

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

MALI

HUMAN SMUGGLING RESILIENT
AMID MAJOR POLITICAL AND
SECURITY UPHEAVAL

Flore Berger

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
CSP	Cadre Stratégique Permanent (Permanent Strategic Framework)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMa	Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian Armed Forces)
FCFA	West African franc
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims)
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali



INTRODUCTION

Mali has long been an important origin and transit country for West African migrants travelling to North Africa. Its role has expanded in recent years as preferred migration routes have shifted westwards from Libya into Algeria.

In 2023, however, the political and security situation in northern Mali changed significantly. MINUSMA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) withdrew from Mali after nearly a decade on the ground. This in turn contributed to the outbreak of hostilities between the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (Permanent Strategic Framework – CSP) and the Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian Armed Forces – FAMA), operating with the support of Russia’s Wagner Group, marking the de facto end of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement. The Malian transitional military government officially terminated this accord on 25 January 2024.¹

Taking advantage of Mali’s international isolation and internal turmoil, violent extremist groups – including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) – stepped up their activities, notably by imposing blockades on major northern towns, most notably Timbuktu by JNIM and Ménaka by IS Sahel.

These events altered the security equilibrium that, in recent years, had allowed migrants to travel through large parts of northern Mali, particularly Timbuktu, with little difficulty. While none of the developments, individually or collectively, drastically disrupted the movement of migrants and the functioning of human smuggling networks, they did have localized and short- to medium-term effects on flows, route safety, methods and means of transport, and prices.

Timbuktu was by far the most significantly affected hub. A blockade was imposed by JNIM at the beginning of August, bringing movement to an immediate halt. Later, however, even as the blockade continued, flows resumed, with migrants using the river to get to Timbuktu rather than overland travel. The safety of movement in and around the city, including on the route to Algeria, deteriorated sharply, and the cost of the journey for migrants almost doubled.

Gao was similarly affected by the resumption of hostilities between the CSP and FAMA. This region has always been much more volatile, however, with migratory flows through the city fluctuating greatly depending on the season and the security situation.

Mali's third major migration route, through the western Kayes region and into Mauritania and Senegal, is a key area to watch. Movements through the south-west have not been directly affected by the upheaval in the north, and a growing number of Malians and West Africans are using this option.

This is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Mali. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued by the GI-TOC since 2019, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Mali, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.²

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – 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 areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Mali and the wider region.



HUMAN SMUGGLING RESILIENT AMID MAJOR POLITICAL AND SECURITY UPHEAVAL

In 2023, Mali's political and security landscape transformed drastically, particularly in the north. Over the course of the year, many of the factors that had underpinned the status quo for nearly a decade either shifted dramatically or disappeared.

The first and arguably most far-reaching change was the withdrawal of MINUSMA, which the Malian authorities requested in June. This process was officially completed on 11 December, bringing to an end a 10-year deployment without a clear plan from the government on how to fill the gap.

The withdrawal had, and continues to have, a considerable impact on the political, security and economic situation in Mali. First, the mission played an important role in the protection of civilians through patrols and security operations, acting as a deterrent to armed groups, particularly in rural areas where there is no state presence. Where security conditions allowed, it also assisted in the provision of basic services and provided a secure environment in which, for example, weekly markets (vital to the local economy) could operate.

While MINUSMA was primarily a peacekeeping mission, it also had a development component, with billions of CFA francs allocated for quick impact projects as well as longer-term interventions to strengthen infrastructure, basic services and capacity building – including that of the Malian authorities, for example, the construction of police stations and support to justice departments – in the regions where it operated (Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu, Ménaka and Kidal).

Speaking in late November 2023, a Malian security analyst summed up the situation:

MINUSMA camps have been retroceded by the mission to the Malian authorities, so in theory, they are occupying the space left by MINUSMA. But it is a superficial presence. MINUSMA has withdrawn almost 9 000 uniformed personnel [with 4 000 more to go],³ and this number is by no means matched by the number of FAMa deployed in the north. FAMa do not conduct patrols, they do not have expertise in areas such as IED [improvised explosive device] investigation and disposal techniques, and it is fair to say that so far they have had other priorities than protecting the civilian population.

Indeed, the focus of the Malian authorities seems to be elsewhere. According to many international observers, the military government has had one main goal since coming to power: to reconquer Mali's north and reunify the country.⁴

In turn, this ambition coupled with the withdrawal of MINUSMA led to renewed fighting between the CSP and FAMA, triggered by disagreements over the transfer of the mission's bases to the government, since at least half of them are located in areas that the CSP claims to control under the 2015 peace agreement. It is worth noting that tensions began much earlier, simmering in 2022 and 2023,⁵ before the first confrontation took place on 11 August in Ber, in the Timbuktu region, when FAMA and Wagner clashed with the CSP over command of the second base to be vacated.

This was followed by a number of other incidents, including CSP incursions on military bases in the Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao regions, and on a FAMA–Wagner convoy that was heading up from Gao to Kidal between early October and mid-November. FAMA and Wagner launched several retaliatory air strikes and drone attacks on rebel positions. Violence reached levels not seen in the north since the launch of France's Operation Serval in 2013.⁶ By the end of the year, FAMA and Wagner had the upper hand, largely due to their superior air power, including newly acquired drones. Their three-month offensive culminated in the capture of the city of Kidal on 14 November. Kidal had been under CSP control since 2013, and has historically been a rebel stronghold, adding symbolic weight to the takeover.

The renewed fighting had serious humanitarian consequences. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), at least 400 people died between August and 1 November, half of them civilians.⁷ FAMA and Wagner were also accused of committing atrocities against civilians, including the execution and beheading of 17 Tuareg people in Ersan on 5 October, as a military convoy was travelling north from Gao towards Kidal.⁸ This incident underlines the particular risk faced by Tuareg and Arab communities during unrest, as they are often accused by FAMA and its supporters of being CSP allies or supporters.

In addition, tens of thousands of civilians were displaced, fleeing their villages as FAMA and Wagner troops approached, fearing human rights abuses, racial targeting and generally being caught in the crossfire. In the Kidal region alone, more than 30 000 people fled their homes, with towns such as Kidal, Aguelhok, Anéfis and Tessalit seeing more than 70% of their inhabitants displaced. Most people relocated to rural areas in the Kidal region itself (Talhandak, Tinzaouaten, Abeïbara), while those with more financial resources left for Algeria.⁹

The renewed fighting between the CSP and FAMA coincided with a rise in the activity of violent extremist groups, especially in the Gao and Timbuktu regions, with JNIM stepping up its attacks against state forces and civilians. For reasons separate from those of the CSP, JNIM opposed the expansion of FAMA's presence in northern Mali, leading it to combat the military's takeover of MINUSMA bases.

