



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND INSTABILITY

ILLICIT HUB MAPPING
IN WEST AFRICA 2025

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OCTOBER 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of the core GI-TOC research team, whose sustained efforts over many years have built the foundation for this work. We are also grateful to the consultants who shared their knowledge and networks, and to the many individuals who generously contributed their expertise and insights throughout the research process.

We wish to extend particular thanks to Flore Berger for her extensive contribution to the drafting of the report, and to Mark Shaw and Tuesday Reitano for their valuable reviews and guidance. We also thank the publications and communications teams for their efforts on this report and the wider set of illicit hub narratives, and Café.art.br and Claudio Landi for their outstanding work in developing the online illicit hub mapping tool.

Finally, the authors would like to pay tribute to José Luengo-Cabrera, whose expertise helped lay the foundations of the illicit hub mapping but whose humour and warmth was cherished most by all those who worked with him.

The 'Support to the Mitigation of Destabilizing Effects of Transnational Organized Crime (M-TOC)' project is a project commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office, implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the GI-TOC, from 2024 to 2025.

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Cover photo: *Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation*

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces
FLA	Azawad Liberation Front
IEIM	Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MFDC	Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance
VEO	Violent extremist organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

West Africa is a region marked by profound economic dynamism but persistent insecurity. At the heart of the security crisis is the widespread violence being perpetrated by violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Nearly half of all fatalities in Africa linked to Islamist militant groups occurred in the Sahel region (see Figure 1).¹ According to the findings of Global Terrorism Index 2025, the Sahel now accounts for 51% of worldwide terrorism deaths.² Worryingly, the violence at the hands of VEOs has continued to rise, with average annual deaths since 2023 more than double that of the period between 2020 and 2023.³ However, while VEOs are often the most focused upon, they are by no means the only drivers of violence in the region. In Nigeria, armed bandit groups are the most significant drivers of violence,⁴ exceeding the role of VEOs in the country, both in terms of the frequency and the deadliness of attacks.⁵ State forces are also major contributors to the violence inflicted on civilians across the region. In Mali, for example, the military – together with Russian forces – were responsible for over 77% of civilian fatalities in the first eight months of 2025.⁶

And so, over the past five years, this complex mosaic of conflicts, weak governance and armed group activity has shaped an environment in which illicit economies have thrived.⁷ Banditry, kidnappings and organized criminal activity have become increasingly prevalent in Nigeria, the Sahel and beyond. Cross-border illicit ecosystems bind together crime and conflict across the region. In contrast, West Africa has become increasingly fractured,⁸ with political divides stymying cross-border collaboration and creating a volatile landscape in which civilians, states and non-state actors are in constant negotiation over control, resources and authority.

Illicit economies operate as key elements of war economies, and have expanded in areas of weakened rule of law. Armed groups have, over time, entrenched their role in illicit economies, gaining resources, financing and legitimacy in the eyes of local populations.⁹ Yet illicit economies also provide increasingly critical livelihoods in contexts where formal and licit alternatives are becoming increasingly scarce owing to instability undermining formal business.

This report presents the findings of the 2025 illicit hub mapping in West Africa, providing an updated snapshot of illicit economy dynamics across the region. It also analyzes the findings of the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), an expert-led tool that provides a quantitative assessment of the degree to which illicit economies fuel violence and instability, providing policymakers with clear insights as to the major crime–conflict nodes in the region. The IEIM provides a score and classification for each hub and allows for those fuelling conflict and violence most to be identified.

The mapping covers 18 countries, which will be referred to in this report as ‘the region’. They include the West African states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau,

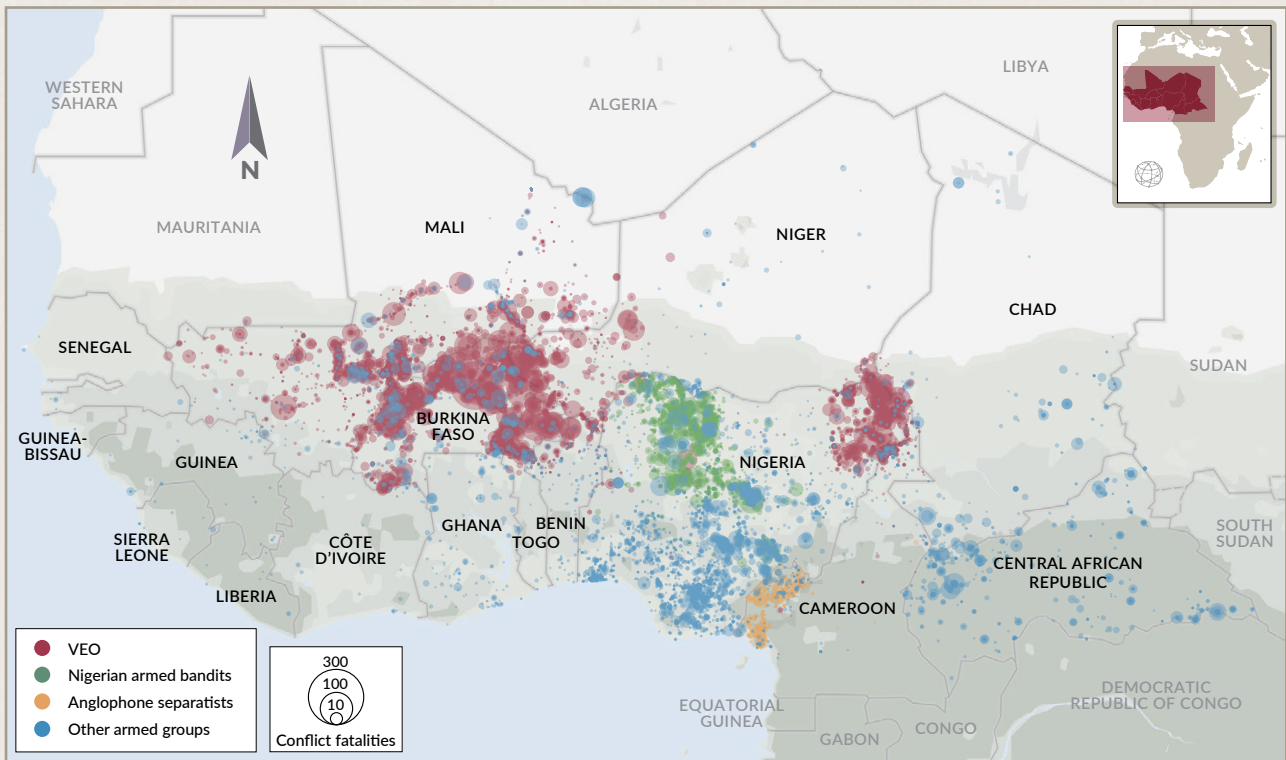


FIGURE 1 Non-state armed group violence in the region since 2023.

NOTE: Includes all political violence incidents in which non-state actors are listed as Actor 1 as per Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). Latest available data as of 12 September 2025.

SOURCE: ACLED

Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, in addition to the Central African states of Cameroon, Central African Republic and Chad. Drawing on over 700 interviews and in-depth ongoing monitoring of regional illicit dynamics, the 2025 mapping builds on the 2022 iteration, enabling analysis of key shifts and trends in the region's crime and conflict landscape.¹⁰

This research clearly demonstrates that some illicit economies play a far bigger role in shaping instability than others. Five specific illicit economies – kidnapping, cattle rustling, the illicit arms trade, the illicit gold trade, and extortion and protection racketeering (referred to in this report as 'accelerant markets') – are particularly significant in shaping the regional conflict landscape. Critically, the expanding influence of armed groups in new territories – and their entrenchment in existing theatres of operation – has strengthened the role of illicit economies as drivers of instability, in particular in the northern areas of coastal West African states. Furthermore, the illicit hub mapping has identified key areas across the region in which armed groups not only generate financing and obtain operational resources, but have proven adept at exploiting illicit economies to build legitimacy among local communities. Not only does this enhance their ability to operate, it erodes trust in formal institutions at the same time, presenting long-term threats to state control,

As regional assessments often conceal critical subnational divergences, this dataset provides policymakers, law enforcement and analysts a granular picture of the galvanizing hubs of crime and instability across West Africa. Leveraging this detailed understanding of illicit economy dynamics and their interplay with instability, policies can be formulated that directly target the most significant geographies and economies. Whether through gold sector formalization, cattle sector regulation or empowering communities living on the margins of national parks that have proven crucial to armed group operations, the evidence base provided by this research enables the development of nuanced and context-sensitive policy recommendations.



KEY FINDINGS

1. One in five illicit hubs in the region are significant vectors of instability.

The mapping identified 350 hubs of illicit economies across West Africa and parts of Central Africa. According to the IEIM, a quantitative metric that captures the strength of the relationship between illicit economies and instability, one in five (20%) hubs play a significant role as vectors of conflict, violence and instability (falling into the 'high' or 'very high' bands; also see Appendix 1). Most of these are in the Sahel, Central Africa and northern Nigeria. Illicit economies in a small number of hubs play a material but not significant role, mostly being clustered in the northern areas of littoral states ('medium' band). The majority of illicit hubs have a more limited link to instability (59%), particularly in the coastal states of West Africa.¹¹

2. Extortion and protection racketeering operates as a key driver of instability in the region.

Although not the most widespread regional illicit economy (identified in just 18% of all hubs), extortion and protection racketeering was extremely prominent (54%) in hubs with a significant role in fuelling instability (i.e. those in the 'high' or 'very high' IEIM bands) and those providing finance, resources and legitimacy to armed groups. This reflects how the practice of extortion is intimately linked to conflict dynamics. Concentrated in areas under significant armed group influence in the Sahel and Central Africa, extortion and protection racketeering often occurs alongside arms trafficking (63%), cattle rustling (56%) and the illicit gold trade (52%), all of which appear to be important in driving instability. This finding reflects the entanglement between extortion practices and other illicit economies, such as cattle rustling and the gold trade, sectors which are often exploited by armed groups.

3. The synthetic drug trade is the most pervasive illicit economy across the region and is spreading fast.

The mapping identified the synthetic drug trade as the most pervasive illicit economy across the region, prevalent in almost half (154; 44%) of the 350 hubs. This represents the most significant increase from the 2022 mapping,¹² underscoring the rapid expansion of this market, which is causing significant harms across the region. The proliferation of synthetic opioids such as tramadol and its chemical variants, and the synthetic drug known as 'kush', which includes nitazenes, as well as the expansion of regional methamphetamine and ecstasy markets are alarming trends.

4. Growing armed group entrenchment has strengthened the role of numerous illicit hubs in fuelling instability.

The presence of armed groups – particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – in northern Benin, and to a lesser extent northern Togo, has expanded dramatically since 2021 and illicit economies have become increasingly critical to their operations. New hubs emerged, with cattle rustling and kidnapping increasingly prominent, while JNIM's operational resourcing – through goods such as fuel, motorbikes and medicine – has become more entrenched. The W-Arly-Pendjari Complex straddling Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, already identified as an illicit hub in 2022, became more intricately tied to fuelling instability (it moved from the 'high' to 'very high' IEIM classification). This reflects its strengthened role as an arms smuggling hub and an increase in violence. Similarly, JNIM's entrenchment in northern and eastern Burkina Faso has allowed the group to tighten its grip over key trading corridors, controlling access to major cities and enabling systematic resourcing (primarily of fuel and motorbikes) and financing (mostly through extortion).

5. Changes in the region's conflict landscape have impacted the illicit arms trade, which remains among the most pervasive – and conflict-linked – illicit economies.

The arms market features in three-quarters of all hubs that have a significant role in fuelling instability ('high' and 'very high' IEIM classification), making it the most commonly identified illicit economy in these hubs. Two major changes in the region's conflict landscape have had deep-rooted impacts on arms trafficking and supply since 2023, namely the resurgence of conflict in northern Mali and the outbreak of war in Sudan. The northward push of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and their Russian allies into zones previously under control of armed groups disrupted long-standing trafficking routes from Libya. Arms smuggling scores at hubs across this area – from Ber to Foïta, Lerneb and Taoudenni – all decreased, and prices in arms markets surged. The outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023 has driven proliferation of increasingly sophisticated weapons into neighbouring arms markets, with illicit hubs such as Tiné, Abeche and Adré in Chad all playing a significant role in gun smuggling and fuelling conflict.

6. Cattle rustling and kidnapping are significant drivers of instability.

Although it rarely attracts the same level of attention as arms or drug trafficking, cattle rustling represents a major driver of insecurity in West Africa and parts of Central Africa. Cattle rustling featured in almost a quarter of all illicit hubs (83), underscoring its reach across the region. Cattle rustling is prevalent in two-thirds (15) of the 23 hubs that play the most significant role in fuelling instability in the region ('very high' IEIM scores). Similarly, over half (57%; 13) of these destabilizing hubs feature kidnapping, which fuels instability by generating profits for criminal, insurgent and violent extremist groups, and is used by extremist groups to infiltrate new areas and entrench their influence.

7. Armed groups exploit illicit economies to generate financing, gain resources and build legitimacy.

Armed groups' engagement with illicit economies seeks three main goals: revenue generation, obtaining operational resources (such as fuel, vehicles or motorbikes) and building legitimacy among the communities in which they operate. Almost half (47%) of the illicit hubs in the region play a role in financing non-state armed groups or in supplying them with goods necessary for their operation. Armed groups also gained legitimacy through their engagement in illicit economies, although this was seen in far fewer cases (9%). Hubs in which illicit economies allow conflict actors to meet all three goals at the same time are particularly damaging to long-term stability. A degree of legitimacy is key to facilitating armed group operations and points to long-term threats to state control. Armed groups were found to build legitimacy through their engagement with illicit economies in 36% of hubs (25 of 70) that play a significant role in fuelling instability across the region (scoring 'high' or 'very high' on the IEIM), concentrated in Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Nigeria.



METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: A SNAPSHOT

This section presents a snapshot of the illicit hub mapping methodology. For an in-depth description of the full methodological approach taken, see Appendix 2. This report – and the accompanying interactive online tool – provides an updated map of hubs of illicit economies across West Africa and parts of Central Africa.¹³



FIGURE 2 Illicit hub mapping data collection methodology.

Mapping illicit hubs

Classifying illicit hubs

Three types of illicit hub have been identified:

- **Hotspots** are places where there is a strong presence of not only illicit economies and organized criminal activities but also criminal actors (who may or may not have the support of people with political power). Hotspots are characterized by either the 'production' of illicit activity (which can also be thought of as 'source/origin locations') or the 'distribution' of illicit activity (alternatively, 'destination markets'), or both. Hotspots should be understood as hubs of concentrated illicit activity that feed into wider national or regional criminal dynamics.
- **Transit points** are certain locations – including seaports, airports, border crossings and road infrastructure – leveraged for the trafficking of illicit commodities.
- **Illicit ecosystems** – referred to as 'crime zones' in the 2022 mapping – are broader geographic areas that encompass more than one hotspot or transit point (for example, the Casamance region, but not the entire northern Benin). Ecosystems are areas that bind together several interlinked hotspots or transit points, with the illicit economies operating there being closely intertwined. To

qualify as an ecosystem, the area must feature a number of illicit economies or organized criminal actors. In a methodological change from the 2022 mapping, illicit ecosystems cannot be standalone hubs; at least one additional hotspot or transit point falling within the geographic scope of the proposed ecosystem must also be identified.

Throughout this report, we use the term ‘illicit hub’ to refer to hotspots, transit points and illicit ecosystems, as defined here.

As part of identifying illicit hubs, researchers considered which illicit economies were prevalent in each hub – 20 illicit economies were identified as most relevant to the West Africa region.

Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor

The IEIM provides a quantitative (score) and qualitative (classification) assessment of the strength of the relationship between illicit economies and conflict and instability. The strength of this relationship in each of the 350 hubs is classified as ‘low’, ‘medium’, ‘high’ or ‘very high’ based on the underlying IEIM score (ranging from 0 to 33). The higher the score, the greater the nexus between the illicit economies and instability.

Three components make up the IEIM (see Figure 3): **violence and instability**; **crime–conflict links**; and **accelerators** (which, in turn, have two subcomponents, namely *infrastructure* and *stress factors*). The three main components encapsulate the key factors and characteristics of illicit hubs that feed into conflict dynamics.

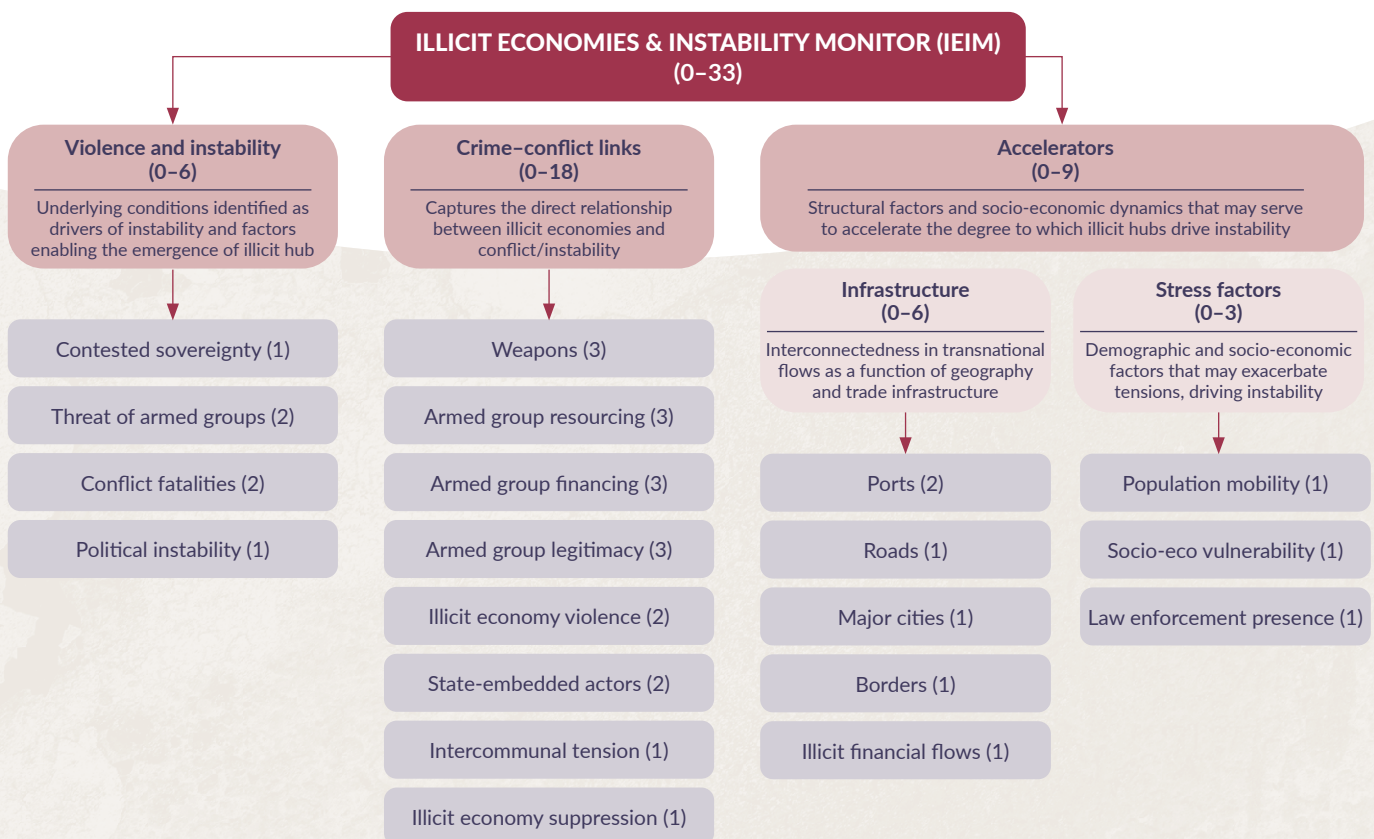


FIGURE 3 Composition of the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor.

NOTE: The numbers in parentheses represent the maximum possible score for each component/subcomponent.

Crime and instability: Causality and circularity

There is a clear relationship between crime and instability, but determining causality is complex: does instability attract criminality, or does criminality fuel instability?

Illicit economies do not by definition *cause* armed conflict, but they often gain a foothold, and subsequently entrench themselves, in areas of instability. By undermining governance, distorting formal economies and weakening rule of law, they can create conditions for conflict. Once conflicts emerge, illicit economies can prolong them by financing armed actors, by providing them with operational resources or by granting them a degree of legitimacy within communities in which they operate (see 'Financing, resourcing and governance: How conflict actors exploit illicit economies' section below).

Conversely, conflict environments allow illicit markets to flourish. Weak state control enables impunity, while demand for weapons and illicit goods rises. Legal activities, such as resource extraction, may also shift into illicit channels when armed groups take control. Arms trafficking illustrates this two-way dynamic: insecurity drives demand for weapons, while weapon proliferation escalates violence.

