motorbike import, trade and distribution ban in Burkina Faso.

SOURCE: Burkina Faso Ministry of Commerce

Motorbike bans are contentious among the civilians affected by them. Understanding the myriad ways in which the bans impact civilian communities, and particularly rural communities, is a complex exercise, but there are several clearly negative ramifications. As residents of the Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso told media outlets last year, the heavy bikes targeted by the ban were also the type most relied upon by villagers in rural areas since they were the only models resilient enough for the condition of the roads.⁷⁹ These motorbikes were not only critical to livelihoods, but were also de facto emergency vehicles, since ambulances were not available in much of the province. (Ambulances in Burkina Faso are frequently stolen by armed groups since they meet the needs for their operational vehicles, so this is a widespread problem).⁸⁰ These measures have further inhibited NGO access in hard-to-reach areas such as Tillabéri in Niger.⁸¹

Authorities often recognize that continuous 24-hour bans on the circulation of all motorbikes are unsustainable. For instance, in the wake of the massacre at Solhan, Oudalan province in

Burkina Faso, in June 2021, circulation on all two-wheeled vehicles was banned in the majority of departments in Est and Sahel provinces. However, this was reduced to a ban on circulation during night hours (between 6pm and 6am) a month later.⁸² Nevertheless, these evening bans still have severe impacts on local economies, particularly in the hospitality sector.⁸³ However, a total ban on circulation on motorbikes has been in place in most departments in Tillabéri, Niger, since March 2016, albeit with a brief respite between September and October 2021. The ban led to the closure of several weekly agricultural markets in agriculturally dependent areas such as Torodi since residents depended entirely on motorbikes to transport their products to market.⁸⁴

In some ways, civilians have adapted. For instance, where the terrain allows, and in areas where small motorbikes are permitted, there has been a dramatic uptake of smaller motorbikes and scooters, which previously had been derisively referred to as 'lady bikes'. However, this has led to a sharp price increase, with most available brands of light motorbikes increasing in value by at least CFA500 000 since sales bans in Burkina Faso were brought in.⁸⁵ Aside from the economic constraints put on households as a result of these rising prices, the smaller bikes are less navigable on rough terrain, and can only carry smaller loads, factors which should be presumed to have knock-on effects for local economies.

Meanwhile, it appears that armed groups are able to adapt to the bans in ways that residents cannot. According to a journalist who has covered the conflict in Burkina Faso extensively, residents are generally trying to obey the ban in order to assist the army and also out of fear of being targeted should they drive a motorbike. However, in Centre Nord, armed groups often circulate on heavy motorbikes during ban hours anyway, assuming that security forces will not be able to monitor the entire area (the entire province is currently affected by bans). Otherwise, in areas where the terrain allows for it, they have taken to using light motorbikes or other forms of transport not covered by the ban.⁸⁶

Impacts on armed groups and trafficking networks

Measuring the impact of any development in a conflict is difficult as each observable trend has numerous causes. However, there is little evidence so far to suggest that these motorbike bans are inhibiting either armed group activity or their ability to obtain motorbikes. The aforementioned bans in Burkina Faso's Est and Sahel provinces are a case in point. In 2021, the year in which the bans were introduced, JNIM were the instigators of 372 violent incidents against civilians, armed forces or other armed groups in both Sahel and Est provinces. In 2022, they instigated 365 such incidents in the same two provinces,⁸⁷ a narrow reduction.

More concerningly, several observers of the situation have concluded that, while the bans are hurting the businesses of licit (or at least partially licit) motorbike traders, they may be boosting the business of motorbike traffickers. The economic downturn may also increase anti-state sentiments, which could be exploited by armed groups. A policeman in Cinkassé, Togo, said:

We have noted a loss of business for normal traders, which is leading to the dismissal of several people by these large traders who are in this sector, and we are seeing a sharp rise in unemployment among the people employed by these traders. We have written to the authorities to alert them to the threat posed by the unemployment of former workers in the motorbike sales and transport industry. We fear that these people could be taken over by terrorists, because they know the roads, the villages and the ways to obtain motorbikes quickly at the expense of the authorities.⁸⁸