JNIM demonstrated its strength by imposing a blockade on Timbuktu in August 2023, which remains in place at the time of writing. In addition, in the last week of November, it launched large-scale attacks on military bases in Goundam and Niafunké in the Timbuktu region, looting military vehicles and heavy weapons and killing dozens of Malian soldiers.¹⁰

Although tensions between the CSP and FAMA subsided after the takeover of Kidal in mid-November, it is clear that the fighting is not over, and Mali's north is at risk of a protracted conflict involving all parties. So far, FAMA and the Wagner Group – together with the newly formed Africa Corps¹¹ – have stabilized their presence in the area, and control the airports and the major routes leading to all main

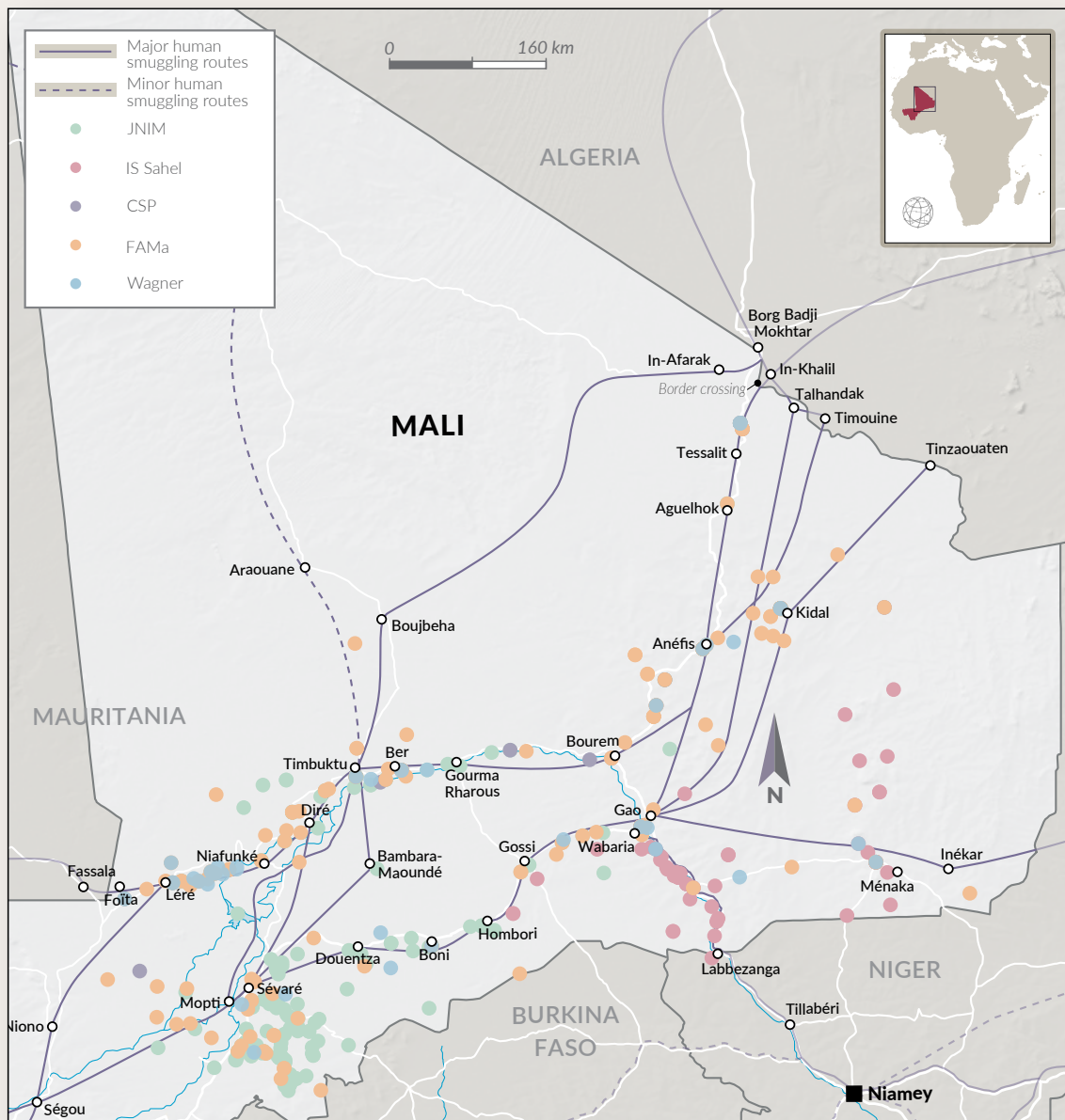


FIGURE 1 Armed conflict events in northern Mali, 1 August to 31 November 2023.

SOURCE: ACLED

towns (Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal). Clashes with the CSP have become rare, but patrols, air strikes and drone attacks in rural areas continued in early 2024, with more allegations of racial targeting and human rights abuses.

In the long term, FAMA's control of northern Mali is far from guaranteed, and further confrontations with the CSP can be expected, as well as more human rights abuses and ethnic targeting by FAMA and Wagner during their military operations. It is fair to say that violent extremist organizations will be the winners in this situation, as they will gain from the weakening of both FAMA and the CSP. These organizations, particularly IS Sahel, have already benefited from the departure of France's Operation Barkhane in the Gao and Ménaka regions in 2022.¹² Both JNIM and IS Sahel will capitalize on the vacuum left by MINUSMA and the authorities' focus on the CSP in the coming months and years.



MIGRATION THROUGH NORTHERN MALI IN FLUX BUT RESILIENT

The renewed conflict between the CSP, FAMA and Wagner, as well as the resurgence of JNIM activity and the imposition of blockades on towns and villages, has destabilized the security equilibrium that had prevailed in parts of northern Mali, particularly in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions. The impact has been less dramatic in Gao, which had already emerged as a hotspot for violent extremist action and competition between state and non-state armed groups. In addition to civilian casualties, internally displaced people and a worsening humanitarian situation, there are new challenges for migrants and human smugglers. This section analyzes the implications of the political and security landscape for the transport of irregular migrants in northern Mali's two main human smuggling hubs, Timbuktu and Gao.

Timbuktu

Timbuktu emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic as the most prominent migrant smuggling hub in northern Mali, replacing Gao, which had historically been the centre of activities.¹³ This could be explained by the relative calm and security in the city of Timbuktu and the region as a whole, particularly along the roads and tracks leading to Algeria through both the Timbuktu and the Kidal regions, in 2021 and 2022. Clashes were rare, not because of the absence of armed groups, but because the various entities (mainly JNIM and the CSP) chose not to confront each other. These groups also benefited, directly or indirectly, from the movement of people and goods between Timbuktu and the Algerian border, creating an environment conducive to human smuggling.¹⁴

As noted above, the relative stability of the Timbuktu region, and of northern Mali generally, did not hold in 2023. Timbuktu itself has been under a blockade imposed by JNIM since early August 2023, when the region's emir, Abu Talha al-Libi, made the declaration in an audio clip circulated on social media. All goods and humanitarian aid are prohibited from entering or leaving the town by road, whether from Algeria or Mauritania (the source of most supplies) or from southern Mali. The movement of people is not expressly banned, but many have limited their travel for fear of being targeted. The blockade and increasing insecurity have had several implications for the dynamics of human smuggling in and around Timbuktu. Towards the end of the year, however, flows recovered and even appeared to be rebounding.