The circularity exemplified by the mutually reinforcing crime–conflict cycle makes it extremely challenging to measure the precise extent to which illicit economies are the *direct and initial* causes of conflict and instability in any given area. However, the IEIM captures the degree to which illicit economies fuel conflict and instability. As set out in our inaugural illicit hub mapping report in 2022:

The IEIM as a whole has been designed to provide insights into the extent to which the illicit economies in the relevant hub contribute to instability and conflict in the region. However, the IEIM does not provide insights into whether illicit economies or instability in any given hub developed first, and consequently does not provide a definitive conclusion to the question of whether crime attracted conflict in a given location, or conflict attracted crime. Neither does the IEIM seek to analyze all the potential roots of the conflict in any given location. Instead, the IEIM is squarely focused on the role of illicit economies in contributing to instability in the region.¹⁴

To ensure that the IEIM is a reliable assessment of the causal relationship between illicit economies and instability, analysis was once again carried out on just those underlying indicators explicitly evaluating the causal relationship between illicit economies and conflict, violence and instability. When analyzing only the IEIM indicators on weapons, armed group resourcing, armed group financing, armed group legitimacy, illicit economy violence and intercommunal tension, there is a very strong correlation (0.96) with the overall IEIM score.¹⁵ This reinforces the argument that the IEIM score is a robust measure of the degree to which illicit economies in each illicit hub directly contribute to violence and instability. ■



MAPPING HUBS OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES

No country is immune to the threat of organized crime,¹⁶ and the findings of the illicit hub mapping underscore the scale and geographic spread of illicit economies across West Africa and parts of Central Africa. The research identified 350 such hubs across the 18 focus countries (see Figure 4), with an average of 17.5 hubs per country.¹⁷

The findings of the 2022 mapping highlighted the variation in the strength of the crime–conflict nexus across the different hubs.¹⁸ While hundreds of towns, cities, infrastructure nodes, national parks, roads and other locations are important hubs for illicit economies, they have very different relationships with conflict and instability. Only a small proportion have a significant impact on conflict.

The 2025 update confirms this finding. Of the 350 illicit hubs identified in the current mapping, 59% (206) of them fall into the ‘low’ IEIM band, as illicit economies do not play a significant role in fuelling regional instability. However, in 70 hubs – that is, one in five – illicit economies are driving conflict

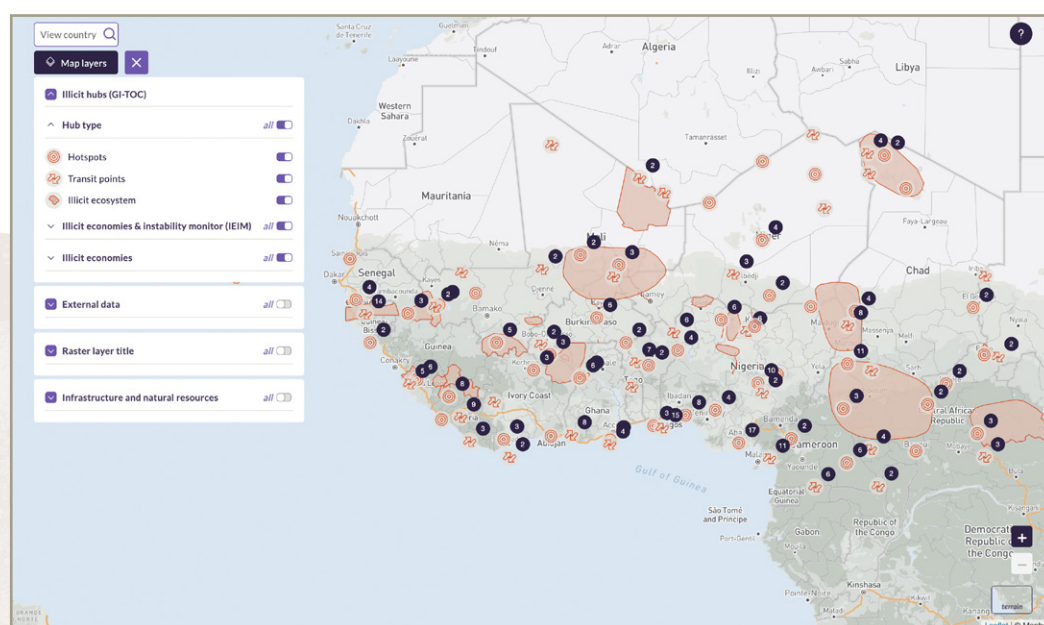


FIGURE 4 Illicit hubs in West Africa and parts of Central Africa.

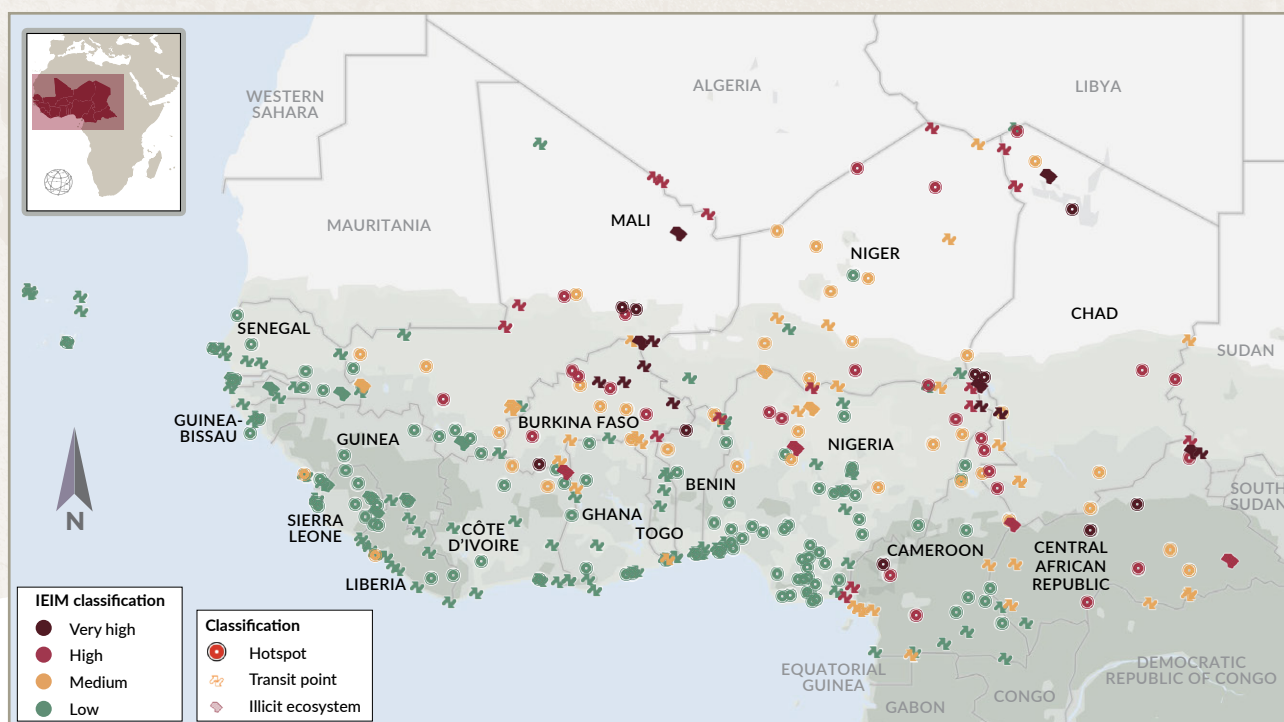


FIGURE 5 Illicit hubs by IEIM classification.

and violence, as seen from their classification as 'high' or 'very high' on the IEIM. Responses seeking to counter instability in the region should therefore be focused here.

As Figure 5 shows, there is a marked geographic variation in the extent to which illicit hubs are associated with instability. Coastal states are largely home to illicit economies with a more limited role in fuelling violence (58% of 'low' IEIM hubs).¹⁹ The borderlands between Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and the Sahel stand out as having a far more material role in fuelling conflict in that they serve as key resourcing areas for Sahelian armed groups ('medium'-scoring hubs, and some 'high' and 'very high' IEIM hubs are clustered in this corridor).

Two hubs play a significant role in fuelling instability ('high' or 'very high' IEIM hubs) in coastal states: the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex and the Burkina Faso–Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire triborder area, both of which straddle the Sahel. Conversely, 43% of illicit hubs in both the Sahel and the three Central African countries fall in the 'high' or 'very high' classification band. In fact, illicit economies are assessed to have a weak relationship with instability, namely scoring 'low' on the IEIM, in only around one in five illicit hubs in either region.

Nigeria presents more of a mixed picture. Of the 75 illicit hubs identified in the country (including the cross-border Lake Chad illicit ecosystem), the vast majority – 76% – are 'low' IEIM hubs.²⁰ These are concentrated in Nigeria's southern states, in which drug markets are among the most common illicit economies, together with the illicit trade of oil (concentrated in south-eastern Nigeria). Eight hubs score in the 'high' and 'very high' bands, highlighting the strong links between illicit economies and instability, especially in Nigeria's North West and North East zones.²¹ This is similar to the picture in 2022, when the 'high' and 'very high' IEIM hubs were also situated only in northern Nigeria. Furthermore, all six of the newly identified illicit hubs that score 'medium' or higher on the IEIM are located in one of Nigeria's North West or North Central zones.

Key shifts in crime–conflict dynamics

Growing evidence of Burkina Faso–Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire triborder area as resourcing hub for JNIM

This triborder area falls into the 'high' IEIM classification, which marks an increase in the reported link between illicit economies and instability compared with the 2022 findings,²² largely owing to the growing evidence regarding the strategic importance of illicit economies in this region for JNIM.²³

The JNIM unit active in the triborder area – the Katiba Banfora – has shifted its focus to financing and resourcing rather than expanding the group's operations in the wake of the significant state response in Côte d'Ivoire, which included both military and wider socio-economic measures, triggered by a major JNIM attack targeting soldiers in 2020.²⁴

Cross-border smuggling critical to JNIM's resourcing includes fuel and motorbikes, which are imported through coastal ports, especially in Ghana, and trafficked northwards. The Ghanaian border towns of Tumu and Hamile are key for fuel flows between Ghana and Burkina Faso. The activity ensures a steady supply of essential resources that sustain JNIM's operations despite the low level of local violence.

The triborder area also plays an important role in JNIM financing: thousands of livestock heads, stolen in conflict hotspots in central Mali or northern Burkina Faso, are transported through this area to be sold at markets in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana by intermediaries. This system enables JNIM to tap into major cattle markets in these coastal states.²⁵

JNIM has also drawn resources from artisanal gold mining activity in the Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire parts of the triborder area.²⁶ Although GI-TOC research found no clear evidence of JNIM resource extraction from artisanal and small-scale gold mining in the Upper West region of Ghana, the sector remains vulnerable to infiltration.²⁷

Illicit hubs in northern Benin are increasingly interconnected with Sahelian conflicts and overall criminality fuelling instability

The heightened infiltration of JNIM in northern Benin has contributed to the expansion of some illicit economies, and the identification of new hubs. In Karimama, JNIM is implicated as being involved in several illicit economies, both as consumers and operators, with the area serving as an important hub for the smuggling of fuel, motorbikes and illicit medical products to this VEO.²⁸



Smuggled motorbikes are a key operational resource for violent extremist organizations such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, pictured here.

Photo: WhatsApp

Cattle rustling and kidnapping, two illicit economies strongly linked to instability and JNIM operations, have increased in prominence in northern Benin. Activity of violent extremist groups between 2021 and 2023 was concentrated in border towns near Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as in and around the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex. Since 2023, the presence of JNIM has strengthened further south, with an increasing number of kidnappings being reported, mainly targeting wealthy pastoralists in towns such as Ségbana.²⁹ Other perpetrators – including criminal groups – have also increased kidnappings in the area, which contribute to increasing instability. Motorbikes, highly prized by VEOs and smuggled into Benin from Nigeria, are often loaded onto pirogues near Ségbana and transported along the Niger River to Niger.

The W-Arly-Pendjari Complex straddling Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin moved from 'high' to 'very high' in the IEIM classification in the 2025 mapping. Not only has violence increased in the complex and surrounding areas, but the ease with which JNIM militants can move around the parks has strengthened its role as an arms smuggling hub.³⁰ Furthermore, violence related to illicit economies has become more commonplace. Not only has kidnapping, an inherently violent illicit economy, intensified in northern Benin since 2022, but there have also been several recorded clashes between VEOs and individuals engaged in illicit economies such as hunting and fishing, and failure to pay *zakat* (forced charitable tax) can also result in violent punishment at the hands of JNIM militants.³¹

JNIM entrenchment in northern and eastern Burkina Faso further embeds the group in illicit economies for operational resources, financing and governance

In northern and eastern Burkina Faso, levels of deadly conflict and violence have increased substantially, with conflict fatalities increasing from around 4 000 between 2021 and 2022 to over 6 500 between 2023 and 2024.³² JNIM has entrenched its presence while fighting the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) and in some instances Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). Higher levels of violence have partly disrupted movement of goods and people, with, for example, the operations of bus companies on many routes in these regions being disrupted. However, JNIM has also tightened its grip over key trading corridors, such as those linking Ouagadougou to Niamey via Dori and Kantchari (both Kantchari and the Dori-Téra road score 'very high' on the IEIM).³³ The group has imposed blockades on dozens of towns, including regional capitals such as Djibo, thereby disrupting formal trade and transport. Along these corridors, illicit flows are increasingly tied to JNIM's resourcing (in particular fuel and motorbikes) and financing (mostly through extortion). For example, in February 2024, the gendarmerie seized 6 000 litres of fuel smuggled from Ouagadougou and stored in Fada N'gourma, destined to be delivered in the east of the country where JNIM is allegedly operating. Fuel costs FCFA2 000 per litre in the eastern rural areas compared with FCFA850 in Ouagadougou, making it a profitable business.³⁴

Conflict resurgence in northern Mali disrupts illicit economies

Between 2015 and mid-2023, northern Mali's regions of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu experienced relative stability under a tacit détente between Tuareg coalitions and al-Qaeda-linked JNIM, allowing the former de facto autonomy and facilitating flows of contraband fuel, consumer goods, migrants, gold and drugs. This equilibrium collapsed when Malian forces and their Russian Wagner partners launched an offensive culminating in the capture of several major towns in the north, including Kidal, in November 2023, triggering a surge in violence: over 130 incidents were recorded between January and August 2024, compared with 12 the previous year.



Fighters from the Coordination of Azawad Movements, one of Mali's main separatist organizations, patrol in Kidal. Recent conflict shifts in the north of the country have disrupted illicit economies and consequently the financing of armed groups. © Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images

This had major impacts on illicit economies and on their links with armed groups operating in northern Mali. For example, in the Kidal region, migrant smuggling and contraband trade with Algeria briefly dipped during the height of the clashes between August and December 2023, but they quickly rebounded and remain largely stable (slightly lower levels than before).

Other illicit economies have been more sustainably and severely impacted, including gold mining. The Kidal region hosts dozens of mines and several treatment centres, with major sites near the Algerian border and around Kidal town. The rebel groups (now called the Azawad Liberation Front, FLA) previously controlled some sites, taxing miners and financing operations, with some resources likely flowing to JNIM, with which the groups have informal alliances. However, the rebel groups were forced to withdraw when fighting resumed. The rebels continue to operate only in Tinzaouaten, but even there they face disruptions owing to armed clashes and air strikes. Similarly, the FLA has also lost the control it had established over the biggest mine in northern Mali, namely N'Tahaka mine in the Gao region, which is now under the control of pro-government forces. These conflict shifts have transformed the role of northern Mali in resourcing and financing both rebel armed groups and JNIM, which indirectly benefited from many of the illicit economies in this area.

Shifting centres of gravity in Nigeria

The 2025 mapping tracks key shifts in the intersection of conflict and crime since the 2022 version. In north-eastern Nigeria, control of territory has shifted predominantly from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) to Jama'at Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). The groups have contrasting engagements with illicit economies and local communities, which reshape intersections in these areas. In the Baga and Marte areas of Borno State, for example, JAS took control from ISWAP, imposing its more violent tactic of extortion, cattle rustling and robbery. This represented a notable change from ISWAP's approach, which relies primarily on taxing of farming and fishing communities in the area, and building legitimacy alongside extracting resources. These shifting dynamics are reflected in the IEIM scores in the north-east: while illicit economies were found to play a significant role in fuelling instability in only one hub in the 2022 mapping (the Lake Chad crime zone was classified as 'very high'), the 2025 update classifies a further three hubs as such, with Marte, Baga and Maiduguri all falling into the 'high' IEIM band.

Elsewhere, growing armed bandit operations drove increased violence in the North Central, particularly in Niger and Kogi states, as well as in Benue and Plateau, albeit to a lesser degree. This is primarily because military operations in the North West increasingly displaced armed bandits, forcing them to temporarily – and in some cases permanently – relocate to the North Central, establishing strongholds in areas such as the Shiroro–Munya axis and Okene, which have witnessed a significant increase in illicit activities, including illicit gold mining, kidnapping and violent attacks on local communities. Kidnapping – one of the economies most associated with bandits – is the most prevalent in North Central, featuring in 73% of hubs.

Conversely, levels of violence and instability have generally decreased across southern Nigeria. Military operations have disrupted the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra secessionist group in the South East and of armed actors linked to the illicit oil trade in the South South, leading to a general decline in levels of violence across these zones (although kidnappings persist in some hubs).

Casamance separatist group's financing from illicit economies diminishes in southern Senegal

The link between crime and conflict in the Casamance region in south-eastern Senegal, on the border with Guinea-Bissau, has been significantly weakened since 2022. With the region being in a state of low-level insurgency since the mid 1980s,³⁵ major operations by the Senegalese army have eroded the position of the separatist rebels – the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) – in the area since 2022. As a result, the MFDC's grip on illicit economies in Casamance – historically central to their funding – has diminished. While the illicit timber trade continues, it is less closely linked to the MFDC and now involves local individuals and foreign investors (particularly Chinese and Indian nationals).³⁶ MFDC members who have surrendered, or who have returned after fleeing, are also involved in this activity – not to buy weapons, but as an alternative source of employment and income to previous combat positions.³⁷ Similarly, although cannabis cultivation and trafficking have historically been a major means of funding for the MFDC and also a vital source of income for local communities, the links between the MFDC and the trade have decreased.

Spreading fast: Synthetic drugs in West and Central Africa

The mapping highlighted the synthetics drug trade as the most pervasive illicit economy across West Africa, prevalent in almost half (44%, 154 of 350) of the hubs across the region. This represents a major increase from the 2022 figures (the greatest increase of all),³⁸ underscoring the rapid expansion of this market, which is causing significant harms across the region.³⁹ The proliferation of synthetic opioids, including of tramadol and its chemical variants⁴⁰ and also the synthetic drug known as 'kush', a highly potent substance often containing nitazenes, is an alarming trend.

The synthetic drug trade is the most pervasive and rapidly expanding illicit economy in West Africa, with tramadol and kush in particular causing significant societal harm. © Guy Peterson

The devastating effects of kush in Sierra Leone and Liberia have proven so detrimental to public health that states of



emergency were declared in 2024 owing to the impacts of drug use.⁴¹ Methamphetamine and ecstasy markets are also surging in a number of countries across the region, including Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Gambia.

The findings of this mapping support those of the Global Organized Crime Index, which has demonstrated in each iteration since its inception in 2019 that the synthetic drug trade has been among the fastest-growing criminal markets in West Africa. Recent research underscores the spread and increasing pervasiveness of the synthetic drug trade in the region.⁴²

Conversely, although the cocaine trade is one of the most influential – and growing – criminal markets in West Africa according to the Index, it ranks only 11th on the list of most

commonly identified illicit economies in the region according to the 2025 mapping. Furthermore, the number of cocaine hubs in the region have remained relatively stable since 2022. This seeming contradiction is a reflection of the concentration of the cocaine trade at key transport hubs, such as at seaports and airports and in major cities. This highlights the added value the mapping offers in that it provides additional insights into illicit economy dynamics at the subnational level.

