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COCAINE AND CONFLICT IN MALI, NIGER AND LIBYA

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANSE	Agence Nationale de la Sécurité de l'Etat (National Agency for State Security)
CNSP	Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland)
FACT	Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad)
FAMa	Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian armed forces)
FLA	Front de Libération de l'Azawad (Azawad Liberation Front)
GATIA	Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies)
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GNS	Government of National Stability, Libya
GNU	Government of National Unity, Libya
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims)
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
UNVP	Union des Nigériens pour la Vigilance et le Patriotisme (Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism)
VEO	Violent extremist organization



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the early 2000s, the central Sahel–Libya corridor has been an important cocaine trafficking route linking West Africa and North Africa with European consumption markets. Although most cocaine shipped from Latin America to West Africa and on to Europe is transported by sea, overland corridors across the Sahel and through Libya account for a notable minority of the trade. These routes are linked to long-standing trading networks, conflict economies and protection systems, which make them resilient to enforcement pressure, shifts in the conflict landscape and political disruption.

Since 2019, cocaine trafficking across West Africa has increased substantially, driven by myriad factors including surging production in Latin America, growing demand in Europe, heightened law enforcement pressure on direct routes from Latin America to Europe, and West Africa's improved transport connectivity.¹ This super-charging of cocaine trafficking routes – particularly into Europe – has led traffickers to explore every possible method of transporting large quantities of the drug, including navigating complex conflict landscapes of the Sahel and Libya.

Cocaine trafficking along these corridors is affected by political authority, armed control and patterns of insecurity. Historically, periods of relative stability, predictable territorial control and consolidated protection arrangements have historically enabled high-volume trafficking. Conversely, moments of acute violence, political ruptures or shifts in military alliances have disrupted established routes, forcing traffickers to renegotiate protection, extend corridors and adopt new operational methods. However, the trade is never abandoned altogether.

This report examines the development of the cocaine trade across the central Sahel–Libya corridor, mapping current dynamics, including pivotal trends and key actors. The focus is on Mali, Niger and Libya, analyzing how shifting conflict dynamics and political change have reshaped trafficking patterns and the implications for governance, security and regional stability across the Sahel and North Africa. By situating cocaine trafficking within the region's conflict economies and protection systems, the report highlights how overland routes are pivotal to the region's conflict landscape, despite carrying smaller volumes than maritime flows. Overland cocaine trafficking provides an enduring source of financing for a wide range of armed groups, state-embedded actors and resilient criminal entrepreneurs.

Methodology

This report is based on an extensive review of primary data and secondary sources. The preliminary analysis included a review of external reports and open source data tools, such as seizure databases, media monitoring and conflict-tracking platforms. It also incorporated the internal archives of field data collected by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) over several years, focusing particularly on the period from 2019 to 2025. The GI-TOC's illicit hub mapping initiative, which draws on field data and open source intelligence (OSINT) to map key hubs of illicit economies and examine their intersections with conflict, was also used to analyze conflict and crime trends in Niger and Mali.² This enabled the identification of critical information gaps and priorities for updating data collection on trafficking dynamics in early 2026.