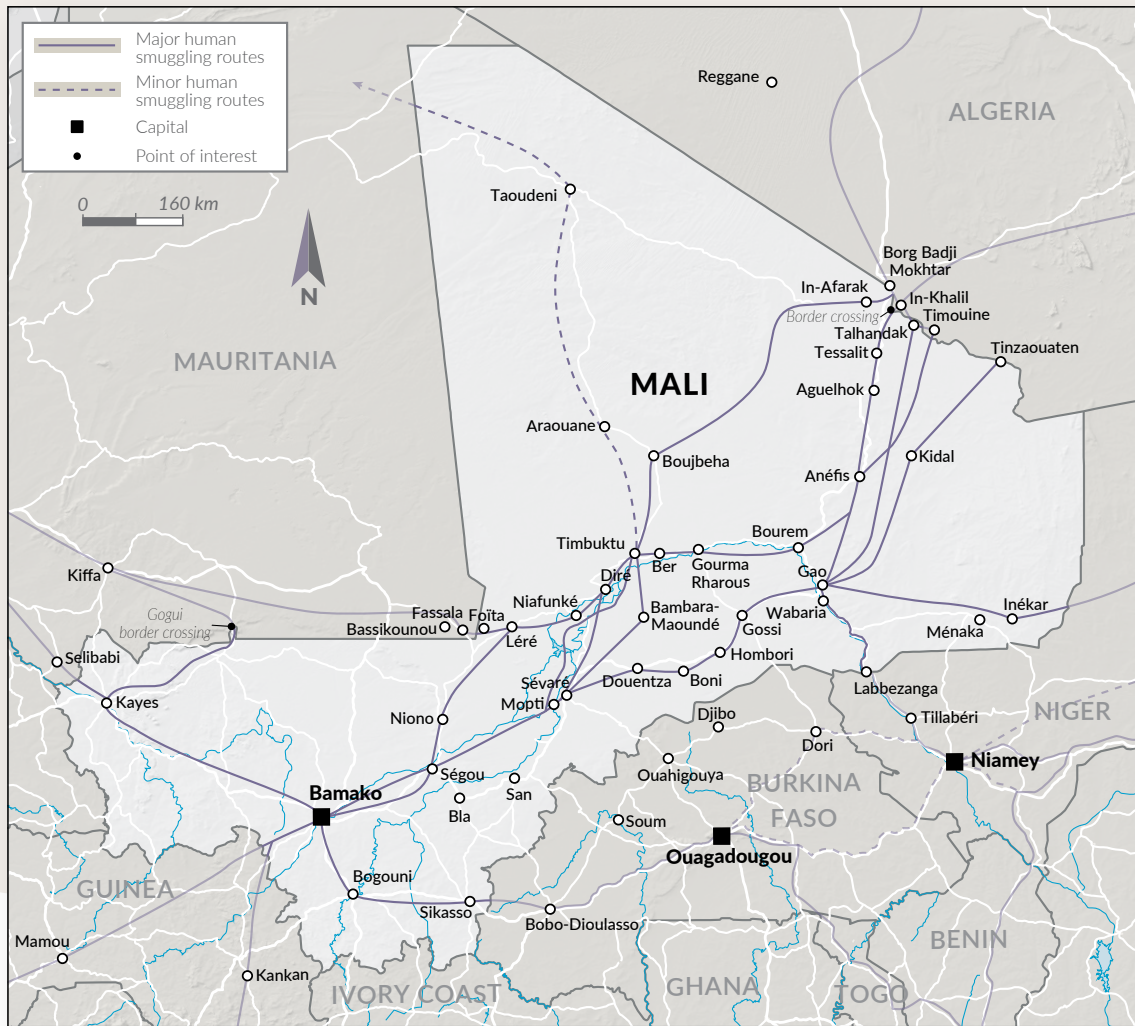


FIGURE 2 Main human smuggling routes through Mali.

Impact on flows

During the first seven to 10 days of the blockade, the movement of migrants in and out of Timbuktu came to an immediate halt. Thousands of people were stuck at various points along the most popular route, from Mopti to Timbuktu. Bambara-Maoudé (about 100 kilometres south of Timbuktu), which is the last major junction before Koriomé on the Niger River (about 18 kilometres south of Timbuktu), was the biggest bottleneck. Hundreds of vehicles carrying people and goods were marooned for weeks, with drivers refusing to go further for fear of being attacked. The drivers stranded in the town included those who were passing through when the blockade was announced and several others who were diverted there after a Niger River ferry, usually used by vehicles to reach Koriomé, was attacked by JNIM on 8 August. At the time of writing, it had still not been repaired.

A second, less popular route to Timbuktu, from Mopti through Niafunké and Goundam on the RN33 national road, was also impassable. However, the impact here was less severe. This is because apart from the blockade and the resumption of hostilities between the CSP and FAMA, this road is usually inaccessible during the rainy season, between June and September. At the very end of October, Sonéf, one of the country's largest bus companies, reopened the Bamako–Timbuktu route on the RN33.

After the initial standstill, the movement of people into and through Timbuktu resumed. Volumes were low at first, but increased steadily, eventually reaching higher levels than before the blockade. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Flow Monitoring Point in Timbuktu, numbers quickly began to recover after a dip in August. Indeed, the flow of migrants through Timbuktu has gradually increased over the past few years, from 3 500 per month in early 2022, to 4 000 by the end of 2022, reaching an average of 4 500 in the first half of 2023. The last quarter of 2023 was the busiest ever recorded, with more than 19 000 migrants passing through the town. October 2023 was the peak of the last quarter, with almost 7 000 migrants arriving, and the figures remained above average until the end of the year (around 6 000 in both November and December).¹⁵ The reasons for this are not yet clear, but there are several possible contributing factors.

First, the blockade appeared to ease in early October 2023, and goods and food began to reach the city, albeit informally and in small quantities (no fuel or food trucks were officially allowed through). On 31 November, two trucks from Algeria entered Timbuktu with permission from JNIM, signalling a significant relaxation. A few weeks later, however, the group reinstated a total blockade in an official communiqué.¹⁶

Nevertheless, JNIM carried out fewer checks on what was entering and leaving the city, and the movement of goods and people to and from southern Mali and towards Algeria was relatively straightforward. The same cannot be said of inbound flows from Mauritania or Algeria. The trucks that entered Timbuktu from Algeria at the end of November were the first to do so in four months, and none have been allowed in since. However, smaller vehicles arriving from the border are permitted to enter.