In addition to synthetic drugs, the illicit arms trade (43%), illicit trade and counterfeit goods (43%), the illicit gold trade (40%) and human trafficking (36%) were most commonly identified across the focus countries (see Figure 6). ■

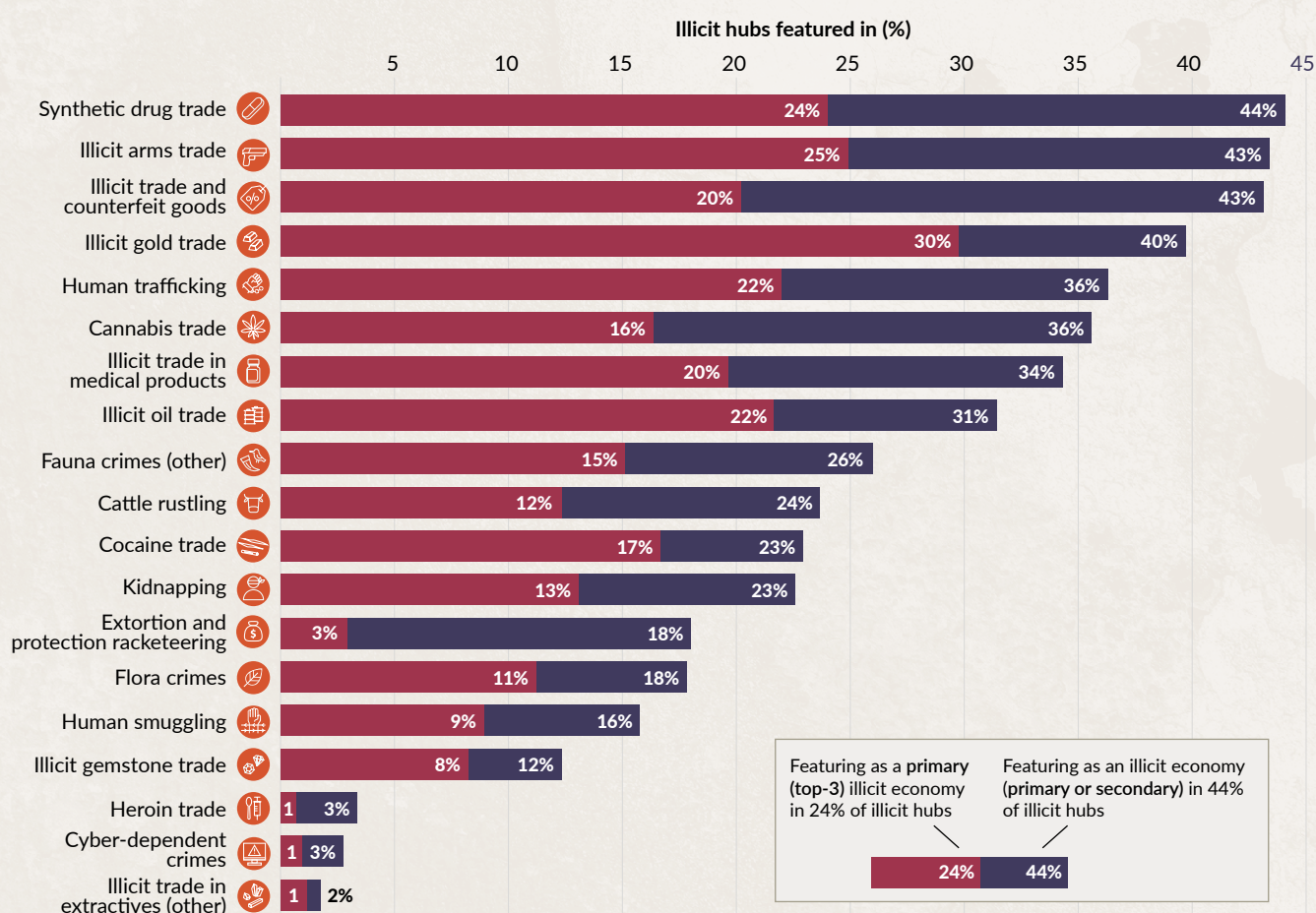


FIGURE 6 Prevalence of illicit economies in hubs in West Africa.

NOTE: Up to 10 illicit economies could be identified in each hub, ranked according to their reach. The top three illicit economies are considered 'primary' economies, whereas those in fourth to tenth place are classified as secondary illicit economies.



ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND INSTABILITY: ACCELERANT MARKETS

Crime and conflict are widely recognized as being linked;⁴³ however, certain illicit economies play a far more important role in fuelling instability than others.⁴⁴ Understanding which economies are most strongly associated with instability and violence is critical for policymakers seeking to mitigate the destabilizing effects of organized crime.

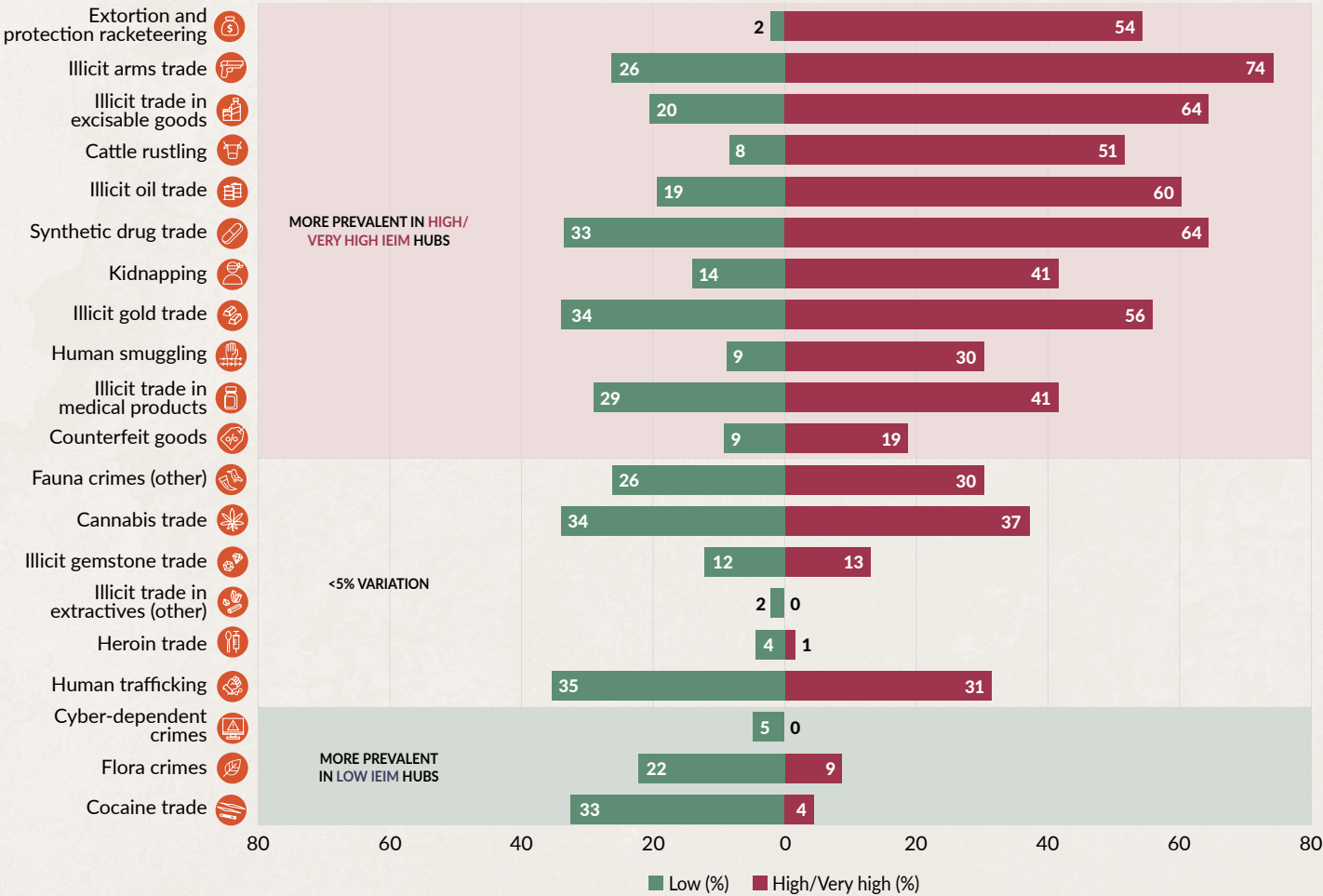


FIGURE 7 Prevalence of illicit economies in hubs with 'low' and 'high'/'very high' IEIM scores.

The 2022 mapping identified four criminal markets that had the strongest relationship with instability across the region, namely the illicit arms trade, cattle rustling, kidnapping and the illicit gold trade. These economies were far more prevalent in hubs classified as 'high' and 'very high' than across hubs more broadly, and have been tracked to significantly contribute to conflict and violence across the region. The 2025 iteration confirms the prominent role of these illicit economies, in addition to extortion and protection racketeering – which often cuts across various others – in driving instability.

Although some 'low'–'high'/'very high' discrepancies may simply reflect the geography of the differently classified hubs, it is evident that there are certain illicit economies that are deeply connected to instability (see Figure 7) and are key to the financing, resourcing or legitimacy building of conflict actors across the region.

Illicit arms trade

The illicit arms trade features in three-quarters of all hubs that significantly fuel instability (those with a 'high' or 'very high' IEIM score), making it the most prevalently identified illicit economy in these hubs, although it features far less prominently on the whole across all hubs (43%, 152 of 350 hubs). The illicit arms trade fuels violence across the region, weaponizing conflicts, supplying key non-state conflict actors and increasing violence as a vehicle for criminal market control. The growing operations of armed groups across West Africa have contributed to the proliferation of weapons,⁴⁵ with rising demand from both conflict actors and communities seeking to defend themselves.⁴⁶

The pervasiveness of the arms trade is driven predominantly by commercial weapons already in circulation, or imported through the region's ports and land borders (the preferred weapons of armed groups and sophisticated criminal networks). Artisanally manufactured weapons – used primarily for self-defence, in hunting and by some street gangs – also contribute to proliferation, albeit to a lesser extent. Of the 152 hubs where illicit arms trade features, 31% (47) are reported as being manufacturing hubs, spread across coastal, Sahelian and Central African states.⁴⁷

Two major changes in the region's conflict landscape have had deep-rooted impacts on arms trafficking and supply: the resurgence of conflict in northern Mali and the outbreak of war in Sudan. From mid-2023, the joint offensive by Wagner and FAMA in northern Mali disrupted both licit and illicit flows of commodities, including arms. Heightened air surveillance, drone strikes and stronger ground deployments along major routes raised risks for traffickers. The seizure of towns previously controlled by armed groups, particularly Ber, dismantled key trafficking hubs. Ber had long served as a major centre for regional arms trading, benefiting from the absence of state or international authority and the presence of armed actors who stored and exchanged weapons alongside other illicit goods.⁴⁸ Its fall to FAMA in August 2023 forced traffickers and their allies to withdraw, reshaping regional supply chains and cutting long-standing trafficking routes from Libya, a primary source of arms for northern Mali, as well as routes linking Mali to Mauritania. Reflecting this, IEIM arms smuggling scores in hubs across this area – from Ber to Foïta, Lerneb and Taoudeni – all decreased.⁴⁹

This shift has tightened supply amid high demand, leading to significant price increases. By February 2025, the cost of an AK-47 in Gao had risen to about FCFA600 000 (€914), up from somewhere between FCFA200 000 and FCFA300 000 (€304–457) in 2023, before the offensive. Near the Mauritanian border, prices rose as high as FCFA900 000 (€1 371).⁵⁰ These dynamics have created unexpected ripple effects. Several sources report that some members of JNIM, taking advantage of soaring market prices, have sold weapons looted during clashes or seized from government stockpiles.⁵¹ Although unsanctioned by



Malian forces and Wagner launched an offensive in the north in November 2023, taking control of major towns from rebel groups and violent extremist organizations.

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the group and limited in scope, such opportunistic sales (including at gold-mining sites) highlight the adaptability of armed actors to evolution in illicit economies.

The outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023 also had profound effects for regional arms markets, concentrated in neighbouring Chad and Libya, but with secondary flows bound for markets further afield. The war catalyzed a dual surge in weapons circulation: one through formal, state-facilitated transfers – via airlifts, convoys and stockpile redistribution (predominantly flowing into Sudan) – and another through informal networks involving smugglers, kinship-linked brokers and ad hoc transactions (which also underpinned outbound flows). These parallel streams traversed long-standing corridors through Darfur, eastern Chad and southern Libya, revitalizing arms trafficking routes and flooding markets with new stockpiles, including of a wider range of sophisticated weapons.⁵² For example, the DShKM (a modernized variant of the Soviet DShK), has become increasingly available in arms markets in Chad and Libya since 2023, selling for up to US\$11 400 in the triborder area between Algeria, Libya and Niger. This influx of weapons is reshaping arms markets beyond areas in the immediate proximity of Sudan, with smuggling networks trafficking weapons north, and south into Niger and Mali.⁵³ The illicit economies in Chadian hubs close to Sudan – Tiné, Abeche and Adré – all play a significant role in fuelling conflict and scored at the maximum for gun smuggling on the IEIM.⁵⁴

Armed groups are not only end users but also distributors. For example, armed bandits in north-west Nigeria have become increasingly entrenched in the regional arms trade, buying arms in the Sahel and distributing them to conflict actors in the North West and North Central areas of Nigeria. The bandit leader Kachalla Halilu Sububu, killed in a gun battle with state forces in September 2024, was a major arms trafficker, importing weapons from Mali and Niger.⁵⁵ The arms market in the North West arguably remains more fragmented than prior to Sububu's killing, with no successor yet identified. However, the region was already saturated with weapons, meaning that the fragmentation of the arms market resulting from Sububu's demise did not lead to a scarcity of guns.

Cattle rustling

The livestock sector is an economic lifeline for swathes of people across the Sahel and West Africa, contributing a significant proportion of the region's agricultural GDP and providing livelihoods for over 20 million people.⁵⁶ But the sector also faces several threats, including from changes in land use

patterns linked to climate change, which can often lead to competition – sometimes violent – between crops and livestock farming systems.⁵⁷ This has strengthened links between the livestock sector – including cattle rustling – and regional conflicts.⁵⁸

Cattle rustling was identified as an illicit economy in almost a quarter of all hubs in West Africa (83), underscoring its reach across the region. Although it is also a growing concern in areas of lower instability, such as in Jegue in Guinea-Bissau or Sampa in Ghana,⁵⁹ it is far more prevalent in hubs with stronger links to conflict and violence. Only 20% of hubs in which cattle rustling is prevalent score in the 'low' IEIM band.

Cattle rustling has emerged as one of the illicit economies most intertwined with conflict dynamics across the region, in particular in the Sahel and the northern areas of West Africa's littoral states. Cattle rustling is not only a means of financing for armed actors in several countries – such as JNIM and IS Sahel in the Sahel, armed bandit groups and Boko Haram in Nigeria, and until their dissolution the 3R (Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation) armed group in the Central African Republic – but also a tool used by armed groups for controlling and intimidating local populations.⁶⁰ Other illicit economies commonly occurring alongside cattle rustling are the illicit arms trade (in 57% of cattle rustling hubs), extortion and protection racketeering (42%) and kidnapping (32%). Some with known links to instability (primarily in the form of resource flows to conflict actors) such as the synthetic drug trade and the illicit trade in excisable goods, gold, medical products and oil are also seen.⁶¹

Cattle rustling is prevalent in almost two-thirds (15) of the 23 hubs that play the most significant role in fuelling instability (scoring in the 'very high' IEIM band). In Mali and Burkina Faso it is closely linked with conflict dynamics, with patterns shifting in line with the level of territorial control of armed groups. In contested areas – where more than one group or actor is vying for control – cattle rustling incidents tend to be more frequent, violent and destabilizing, fuelling cycles of retaliation between communities. For example, in the Bandiagara and Bankass districts of central Mali – a conflict hotspot where JNIM, self-defence groups and state forces are vying for influence – thousands of heads of cattle are looted by JNIM.⁶² However, VEOs are not the only actors looting animals. Both Wagner/Africa Corps elements



Cattle rustling has emerged as one of the illicit economies most intertwined with conflict dynamics in West Africa.
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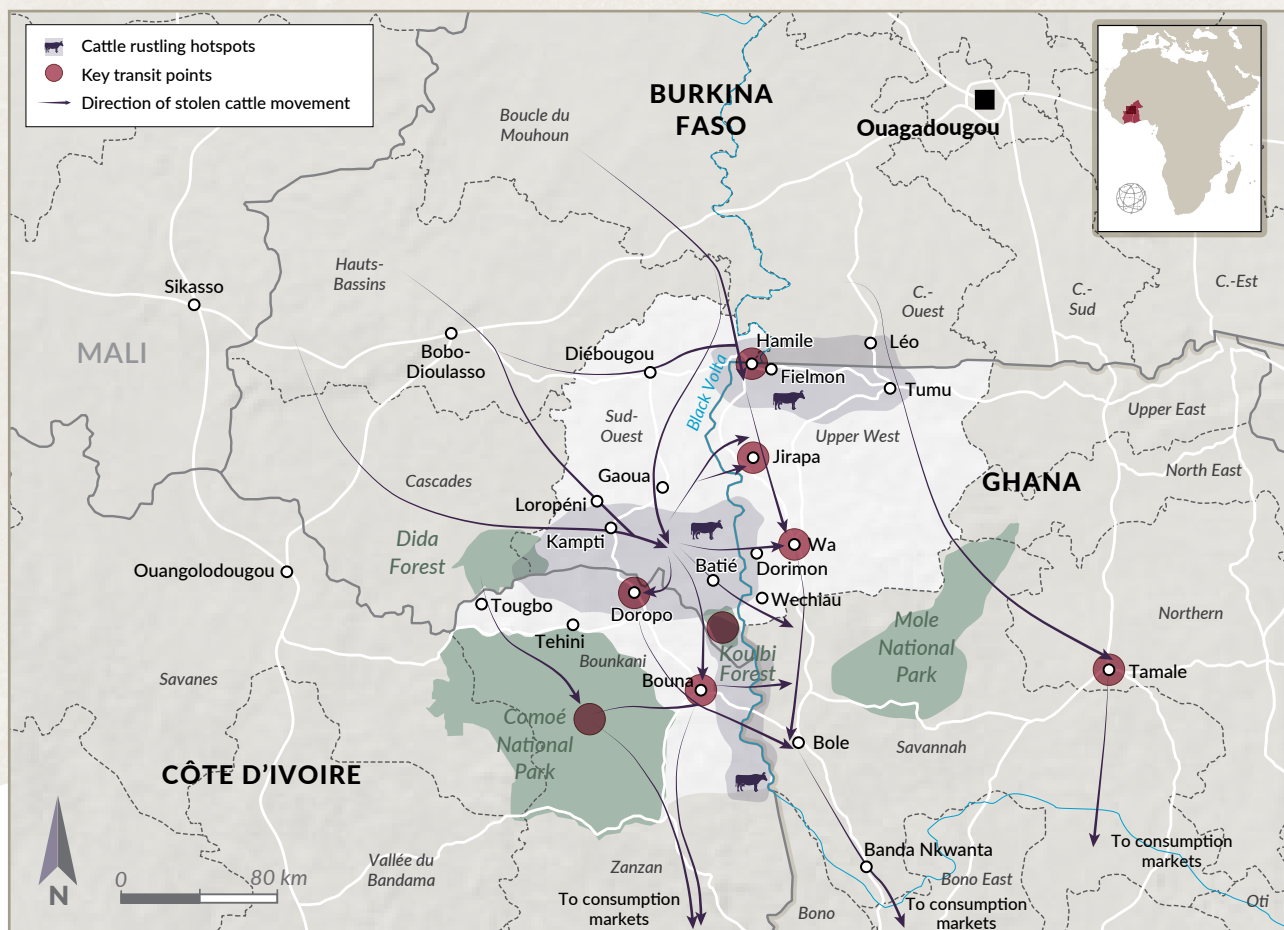


FIGURE 8 Stolen livestock routes and selling points in the Burkina Faso–Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire triborder area.

SOURCE: Flore Berger, Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, GI-TOC, July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-and-insecurity-in-the-triborder-area-between-burkina-faso-cte-divoire-and-ghana/>

and FAMA have been accused of looting cattle under the guise of counterinsurgency operations, mostly to force displacement and terrorize the population – both in central Mali and in herder communities at the border with Mauritania in the Timbuktu region.⁶³

In contrast, in zones where VEOs have a high level of authority or influence, the mode of obtaining cattle changes and becomes a mechanism for consolidating influence. Instead of outright theft, these groups impose *zakat* (an Islamic tax on cattle owners, which is broadly in line with Islamic law).⁶⁴ Although this can build legitimacy in some areas, *zakat* is not always perceived as legitimate by herder communities.

For example, since 2023, this shift from looting to regulating and taxing has been seen in the Menaka region, where IS Sahel established sufficiently high and stable levels of influence to allow the group to engage in some form of economic governance with certain herders.⁶⁵

The cattle rustling ecosystem binds together Sahelian conflicts and more stable coastal states. Illustratively, the Burkina Faso–Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire triborder ecosystem has emerged as a key hub for the laundering of livestock stolen by JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso.⁶⁶

JNIM therefore continues to secure resources without resorting to violence, reflecting a strategy of non-violent extraction along key logistical corridors. (Across north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and also in the Upper West region in Ghana, hubs score high on resourcing of armed groups, but low on

violence indicators.) Just like in the Sahel, VEOs are not the only actors involved in livestock looting, and herder communities are often also threatened by state-affiliated parties. In Burkina Faso, especially in the south-western regions, the VDP has become a central perpetrator of rustling since 2024. Its growing presence in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, in the Bounkani region, extends beyond livestock theft and includes coercion and broader destabilizing activities, which raises concerns about spillover violence and the increasing autonomy of these actors.⁶⁷ These trends reaffirm the centrality of the livestock economy in sustaining conflict systems across the Sahel and into coastal West Africa.