Two motorbike traders in Cinkassé and one in Malanville, Benin, acknowledged that a rise in prices, due to increased demand, would tempt traders into increasingly relying on motorbike trafficking networks to resupply them.⁸⁹ Likewise, the fact that armed actors (and not only violent extremist armed actors) are both willing to pay good prices for motorbikes and able to force traders into cooperating, will force some to rely on trafficking networks. A motorbike seller based in Kompienga, who uses transporteurs to smuggle motorbikes, explained:

I also have contacts who supply me with the number of motorbikes I need in record time. They can bring me 40 to 50 motorbikes per order for a two-month sales period. At the moment, I take around 20 motorbikes per month because it's become very difficult to get them out and sell them in the field. Over the past two years, I've had to sell motorbikes to the armed men who control the Fada area. These people can be Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland and the Defence and Security Forces. Often they are also men from the bush. We can't lie, we sell them the motorbikes because they pay without discussing the price, and they control the road access. If you avoid them they block you and kill your motorbike transporters.⁹⁰

It has been observed, not only in west Africa but globally, that the outlawing of goods or activities leads to a rise in trafficking in regard to multiple illicit economies. This is particularly true when the commodity in question is critical to local economies, and demand is more or less guaranteed.



CONCLUSION

Motorbikes occupy a curious position in the Sahelian conflict economy. They are vital to the daily lives of a vast proportion of the region's residents, and fill niches for both business and domestic life that public transport or cars currently cannot. In this sense, they are vital to residents' stability and resilience. However, motorbikes are also immeasurably important to armed violent extremist groups, who are among the key drivers of instability and violence in the Sahel. Policymakers and Sahelian governments face the substantial challenge of trying to strike a balance between these drivers of stability and instability when targeting motorbikes.

This is a challenging area of policy on which to offer realistic recommendations, since a lack of resources hampers many regional government ambitions to better regulate and police both the transport sector and illicit economies more widely. However, there is clearly a need to take stronger action against motorbike trafficking and the resale of stolen motorbikes, given both the importance of motorbikes to extremist armed groups, and the violence and economic harm that motorbike theft represents to residents of the Sahel.

Equally importantly is to avoid responses that create unintended consequences, while failing to hit their mark. For example, motorbike bans have failed to yield definitively positive results, but do take a substantial toll on local economies. Further, bans on the import and sale of motorbikes do not appear to be substantially limiting the acquisition of motorbikes by armed groups, but do appear to be bolstering trade for illicit sellers.

A more targeted approach, focused on illicit diversion at regional ports and on individuals supplying armed groups at scale, may be necessary. Law enforcement must consider that certain sellers, particularly those living in areas controlled by armed groups, may not have a choice but to supply them. Their objective should be to ensure that large deliveries of terrain-appropriate heavy motorbikes entering Sahelian countries from coastal states are not being sent directly to armed groups.