Second, clashes between the CSP and FAMA in the Timbuktu region were at their height in August and September, while from October tensions began to rise on the Gao–Kidal axis, culminating in the takeover of the MINUSMA base in Kidal in mid-November. This meant that the journey to Timbuktu became a little safer, or at least more predictable. Moreover, the authorities' scrutiny, described below, eased as well, most likely as a result of reduced tensions with the CSP.

Third, the end of the rainy season in September meant that the roads were more passable, especially for buses. The improved accessibility of the RN33 to Timbuktu, combined with the easing of the blockade and a slight reduction in violence, meant that bus companies, as mentioned above, were able to resume operations on the Bamako–Timbuktu route through Mopti and Niafunké at the beginning of October.

Impact on transport to Timbuktu

Despite the rather rapid resumption of movement, the roads were still considered too dangerous by many *passeurs* and transporters until mid-October, which in turn affected transport methods.

A contact monitoring arrivals and departures in Timbuktu reported that from August to the first half of October, most migrants arrived on *pinasses* (small river boats) on the Niger River. They typically embarked in Mopti and sailed past Niafunké to Koriomé before crossing into Timbuktu. The river route became popular after JNIM began forcing many vehicles (particularly the minibuses and pick-up trucks used to transport migrants) to turn around 15 kilometres away from Koriomé. Vehicles were also attacked by JNIM, and migrants had their goods confiscated at checkpoints. While the movement of people was never prohibited by the blockade, JNIM targeted drivers transporting people on the suspicion that they might be concealing goods, according to a transporter operating between Mopti and Timbuktu.

Pinasses are able to navigate the Niger River fairly easily, and JNIM is less vigilant on the water than on land, although it does operate at certain points. As a precaution, migrants were generally asked to travel with one small bag containing the bare minimum, just their personal effects. If JNIM became suspicious of a passenger (for example, if they suspected someone of working for the state), or if they saw large bags, the *pinasse* and its passengers would be threatened and would not reach Koriomé. A *pinasse* driver reported that most vessels were checked 5 to 10 kilometres before reaching Koriomé. As the blockade eased, migrants were no longer deprived of their luggage, and by the last quarter of the year they were able to travel more freely, according to most of those interviewed in Timbuktu at the end of November.

Impact on temporary stays in Timbuktu

The third effect of the blockade and heightened insecurity on migratory flows through Timbuktu concerns the length and condition of migrants' stopovers in the city before leaving for the Algerian border. In August and early September, during the first few weeks of hostilities, some 30 000 people left the Timbuktu region.¹⁷ Most were Arabs and Tuaregs who feared ethnic reprisals from FAMA and Wagner. Many were transporters and traders working on the routes to and from the Algerian border. This exodus of drivers meant that the length of time migrants spent in Timbuktu increased from 24 to 48 hours to up to a week or even several weeks.

In addition to the fact that many drivers who stayed in Timbuktu feared being targeted by JNIM or FAMA and Wagner, the situation also affected their activities, as migrants were stranded south of the city. From early to mid-September, however, movement resumed, and many drivers returned to Timbuktu. From then on, according to *passeurs*, supply more or less matched demand, and if there were delays in departures, it was not due to a lack of available vehicles and drivers.

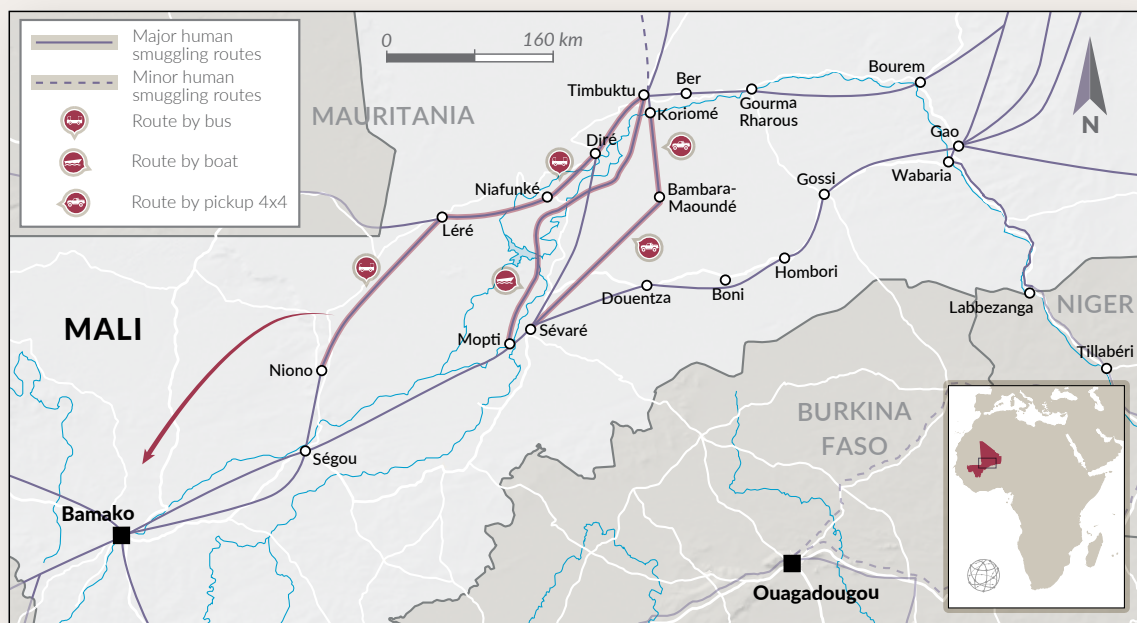


FIGURE 3 Detail of the area between Mopti, Douentza, Bambara-Maoundé, Koriomé and Timbuktu.



Migrants arrive in Koriomé, after travelling in *pinasses* from Mopti, where *passeurs* receive them and take them to safehouses in Timbuktu, August 2023.

Photo: GI-TOC

It is also worth noting that even drivers who were not previously involved in transporting people reportedly became involved in human smuggling, as the blockade strictly targeted goods and trade. As one driver interviewed in early September explained: 'Migrants are all we have at the moment, they are our only source of income, so we all want to transport as many as we can, and we put many of them in our cars for the Algerian border every day.' This was still the case at the beginning of December, as the movement of goods was still being monitored closely, and drivers were largely focused on transporting migrants towards the Algerian border, especially as these numbers continued to increase.