Kidnapping

Kidnapping has become a pervasive and highly lucrative illicit economy across parts of West Africa, generating substantial profits for criminal, insurgent and violent extremist groups. Beyond its financial dimension, the practice is used by VEOs in particular as a mechanism to infiltrate new areas and entrench their influence. Kidnapping has profound destabilizing effects, eroding community security, undermining state authority and fuelling cycles of violence.

Kidnapping was prevalent in 23% of hubs (79) across the region,⁶⁸ mostly in countries with high levels of violence, stretching from Mali to Cameroon and the Central African Republic. However, kidnapping was also found to be prominent in some northern areas of littoral states, particularly Benin. Outside of Nigeria (which is explored in greater detail later), only three of the 38 illicit hubs where kidnapping is an illicit economy fall in the 'low' IEIM band. Conversely, of the 23 hubs that score 'very high', 57% (13) feature kidnapping, emphasizing the role of this illicit economy in fuelling instability. Other accelerant markets are also common in kidnapping hubs, with the most commonly seen being the illicit arms trade (in 46% of kidnapping hubs), cattle rustling (in 39%) and extortion and protection racketeering (in 38%).

Across the focus countries, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) tracked a 25% increase in abductions and forced disappearances between the 2021/2022 and the 2023/2024 periods.⁶⁹ This increase was driven primarily by spikes in Cameroon (kidnapping incidents increased by 275%) and Benin (an almost fivefold increase).⁷⁰ In Cameroon, kidnappings by anglophone separatist groups in the north-west and south-west as well as by violent extremist groups (both ISWAP and JAS) increased in 2023 and 2024, as these conflict actors increased reliance on kidnapping as a source of revenue.⁷¹

In northern Benin, the number of hubs featuring kidnapping increased significantly in the period between the two mapping iterations, reflecting JNIM's expanding operations in the area.⁷² Since its expansion into the country in 2019, JNIM has used kidnapping primarily as a tool (alongside threats, direct attacks, improvised explosive devices and other forms of violence) to extend its area of influence and enforce its rules.⁷³

Abductions by criminal networks and armed bandit groups in Nigeria are typically conducted for ransom. In contrast, for a significant proportion of abductions that involve Sahelian violent extremist groups – most notably JNIM – the primary motivation is not financial gain, but rather intelligence gathering, coercion or punishment.⁷⁴ Across the region, armed groups of different typologies are major perpetrators of kidnapping, with 56% of abductions tracked by ACLED in the period between 2023 and 2024 perpetrated by armed groups.⁷⁵ Kidnappings often surge in areas where armed groups start operating.⁷⁶

Alongside Cameroon, where violent extremists, anglophone separatists and criminal actors known as *zaraguinas* are all prolific perpetrators of kidnapping,⁷⁷ Nigeria is often considered the epicentre of kidnapping in the region, with 36% of kidnapping incidents in the region between 2023 and 2024 recorded

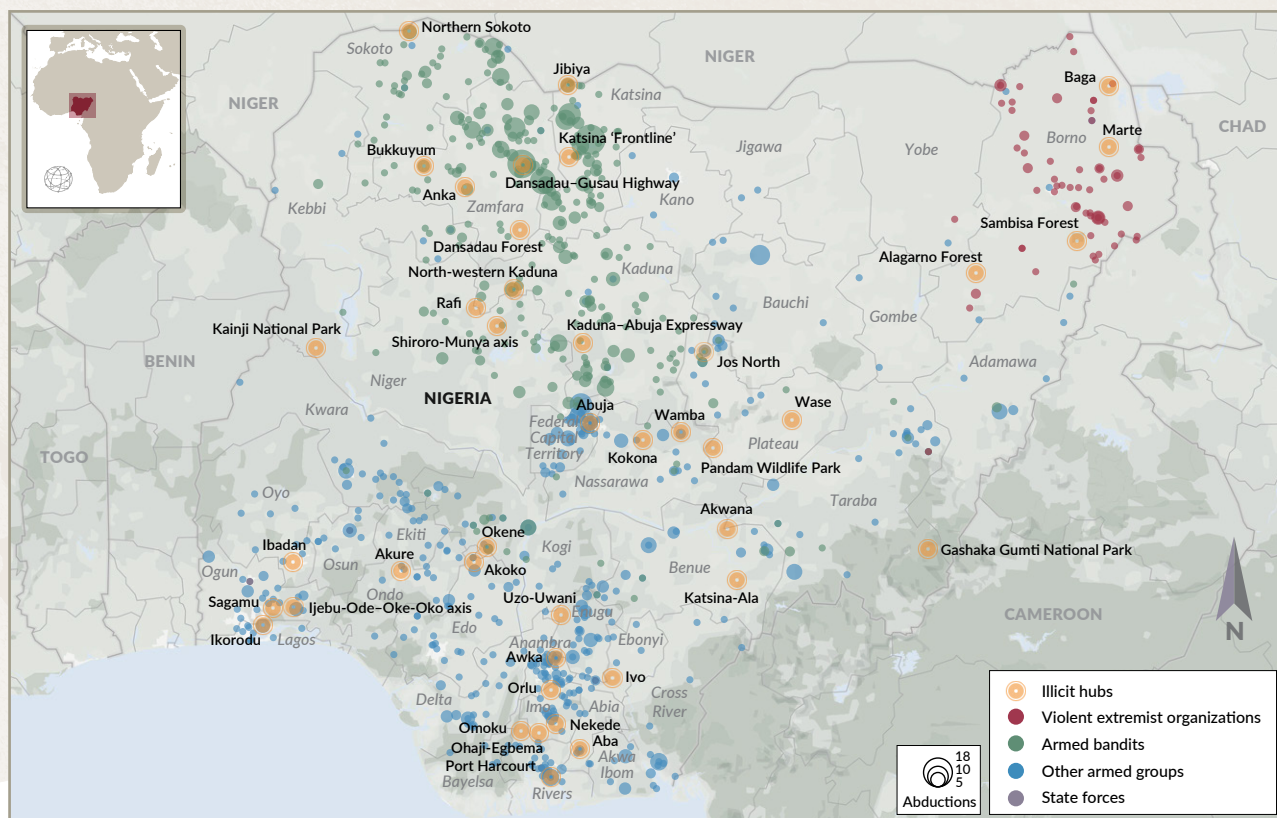


FIGURE 9 Kidnapping incidents in Nigeria, 2023–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC and ACLED

here.⁷⁸ Kidnapping is an important illicit economy in over half of the country's illicit hubs (42), and they make up over half of the kidnapping hubs in the mapped region.⁷⁹

Armed bandits are among the primary perpetrators of kidnapping in Nigeria (responsible for over 52% of abductions in 2024), particularly in north-western areas, but increasingly also in North Central (see Figure 9).⁸⁰ This geographic diffusion reflects the (likely temporary) displacement of some armed bandits from their traditional strongholds in North West due to sustained military interventions, and growing diffusion into other areas of the country. Since 2022, the profitability of individual kidnapping for ransom in North West decreased, as the potential pool of victims shrunk owing to communities being displaced because of the increased violence or their being impoverished by repeat kidnappings.⁸¹ Armed bandits now appear to rely more on other revenue streams (such as artisanal and small-scale gold mining), and have shifted tactics: mass abductions by bandits surged in the first quarter of 2024 and urban abductions increased from the second quarter while rural kidnappings dwindled.⁸²

In north-eastern Nigeria, a different set of perpetrators and motivations are at play. In Borno State, for example, the vast majority of kidnapping incidents (96% of cases between 2023 and 2024) continued to be conducted by VEOs, namely JAS and ISWAP.⁸³ Ransom demands are often less common in these incidents than when bandits or criminal networks are perpetrators. According to reported ransom payments between July 2024 and June 2025, the total value of ransom demanded was much lower in the north-east, where the actors are primarily VEOs, than in the north-west, where criminal bandits are the primary culprits.⁸⁴ This could be partly shaped by the sensitivities of reporting payments to violent extremist groups, which constitute terrorist financing, but may also reflect fewer ransom demands by VEOs in the north-east, although both ISWAP and JAS do demand ransom in some

instances.⁸⁵ For example, Borno State ranked highest with regard to total ransom amount received (with JAS receiving the largest share of ransom paid in the period between July 2024 and June 2025) as a result of the ransom payment made for the liberation of a senior judge in June 2024.⁸⁶ JAS also uses kidnapping for strategic purposes, either as a tool of terror and intimidation or to showcase its strength and influence in the region.⁸⁷

Since 2020, most abductions in Mali and Burkina Faso have been carried out by VEOs as primary perpetrators and have targeted local communities, mainly to achieve strategic goals, with ransoms a secondary motivation and often not demanded.⁸⁸ Between 2022 and mid-2025, kidnappings and forced disappearances have been a persistent feature of insecurity in Mali and Burkina Faso. ACLED indicates that JNIM was involved in the vast majority of incidents where a clear perpetrator was identified, with about three-quarters of all incidents attributed to this group (580 events), therefore making it the main actor in civilian abductions. IS Sahel is responsible for around 15% of incidents (119 events), while state security forces account for roughly 8% (67 events).

In Mali and Burkina Faso, JNIM has increasingly used kidnappings as a tool to intimidate in two specific contexts: either to punish villages of communities that refuse to enter into local agreements with it or to punish individuals who live in towns that JNIM has put under siege and who do not respect the mobility restrictions. This has led to mass kidnappings, such as in April 2023 and November 2023, when JNIM militants abducted more than 250 civilians in three separate incidents in Mali's Mopti region. Civilians from communities with non-aggression pacts were subsequently released, while others remain in captivity.⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the tendency for VEOs to refrain from seeking ransom payments, the early months of 2025 saw an unusual spike in the number of foreign nationals kidnapped by IS Sahel, likely due to the group's need for financial resources (far higher ransom amounts can be demanded for abducted foreign nationals than locals).⁹⁰ The motivations behind the use of kidnapping differ not only between actor types but also within groups themselves.⁹¹

Extortion and protection racketeering

Extortion and protection racketeering is the fourth accelerant market, often intertwined with the illicit arms trade, cattle rustling and kidnapping. The practice includes organized extortion, which involves individuals or entities providing money or benefits in exchange for protection against a real or fabricated threat (with or without an explicit request), as well as cartel racketeering, where an organized crime group acts as an intermediary or mediator for handling external competition and solving disputes as gatekeeper by controlling access and exit to and from key markets.⁹² Across our focus countries, this criminal typology is manifested mainly by armed groups operating in the Sahel and Central Africa: insurgent or violent extremist groups were identified as significant criminal actors in 70% of hubs featuring this illicit economy. It often occurs alongside arms trafficking (63%), cattle rustling (56%), and illicit gold trade (52%), economies that are all particularly important in driving instability.

Although extortion and protection racketeering is not the most widespread illicit economy in West Africa (identified in 18% [63] of all hubs), it features in over half (54%) of hubs that play a significant role in fuelling instability (i.e. those falling in the 'high' or 'very high' IEIM band). This dynamic is even stronger in the smaller subset of hubs most strongly driving instability – those in the 'very high' band – with the practice seen in over 78% (18 of 23) of hubs. By contrast, only 2% of hubs with weak links to instability feature extortion and protection racketeering.

This illicit economy is overwhelmingly concentrated in areas under significant armed group influence (JNIM or IS Sahel in the Sahel, and various armed groups under the umbrella of the Coalition of Patriots for Change in the Central African Republic). As described later, armed groups can gain, or erode, their legitimacy through their engagement with illicit economies. Whereas highly violent crimes such as kidnapping or robbery often reduce legitimacy, the impact of extortion practices is highly context dependent.⁹³

This is reflected in JNIM's collection of *zakat*, which varies both in how it is collected and in the subsequent impacts on the group's legitimacy; even across areas where JNIM wields significant influence, perceptions differ. In Niger, for example, taxation is seen as 'messy and extortionist' in the south-western areas of Gotheye and Torodi, whereas in Midal, in the country's Tahoua region, it is regarded as relatively non-violent and socially tolerated.⁹⁴ In the Boucle du Baoulé National Park in Mali, and particularly around the Kongassambougou reserve, JNIM has imposed a *zakat* system on local communities and herders seeking access to natural resources. Although payment is enforced through the threat of violence, many communities have nonetheless accepted it. This is partly due

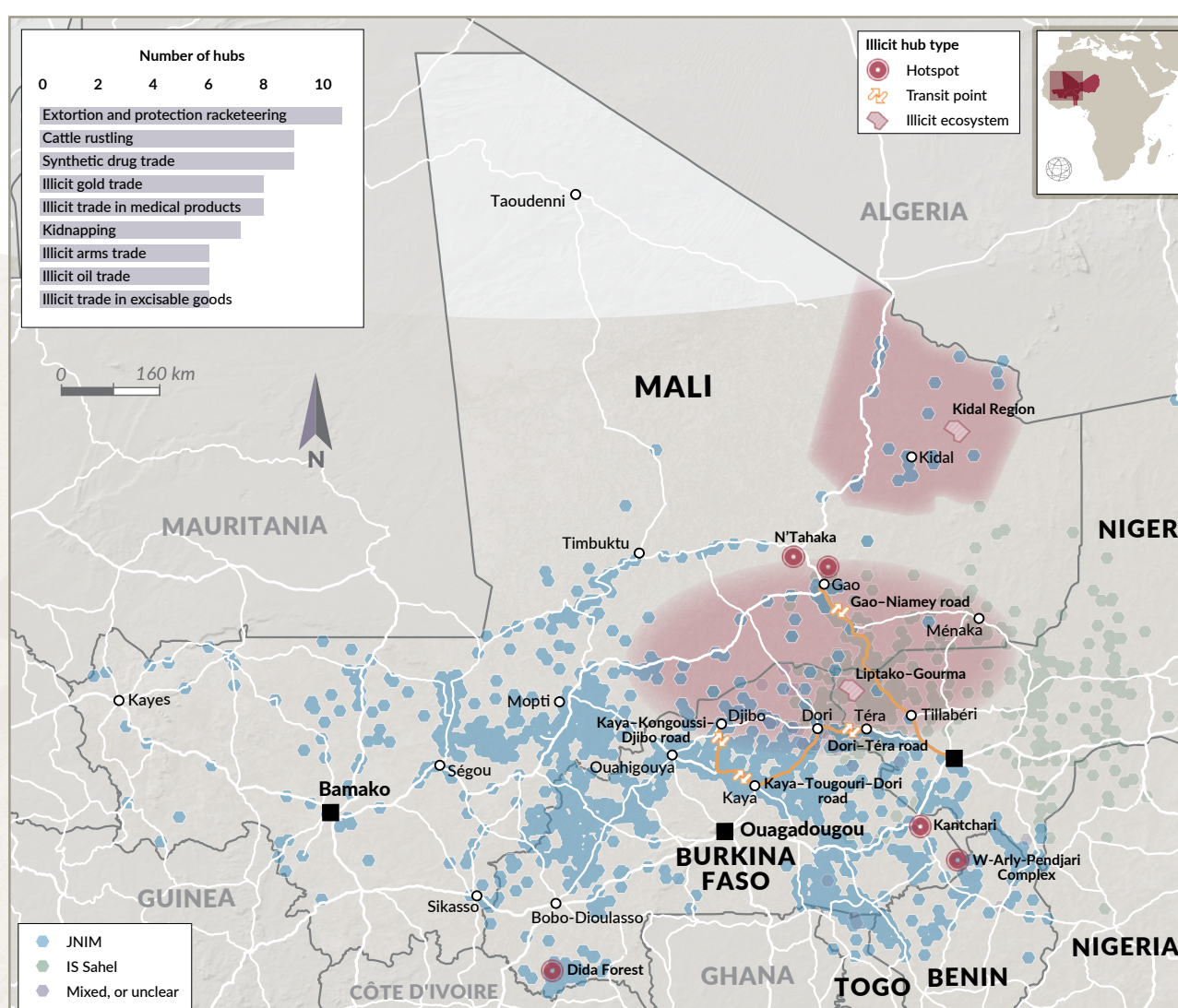


FIGURE 10 Hubs classified as 'very high' on the IEIM that feature extortion and protection racketeering in the central Sahel overlap with areas of VEO activity.

NOTE: The map shows all conflict events, including operations targeting militants and non-violent events, involving JNIM and IS Sahel (and any affiliates) between 1 January 2024 and 31 December 2024.

SOURCES: GI-TOC; ACLED

to coercion, but also because the system is perceived as more predictable and transparent than the previous regime of bribery and corruption that governed access to the reserve.⁹⁵

The degree of organization and territorial control of armed groups plays a key role in shaping the impact of extortion in local communities. For example, in north-western Nigeria, uncoordinated extortion of farming communities by multiple bandit groups reduces legitimacy, as nothing is provided in exchange for the tax. Conversely, taxation of gold mining in Birnin Gwari (part of the north-western Kaduna illicit ecosystem, which scored at the highest level on the IEIM with regard to armed group legitimacy) happens alongside a degree of legitimacy building (as explored later). These examples show that the effect of extortion on social legitimacy depends on the group's organizational capacity, local dynamics, the balance between coercion and relationship building with the population, and the nature of the extraction mechanism itself.⁹⁶

Illicit gold trade

The illicit gold trade is intimately linked to instability in West and Central Africa, not only through conflict financing, but also as a key source of legitimacy for armed groups governing or taxing artisanal mining areas. However, it is also a central regional livelihood, often in areas where alternatives are scarce. Furthermore, in some areas, such as in northern Niger and Mali, some actors have turned away from more violent activities to engage in gold mining, showing how the sector can have a stabilizing effect on local communities.⁹⁷ The gold sector therefore has a more complex relationship with instability than illicit economies that operate purely as drivers, such as kidnapping, the arms trade and cattle rustling.

Illicit gold trade is one of the most commonly identified illicit economies in the region, third after the synthetic drug trade and the illicit arms trade. Reflecting its relationship with instability, it is also more

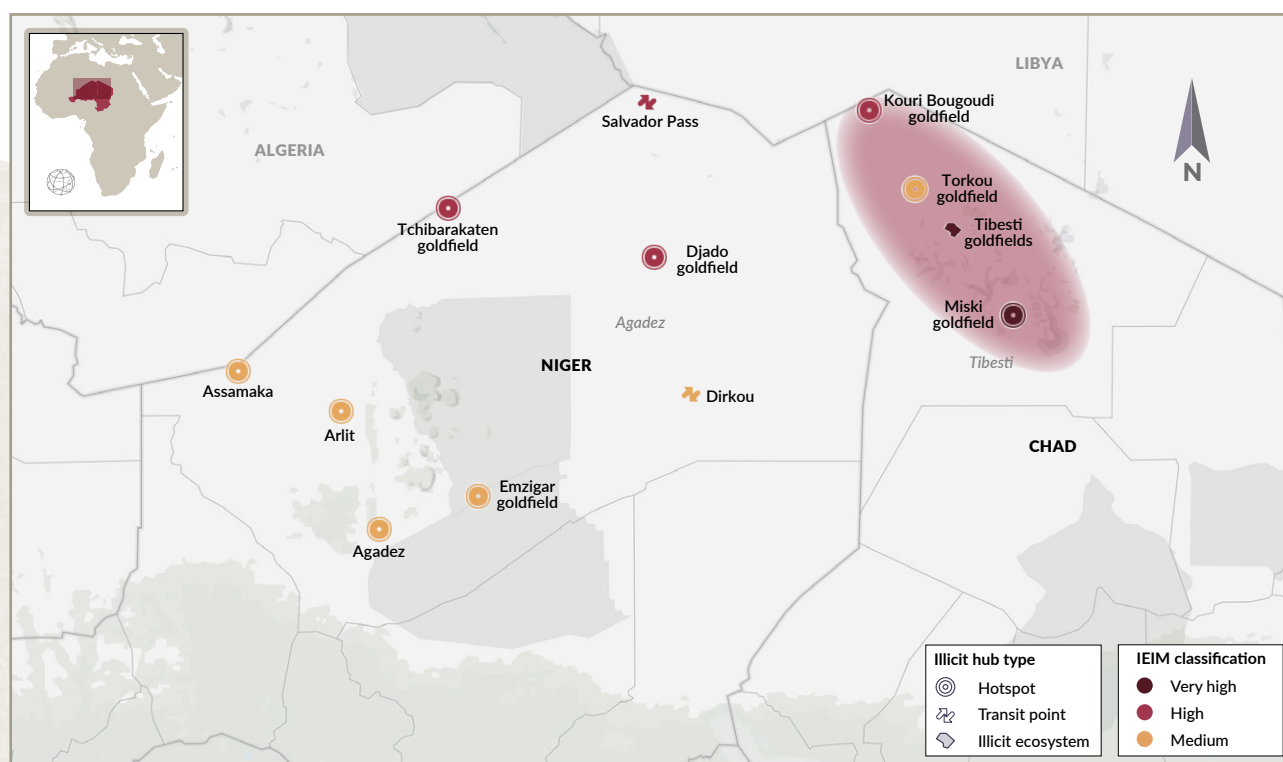


FIGURE 11 Hubs of the illicit arms trade and illicit gold trade in northern Niger and northern Chad.

prevalent in hubs where illicit economies play a significant role in fuelling conflict (those scoring 'high' or 'very high' on the IEIM).⁹⁸ Although some armed groups engage in gold mining directly, they more often derive revenue through taxation of mining activities, sometimes in return for providing security, or at the very least not attacking the mining community themselves.