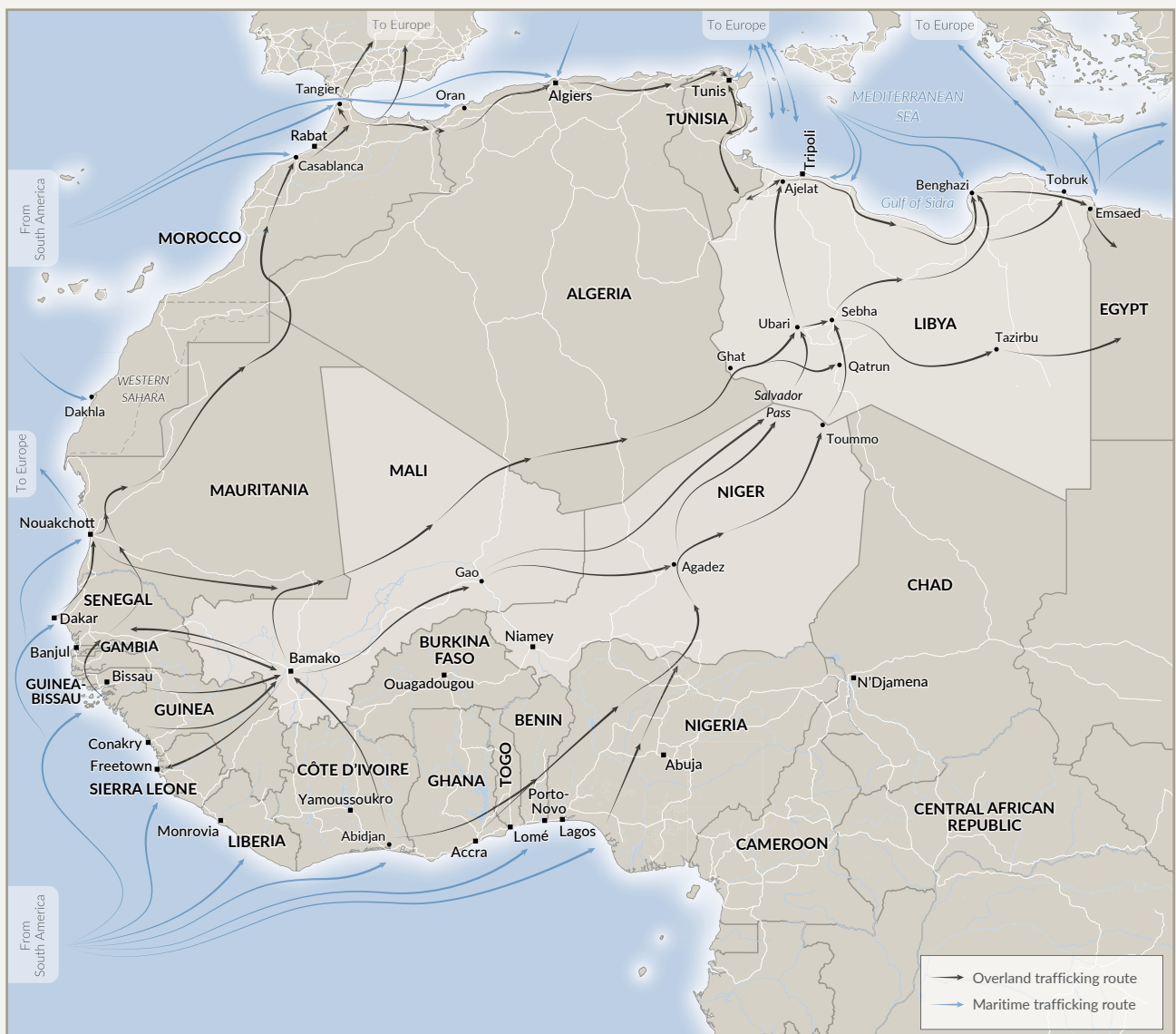


FIGURE 1 Cocaine trafficking routes, North and West Africa.

Targeted field data collection took place from September 2025 to January 2026, and the resulting analysis reflects the situation as of January 2026. Developments in Mali, Libya and Niger after January 2026, including key shifts in conflict dynamics that occurred after that point (such as the April attacks in Mali), are not captured in this report. More than 150 interviews were conducted with key informants, including local traders, transporters, security officials, community leaders, intermediaries, members of armed groups and individuals affiliated with them, cocaine traffickers, diplomatic personnel and regional experts. Interviews are coded in the endnotes using a unique interview identification code that preserves the anonymity of the interviewees and is necessary for security reasons. The fieldwork took place in Mali (including in the Kayes, Gao and Bamako regions), Niger (Agadez, Zinder and Tahoua regions) and several regions of Libya, with additional information gathered in the capital cities.

All information was systematically triangulated across multiple independent sources to ensure reliability and accuracy. The findings were then synthesized to identify the most notable developments and structural shifts in the cocaine trade. The brief underwent an internal review and validation process before finalization.

Key findings

- While overland trans-Saharan routes carry smaller volumes of cocaine than maritime trafficking, they play a critical role in the region's conflict and political economy.
- Cocaine trafficking in the central Sahel and Libya is deeply entangled with conflict dynamics. Trafficking revenues reinforce protection economies, distort security institutions and create incentives for armed and political actors to maintain the status quo.
- State-linked actors continue to dominate the most lucrative segments of the cocaine trade. Across Mali, Niger and Libya, the ability to move large consignments remains dependent on access to political protection.
- Armed groups, whether state-aligned or not, are key actors in the trade. They play an operational role in cocaine trafficking by providing armed escorts, route security and access to territory. Their involvement is primarily transactional, as they extract revenues from high-value convoys rather than managing the trade directly.
- Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are not primary organizers of cocaine trafficking, but they benefit indirectly from it. The Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) in particular has increased its access to resources linked to cocaine trafficking since late 2023.
- Many high-level traffickers operate across multiple licit and illicit markets, including cocaine, cannabis resin, gold, cigarettes and fuel. This polycriminal profile allows them to shift activities during periods of disruption while retaining networks that facilitate re-entry into the cocaine trade.
- Some large-scale, high-level traffickers have stayed resilient over long periods of time, operating in bulk since the cocaine trade first expanded in the early 2000s, and remaining consistent, and extremely well-connected, nodes in the system.
- Trafficking ecosystems linking the Sahel and coastal West Africa are interconnected and multidirectional. Overland routes connect maritime entry points, including by linking non-containerized imports through porous coastal areas to larger ports for export to Europe.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRANS-SAHELIAN COCAINE TRAFFICKING CORRIDOR