But while the JNIM blockade and the hostilities between the CSP and FAMA were becoming less destabilizing, the next threat came from the government. From mid-September to mid-October, the government stepped up its scrutiny of movement and smuggling networks in the Timbuktu region, and accused migrants of joining the ranks of 'terrorists' (a word used interchangeably by the authorities when referring to the CSP and violent extremist groups). According to a contact close to the government, the authorities claimed that some migrants had been found with weapons during the clashes around Ber in the Timbuktu region at the time of the MINUSMA base handover.

The dock at Koriomé, where most migrants disembark from the *pinasses* and are received by *passeurs* before being driven to safehouses in Timbuktu to await the journey to Algeria, was then heavily monitored by government authorities. Migrants were either told to turn back or were escorted to the IOM office for voluntary return. However, as this programme is optional, migrants who wished to continue were allowed to do so, after attending an information session on the risks of travelling in the present security environment.

One *passeur* explained: 'When the gendarmerie was controlling the dock, paying them between FCFA5 000 and FCFA10 000 [€7.60 to €15.25] per migrant was enough to be left alone, but when it was the armed forces it was more difficult.' One of the ways in which *passeurs* adapted was to have migrants disembark further away from the dock, and instead of having them wait as a group to be driven in pick-up trucks or minibuses, they organized motorcycles to transport them individually. This made their activities more discreet, as they could blend in with the flow of motorcycles, one of the most common means of transport in the area.

Nevertheless, some migrants were arrested in the city of Timbuktu, following patrols of the safehouses where they were staying. Several *passeurs* were also arrested. Detailed information on the number of raids or the number of *passeurs* arrested was not available. In one incident, three *passeurs* were arrested by the gendarmerie and immediately transferred to Bamako, according to other *passeurs* who knew them. Regarding migrants, at least four separate raids were carried out between mid-September and mid-October, during which between 15 and 20 migrants were arrested, either in Koriomé, in safehouses in Timbuktu or just outside the city. It was not possible to determine precisely what happened to them, but contacts reported that the women were released within a few days. *Passeurs* were extremely cautious during this period, and migrants were not allowed to leave their safehouses before their time of departure to Algeria.

From the second half of October, the authorities appeared to relax their scrutiny of migrant movements, and no arrests in Koriomé or in the city of Timbuktu were reported to the GI-TOC. This was probably due to the easing of tensions between the CSP and FAMa in the Timbuktu region. However, *passeurs* stated that they were still concerned about insecurity in the area, and the possibility that the authorities would resume their patrols, so migrants continued to be confined to their safehouses.

Migrants interviewed in Timbuktu, particularly those who had arrived from neighbouring countries such as Côte d'Ivoire or Guinea, said they had not been fully aware of the security situation before starting their journeys. *Passeurs* and migrants spoke of the risks of being targeted by JNIM or the authorities once they reached Mopti. However, they had continued as they could not turn back and felt they had no choice. When asked if they would take a different route if they had to make the trip again, they all said they would not, simply stating that this was the route that had been recommended to them, and adding that their *passeurs* had not suggested changing the itinerary.

Impact on the Timbuktu–Algeria journey

The road between Timbuktu and Algeria has also been affected by the volatile security environment. Several drivers reported that their journeys to and from the Algerian border were more dangerous, but said they felt compelled to continue because they needed the money and it was the only business available to them. According to one interviewee, drones posed the greatest threat. And indeed, FAMa has used drones to target CSP positions in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions, particularly on the road between Bourem and Kidal. Given the conflation of 'terrorists' and 'migrants' in the discourse of the authorities, some feared being targeted by drone attacks, not to mention the risk of arrest.

The direct clashes between the CSP and FAMa, many of which take place along the key axis of Bourem–Kidal, appear to be less of a worry. One driver explained:

Yes, it is a concern, and we have had to adapt, but it is not a big one. We inform ourselves through our network [of transporters, close to the CSP] or our families and colleagues who have left. For example, if we hear that clashes are taking place in Anéfis, we delay our departures or wait in a town nearby for things to calm down. But clashes are mostly localized in or near towns, and we often use tracks and small roads to avoid the main towns anyway. Moreover, we are lucky because JNIM and the CSP are not a threat to us, so the only ones we have to dodge are the authorities.

During periods of intense hostilities, such as in early October, when clashes around Anéfis lasted for almost three days, some drivers paused their activities, while others used a longer but safer route, from Timbuktu to Boujbeha, on to In-Afarak, and then to In-Khalil at the border.





Migrants in Timbuktu prepare to leave for Algeria, August 2023. Photo: GI-TOC

Another driver said that while travelling with migrants from Timbuktu to In-Khalil was not a problem, he was concerned about not being able to bring goods back. The blockade's strict rules on goods entering Timbuktu from Algeria or Mauritania has meant a significant loss of business for drivers, who can no longer make money on both legs of the journey.

This loss of business, combined with rising fuel prices – driven up by blockade-related shortages, especially of fuel from Algeria – pushed up the cost of the Timbuktu–In-Khalil journey for migrants in the second half of 2023. In 2022, the trip to In-Khalil or In-Afarak was priced between FCFA75 000 and FCFA80 000 (€115–€120), with some Malian migrants reportedly paying even less, around FCFA60 000 (€91). In the second half of 2023, the same journey cost between FCFA80 000 and FCFA100 000 (€120–€152), for those who negotiated with their *passeurs* (mainly Malian migrants), and between FCFA100 000 and FCFA130 000 (€152–€198) for others, such as Guineans and Ivorians. In August, at the height of the blockade, when demand outstripped supply due to a lack of drivers willing to make the trip, prices reached up to FCFA150 000 (€228).

At the time of writing, it is not yet clear how long the blockade will last. There were promising developments in the last quarter of 2023, such as the negotiations between customary leaders in Timbuktu and JNIM in September, or the gradual easing of the blockade and temporary resumption of trade from Algeria in November, when JNIM officially allowed two trucks into the city. However, in a communiqué issued on 11 December, JNIM reiterated that the blockade was absolute and had to be respected, and it has largely adhered to this approach for the first four months of 2024. If the situation continues, the cost of travel for migrants will remain high, given the price of fuel and the loss of income for drivers on return trips.

Gao

Migration dynamics in Gao have been in constant flux since movement resumed in 2021.¹⁸ Flows to and from this important hub have been affected by high levels of insecurity and the rainy season. The resumption of hostilities between the CSP and FAMA and an uptick in JNIM activity have complicated the picture further.