Artisanal gold-mining areas are often hubs for other illicit economies: the mapping identified the illicit arms trade and the synthetic drug trade as most commonly featured in gold hubs (both are seen in 65 of the 139 gold hubs, or 47%).⁹⁹ Artisanal gold-mining areas and trading hubs are often areas with high levels of weaponization – whether in areas of instability or not – as arms are used to protect the gold from thieves and bandits (see Figure 11). Arms are also often traded at mining sites, including by JNIM in areas of the Sahel. Synthetic drug consumption – particularly of tramadol – is high in artisanal mining areas, as miners often use drugs to enable them to work longer hours without feeling pain.



An artisanal trader shows gold being prepared for smelting in Tarkwa, in Ghana's Western region.

© Reuters/Matthew Mpoke Bigg

Financing, resourcing and governance: How conflict actors exploit illicit economies

Armed groups engage with illicit economies for three main goals: revenue generation, obtaining operational resources (such as fuel, vehicles or motorbikes) and building legitimacy among the communities in which they operate. The mapping project found that hubs that play a significant role in enabling armed groups to achieve any of these goals are also almost exclusively those that play the most significant role in driving instability across the region more broadly.¹⁰⁰

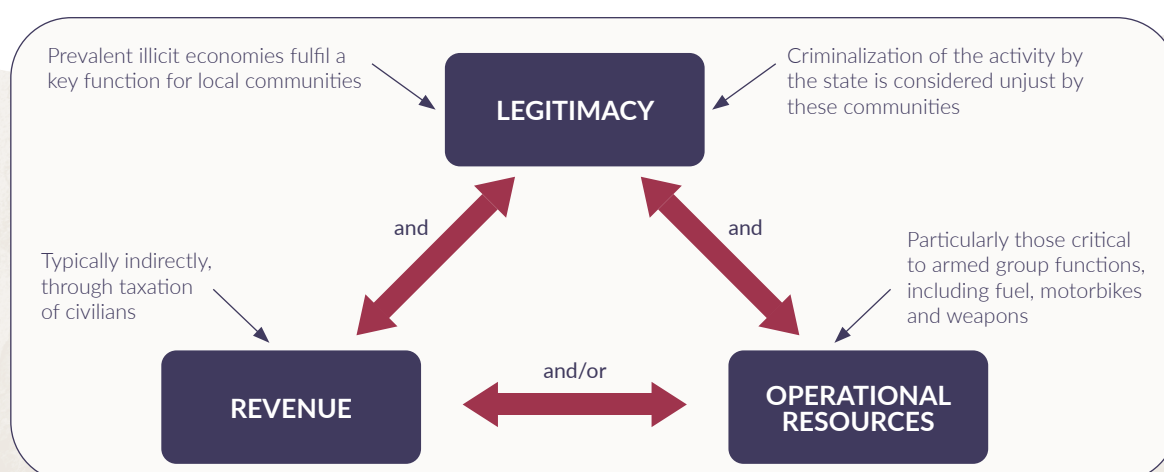


FIGURE 12 Identifying spaces of maximum potential for armed group legitimacy, revenue and resource generation.

SOURCE: Lucia Bird, Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, How do illicit economies build and degrade armed group legitimacy?, ACLED and GI-TOC, December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>

Hubs in which illicit economies allow conflict actors to meet all three goals simultaneously are particularly damaging to long-term stability. These 28 hubs, concentrated in Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Nigeria, are listed in Appendix 4.

Revenue generation

Illicit economies provide essential revenue streams for armed groups across West Africa. Of the 350 illicit hubs identified, almost half (47%) play a role in financing non-state armed groups. In a quarter of these, the revenue earned is assessed to be significant.

Research has highlighted that the primary illicit economies financing conflict actors across West and Central Africa are extortion, cattle rustling, gold mining and kidnapping.¹⁰¹ Findings from the mapping project support this: of the 94 hubs in which illicit economies generate moderate or significant revenue for armed actors, the illicit gold trade features in 55%, extortion and protection racketeering in 51%, cattle rustling in 50%, and kidnapping in 43%. This holds true across the wide range of armed groups drawing financing from illicit economies across the region – from VEOs (e.g. JNIM, IS Sahel, ISWAP); insurgent groups (anglophone separatist movements in Cameroon, the FLA in Mali and rebel groups in Chad); and criminal groups (bandits in north-west Nigeria).

Although the illicit gold trade is a central source of financing for JNIM, there are some indicators that the group's revenues from the sector may have declined since 2023. This appears to be the case particularly in Mali, as the group lost influence over certain key areas in the north, but also potentially in Burkina Faso, where it struggled to secure lasting control over mining sites and guarantee safety for miners. At Tinaykaren in Gao, which once provided a steady source of income through levies on production, JNIM has faced repeated attacks from IS Sahel, pressure from FAMA and Wagner operations, and violence by bandits since early 2023, driving miners away to safer sites like N'Tahaka. Yet even N'Tahaka has slipped from JNIM's indirect influence in 2023 after the collapse of its arrangement with the Cadre Stratégique Permanent and the takeover of the mine by pro-government forces. In Burkina Faso, sustained government air strikes on artisanal mining sites under JNIM's influence have reduced activity in communes such as Thiou, forcing miners toward safer areas under state control.

By contrast, gold has become an increasingly important revenue stream for armed bandit groups in north-west Nigeria since 2023, as other key traditional sources – such as cattle rustling and kidnapping – have dwindled in some areas.¹⁰² In Anka, bandit groups seized control of gold mines in 2023,¹⁰³ shifting from attacking and robbing local miners to taxing gold mining activities. Previously, gold was sold directly by miners to agents at the mines and to shops in Gusau, the capital of Zamfara State. However, bandits now appropriate the gold, paying miners either a salary or in kind with bags of unprocessed ore.

Unlike gold, cattle rustling is a stable and resilient source of financing for JNIM and remains central to conflict dynamics in the Sahel. Thefts fuel cycles of violence, which are at the highest in central Mali (especially in the Bandiagara and Bankass districts, where competition between JNIM, self-defence groups and state forces is high). Yet areas in southern Mali, especially the Yorosso and Koutiala districts of the Sikasso region – where JNIM expanded between 2022 and 2024 – also experience considerable cattle thefts. In Burkina Faso, where the VDP have increasingly deployed since 2022, pillaging of animals is a central part of recurring cycles of tit-for-tat attacks. JNIM has also increased its control over key routes leading to coastal states, through corridors in the Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Ghana triborder area, allowing the group to move large numbers of animals to be sold in markets of coastal states.¹⁰⁴

In the illicit ecosystem of the Lake Chad area in north-eastern Nigeria, straddling northern Cameroon, south-western Chad and south-eastern Niger, cattle rustling is a stable source of revenue for JAS and is primarily carried out by criminal networks and actors linked to the group.¹⁰⁵ Maiduguri, the largest city in north-eastern Nigeria, hosts a major regional livestock market visited by traders from Cameroon, Chad and Niger and at which cattle stolen by JAS members are sold through intermediaries.¹⁰⁶

Operational resources

Almost half (47%) of illicit hubs across the region serve to resource armed groups. Most of these (81%) are located in the Sahel and Central Africa, but there are also a cluster of hubs in the Gulf of Guinea states, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin, underscoring their central role as source countries for goods supplying armed groups in the region.

In hubs where illicit economies play a significant role in armed group resourcing,¹⁰⁷ the trade in excisable goods (68% of resourcing hubs), synthetic drugs (60%), illicit oil (59%) and illicit medical products (48%) featured most commonly.¹⁰⁸ These categories encompass resources critical to armed group, providing them with fuel, motorbikes, medicine and synthetic drugs, particularly tramadol. According to one civil society organization operating in northern Togo, medicine sold informally by so-called *bonne dames* on the roadside is often purchased by injured members of VEOs who cannot access formal health institutions.¹⁰⁹

Many commodities are smuggled northwards, from coastal states into the Sahel, along long-standing smuggling routes that leverage price differentials between regions, and which now supply armed groups with key commodities. For example, both the corridor between Malanville in north-eastern Benin and Gaya in southern Niger, and the town of Cinkassé in northern Togo are key to the supply of fuel and motorbikes to Sahelian violent extremist groups. The Malanville–Gaya corridor benefits both JNIM and IS Sahel, whereas Cinkassé exclusively resources JNIM. Armed groups are key consumers of fuel traded through Karimama in northern Benin, an important source of income for local traders.

Similarly, motorbikes imported through the Port of Lomé and stored in warehouses before being smuggled northwards transit Cinkassé, feeding demand from JNIM, among others. JNIM demand has contributed to rising prices observed in the Sahel and northern Benin since 2021.¹¹⁰

Illicit hubs in Nigeria perform a similar function for VEOs operating in the north-east. In Maiduguri, for example, the bus station serves as a hub for petrol supplies to JAS, with drivers concealing fuel in modified tanks for delivery to the group's operatives in the nearby fishing village of Baga.¹¹¹

Building legitimacy

Although the involvement of armed groups in illicit markets is often viewed through the lens of either revenue generation or supply chains, legitimacy building is also a crucial aspect. How armed groups gain or lose legitimacy among communities through their engagement with illicit and licit economies is a key factor shaping how easily they can retain influence in these areas, and how effectively they can operate.

Our research identified that armed groups gained legitimacy through their engagement in illicit economies in 9% (32) of illicit hubs across West Africa. Half of these hubs are in the Sahel, with others clustered in northern Nigeria, the Lake Chad area and other parts of Central Africa, and in northern Benin. A degree of legitimacy is key to facilitating armed group operations, and signals long-term threats to state control. Underscoring this, armed groups build legitimacy through their engagement

with illicit economies in 40% of hubs (28 out of 70) that play a significant role in fuelling instability across the region (scoring 'high' or 'very high' on the IEIM).

Armed group legitimacy does not necessarily refer to an ideological alignment, but can also mean a degree of social acceptance significant enough to allow the group to operate efficiently, without needing to engage in ongoing violence to prevent communities resisting their operations and rules.¹¹² This makes legitimacy valuable to many armed groups. In fact, although VEOs are active in illicit economies in 81% (26) of legitimacy-building hubs, a far wider range of armed groups is prominent, for whom governance is of varying importance.

For example, Nigerian bandits gain legitimacy across the North West (including in the hubs of Anka, Bukkuyum and the wider north-western Kaduna illicit ecosystem) from allowing gold-mining activity in areas where it has been banned by the state for the last five years.¹¹³ This has generated a degree of reluctant acceptance of the bandits by local communities who rely on informal artisanal mining.

Armed groups are most likely to generate legitimacy through their engagement in illicit economies that are key to a community's livelihoods, particularly where these have been criminalized by the state. This enables armed groups to position themselves as providers of socio-economic opportunities banned by the state, and to step into the shoes of the state by demanding taxation. This explains why the illicit gold trade, a major livelihood across the region, and extortion and protection racketeering were the two economies identified to be most prevalent across legitimacy-building hubs.¹¹⁴ Often, these feature in the same hubs: 44% of legitimacy-building hubs – primarily in north-western Nigeria, the Liptako–Gourma illicit ecosystem and northern Chad's Tibesti goldfields – featured both illicit gold trade and extortion and protection racketeering.

Across the region, economies that provide financing for armed groups have triggered a wave of criminalization or crackdowns aimed at blocking these resource flows. Although these efforts are sometimes successful in decreasing flows, they also tend to engender tensions between the state and communities, creating opportunities for alternative governance providers. For example, in the Lake Chad area, the Nigerian state closed down a major fish market owing to perceived resource flows to JAS, creating space for JAS – which has retained a significant degree of influence in the area – to regulate and tax the fishing trade instead, gaining both financing and legitimacy. Although the ban on fishing activities was lifted in 2022, JAS continues to hold considerable control over access to fishing in the region.

The same rationale explains why five national parks and forests are legitimacy-building hubs, albeit to different degrees. In protected areas, the state has typically prohibited resource-extraction activities in an effort to conserve the area. In a number of these hubs, armed groups – including JNIM and armed bandits – have granted communities and private-sector actors access to natural resources in the protected areas, ranging from wildlife to timber and gold mines, and gained a degree of legitimacy as a result.¹¹⁵



LOOKING AHEAD

The behaviour of armed groups in the Sahel is evolving in ways that affect their financing strategies, operational reach and geographic footprint. From the resurgence of kidnapping for ransom to the use of new resourcing corridors and the pursuit of expansion into neighbouring states, a number of possible trajectories are emerging, with implications for the development of illicit economies. The following scenarios outline key dynamics to watch as these trends unfold.

Is kidnapping re-emerging as a source of financing for Sahelian groups?

Since the beginning of 2025, both IS Sahel and JNIM have significantly increased their reliance on kidnapping for ransom as a financing stream. IS Sahel, historically not engaged in systematic abductions of foreigners, carried out a series of kidnappings (including an Austrian woman in Niger, a Spanish tourist near Assekrem, four Moroccan truck drivers and two Chinese oil workers) that appear designed to secure ransom payments, a tactic made possible by its consolidation of control in parts of Ménaka and Gao that allow it to detain hostages over time.¹¹⁶ In parallel, JNIM, which relied less and less on kidnappings for ransom as a financing stream, paired its unprecedented southern offensives in Mali with a surge in abductions, conducting four kidnappings in less than three months and seizing 11 foreign nationals (of Chinese, Indian and Iranian nationalities), mainly from mining and industrial sites in Kayes, Koulikoro and Sikasso.¹¹⁷ While IS Sahel's turn to kidnapping represents a new revenue model rooted in territorial control in the north-east, JNIM's approach reflects a strategy of economic warfare in the south, using abductions alongside extortion and infrastructure attacks to pressure foreign companies.¹¹⁸ Together, these developments highlight how kidnapping for ransom has re-emerged in 2025 as a core tactic and source of financing for both groups, albeit through different geographic strongholds and strategic logic.

Will resourcing corridors in the Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire–Burkina Faso triborder area remain JNIM's logistical backbone?

The resourcing corridors connecting the Sahel, in particular Burkina Faso, to the northern areas of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are likely to remain crucial to the resourcing strategies of armed groups, particularly JNIM and the Katiba Banfora operating in that area. The Katiba is expected to continue to prioritize non-violent extraction over attacks and expansion operations in these areas. These routes are key because they facilitate the laundering of stolen cattle and also the illicit trade of motorbikes and fuel – critical to JNIM's operations in battlefields in Burkina Faso. There is also potential for more involvement in the gold trade. The illicit economies of the region, and JNIM's involvement, underscore the importance of the zone as JNIM's logistical and financial base. Violence levels are likely to remain low as long as resource flows are maintained, with these hubs serving more as financial and supply nodes than battlefronts.

Will JNIM use the gold sector as a vector to expand further into south-western Mali?

The Kayes region in south-west Mali on the border with Senegal has been increasingly affected by JNIM, seeing approximately 40 violent incidents in 2024.¹¹⁹ In July 2025, JNIM launched a series of coordinated attacks on seven towns along Mali's borders with Senegal and Mauritania, signalling a clear escalation of intent.¹²⁰ So far, there have been no reports of armed groups operating at or around the mines (which often takes the form of taxation) nor violence fed by competition around gold mines. In contrast to other gold-rich areas across Mali, JNIM's revenue potential in Kayes may be less about directly controlling mines or other resources, and more about striking deals with companies operating in this economically vibrant region. With abundant mining and commercial activity, JNIM can leverage bans or restrictions (such as the one imposed in September 2025 by the group on fuel imports) to compel businesses to pay in order to continue operating, opening up significant new streams of income. Furthermore, in its drive to secure funding and diversify its revenue streams, JNIM could intensify attacks against foreign miners – particularly Chinese nationals – who are increasingly present in the Kayes region and are often engaged in informal artisanal mining. In July 2025, for example, JNIM elements attacked mining sites operated by Chinese nationals in Sikasso, and in same month, Chinese nationals were also taken hostage by armed groups in Kenieba. In this context, there is reason to believe that kidnappings for ransom targeting Chinese artisanal gold miners could become one of the group's approaches for generating revenue.

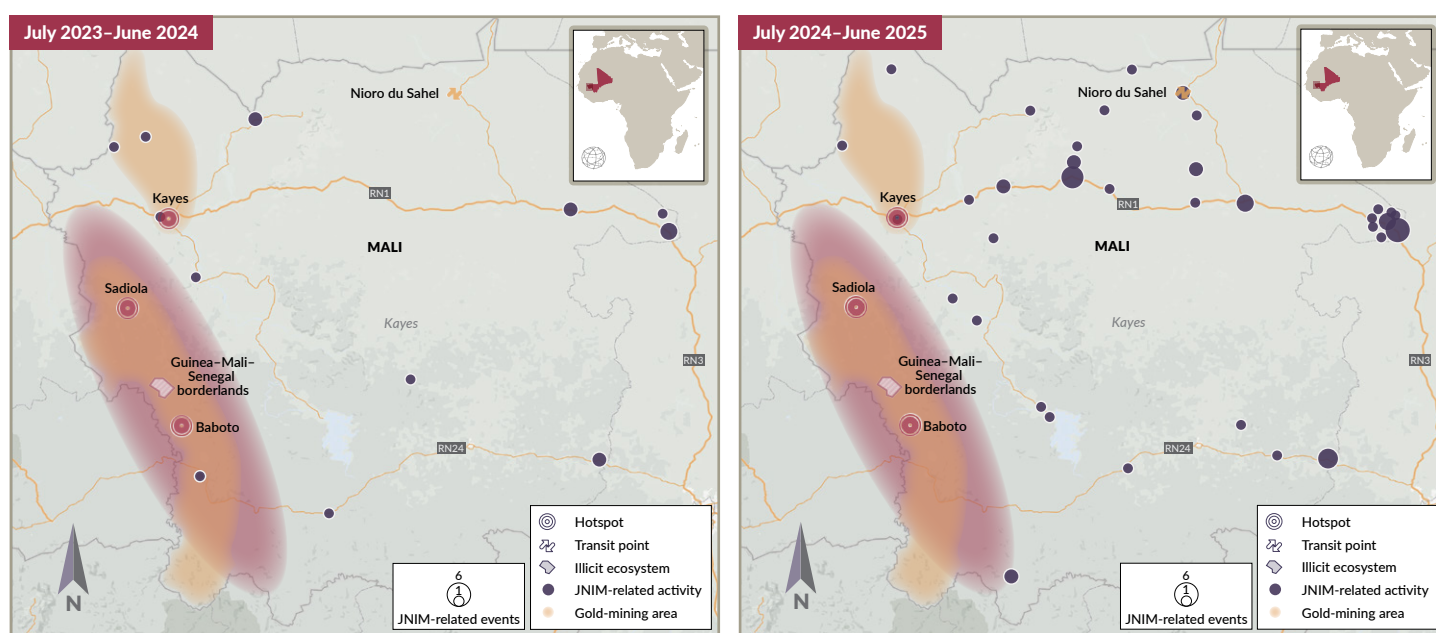


FIGURE 13 JNIM expansion into the Kayes region, south-west Mali.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, ACLED

Could Senegal see possible JNIM encroachment?

The Kayes region in south-west Mali is a strategic area for the group's expansion into Senegal and Guinea, given Mali's porous borders. This would make JNIM well positioned to exploit, for example, the natural resources of the gold-rich area of Kédougou in south-eastern Senegal, and to take advantage of the Niokolo-Koba National Park as a safe haven and resourcing base.



Senegalese soldiers en route to dismantle artisanal gold-mining sites in Kédougou, May 2025. The Senegalese military have launched operations in the area to combat armed group spillover from Mali. © Amaury Falt-Brown/ AFP via Getty Images

Will growing JNIM operations in south-western Mali fuel a surge in demand for maritime smuggling to the Canaries?

Since 2022, JNIM has doubled the frequency of its operations in southern and western Mali. The Kayes region, the target of the group's attacks in July, and the neighbouring Sikasso region, which is also experiencing growing insecurity, have long been key points of origin for migrants and refugees embarking on maritime smuggling routes from Senegal and Mauritania to Spain's Canary Islands.¹²¹ This route has seen unprecedented levels of movement in recent years, particularly of Malian nationals. Although law enforcement operations in Mauritania resulted in a decrease in movement on this route in 2025, intensifying JNIM activities in south-western Mali are expected to lead to a rise in demand, including for disembarkations further south, from Senegal (including the key hub of Mbour), Guinea (Kamsar) or Guinea-Bissau.