Four main overland corridors begin at arrival ports in West Africa, bisect the Sahel, and exit through Libya, Morocco or Mauritania towards Europe (as shown in Figure 1 above). Two of these routes run northwards: one from coastal entry points in the western hub (Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone) through Mali and Niger into Libya, and the other from Togo, Benin, Ghana or Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Burkina Faso, through Niger into Libya. A third route also runs northwards, but further west along the Atlantic coast, linking coastal ports in Senegal and Gambia with Mauritania and combining with inbound maritime flows in that country before moving overland towards Morocco and on to Spain. A fourth route runs through Nigeria, making use of the country's major maritime ports (Lagos and Port Harcourt) as well as neighbouring coastal states, and using Nigeria's extensive road network to reach Niger. However, a far more complex and diverse web of routes is also used to link points of entry with more logistically advantageous points of exit – for example, connecting non-containerized imports through porous coastal areas with larger maritime ports in the region for export to Europe. The result is a network of often bidirectional overland trafficking routes, along which cocaine is concealed among other commodities, with small amounts feeding consumption markets across the region.³

Period 1: 2000–2019

Since the early 2000s, North and West Africa have been important nodes for transshipment and logistics in the global cocaine trade, connecting producers in Latin America with consumers in Europe and beyond.⁴ During the first two decades of the 21st century, cocaine trafficking became progressively embedded in the political economy of the central Sahel, building on earlier trading and smuggling systems that had linked northern Mali and Niger to regional hashish routes since the 1990s. In northern Mali, cocaine flows were initially dominated by Arab trafficking networks, but the growing profitability of the trade from about 2005 attracted wider participation, intensifying competition and reshaping local power relations.⁵ Across the Sahel, the combination of expanding drug revenues and the circulation of weapons contributed to the militarization of smuggling, with traffickers relying on

militias and armed escorts to secure or intercept convoys.⁶ Although seizures in the Sahel were rare, the 2009 'Air Cocaine' incident – in which a plane allegedly carrying several tonnes of cocaine landed on a makeshift airstrip in the desert in northern Mali – revealed the scale and organization of these networks, as well as state complicity.⁷

When conflict erupted in northern Mali in 2012, it disrupted established cocaine trafficking patterns across the Sahel, displacing routes (including those through Mauritania), and altering relations between traffickers, armed groups and state actors. The conflict did not, however, halt flows.⁸ In Mali, trafficking networks adapted by forging more transactional ties with armed groups controlling territory, while competition over routes and revenues became increasingly entangled with conflict dynamics.⁹ Throughout this period, trafficking networks demonstrated a high degree of resilience. Some large-scale, high-level traffickers have remained consistent nodes in the system since the start of the cocaine trade in the early 2000s, proving adept at shifting alliances to ensure protection.

To the north, the 2011 Libyan revolution led to an increase in drug trafficking, including cocaine. As in Mali, however, the ensuing conflict disrupted the political economy of cocaine trafficking, creating opportunities for new players to become involved. In Libya's south-western Fezzan region, for example, traffickers from the Magarha and Qaddadfa tribes, both of which had supported the previous regime, were sidelined by traffickers from the competing Awlad Suleiman and Tebu tribes in the wake of the revolution.¹⁰

From 2016 onwards, the security situation in the Fezzan and northern Niger worsened, affecting cocaine trafficking through the region. Notably, the Nigerien government's crackdown on human smuggling in 2015/16 led a number of former human smugglers to turn to banditry, often targeting lucrative drug trafficking convoys. The Salvador Pass, a key route used by cocaine traffickers to travel from the Sahel to Libya, was particularly affected. Although cocaine trafficking did not halt, volumes diminished in comparison to those trafficked in the early 2010s.¹¹



The Salvador Pass, a key route for cocaine traffickers moving from the Sahel to Libya, was hit hard by the deteriorating security situation in the Fezzan and northern Niger after 2016. *Photo: GI-TOC*