Mobility in and around Gao consists of two distinct flows: long-term migrants passing through the town with the aim of reaching Europe, and seasonal migrants, mainly Nigerien and Burkinabé, travelling to work in the artisanal gold mines in the Gao and Kidal regions.¹⁹

Seasonal migration

While the first half of 2023 was relatively stable in terms of migration in Gao, the second saw significant fluctuations. This was partly due to the rainy season between June and September, when many seasonal migrants stayed in their home countries to work in agriculture. The rains also hampered work on the gold mines, reducing the demand for labour. In September, however, seasonal migration picked up again. Notably, despite the ongoing hostilities between the CSP and FAMA, movements in September and October were higher than they had been earlier in the year. According to GI-TOC contacts monitoring this situation in Gao, levels during the last four months of the year were 30% higher than at the beginning of 2023, probably largely due to the high demand for labour on the gold mines. This was linked to the upheaval in the gold sector, as a substantial number of Malian gold workers fled Gao and Kidal for Algeria or Niger because of the insecurity, creating a labour shortage that was filled by foreigners, mainly Nigeriens and Burkinabés.

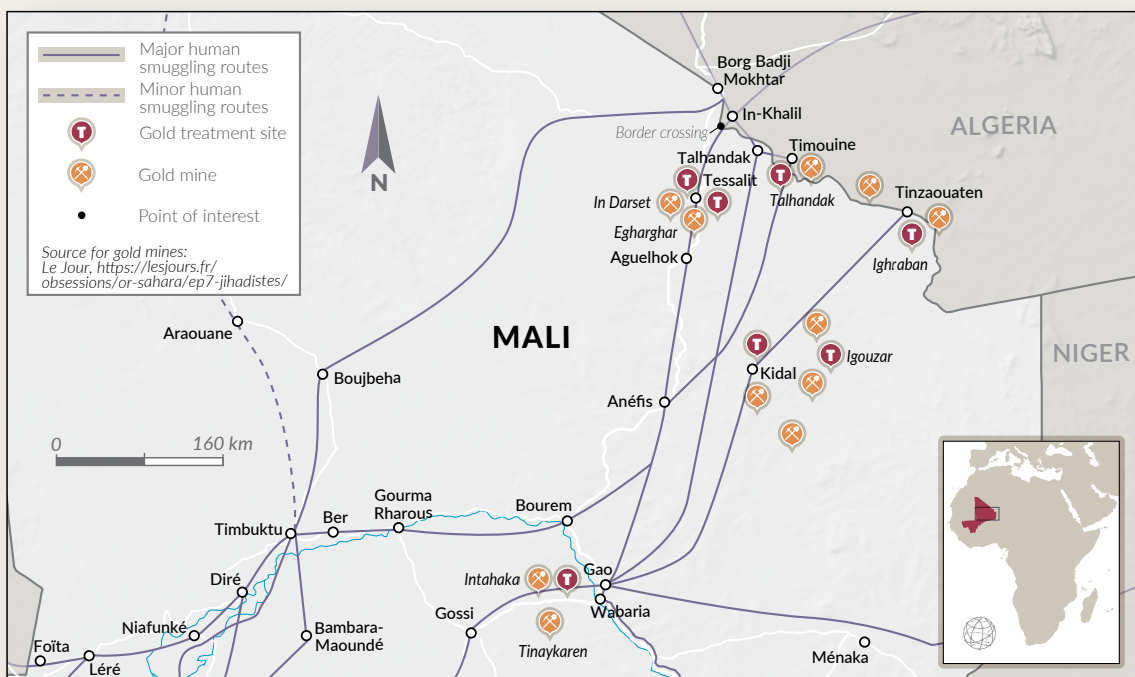


FIGURE 4 Gold mines along the Gao-Kidal human smuggling route.



A gold mining site in Tinaykaren attacked by IS Sahel in late November 2023. Photo: Inkinane on Twitter/X

A GI-TOC contact close to the CSP and involved in gold mining in the Gao and Kidal regions confirmed this assessment:

At the end of August, when the rain becomes less of a problem, the gold mines become really busy. Usually, thousands of Malians and others come back to the north to work on these mines. But this year, because of the war, many Malians did not return. Malians from the south did not come, but also all the people who usually live in Gao and Kidal have fled to the bush, where their villages are, or to Niger or Algeria. Hundreds and hundreds of families have left, including the men who usually work on the mines. So, we have a high demand for workers, which is mainly being filled by Nigeriens and Burkinabés.

This was corroborated by several GI-TOC contacts in Gao, who had the same understanding of the situation, as well as by migrants interviewed on arrival in the area, who said word had spread that there was a lot of work to be done and not enough hands to do it.

While flows were unaffected, security around the mines in the Gao and Kidal regions deteriorated. Previously, the CSP had provided protection and a degree of management at some of the mines and along the roads leading to them. This was no longer the case between August and October, as the group focused its attention on the FAMa offensive. Following the takeover of Kidal by FAMa and Wagner in mid-November, the CSP remained less visible on the roads and at the mines. The instability led to an increase in banditry and attacks by armed groups, including IS Sahel, which targeted a gold mine in Tinaykaren, just south of the national road between Gossi and Gao, in the last week of November.²⁰

In addition, as they had in Timbuktu, FAMa and Wagner adopted a predatory attitude towards civilians, including migrants. In mid-October, for example, they arrested a group of Burkinabé and Nigerien miners as they were leaving a mine just south of Tessalit in the Kidal region. They beat the miners and seized their belongings before finally releasing them. Many other similar incidents were reported over the next few months, and FAMa and Wagner also carried out patrols of gold sites, such as Igouzar in the Kidal region. Moreover, a Wagner presence was reported at N'thaka gold mine, the largest in the Gao region.²¹ Wagner's involvement in and around gold mines could affect the movement of migrants to these mines, a trend the GI-TOC is monitoring in 2024.

In mid-November, several Burkinabé migrants interviewed in Gao on their return from the gold mines said they had been somewhat aware of the heightened insecurity, but most had not understood the gravity and intensity of the situation. They said there had been a visible change in the environment at the sites, especially in terms of security and management. However, they also indicated that they would be returning in December. They said they had no choice as the situation in Burkina Faso was just as bad, if not worse, and they needed to earn money for their families.

Economic migration

Insecurity in the second half of 2023 also made travel more difficult for economic migrants attempting to reach Algeria. First, the route between central Mali and Gao was cut off by JNIM, which has imposed a blockade on Boni, a town on the RN16 national road 300 kilometres south-west of Gao, since 29 July.²² This mainly affected West African migrants, who typically travel to Bamako before heading towards Gao. Burkinabés and Nigeriens mainly use the Niamey–Gao road. Migrants travelling north from Bamako to Gao were blocked at Douentza, 90 kilometres west of Boni. Boni had previously been subject to a blockade by JNIM from May to September 2022. At that time, alternative routes were used, for example through Bambara–Maoudé, Timbuktu, Gossi and finally Gao, but this route was heavily affected by the blockade of Timbuktu in August, and only became an option again in early September.