Will sophisticated weapons from the conflict in Sudan increasingly leak into arms markets in northern Mali and Niger?

The outbreak of conflict in Sudan in mid-2023 precipitated a surge in weapons circulation in neighbouring countries, primarily Chad and Libya. Trafficking networks are smuggling weapons further afield, including into Mali and Niger. Armed groups operating in the Sahel may benefit from leakages from Sudan's conflict.

Could greater criminal-extremist interaction be seen in north-western Nigeria?

The proliferation of attacks in Sokoto and Kebbi states between January and June 2025 by the ISWAP affiliate known as Lakurawa – reportedly increasingly supported by JAS militants – underscores the risk of alliances between armed groups strengthening in this area, and of violent extremist activity becoming a growing challenge there.¹²² The spread of armed banditry, together with that of VEOs further west from their traditional areas of operation, has shaped increasing overlap between bandit groups and VEOs. Bandit groups have shown varying patterns of interaction with extremist factions: some avoid or confront them, while others have formed temporary alliances. Documented links exist between various armed bandit groups and extremist groups such as Ansaru, JAS and ISWAP. As VEOs gain a greater foothold in the north-west, and state offensives reduce the geographic space

available for bandits and extremist groups to operate and establish bases, instances of both conflict and collaboration between the two actor types are expected to increase.¹²³

Will VEO movements from the Sahel and Nigeria grow closer?

In north-east Nigeria, ISWAP has intensified its attacks, in particular on state forces, since the beginning of 2025. The group has exhibited a shift in tactics, including sophisticated social media propaganda and the use of drones to drop explosives, which suggests a greater role is being played by Islamic State's central leadership.¹²⁴ However, there is a risk of growing alliances between Nigeria-based violent extremist groups and like-minded Sahelian groups. In September 2024, for instance, Lakurawa re-emerged after several years of apparent dormancy.¹²⁵ Designated a terror organization by the Nigerian government in January 2025,¹²⁶ this group is believed to have origins in Mali but over the past year has increasingly operated in the north-west of Nigeria. Lakurawa has long maintained links with IS Sahel, which since early 2024 has been expanding into the triborder area between Niger, Benin and Nigeria.¹²⁷ Collaboration between Lakurawa and other armed groups is not without precedent, and the group certainly has shown a degree of autonomy in its past operations (lending credence to the notion that it is not simply an IS Sahel faction). Compounded with the increasing (albeit still limited) presence of ISWAP in the north-west, the latest developments signal a risk of a growing closeness, and potential collaboration, between different extremist movements from the Sahel and Nigeria, multiplying the threat posed by extremist movements in West Africa. And the consolidation of swathes of territory under the control of VEOs will strengthen their positions, given armed groups' use of the area as a support zone and supply corridor, from extortion practices and cattle rustling to the supply of motorbikes and synthetic drugs.



TURNING FINDINGS INTO ACTION

Formalize and support the artisanal gold-mining sector, and avoid prohibitions and crackdowns

The illicit gold trade is central to resourcing, financing and legitimacy building for armed groups.¹²⁸ Seeking to prohibit economies that provide widespread economic benefits to communities has repeatedly undermined stabilization attempts and helped legitimize alternative governance providers. Artisanal and small-scale gold mining could play a greater role in stabilizing the region when seen as a lucrative livelihood, well positioned to offer communities and armed group members alternatives to banditry and insurgency.¹²⁹

Formalizing and supporting artisanal gold mining is fraught with obstacles. There have, however, been some successes across the region, including in some community schemes rolled out in Ghana, where the strategic use of incentives has shaped a different dialogue between states and communities. These promising regional examples should be examined and replicated where feasible.

Where formalizing and supporting the artisanal gold-mining sector is not feasible, it may be preferable to not intervene or to simply provide greater security for mining activity, limiting armed group presence and resource extraction and allowing the sector to continue, rather than spending limited state resources on seeking to enforce prohibitions that can prove counterproductive. This is particularly relevant in gold-rich areas that are under state control but are close to areas where armed groups operate or may infiltrate.

Prioritize responses to cattle rustling and the laundering of stolen livestock in coastal markets

Given the widespread relationship between cattle rustling and instability, intervention in this illicit economy should be a priority. Intervention is a feasible option because a number of regions that are under control of state authorities are hubs for cattle rustling and laundering of stolen cattle. This includes Ghana's Upper West region, and to a lesser extent the Bounkani region of Côte d'Ivoire. Cattle market closures should be avoided as a response to tracked links to armed group finance; instead enhanced regulation should mitigate the risk of stolen livestock being sold through these markets. The construction of formal livestock markets in rural areas could be a mechanism to draw more transactions into the formal market and facilitate regulation of the trade. Cooperation between

states, actors in the livestock economy and local communities is key to better regulating the livestock sector, and disrupting its links to conflict.¹³⁰

Acknowledge the non-financial motivations behind kidnappings to guide state responses

Authorities should recognize that one of the main drivers of kidnappings by violent extremist groups, in particular in the Sahel but also in the northern areas of littoral states, is suspicion of collaboration with the state. When governments establish local vigilance committees (often called *comités locaux de surveillance* or *comités civilo-militaires*) or expect civilians to share intelligence, they expose these individuals to heightened risk: being perceived as informants can be enough to justify abduction, threats, or even killings. If the state cannot provide reliable protection for communities engaged in such initiatives, these practices should be avoided, as they inadvertently fuel the cycle of kidnappings and violence. Efforts to counter abductions should therefore prioritize safeguarding civilians and reducing the perception that community members are serving as state informants.

Strengthen weapons management systems and put stricter controls on arms exports in place

Sahelian states should recognize that large-scale arming of their national forces often results in unintended diversion of weapons, with VEOs and other armed actors seizing these arms and thereby reinforcing their own capacities. Instead of reducing insecurity, such transfers risk sustaining the conflict economy and fuelling further violence. Moreover, arms manufacturers and exporting countries should also acknowledge that the weapons they supply are frequently implicated in mass atrocities against civilians by national armies and, in some cases, are being used by private military companies such as Wagner/Africa Corps. This should serve as a grave warning for more stringent export controls, greater accountability, and a shift towards supporting non-military responses to insecurity.

Improve information systems to stem the rapid expansion of the synthetic drug trade

The rapid expansion of the synthetic drug trade is a clear and escalating threat to public health and governance in the region. The pace at which certain new drugs have taken hold and are spreading highlights the urgent need to drastically improve early identification of new synthetic substances, in order to prevent their entrenchment in society. Information-sharing with states that play a role as source countries for precursor chemicals must be scaled up. For example, better algorithm-based scanning and detection systems to flag suspect shipments before arrival could be developed, potentially in partnership with countries further up the supply chain.

Empower communities in areas surrounding national parks

Five national parks were highlighted as legitimacy- and resource-building hubs for armed groups. Communities living in the corridors of national parks have repeatedly proven vulnerable to infiltration by armed groups. The criminalization of community livelihood practices through laws that prohibit resource extraction from protected areas has not only undermined conservation efforts but also multiplied community grievances and created entry points for armed groups.¹³¹ This tension between conservation and livelihoods is compounded by the growing impacts of climate change, which dictate

dwindling agricultural yields for many communities and growing reliance on resource extraction in protected areas.

Areas near national parks, particularly in regions close to those where armed groups operate, should be prioritized in programming that aims to support climate-resilient agriculture and maximize agricultural yields. Doing so multiplies impacts: not only will regional security, biodiversity and livelihoods benefit, but illicit economies based on extraction of protected resources will also be curtailed.

It is key to strengthen the social compact between communities in the corridors around national parks and local governance authorities. This can include efforts to align state and community incentives – including through channelling more funds generated by the park to communities – and by enhancing the role of communities in park management, for example as park rangers or tourist guides.



APPENDIX 1: ILLICIT HUBS BY IEIM CLASSIFICATION

LOW (206)	MEDIUM (74)	HIGH (47)	VERY HIGH (23)
Aba (NGA)	Aderbissinat (NER)	Abeche (TCD)	Am Dafok (CAF)
Abalak (NER)	Agadez (NER)	Adré (TCD)	Bagasola (TCD)
Abang Minko (CMR)	Alagarno Forest (NGA)	Andjani (TCD)	Bamenda (CMR)
Abengourou (CIV)	Arlit (NER)	Anka (NGA)	Dida Forest (BFA)
Abidjan (CIV)	Assamaka (NER)	Baffousam-Mbouda cluster (CMR)	Dori-Téra road (BFA-NER)
Abong-Mbang (CMR)	Bakouma (CAF)	Baga (NGA)	Fotokol (CMR)
Abuja (NGA)	Bangassou (CAF)	Bakassi (CMR)	Gao (MLI)
Aby Lagoon (CIV)	Batié-Gaoua-Kampti axis (BFA)	Bamako (MLI)	Gao-Niamey road (MLI-NER)
Accra (GHA)	Bawku (GHA)	Bambari (CAF)	Kaga-Bandoro-Batangafu-Kabo triangle (CAF)
Aflao (GHA)	Ber (MLI)	Bangui (CAF)	Kantchari (BFA)
Ahmed Sekou Touré International Airport (GIN)	Berbérati-Gamboula axis (CAF)	Birao (CAF)	Kaya-Kongoussi-Djibo road (BFA)
Akamkpa (NGA)	Birni-N'Konni (NER)	Bobo-Dioulasso (BFA)	Kaya-Tougouri-Dori road (BFA)
Akoko (NGA)	Bole (GHA)	Bukkuyum (NGA)	Kidal Region (MLI)
Akure (NGA)	Bouar (CAF)	Burkina Faso-Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire triborder area (BFA-GHA-CIV)	Kousséri (CMR)
Akwana (NGA)	Bria (CAF)	CAR-Cameroon-Chad triborder area (CAF-CMR-TCD)	Lake Chad area (TCD-CMR-NER-NGA)
Akwanga (NGA)	Cinkansé (BFA)	Djado goldfield (NER)	Liptako-Gourma (MLI-BFA-NER)
Amílcar Cabral International Airport (CPV)	Cinkassé (TGO)	Fada N'gourma (BFA)	Miski goldfield (TCD)
Andoni (NGA)	Comoé National Park (CIV)	Foïta (MLI)	N'Délé (CAF)
Aného (TGO)	Conakry (GIN)	Gaya (NER)	N'Tahaka (MLI)
Apapa Tin Can Port (Lagos Port) (NGA)	Daboua (TCD)	In-Afarak (MLI)	Tchoukoutalia (TCD)
Awka (NGA)	Damasak (NGA)	In-Khalil (MLI)	Tibesti goldfields (TCD)
Baboto (MLI)	Dan Issa (NER)	Jibiya (NGA)	Tissi-Am Dafok-Birao triangle (CAF)
Bagwu (LBR)	Dansadau Forest (NGA)	Kaya (BFA)	W-Arly-Pendjari Complex (BEN-BFA-NER)
Banjul (GMB)	Dansadau-Gusau Highway (NGA)	Kouri Bougoudi goldfield (TCD)	
Banjul International Airport (GMB)	Dapaong (TGO)	Kourzo Pass (TCD-NER)	
Batouri (CMR)	Dirkou (NER)	Lerneb (MLI)	

LOW (206)	MEDIUM (74)	HIGH (47)	VERY HIGH (23)
Bertoua (CMR)	Douala (CMR)	Maiduguri (NGA)	
Bijagós Archipelago (GNB)	Emzigar goldfield (NER)	Mainé-Soroa (NER)	
Biombo coastal area (GNB)	Garoua (CMR)	Maroua (CMR)	
Bissau (GNB)	Garoua-Boulai (CMR)	Marte (NGA)	
Blaise Diagne International Airport (SEN)	Gourcy (BFA)	Mayo-Sava (CMR)	
Blitta (TGO)	Guinea-Mali-Senegal borderlands (MLI)	Mundemba (CMR)	
Bonny (NGA)	Hamile (GHA)	Nadiagou (BFA)	
Bouaké (CIV)	Idenau (CMR)	North-western Kaduna (NGA)	
Bougouni (MLI)	Kainji National Park (NGA)	Ouahigouya (BFA)	
Bouna (CIV)	Karimama (BEN)	Salvador Pass (NER)	
Boundiali (CIV)	Katsina 'Frontline' (NGA)	Séna Oura National Park (TCD)	
Bowila (LBR)	Kayes (MLI)	South-eastern zone (CAF)	
Bwea Town (LBR)	Kélo (TCD)	Tchibarakaten goldfield (NER)	
Campo (CMR)	Kongassambougou Reserve (MLI)	Thiou (BFA)	
Casamance (SEN)	Koury-Koutiala road (MLI)	Timbuktu (MLI)	
Cesária Évora International Airport (CPV)	Koutiala-Yorosso area (MLI)	Tinaykaren (MLI)	
Cotonou (BEN)	Kye-Ossi (CMR)	Tinzaouaten (MLI)	
Cotonou International Airport (BEN)	Lake Maga Pouss (CMR)	Tissi (TCD-CAF)	
Dakar (SEN)	Léré (TCD)	Yaoundé (CMR)	
Diori Hamani International Airport (NER)	Limbe (CMR)	Zha Soo National Park (TCD)	
Djougou (BEN)	Malanville (BEN)	Zinder (NER)	
Djoum (CMR)	Maradi (NER)		
Dollar Power (GHA)	May Moudjia (NER)		
Doropo (CIV)	Mobaye (CAF)		
Dourbeye (CMR)	Monrovia (LBR)		
Elubo (GHA)	N'Djamena (TCD)		
Enugu (NGA)	Northern Sokoto (NGA)		
Epe (NGA)	Nzako (CAF)		
Félix-Houphouët-Boigny (Abidjan) International Airport (CIV)	Ouagadougou (BFA)		
Forécariah (GIN)	Ouangolodougou (CIV)		
Forest Guinea (Guinée forestière) (GIN)	Port of Lomé (TGO)		
Freeport of Monrovia (LBR)	Pouytenga (BFA)		
Freetown (SLE)	Roro (TCD)		
Freetown International Airport (SLE)	Sambisa Forest (NGA)		
Freetown Port (SLE)	Shiroro-Munya axis (NGA)		
Ganta (LBR)	Sido (TCD)		
Gaschiga (CMR)	Sikasso (MLI)		
Gashaka Gumti National Park (NGA)	Tahoua (NER)		
Gbalamuya (SLE)	Tanguiéta (BEN)		
Geidam (NGA)	Tanout (NER)		
Gola Rainforest National Park (SLE)	Tchintabaraden (NER)		
Greater Banjul Area (GMB)	Tiko (CMR)		
Grebo-Krahn National Park (LBR)	Tin-Akoff (BFA)		
Guéckédou (GIN)	Tiné (TCD)		
Hilacondji (BEN)	Torkou goldfield (TCD)		
Ibadan (NGA)	Touboro (CMR)		

LOW (206)	MEDIUM (74)	HIGH (47)	VERY HIGH (23)
Idiroko (NGA)	Toummo (NER)		
Ijebu-Ode-Oke-Oko axis (NGA)	Wase (NGA)		
Ikom (NGA)			
Ikorodu (NGA)			
Itagunmodi-Iperindo axis (NGA)			
Ivo (NGA)			
Jegué (GNB)			
Jendema-Bo Waterside (LBR-SLE)			
Jos North (NGA)			
Jos South (NGA)			
Jos South-Barkin Ladi Road (NGA)			
Kaduna-Abuja Expressway (NGA)			
Kaffrine (SEN)			
Kailahun District (SLE)			
Kamba (NGA)			
Kambia District (SLE)			
Kambui Hills Forest Reserve (SLE)			
Kangari Hills Forest Reserve (SLE)			
Kano (NGA)			
Kano-Daura Highway (NGA)			
Kaolack (SEN)			
Kara (TGO)			
Kartong (GMB)			
Kasoa (GHA)			
Katsina-Ala (NGA)			
Kédougou Region (SEN)			
Kentzou (CMR)			
Ketao (TGO)			
Kette (CMR)			
Kidira (SEN)			
Koidu (SLE)			
Kokona (NGA)			
Kolondieba (MLI)			
Kono District (SLE)			
Kotoka International Airport (GHA)			
Kouri 17 (TCD)			
Kumasi (GHA)			
Lagos (NGA)			
Lake Nokoué-Ouémé Delta (BEN)			
Lake Sonfon (SLE)			
Lofa Mano National Park (LBR)			
Lollo (NGA)			
Lomé (TGO)			
Lomé-Tokoin International Airport (TGO)			
Lomié (CMR)			
Macenta (GIN)			
Médina Gounass (SEN)			
Makurdi-Lafia Road (NGA)			
Mallam Fatori (NGA)			

LOW (206)	MEDIUM (74)	HIGH (47)	VERY HIGH (23)
Mamou (GIN)			
Man (CIV)			
Mbour (SEN)			
Mole National Park (GHA)			
Moloundou (CMR)			
Monrovia-Roberts International Airport (LBR)			
Moussala (SEN)			
Murtala Mohammed International Airport (NGA)			
Nekede (NGA)			
Nelson Mandela International Airport (CPV)			
Ngaoundéré (CMR)			
Niokolo-Koba National Park (SEN)			
Nioro du Sahel (MLI)			
Noé (CIV)			
Nola (CAF)			
Ogbia (NGA)			
Ohaji-Egbema (NGA)			
Okene (NGA)			
Old Oyo National Park (NGA)			
Omo Forest Reserve Area (NGA)			
Omoku (NGA)			
Onitsha (NGA)			
Onne Port (NGA)			
Orlu (NGA)			
Oron (NGA)			
Osvaldo Vieira International Airport (GNB)			
Outamba-Kilimi National Park (SLE)			
Paga-Pô road (BFA)			
Pandam Wildlife Park (NGA)			
Penguia Chiefdom (SLE)			
Port Harcourt (NGA)			
Port of Abidjan (CIV)			
Port of Banjul (GMB)			
Port of Buchanan (LBR)			
Port of Conakry (GIN)			
Port of Cotonou (BEN)			
Port of Dakar (SEN)			
Port of Greenville (LBR)			
Port of Harper (LBR)			
Port of Porto Novo (CPV)			
Port of San Pedro (CIV)			
Port of Takoradi (GHA)			
Port of Tema (GHA)			
Porto da Praia (CPV)			
Porto Grande (CPV)			
Porto Novo (CPV)			
Porto Sal-Rei (CPV)			
Praia (CPV)			
Rafi (NGA)			
Sadiola (MLI)			

LOW (206)	MEDIUM (74)	HIGH (47)	VERY HIGH (23)
Safim (GNB)			
Sagamu (NGA)			
Saint Louis (SEN)			
Salikegné (SEN)			
Sampa (GHA)			
Sapo National Park (LBR)			
Ségbana (BEN)			
Seme (NGA)			
Sèmè-Kpodji (BEN)			
Serekunda (GMB)			
Siguiri (GIN)			
Sikasso–Guinea–Côte d’Ivoire borderlands (MLI)			
Sokodé (TGO)			
Soubré (CIV)			
Southern Ijaw (NGA)			
Tabelot (NER)			
Tambacounda (SEN)			
Taoudenni (MLI)			
Tarkwa (GHA)			
Tengréla (CIV)			
Toe Town (LBR)			
Touba (SEN)			
Tumu (GHA)			
Uzo-Uwani (NGA)			
Velingara (SEN)			
Wamba (NGA)			
Warri (NGA)			
Wassa Akropong (GHA)			
Western Area Peninsula National Park (SLE)			
Yanfolila (MLI)			
Yeala (LBR)			
Yewa North (NGA)			
Yokadouma (CMR)			
Yorosso (MLI)			
Zégoua (MLI)			



APPENDIX 2: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

Three years after the initial illicit hub mapping in West Africa in 2022, the purpose of this report and the accompanying interactive online tool is to provide an updated map of hubs across West Africa and parts of Central Africa, and their intersections with conflict and instability. The methodology has been strengthened in a number of ways since 2022, including by increasing the burden of proof required for each illicit economy identified, increasing the maximum number of illicit economies per hub, the addition of a new IEIM indicator, and a strengthened evidence base for expert assessments.

As in 2022, 18 countries fall within the geographic scope of the updated mapping: the West African states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, together with the Central African states of Cameroon, Central African Republic and Chad.

The multistage research was led by a core team from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), working with a wide network of research consultants, and a field monitoring network was established across countries of focus. An updated literature review was conducted for each country, and tailored guidance manuals were developed.¹³² Primary data collection included semi-structured interviews, conducted either in person or remotely and based on pre-prepared questionnaires, focus group discussions and roundtables, and requests for information sent out to elements of the network.¹³³ Drawing on this, the research team developed a preliminary mapping of hubs and their characteristics, highlighting changes from the previous iteration. Each country mapping package was presented to a group of national, regional and international experts for validation, either as part of a roundtable discussion or as bilateral engagements.