Recommendations

- 1. Reconsider the widespread use of motorbike circulation bans, and use them for the shortest possible periods in the service of clear objectives.** Refocus efforts on investigating and halting armed group acquisition of motorbikes at scale. As described, these periods in which bans are in force often see a spread of activity or violence into neighbouring areas where the ban is not in place. Moreover, the bans severely damage local economies because residents rely on motorbikes to transport themselves and their goods. This in turn creates resentment and ill-feeling towards the state, which may be exploited by armed groups.
- 2. Enhance monitoring and anti-corruption efforts at key regional ports.** Evidently, much of the illicit trade in motorbikes begins at key regional ports in West Africa, including Cotonou, Lome and Lagos. More must be done to disrupt the illicit diversion of motorbikes at ports. There is a clear relationship of dependence between those involved with diversion at the ports and trafficking networks, and equally between trafficking networks and armed groups.
- 3. Enhance intelligence gathering and knowledge of armed group acquisition of motorbikes, and implement countermeasures.** A more promising alternative to motorbike bans could be preventing armed groups from acquiring motorbikes at scale. This could be achieved by identifying individuals and networks responsible for supplying them with new motorbikes, and by improving controls on the import of motorbikes. This approach, if successful, does run the risk of increasing armed groups' reliance on networks selling stolen motorbikes, which often behave violently towards their victims. It will therefore need to be accompanied by substantial additional efforts to protect motorbike users on the streets, and to increase efforts to tackle vehicle crime. A regional database for registering all types of motorbikes, which is digitized and easily accessible to officers across the region, will be an essential component of such an effort.
- 4. Simplify the procedure for individuals to register motorbikes and obtain licence plates, so as to increase law enforcement capacity to track and recover stolen motorbikes.** Complications, expenses and the expectation that they may be asked to pay bribes have disincentivized many residents of the Sahel from formalizing their ownership of a motorbike. However, the downside is that their chances of recovering a stolen motorbike are even further limited if they are not registered as the formal owner. Ensuring that the process is as simple and cost-effective as possible will help to encourage motorbike registration.
- 5. Increase police investigative capacity and resources to respond to motorbike crime wherever possible.** One of the constant challenges cited in this research is that in contested areas, law enforcement and security services must constantly prioritize security, and have little capacity to respond to vehicle crime. However, in areas where there are fewer immediate security challenges, residents still perceive that police are unlikely to recover their motorbikes if they are stolen. Failure to respond adequately to motorbike crime risks exposing civilians to further violent thefts and serious economic losses, but also risks violent actors acquiring stolen motorbikes.



NOTES

- 1 Here, the Sahel region is shorthand for the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and western Niger, and the surrounding areas affected by the Sahelian conflict.
- 2 Interview with a motorbike trader in Dori, 15 March 2023, by phone.
- 3 Pamela Engel, These Toyota trucks are popular with terrorists – Here’s why, *Business Insider*, October 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-isis-uses-toyota-trucks-2015-10>; Ignacio Yáñez, Toyota wars and the next generation in counterinsurgency, <https://www.unav.edu/en/web/global-affairs/detalle1/-/blogs/toyota-wars-and-the-next-generation-in-counter-insurgency-strategies#>.
- 4 See, for example, *Niafunké: Les FAMA saisissent près de 200 motos neuves destinées aux GAT*, Bamada, <https://bamada.net/niafunke-les-fama-saisissent-pres-de-200-motos-neuves-destinees-aux-gat>.
- 5 Eleanor Beevor, Car thieves of the Sahel: Dynamics of the stolen vehicle trade, GI-TOC, June 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/car-thieves-sahel-stolen-vehicle-trade/>.
- 6 Thomas Flichy de La Neuville, How to prevent motorbike attacks in the Sahel?, *Journal of Intelligence and Cyber Security*, 2, 1, 66–72; William Assanvo et al, Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, 10 December 2019, <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/violent-extremism-organised-crime-and-local-conflicts-in-liptako-gourma>.
- 7 Thomas Flichy de La Neuville, How to prevent motorbike attacks in the Sahel?, *Journal of Intelligence and Cyber Security*, 2, 1, 66–72.
- 8 *Le Figaro, Niger: 100 civils tués dans les attaques de deux villages*, 3 January 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/niger-100-morts-dans-les-attaques-de-deux-villages-dans-l-ouest-20210103>; NigerFocus, *Niger: L’armée tue 40 terroristes dans la zone du Tchoma Bangou (Gouvernement)*, 12 July 2021, <http://www.nigerfocus.com/niger-larmee-tue-40-terroristes-dans-la-zone-de-tchoma-bangou-gouvernement/>.
- 9 Interviews with a motorbike trader in Dori, 15 March 2023, and a motorbike trader in Ouagadougou, 16 March 2023.
- 10 William Assanvo et al., Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, 10 December 2019, <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/violent-extremism-organised-crime-and-local-conflicts-in-liptako-gourma>.
- 11 GI-TOC, West Africa Risk Bulletin #7 - Motorbike trafficking is critical to armed groups’ mobility in the Sahel, April 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-007/03-motorbike-trafficking-critical-to-armed-groups-mobility.html>.
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