In addition, the rainy season made most alternatives – such as the route from Douentza to Hombori on the small tracks that run alongside the RN16 – impassable for all vehicles except those with four-wheel drive. On 28 November, the governor of Douentza issued a communiqué prohibiting the 'transport of passengers in pick-up trucks and station wagons to get around the RN16 between Douentza and Hombori, and vice versa'.²³ This has been negatively affecting the movement and safety of migrants, especially given the predatory attitude adopted towards them in northern Mali since mid-2023, discussed above.



A truck full of migrants prepares to depart from Gao, November 2023. *Photo: GI-TOC*



A pick-up truck and a Hilux ready to depart from Gao, November 2023. *Photo: GI-TOC*

Similar to seasonal migration trends, the first half of 2023 was relatively stable in terms of economic migration, while the second half saw significant fluctuations in movements. There was a sharp drop between June and September, after which flows resumed. From July to August, according to a GI-TOC contact, just 400 to 500 migrants passed through Gao per month. From September onwards, however, movements reached their highest levels since 2021, averaging more than 2 000 per month,²⁴ despite the fact that the road from Gao to the Algerian border was more dangerous than before, due to lingering open clashes between the CSP and FAMA. This was particularly the case between early October and mid-November, when a large military convoy moved up through Gao, Bourem, Anéfis and finally Kidal.

As in Timbuktu, however, transporters reported that they were able to locate the convoy through their networks without too much difficulty, knew when and where to expect clashes, and could plan their departures and itineraries accordingly. They avoided the national road as much as possible, especially the larger towns along it, where fighting was taking place, and used tracks to the east of the RN18, through Talataye, Tin-Essako and Abeïbara, with some crossing the Algerian border at Timouine and others driving up to In-Khalil.

Several drivers stressed the danger of using pick-up trucks in these areas, as these were used by both the CSP and JNIM, and it was important not to be mistaken for these groups in times of violence. In mid-September, some transporters began using Toyota Hiluxes instead, as these could negotiate the roads and were less likely to be mistaken by FAMA and Wagner for combatant vehicles. Others started using larger trucks, typically used to transport goods from Algeria to Gao, to carry migrants. However, according to one driver, there were not enough alternative vehicles, especially Hiluxes, so some continued to use pick-up trucks despite the risk.

The cost of the journey from Gao to Algeria was also affected by the unrest, mainly due to a lack of transporters in the town of Gao. Many transporters were Arabs or Tuaregs, and had fled to their villages or towards the Algerian or Nigerien borders in August and September. A large number stayed away until mid-November, fearing persecution. Some were concerned about being targeted en route, given the heavy presence of FAMA and Wagner forces between Gao and the Algerian border from September to November, and the numerous allegations of extrajudicial killings and the looting of villages, mostly in Arab or Tuareg communities. These increased risks justified a higher price. While rates in 2022 ranged from FCFA30 000 to FCFA40 000 (€45–€60), they rose to between FCFA50 000 and FCFA80 000 (€76–€121) in the second half of 2023.

South-west Mali

Travel along the route through the western region of Kayes towards Mauritania remained popular in 2023. This was in line with trends that emerged in mid-2022, when the border post at Gogui was reopened following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, allowing legal passage between the two countries.²⁵ Most Malians entered Mauritania legally, using buses linking Bamako to Nouakchott through Gogui, north-east of the city of Kayes. Malians do not need a visa to enter Mauritania, only a *laissez-passer* (travel document), which can be purchased at the border for FCFA500 (€0.76). However, some continued to use smugglers or unofficial and unmonitored border crossings, especially if they did not have the documentation, such as an identity card, required for the *laissez-passer*. Some migrants crossed irregularly through Gogui itself, but most crossed at Sélibabi, north-west of the city of Kayes.

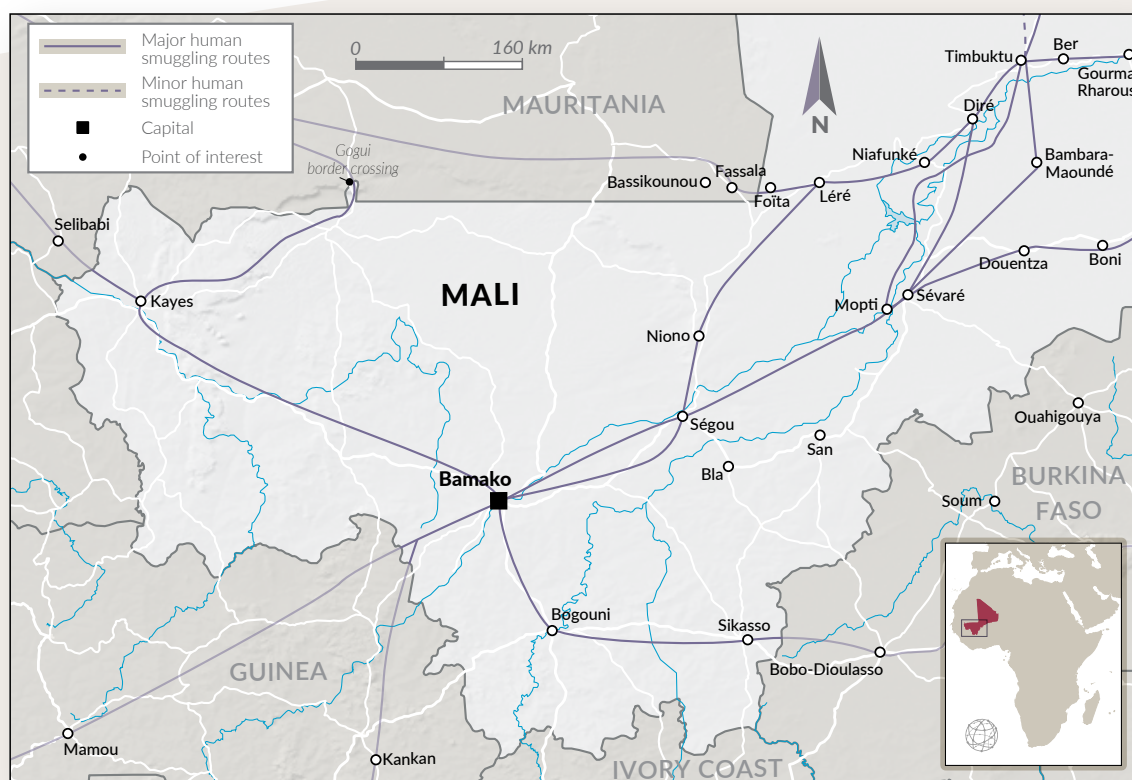


FIGURE 5 Human smuggling routes through south-west Mali.