The final mapping is the culmination of 18 months of research led by 11 GI-TOC researchers, supported by a team of 37 local research consultants, and a wide network of field monitors, drawing on specific consultations with over 640 stakeholders. Other West Africa Observatory research workstreams, each underpinned by extensive primary data collection, also contributed to the hub mapping. A total of 77 experts were engaged through validation processes.

Mapping illicit hubs

Classifying illicit hubs

Three types of illicit hub have been identified:

- **Hotspots** are places where there is a strong presence of not only illicit economies and organized criminal activities but also criminal actors (who may or may not have the support of people with political power). Hotspots are characterized by either the 'production' of illicit activity (which can be also thought of as 'source/origin locations') or the 'distribution' of illicit activity (alternatively, 'destination markets'), or both. Hotspots should be understood as hubs of concentrated illicit activity that feed into wider national or regional criminal dynamics.
- **Transit points** are certain locations – including seaports, airports, border crossings and road infrastructure – leveraged for the trafficking of illicit commodities.
- **Illicit ecosystems** – referred to as 'crime zones' in the 2022 mapping – are broader geographic areas that encompass more than one hotspot or transit point (for example, the Casamance region, but not the entire northern Benin). Ecosystems are areas that bind together several interlinked hotspots or transit points, with the illicit economies operating there being closely intertwined. To qualify as an ecosystem, the area must feature a number of illicit economies or organized criminal actors. In a methodological change from the 2022 mapping, illicit ecosystems cannot be standalone hubs; at least one additional hotspot or transit point falling within the geographic scope of the proposed ecosystem must also be identified.

Throughout this report, we use the term 'illicit hub' to refer to hotspots, transit points and illicit ecosystems, as defined here.

Identifying illicit hubs

Several factors influence where illicit hubs emerge,¹³⁴ including infrastructure, the nature of the economy, whether sovereignty is contested in the area, and the strength of the rule of law. The size and diversity of illicit economies in an area, the strength of the links to national, regional or continental criminal dynamics, and the degree of organization with which criminal actors operate also determine where hubs emerge.

Mapping illicit hubs across 18 countries is a daunting task, and the 2022 mapping was recognized as not being exhaustive. The current mapping built on the previous dataset to identify additional hubs,¹³⁵ but likely still misses some areas. Some previously identified hubs were also removed from the dataset, as illicit economies were assessed to have decreased in scale and impact.

Following extensive engagement with policymakers and practitioners across the region, it was decided that crime zones should be removed as standalone hubs and be replaced with illicit ecosystems that bind together multiple hotspots or transit points in order to map the extensive intersections between distinct hubs.¹³⁶

Illicit economies

As part of identifying illicit hubs, researchers considered which illicit economies were prevalent in each hub. For the purposes of this research, illicit economies include all markets in which there is illegality, whether in the sourcing or production, transport, sale or diversion of commodities from legal to illegal channels.

Based on past research conducted by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, a thorough review of literature and the institutional expertise of the GI-TOC more broadly, 20 illicit economies were identified as most relevant to the West Africa region. These include overtly criminal markets such as arms trafficking and kidnapping, and illicit economies that overlap with other economic activities, which local populations may consider merely 'informal'.¹³⁷ Three illicit economies were added to the mapping since 2022, terminological modifications were applied to five,¹³⁸ and one illicit market was removed.¹³⁹

The economies are presented below:

ILLCIT ECONOMY	DEFINITION
Cannabis trade	Refers to the illicit cultivation, distribution, sale and consumption of cannabis oil, resin, herb or leaves. Given the growing legalization of cannabis production, sale and consumption, the mapping focuses solely on areas where an activity is criminalized or where criminal groups are involved in the supply chain.
Cattle rustling	Refers to the theft of cattle, as well as all other stages in the supply chain such as the transportation, sale and purchase of cattle.
Cocaine trade	Refers to the production, distribution, sale and consumption of cocaine and its derivatives.
Counterfeit goods	Refers to the production, transport, storage, distribution and sale of counterfeit goods. Counterfeit goods are either deliberately and fraudulently mislabelled with respect to identity or source, or sold as fraudulent imitations of registered brands and involve the theft of a trademark. This excludes counterfeit medical products, which is captured as a standalone illicit economy.
Cyber-dependent crimes	Refers to organized crimes that are dependent solely on the use of a computer, computer network or other forms of information communications technology. These include: the spread of viruses or other malware; hacking; distributed denial-of-service attacks; ransomware attacks; and cryptocurrency fraud for the purpose of obtaining a monetary or material benefit (as opposed to a political or ideological objective).
Extortion and protection racketeering	Crimes of protection and extortion linked to organized crime groups that exert control over a given territory or market, whether legal or illegal, such as: ■ activities of organized extortion, where the extortioner asks for money or other utility/benefit in exchange for a purposefully fake, fabricated or real need for protection (with or without an extortion request) ■ cartel racketeering, where an organized crime group acts as intermediary or mediator by handling external competition and solving disputes as gatekeeper by controlling access and exit to and from key markets.
Fauna crimes (other)	Crimes involving fauna species entail the poaching and illicit trade in animals and animal products, as well as the possession of species or animal products covered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) or protected by national law.
Flora crimes	Crimes related to flora involve the illicit trade as well as possession of plant species covered by CITES, as well as other species protected under national law.
Heroin trade	Refers to the production, distribution, sale and consumption of heroin. Synthetic opioids are considered under the synthetic drugs category.
Human smuggling	Human smuggling is defined as the criminalization of the irregular entry, transit or residence of migrants (by land, sea or air) by an organized criminal group for the purposes of a financial or material benefit. Activity in this criminal economy reflects all stages of the illicit activity, including producing, procuring, providing or possessing fraudulent travel or identity documents when committed for the purpose of enabling the smuggling of migrants. Although they are distinct crimes that are defined in different ways, human smuggling may turn into trafficking when the element of exploitation is involved.
Human trafficking	Drawing from a range of sources, the definition of human trafficking comprises trafficking within a modern slavery context and includes the trafficking of human organs. In line with common interpretations of human trafficking, this criminal market does not require the movement of individuals, and includes men, women and children. When movement is involved, it may include both cross-border and internal flows (such as from rural to urban locations). For the purposes of this research, human trafficking includes activity, means and purpose, and reflects all stages of the illicit activity, from recruitment and transfer to harbouring and receipt of persons. To distinguish this market from that of human smuggling, trafficking in persons involves a form of coercion, deception, abduction or fraud, and is carried out for the purpose of exploitation, regardless of the victim's consent. In line with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

ILLCIT ECONOMY	DEFINITION
Illicit arms trade	The trafficking of arms involves the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of arms, their parts and components, and ammunition across national borders, as well as the intentional diversion of firearms from legal to illegal commerce, without involving the movement of items across physical borders. For the purposes of this research, the illicit arms trade also includes the illicit manufacturing of arms. 'Firearms' refers to any portable barrelled weapon that expels, is designed to expel or may be readily converted to expel a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive, excluding antique firearms or their replicas, as per the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the UNTOC. 'Small arms' and 'light weapons' refer to a range of specific weapons, as outlined by the Small Arms Survey. Often, the trafficking of arms facilitates the commission of other organized crime activities.
Illicit extractives trade (other)	This illicit economy captures the illicit mining, processing, transport/smuggling or sale of minerals, rocks and other extractives not already covered by a standalone illicit economy (i.e. the illicit gold trade, the illicit oil trade and the illicit gemstone trade). These can include lithium, bauxite and coltan.
Illicit gemstone trade	Refers to the illicit mining, smuggling or sale of gemstones (this includes diamonds and other precious stones). It also covers any illicit activities related to trade in such products, including price misinvoicing.
Illicit gold trade	Refers to the illicit mining, smuggling or sale of gold. It also covers any illicit activities related to trade in such products, including price misinvoicing. The illicit trade in mercury and cyanide, products intimately linked to artisanal and small-scale gold mining, should also be included under the illicit gold trade.
Illicit oil trade	Refers to the illicit extraction, smuggling, mingling, bunkering or sale of oil. It also covers any illicit activities related to trade in such products, including price misinvoicing.
Illicit trade in excisable goods	This market involves the illicit transport, distribution and sale of excise consumer goods. An illicit market exists where the product is either transported or sold illegally (i.e. despite prohibition) or where the product is distributed outside regulated processes, the regulated trade market or the legal regulatory framework (e.g. for the purposes of tax evasion). This market does not include trade in counterfeit versions of such products (which falls under trade in counterfeit goods).
Illicit trade in medical products	Refers to all trade in medicine that flows outside of the formal supply chain to some extent, i.e. trade that is not recognized or authorized by national authorities. This includes all categories of substandard, spurious, falsely labelled, falsified and counterfeit products as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO). In line with WHO and UN Office on Drugs and Crime definitions, the term 'medical products' is used to cover medicines, excipients and active substances, as well as medical devices and their parts.
Kidnapping	Refers to the taking and carrying away of a person by force or fraud, or the unlawful seizure and detention of a person against their will. Kidnapping for ransom is a subtype of the broader term 'kidnapping', and refers to incidents of kidnapping in which a sum of money or other financial or material benefit is demanded in exchange for the return of the hostage.
Synthetic drug trade	Refers to the production, distribution, sale and consumption of synthetic drugs. Notably, synthetic opioids, such as tramadol, and amphetamine-type stimulants, methamphetamines and fentanyl are included in this criminal market, as well as any other drug included in the 1972 Protocol Amending the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 and the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988.

In the 2022 mapping, up to three major markets were identified for each illicit hub (from the original list of 17 illicit economies). This focused on economies with the greatest impact, but introduced two key limitations. First, many major hubs are home to a wider range of illicit economies, which were not reflected in the dataset. Second, this disguised the prevalence of some illicit economies that did not fall in the top three but were nonetheless important in shaping dynamics, resulting in a significant undercount of the actual number of locations in which the illicit economy is present.

To address these limitations in the 2025 mapping, up to 10 economies could be recorded for each illicit hub, listed in order of prominence in order to gauge the relevance of each one and to enable a comparison with illicit economy prevalence in the 2022 iteration.

In addition to reporting on illicit economies, researchers identified the major criminal actor types in each hub.

CRIMINAL ACTOR TYPE	DEFINITION
Mafia-style group (criminal)	Refers to clearly defined, organized criminal groups. There are four defining features of a mafia-style group: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. A criminal mafia-style group is one whose objectives are purely financial.
Mafia-style group (insurgent)	Refers to clearly defined, organized criminal groups. There are four defining features of a mafia-style group: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. An insurgent mafia-style group is an armed non-state group with political objectives. The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area and their use of guerrilla warfare. ¹⁴⁰
Mafia-style group (violent extremist organization, VEO)	Refers to clearly defined, organized criminal groups. There are four defining features of a mafia-style group: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. A violent extremist mafia-style group is a group that primarily employs terrorist tactics, a feature of which is high levels of violence against civilians, to further an (ostensible) ideological objective. The line between insurgent groups and VEOs is increasingly blurred. Although not all VEOs are insurgent groups, almost all insurgencies use terror tactics. In West Africa, VEOs (such as JNIM and IS Sahel) often operate as insurgents, seeking to control territory and assume governance functions. For the purposes of this research, VEOs are classified as VEO mafia-style groups.
Criminal networks	Refers to a loose network of criminal associates engaging in criminal activities. This also includes relatively small groups that do not control territory and are not widely known by a name or with a known leader. Criminal networks are involved in illicit trafficking of commodities but do not have territorial control or any of the other defining features of mafia-style groups. In essence, criminal networks and entrepreneurs are defined by their failure to meet the defining characteristics of mafia-style groups.
State-embedded actors	Refers to criminal actors that are embedded in, and act from within, the state's apparatus (including but not limited to politicians, civil servants, law enforcement agents and members of the judiciary).
Private-sector actors	Refers to profit-seeking individuals or entities who own, manage or control a segment of the legal economy free from state ownership or control, that collaborate or cooperate with criminal actors wilfully, through coercion or neglect. Activities include, but are not limited to, the laundering of illicit proceeds, acting as informants and legal representation through unethical means.

Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor

The IEIM provides a quantitative (score) and qualitative (classification) assessment of the strength of the relationship between illicit economies and conflict and instability. The strength of this relationship in each of the 350 hubs is classified as 'low', 'medium', 'high' or 'very high' based on the underlying IEIM score. The higher the score, the greater the nexus between the illicit economies and instability.

Three components make up the IEIM: violence and instability; crime–conflict links; and accelerators (which, in turn, have two subcomponents, namely infrastructure and stress factors). The three main components encapsulate the key factors and characteristics of illicit hubs that feed into conflict dynamics. Drawing on extensive research since the 2022 iteration, one indicator – armed group legitimacy – was added under the crime–conflict links, bringing the total component score to 18, and the maximum IEIM score to 33 overall.

The first component of the IEIM, **violence and instability**, assesses the degree to which underlying conditions identified through literature and GI-TOC research as drivers of instability and factors enabling the emergence of illicit hubs are present. This includes assessments of governance capabilities and conflict and violence.

The monitor's second component, **crime-conflict links**, captures the relationship between illicit economies on the one hand and conflict and instability on the other. Assessed under this component are the levels of violence seen in illicit markets in the identified location,¹⁴¹ whether illicit markets are supplying conflict actors in the subregion,¹⁴² and the degree to which armed actors are earning revenue from the illicit economies.¹⁴³ The new indicator under this component captures the extent to which armed actors earn legitimacy in the eyes of local populations through their governance of illicit economies.¹⁴⁴ Other indicators pertain to weapons,¹⁴⁵ state-embedded actors and state responses. The crime–conflict links are at the centre of the characteristics the IEIM seeks to assess, and as such this component has the highest weighting of the three components.

The third component, **accelerators**, captures the structural factors and socio-economic dynamics that may serve to accelerate the degree to which illicit hubs drive instability. This component consists of two subcomponents:

- **Infrastructure** encapsulates a location's propensity to play a significant role in transnational flows – both licit and illicit – as a function of its geography and trade infrastructure. Proximity to transport infrastructure, major cities and national borders are examples of some of the indicators captured in this subcomponent.
- **Stress factors** are conditions that may exacerbate tension within communities, potentially driving instability in the context of illicit hubs. Demographic factors, such as levels of mobility (both forced and voluntary), are captured in this subcomponent, as are various measures of socio-economic vulnerability.

In total, 26 individual variables make up the overall IEIM score.¹⁴⁶ The majority of variables (15) included in the IEIM are based on expert assessment, with the remaining indicators scored based on existing quantitative data (5) or simple facts or calculations (6). To strengthen the accuracy and reliability of the IEIM, experts were required to, as part of the scoring process, provide a written justification for all scores given in the expert-assessed indicators. Scores were then assessed and calibrated by GI-TOC country experts at an online roundtable meeting to ensure accurate and comparable scores across the region (see Appendix 3 for the comprehensive indicator table).



APPENDIX 3: IEIM INDICATOR TABLE

Indicator	Variable	Measurement	Maximum score	Source
VIOLENCE AND INSTABILITY (6 points)				
Contested sovereignty	Is the sovereignty of the relevant area contested? (For example, do rebel secessionist groups operate in the area? Are there areas where law enforcement or other security forces cannot enter/govern?)	0 = no	1	Expert assessment
		1 = yes		
Threat of armed groups	To what degree do VEOs and/or armed groups pose a threat?	0 = no	2	Expert assessment
		0.5 = limited		
		1 = limited but growing		
		1.5 = moderate		
		2 = high		
Conflict fatalities	Conflict fatalities per 100 000 (between 2023 and 2024)*	0 = 0	2	ACLED
	*Includes any fatalities arising from battles, explosions/remote violence, protests, riots and violence against civilians	0.5 = <2		
		1 = 2-10		
		1.5 = 10-50		
		2 = >50		
Political instability	Has there been a recent (successful) coup?	0 = more than 5 years ago (pre-2020)	1	Powell & Thyne (2011)
		0.5 = between 2-5 years (i.e. 2020-2023)		
		1 = within last 12 months (i.e. 2024)		
CRIME-CONFLICT LINKS (18 points)				
Weapons	Does gun manufacturing take place?	0 = no	1	Expert assessment
		1 = yes		
	Does gun smuggling take place?	0 = no	2	Expert assessment
		1 = limited		
Flows to conflict actors	Are commodities, other than guns, moving through the area known to be trafficked or smuggled to conflict actors in the subregion, or to illicit markets that finance conflict actors?	2 = significant	3	Expert assessment
		0 = no		
		1 = limited		
		2 = moderate		
		3 = significant		

Indicator	Variable	Measurement	Maximum score	Source
Armed group financing	Are armed groups earning revenue from illicit activities present, or flowing through the area?	0 = no 1 = limited 2 = moderate 3 = significant	3	Expert assessment
Armed group legitimacy	Does engagement in illicit economies in this hub give legitimacy to the armed group?	0 = no 1 = limited 2 = moderate 3 = significant	3	Expert assessment
Criminal market violence	Is violence associated with the illicit economies present?	0 = no 1 = limited 2 = significant	2	Expert assessment
State-embedded actors	Are state-embedded actors involved in the illicit economy?	0 = no 1 = limited 2 = significant	2	Expert assessment
Intercommunal tensions	Do illicit markets operate across ethnic lines, and do they feed into inter-community tensions?	0 = no 0.5 = somewhat 1 = yes	1	Expert assessment
Illicit economy suppression effects	Are illicit economy suppression measures in place that have precipitated a displacement effect, or a surge in violence?	0 = no 0.5 = somewhat 1 = yes	1	Expert assessment
ACCELERATORS (9 points)				
INFRASTRUCTURE (6 points)				
Port infrastructure	Is the location in close proximity to an international airport or seaport, either in the country or in neighbouring countries?	0 = >200 km	1	Expert input
		0.25 = 100–199 km		
		0.5 = 50–99 km		
		0.75 = 0–49 km		
		1 = 0 km		
	a) Magnitude of container port traffic (nearest seaport)?	0 = <0.25 million twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU)	1	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development / open source (expert input)
		0.25 = 0.25–0.5 million TEU		
		0.5 = 0.5–1 million TEU		
		0.75 = >1 million TEU		
		1 = >1 million TEU and plays a role in transshipment overland to neighbouring states		
	<u>OR</u>	<u>OR</u>		
	b) Total number of passengers per year (nearest international airport)	0 = <1 million		
		0.5 = 1–5 million		
		1 = >5 million		
Road infrastructure	Is the location situated on/near an operational major road?	0 = no 0.5 = secondary roads 1 = primary roads	1	Expert assessment
Proximity to major cities	Is the location in close proximity to a large city*? <i>*Defined as a city with a population greater than 500 000</i>	0 = >200km	1	Expert calculation based on World Population Review data
		0.5 = 50–199 km		
		1 = 0–49 km		

Indicator	Variable	Measurement	Maximum score	Source
Proximity to national borders	Is the location in close proximity to a national land border?	0 = >200km	1	Expert input
		0.25 = 150–199 km		
		0.5 = 100–149 km		
		0.75 = 50–99 km		
		1 = 0–49 km		
Illicit financial flows	Are there formal financial institutions used to launder illicit proceeds?*	0 = no	0.5	Expert assessment
	<i>*We have considered that where financial institutions or illicit markets are used to launder terrorist funds, this means the area plays a significant role in terrorist financing. But, given difficulties in tracking terrorist financial flows, particularly at a subregional level, this has not been included as a metric.</i>	0.5 = somewhat		
		1 = yes		
	Is the location (situated in) a free trade zone?	0 = no	0.5	Expert input
		1 = yes		
STRESS FACTORS (3 points)				
Population mobility	Have local populations been forcibly displaced in the last 12 months?	0 = no	0.5	Expert assessment
		0.5 = minor		
		1 = yes		
	Are there high levels of mobility into, through or out of the location?	0 = no	0.5	Expert assessment
		0.5 = minor		
		1 = yes		
Socio-economic vulnerability	Is the location characterized by low levels of development?	Normalized (and inverted) on a scale of 0–1	0.33	Human Development Index
	Is the location characterized by high levels of poverty?	Normalized on a scale of 0–1	0.33	Multidimensional Poverty Index
	Is the location characterized by high levels of gender inequality?	0 = <2.5%	0.33	Gender Development Index
		0.25 = 2.5–5%		
		0.5 = 5–7.5%		
		0.75 = 7.5–10%		
1 = >10%				
Law enforcement presence	Is the location considered to be one with limited law enforcement reach?	0 = no	1	Expert assessment
		0.5 = somewhat		
		1 = yes		