The route through south-west Mali became more popular in 2023. According to GI-TOC contacts in Gogui, the number of trips increased by about 30% compared to 2022. Several factors may explain this. The first is economic. By far the largest number of Malians passing through the region were Bambara and Soninke, from the south (Bamako, Kayes and Sikasso), driven by economic hardship and social pressure to try their luck abroad and send money back home. For these migrants, Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria offered good opportunities. Work was generally available, and the pay was usually better than at home. The men were employed in construction, trade, fisheries and gold mining, the women in domestic service.²⁶ While some may have attempted to continue their journey to Europe via the Canary Islands, most intended to stay and work in North Africa.

The appeal of these opportunities becomes even clearer when one considers Mali's deteriorating economic structure. Unemployment has soared in recent years, reaching 32% for the youth in Bamako.²⁷ Inflation remained stubbornly high in 2022, at 10%, driven by rising food prices, while 20% of Malians fell below the poverty line.²⁸ The country's growing isolation from its traditional political and economic partners and the government's lack of strong investment prospects are likely to exacerbate these trends in 2024.²⁹ Mali's decision (together with Burkina Faso and Niger) to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is an additional concern for its economic prospects.³⁰

In addition to these structural challenges, international isolation, including the withdrawal of MINUSMA, is expected to drive even more Malians abroad. MINUSMA generated tens of thousands of jobs, directly and indirectly. The blow will be magnified in the north, which already suffers from poor economic conditions caused by more than a decade of conflict. In the south, particularly in the capital of Bamako, thousands of Malians worked as drivers, cleaners, gardeners and security guards for MINUSMA personnel, and their families will have lost a lucrative source of income in a short period of time.

A security guard and a driver interviewed by the GI-TOC in November 2023, both of whom had worked mainly for MINUSMA expatriate personnel in Bamako, said that they and their colleagues were in a desperate situation, being unable to provide financial support for their families, with no other job opportunities in the area. The security guard explained: 'If I cannot find anything [here], I will have to find something somewhere [else], maybe on a gold mine abroad, like Mauritania, or even Europe. I cannot sit here and do nothing while my family looks at me every day and expects me to be the financial provider.' This is the situation for hundreds, if not thousands, of men in the capital and across the country.

The second factor explaining the popularity of the route through south-west Mali is the security situation. Violent extremist groups have become more entrenched in the southern regions, especially Koulikoro, Kayes and Sikasso, and there have been several incidents near Bamako and on the key roads linking it to the regional capitals. This has already had a direct impact on economic activity in the area, for example through attacks on weekly markets. Insecurity in southern Mali is expected to increase even further in 2024, leading to greater economic hardship.³¹

So far, despite high levels of violence and volatility and several blockades affecting transit, insecurity in the north has not led to a marked diversion of migration through the south-west. As outlined above, movement through the north has continued, with levels in Timbuktu, for example, even higher than before.

During the second half of 2023, however, two new dynamics emerged in the Kayes region that could affect future movements. The first relates to migration between the Timbuktu region and Mauritania. Many people make this journey several times a year, either to work in Mauritania, to visit family or for trade. With the blockade of Timbuktu, the clashes between the CSP and FAMa, and JNIM's increased activity, some migrants from the Timbuktu region began to take a detour – travelling south to Bamako and then west through Kayes and Gogui – rather than the quicker option west to Léré and then on to Néma in Mauritania. This was noted by monitors in Gogui from August to October in particular, but continued to a lesser extent in the last two months of 2023, both because of JNIM attacks and fears of ethnic targeting by FAMa and Wagner.

Second, for the first time since the GI-TOC began monitoring movements in south-west Mali, some migrants have shifted their routes from the north to the south-west. According to a Guinean migrant interviewed in Gogui:

When I first considered the journey and started speaking to people [other Guinean migrants who had already left] early in 2023, I was planning to go through Gao. But then my friend [a *porteur*] told me that Gao was too dangerous. So I took a bus to Bamako. I stayed there for three weeks, and then took another bus through Diéma and Nioro, and now I am in Gogui. My goal is to live and work in Italy with my Guinean brothers, and to do that I will cross Mauritania and then go to Algeria. It is longer [than the northern Mali route], but I think it is worth it.

Another GI-TOC contact reported hearing of numerous migrants driven by the same considerations, but their cases remain anecdotal; no major shift from north to south has yet been reported. The resilience of smuggling networks in the north and their ability to adapt to changing security conditions should also be taken into account. Nevertheless, this is a development to watch.





CONCLUSION

Cumulatively, the major security and political shifts in northern Mali in 2023 signalled the end of a status quo that had endured for nearly a decade. As the first three months of 2024 have demonstrated, however, a new state of affairs has yet to emerge, and the situation remains in considerable flux.

The Malian government now controls the key cities and towns in the Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao regions. From these garrison points, however, FAMA and its Wagner allies have only limited control over the dynamics in the vast rural areas of the north. While the government has attempted to secure this territory through patrols, it has begun to rely heavily on attack and surveillance drones as a means of exerting its authority. Notably, drone strikes have been used against both military and smuggling targets, with the latter having a significant effect on contraband economies, and the populations that rely on them, in the northern regions.

In the face of these developments, the CSP is in a state of disarray. Its personnel and leadership have been driven into rural areas and, in some cases, dispersed to neighbouring states. Nonetheless, it remains a potentially potent insurgent force. While violence remains limited for the moment, this is likely to be short lived. In contrast, JNIM and IS-Sahel have been extremely active, attempting to turn the situation to their advantage. Remarkably, JNIM has been able to impose a long-term blockade on Timbuktu, despite the increased presence of FAMA in northern Mali. It is unclear how instability in the north will affect human smuggling going forward, although it is likely such activities will continue at the same rate, if not increase, in the coming years.

Structural drivers of migration, such as economic pressures, have been intensifying in 2024 due to Mali's isolation from international and regional partners and growing insecurity throughout the country. Furthermore, while Mali's transitional authorities have succeeded in buttressing their security presence in some areas, their efforts to promote economic growth or deliver key services have met with limited success. If these challenges persist, they could further fuel the migration of Malians to northern Africa or Europe in search of better opportunities.

Because the complex security environment can have unpredictable effects on movements, migrants are likely to increasingly rely on the services of human smugglers earlier on in their journeys, to facilitate border crossings, and throughout northern Mali due to heightened insecurity and volatility.

As this brief has detailed, the vulnerability of migrants is not only due to the presence of armed groups, but also to FAMA and Wagner, who are likely to continue to target migrants and seasonal gold miners. Human smuggling networks in Mali and the wider Sahel have shown a high degree of resilience, adapting to blockades of key roads and major smuggling hubs, border closures, high levels of armed conflict, and predatory behaviour by state and non-state actors. Their adaptability will continue to be tested, as the security situation between the CSP and FAMA in the north will remain unstable, and violent extremist groups will continue to expand and consolidate their influence in Malian territory.



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