APPENDIX 4: FINANCE-GENERATING, RESOURCING AND LEGITIMACY-BUILDING HUBS

HUB NAME	IEIM CLASSIFICATION
Anka (NGA)	High
Bagasola (TCD)	Very high
Burkina Faso–Ghana–Côte d’Ivoire triborder area (BFA–GHA–CIV)	High
Dida Forest (BFA)	Very high
Foïta (MLI)	High
Gao–Niamey road (MLI–NER)	Very high
In-Afarak (MLI)	High
In-Khalil (MLI)	High
Kainji National Park (NGA)	Medium
Kantchari (BFA)	Very high
Karimama (BEN)	Medium
Kaya–Tougouri–Dori road (BFA)	Very high
Kidal Region (MLI)	Very high
Kongassambougou reserve (MLI)	Medium
Lake Chad area (TCD–CMR–NER–NGA)	Very high
Lerneb (MLI)	High
Liptako–Gourma (MLI–BFA–NER)	Very high
Miski goldfield (TCD)	Very high
N’Tahaka (MLI)	Very high
Nadiagou (BFA)	High
North-western Kaduna (NGA)	High
Séna Oura National Park (TCD)	High
Thiou (BFA)	High
Tibesti goldfields (TCD)	Very high
Tinaykaren (MLI)	High
Tinzaouaten (MLI)	High
Tissi–Am Dafok–Birao triangle (CAF)	Very high
W-Arly-Pendjari Complex (BEN–BFA–NER)	Very high



NOTES

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- 5 Author analysis of figures from ACLED.
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- 7 West Africa has the second highest level of organized criminality in Africa, after East Africa, according to the latest Global Organized Crime Index, <https://ocindex.net/>.
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- 10 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africa-illicit-hub-mapping/>.
- 11 For the purposes of this report, given the complex and unique criminal dynamics in the country, Nigeria is not included in the set of countries referred to as 'coastal states' and is instead analyzed separately.
- 12 In 2022 only 11% of illicit hubs featured the synthetic drug trade. Part of the increase is due to methodological changes in 2024, where up to 10 illicit economies could be identified for each illicit hub, compared to a maximum of three in 2022. However, illicit economies identified in each hub were ranked according to their reach, enabling a like-for-like comparison between 'major markets' (namely, the top three illicit economies) in 2022 and in 2024. When assessing 'major markets' only, the percentage of illicit hubs featuring the synthetic drug trade in 2024, 24%, is still notably higher than the 11% in 2022.
- 13 As in 2022, 18 countries fall within the geographic scope of the updated mapping: the West African states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, together with the Central African states of Cameroon, Central African Republic and Chad.
- 14 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africa-illicit-hub-mapping/>.
- 15 This finding held when removing the weapons indicator from the subset of 'causal' indicators.
- 16 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, forthcoming.
- 17 Although there are several countries with a particularly high number of illicit hubs, not least Nigeria (75), 16 of the 18 countries mapped have 10 or more illicit hubs. None of the focus countries feature fewer than six illicit hubs. The median average is used to account for the outlier that is Nigeria.
- 18 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africa-illicit-hub-mapping/>.
- 19 For the purposes of this report, given the complex and unique criminal dynamics in the country, Nigeria is not included in the set of countries referred to as 'coastal states' and is instead analyzed separately.
- 20 This is a significant increase from 2022, when only 47% of hubs identified in Nigeria fell into the 'low' IEIM classification, and is driven predominantly by the number of new hubs identified in southern Nigeria.
- 21 Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones, based primarily on geographic distribution but also on the basis of ethnolinguistic

- similarities: North West, North East, North Central, South West, South South and South East.
- 22 In the 2022 mapping, north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and south-western Burkina Faso were identified as separate crime zones. The analysis of 2024 data emphasized the interconnected nature of the criminal dynamics at play in the triborder area between Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. However, a comparison can still be made between these regions.
 - 23 IEIM scores for political instability, as a result of the September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, and conflict fatalities have also increased since the first version of the mapping. However, this triborder area is not a major conflict hotspot like northern or eastern Burkina Faso, with levels of violence remaining relatively low. Moreover, in March 2024 JNIM lost some of its strongholds in Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest region (such as Helintira and Djigaoué) under pressure from Burkinabé forces and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) militias. On the Ivorian and Ghanaian side, JNIM's presence is largely passive (violence associated with JNIM has decreased in Côte d'Ivoire during the 2022–2024 period, with no attacks recorded since mid-2022).
 - 24 Suspected JNIM militants killed 14 soldiers in Kafolo, a town in northern Côte d'Ivoire on the border with Burkina Faso. See: Crisis Group, Keeping jihadists out of northern Côte d'Ivoire, Africa Briefing No. 192, 11 August 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>.
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 - 27 Marcena Hunter and Gideon Ofosu-Peasah, JNIM and Northern Ghana's gold sector, GI-TOC, forthcoming.
 - 28 Written correspondence from an expert on VEOs in Benin.
 - 29 Author analysis of figures from ACLED.
 - 30 Feyi Ogunade, Arms trafficking threatens West African wildlife sanctuary, ENACT Observer, 14 February 2025, <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/arms-trafficking-threatens-west-african-wildlife-sanctuary>; Parks complex becoming a hive of insecurity, ADF, 1 April 2025, <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/04/parks-complex-becoming-a-hive-of-insecurity/>.
 - 31 For example, in December 2023, suspected JNIM militants abducted three poachers in the Pendjari National Park, as reported by ACLED.
 - 32 Using conflict fatalities in Burkina Faso's Sahel and Est regions from ACLED.
 - 33 Although Kantchari was not identified as a standalone illicit hub in 2022, the crime zone under which it falls – denoted 'South-East borderlands' – fell into the 'high' band, underscoring the strengthening of the crime–conflict links in the area more broadly.
 - 34 *Fada N'Gourma: des réseaux de contrebande de carburant dans la région de l'Est démantelés*, Wakat Séra, 26 February 2024, <https://www.wakatsera.com/fada-ngourma-des-reseaux-de-contrebande-de-carburant-dans-la-region-de-lest-demanteles/>.
 - 35 A separatist organization, the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), was formed in response to the grievances of the Jola people in the 1980s and has been in conflict with the state since.
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 - 37 Interview with an academic at the University Assane Seck, Ziguinchor, July 2024.
 - 38 In 2022, the synthetic drug trade featured in only 11% of illicit hubs. The increase is partly due to methodological changes in the 2024 analysis, when up to 10 illicit economies could be identified for each illicit hub, compared with at most three in 2022. However, illicit economies identified in each hub were ranked according to their reach, enabling a like-for-like comparison between 'major markets' (namely, the top three illicit economies) in 2022 and in 2024. When assessing 'major markets' only, the percentage of illicit hubs where the synthetic drug trade featured in 2024, 24%, is still notably higher than the 11% in 2022.
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 - 60 Flore Berger, Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, GI-TOC, July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-and-insecurity-in-the-triborder-area-between-burkina-faso-cte-divoire-and-ghana/>.
 - 61 The synthetic drug trade was identified in 51% of cattle rustling hubs, the illicit trade in excisable goods in 48%, the illicit gold trade and illicit trade in medical products in 43% each, and the illicit oil trade in 41%.
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- 68 The prevalence of kidnapping hubs in West Africa has remained fairly stable over the two mapping periods. In the 2025 version of the map, kidnapping features in 23% of illicit hubs compared with 17% in the 2022 version. However, if only those hubs where kidnapping is in the top three major markets are included (to enable a direct comparison with 2022), the result sits at 13%, four percentage points lower.
- 69 As per ACLED's hierarchy of event and sub-event types, incidents that begin as an abduction but result in the death of the victims are coded not as abduction/forced disappearance, but as an attack. As such, ACLED data significantly undercounts the true number of kidnapping incidents. Between 2021 and 2022, ACLED shows almost 2 700 separate incidents of kidnapping across the 18 focus countries, and 3 363 incidents between 2023 and 2024.
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- 72 While in 2022 only the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex featured kidnapping, a further four illicit hubs (in addition to the parks complex) were found where kidnapping is identified as a prominent illicit economy in the 2025 version. These are Tanguéta in Benin's Atacora department, as well as Malanville, Karimama and Ségbana in the Alibori department.
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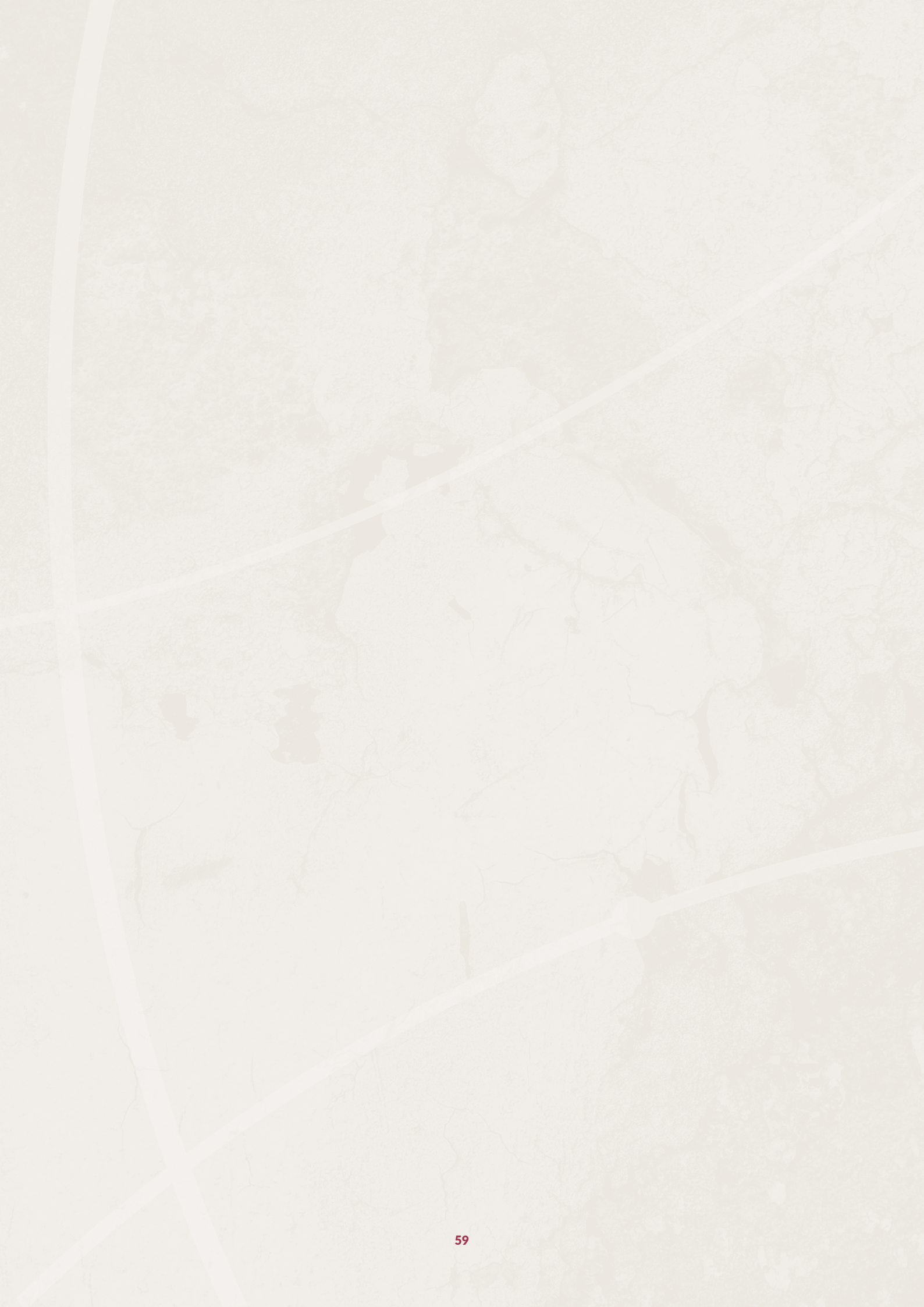
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- 'high'/'very high'. There are many low-IEIM hubs that also feature the illicit gold trade (70 in total), mostly concentrated in the coastal states (71%).
- 99 The illicit trade in excisable goods is equally prominent.
 - 100 Of the hubs where illicit economies play any role, even minor, in generating revenue for armed groups (i.e. where the illicit hub scores above 0 in the armed group financing category on the IEIM indicator), 42% are classified as 'high' or 'very high'. For armed group resourcing hubs, the proportion of hubs that score 'high' or 'very high' is 40%; and for legitimacy it is 88%.
 - 101 For example, see: Flore Berger, Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, GI-TOC, July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-and-insecurity-in-the-triborder-area-between-burkina-faso-cte-divoire-and-ghana/>; Flore Berger, The silent threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso, GI-TOC, March 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kidnappings-burkina-faso/>; Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa – Report series, ACLED and GI-TOC, October 2023 to December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
 - 102 Kingsley L Madueke, Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu and Lucia Bird, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illiciteconomies-west-africa/>.
 - 103 Interview with a journalist based in north-western Nigeria, July 2024.
 - 104 Flore Berger, Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, GI-TOC, July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-and-insecurity-in-the-triborder-area-between-burkina-faso-cte-divoire-and-ghana/>.
 - 105 For example, on the Nigerien side of Lake Chad, as illustrated by an operation near Komadougou in late 2023 in which the Nigerien army recovered some 200 cattle stolen by JAS. *Sécurité: Trois (3) bandits neutralisés, six capturés et un important lot de matériels saisi par l'Armée nigérienne*, FAAPA, 3 August 2024, <https://www.faapa.info/blog/securite-trois-3-bandits-neutralises-six-captures-et-un-important-lot-de-materiels-saisi-par-larmee-nigerienne>.
 - 106 Interview with a military commander, 23 July 2024, remote.
 - 107 The subset of hubs analyzed here are illicit hubs scoring 2 or higher for the 'flows to conflict actors' indicator in the IEIM, namely where there are 'moderate' or 'significant' flows of commodities, other than guns, moving through the area and which are known to be trafficked or smuggled to conflict actors in the subregion, or to illicit markets that finance conflict actors.
 - 108 Although weapons flows are explicitly excluded from the 'flows to conflict actors' indicator, the illicit arms trade is the illicit economy most commonly seen in hubs scoring 2 or higher, highlighting the correlation between arms flows and other goods to armed actors. Furthermore, the illicit gold trade – present in half of these hubs – is more relevant from the perspective of financing, as armed groups draw financing indirectly through taxation or use gold as currency, as is common practice across the region.
 - 109 Interview with Youth Awake, October 2024, telephonic.
 - 110 Eleanor Beevor, Motorbikes and armed groups in the Sahel: Anatomy of a regional market, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/motorbikes-trade-armedgroups-sahel/>.
 - 111 Interviews with a commercial bus driver and a military commander, 11 August 2024 and 23 July 2024, remote.
 - 112 Lucia Bird, Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, How do illicit economies build and degrade armed group legitimacy?, ACLED and GI-TOC, December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
 - 113 Kingsley L Madueke, Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu and Lucia Bird, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illiciteconomies-west-africa/>.
 - 114 Both extortion and the illicit gold trade were identified in two-thirds of hubs (65.6%, 21 out of 32).
 - 115 Lucia Bird, Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, How do illicit economies build and degrade armed group legitimacy?, ACLED and GI-TOC, December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
 - 116 Jalale Getachew Birru, Q&A | Is the Islamic State Sahel Province kidnapping more foreigners?, 11 February 2025, ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/qa/qa-islamic-state-sahel-province-kidnapping-more-foreigners>.
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 - 118 Ladd Serwat et al, Africa overview: August 2025, ACLED, 8 August 2025, <https://acleddata.com/update/africa-overview-august-2025>.
 - 119 Author analysis of figures from ACLED.
 - 120 Flore Berger, Lucia Bird and Mouhamadou Kane, Why the deadliest migration route in the world is becoming more popular, GI-TOC, 23 July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/why-the-deadliest-migration-route-in-the-world-is-becoming-more-popular/>.
 - 121 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Canary Islands migrant smugglers ramp up to meet surging demand, Risk Bulletin – Issue 12, GI-TOC, May 2025, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-012/03-canary-islands-migrant-smugglers-ramp-up-to-meet-demand.html>; Flore Berger, Lucia Bird and Mouhamadou Kane, Why the deadliest migration route in the world is becoming more popular, GI-TOC, 23 July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/why-the-deadliest-migration-route-in-the-world-is-becoming-more-popular/>.

- 122 From criminality to insurgency: The convergence of bandits and jihadists in Nigeria's northwest, Soufan Centre, 22 August 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-august-22/>.
- 123 Kingsley L Madueke, Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele, Lawan Danjuma Adamu and Lucia Bird, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illiciteconomies-west-africa/>.
- 124 The Islamic State West Africa Province's tactical evolution fuels worsening conflict in Nigeria's northeast, The Soufan Center, 21 May 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-may-21/>.
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- 129 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Gold at the crossroads: Assessment of the supply chains of gold produced in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2018, pp 12 and 44, <https://mneguidelines.oecd.org/Assessment-of-the-supply-chains-of-gold-produced-in-Burkina-Faso-MaliNiger.pdf>. The UN Panel of Experts on Mali has reported on the gold rush 'draining essential human resources, vehicles and potential recruits' from armed groups and noted the role of artisanal gold mining in 'absorb[ing] ex-combatants and draw[ing] youth away from joining armed groups'. See United Nations Security Council, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785, 7 August 2020, pp 3 & 104, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3876820?ln=en&v=pdf>.
- 130 For more granular recommendations on how to enhance oversight of cattle markets, see: Flore Berger, Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, GI-TOC, July 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-and-insecurity-in-the-triborder-area-between-burkina-faso-cte-divoire-and-ghana/>.
- 131 Antônio Sampaio et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/>.
- 132 This included institutional expertise-sharing in particular with the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index team.
- 133 Requests for information consist of a short set of questions – typically up to 15 – which are circulated to the network of the researcher (could be academics/civil society/other) to respond to in writing, using their own knowledge, together with an agreed set of additional engagements with the monitor's network (typically 5–10).
- 134 These categories draw on the literature of illicit geography, including: Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (eds), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*, National Defense University Press, 2013; Stuart Brown and Margaret Hermann, *Transnational Crime and Black Spots: Rethinking Sovereignty and the Global Economy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- 135 Overall, 70 more illicit hubs were identified in 2025 than in the first West Africa mapping in 2022 (280 illicit hubs identified).
- 136 This also resulted in the disaggregation of some larger areas, and in more overall hubs being identified.
- 137 Widespread informality across the West Africa region blurs perceived distinctions between 'illegal' and 'legal', and in some cases there is a disjunct between what the state considers to be legitimate ('legal') and what communities and actors in transnational networks consider to be legitimate ('licit'), with cannabis use, artisanal gold mining and irregular cross-border trade in foodstuffs being three common examples. Involvement in many illegal trades may often not be deemed inappropriate by society in the region, although the degree of sanction (or proscription) varies from market to market, evolves over time and exists across a spectrum of risk. Involvement in some illegal economies may enjoy a high degree of social legitimacy.
- 138 'Kidnapping for ransom' has been changed to 'kidnapping' to reflect the diverse set of motivations behind kidnappings conducted by criminal actors in many countries, which are not always tied to ransom. 'Counterfeit medicine' has been changed to 'illicit trade in medical products' to reflect the presence of substandard products and the complexity involved in accurately describing such a multifaceted illicit economy involving many illicit dimensions, including the products involved (ensuring that not just medicine but also active substances, medical devices and other equipment are captured) and sources of illegality (including the counterfeit nature of certain goods but also substandard or falsely labelled medical goods).
- 139 Money laundering was removed from the mapping. Data was originally collected on both money laundering and financial crimes. However, digging into the data demonstrated the challenges in reaching the required burden of proof, so a decision

was taken to remove them to avoid misleading findings and undercounts.

- 140 This definition builds on existing literature on the definitional debates surrounding the concepts of insurgency, rebellion and terrorism. See for example Daniel Byman, *Terrorism, Insurgency, and Proto-Insurgency*, Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: RAND Counterinsurgency Study Paper 3, 1st ed., RAND Corporation, 2007, pp. 3–6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/op178osd.8>; James D Fearon and David D Laitin, Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war, *The American Political Science Review*, 97, 1 (2003), pp. 75–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118222>.
- 141 Where violence is a regular feature of an illicit market, it can often act as a catalyst in the establishment of militias and other types of (often) armed self-protection groups. See William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga, Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, Institute for Security Studies, 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.
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- 143 Crisis Group, Getting a grip on central Sahel's gold rush, Africa Report No. 282, 13 November 2019, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/282%20Getting%20a%20Grip%20.pdf>.
- 144 Lucia Bird, Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, How do illicit economies build and degrade armed group legitimacy?, ACLED and GI-TOC, December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
- 145 The measure of civilian firearms in circulation has been removed under the weapons indicator in the crime–conflicts component.
- 146 Five of the indicators are 'clustered indicators', in that there is more than one variable contributing to the overall score. These are 'weapons', 'port infrastructure', 'illicit financial flows', 'population mobility' and 'socio-economic vulnerability'. See Appendix 3 for further details on the IEIM composition.





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