Rising challenges in the Sahel led Latin American trafficking groups to experiment with alternative routings, including the maritime shipment of cocaine to Libya.¹² In part, this involved sending consignments to major cities in western Libya, such as Misrata, al-Khoms and Tripoli, either directly from Latin American ports or transshipped from ports on the north-western African coast. These routes fed into an existing cocaine trafficking ecosystem that had previously benefited from shipments through Tripoli International Airport, before its destruction in 2014.¹³ During this period, security forces in Colombia and Italy regularly seized cocaine destined for the port of Benghazi, underlining the development of a cocaine trafficking hub on Libya's north-eastern coast.¹⁴

Two developments in 2019 proved critical to shaping the cocaine trade in Libya. The first was when the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) took control of the Fezzan. Beginning in January, the LAAF deployed a number of key units – such as the Tariq Bin Ziyad, the 166th and the 128th brigades – to the south, while simultaneously negotiating with tribal armed actors, particularly those from the Awlad Suleiman, Tebu and Tuareg tribes. By March, the LAAF had effectively gained control of the region and its associates had taken over key cocaine routes, though local armed groups continued to operate in most areas.

The second major development was the LAAF's war to take control of Tripoli, which erupted in April 2019. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the conflict upended cocaine trafficking ecosystems, protection networks and law enforcement operations, particularly in western Libya. It also allegedly resulted in cocaine trafficking becoming concentrated within a smaller number of networks. Despite the fighting, illicit connections were forged between fighters and traffickers in the west and east, which endured after the war ended in 2020 and laid the foundation for the current cocaine trafficking landscape.

Period 2: 2019–2023

Between 2019 and 2023, several indicators pointed to an increase in northbound trans-Saharan cocaine trafficking. Higher production in Latin America, growing European demand and tighter enforcement on direct maritime routes from Latin America to Europe drove more cocaine through West and North Africa. Increased flows of cocaine on trans-Saharan corridors therefore mirrored a broader increase in the overall volume of cocaine transiting the two regions.¹⁵ According to the Global Organized Crime Index, which provides an expert-led assessment of the scope and scale of criminality and state resilience to it, cocaine trafficking was the fastest-growing criminal market in West Africa from 2019 to 2023.¹⁶ Many actors close to the trade reported elevated cocaine flows during this period.¹⁷ Seizures, which are stronger indicators of disruption than underlying volumes, also surged during this period. This reported increase was enabled by a degree of stability in the territories bisected by key corridors, agreements between major market players and the relatively consistent ability of these actors to provide a degree of protection. The enabling factors included:

- the low level of violence in the Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu regions in northern Mali and the respect for existing agreements (for example, the Anéfis accords) between the main armed actors (Tuareg rebels and pro-government groups), which allowed these groups to divide the territory among themselves and control trafficking nodes and routes. This division, coordinated with their counterparts in neighbouring areas of Niger, enabled traffickers to operate with a degree of predictability;¹⁸
- the existence and maintenance of protection systems between traffickers and authorities in Mali and Niger;

- the consolidation of power in the hands of the LAAF across the Fezzan and the south of the Cyrenaica, which created a more stable environment for trafficking; and
- the alleged involvement of figures close to the LAAF in enabling and protecting the drug trade.¹⁹

Part of the reported increase in cocaine trafficking during this period occurred in southern Mali, particularly from late 2022 onwards. Some of these flows were likely linked to networks moving consignments between coastal entry points and more convenient exit points, rendered attractive either by a better-connected maritime port or other favourable logistics.²⁰ However, the growth could also have been linked to the broader expansion of northbound flows, in line with regional trends.

Period 3: 2023 to January 2026

While cocaine trafficking continued to increase across West Africa more broadly, 2023 marked a pivotal year for the disruption of cocaine trafficking in Mali, Niger and Libya. A series of security and political events in all three countries had a drastic impact on trafficking patterns. The following sections examine the situation in each country, tracking the relevant dynamics and mapping the current state of the cocaine market. As highlighted above, developments since January 2026 fall outside the scope of this report, and it is likely that the coordinated attacks by al-Qaeda affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) across Mali have restructured some of the dynamics outlined below.

Mali

In mid-2023, a major northward offensive led by the Malian armed forces (Forces Armées Maliennes – FAMA) supported by the Wagner Group – a Russian private military company deployed in Mali since late 2021 – led to escalating violence, which reached levels not seen in northern Mali since 2013.²¹ The offensive resulted in shifting territorial control and brought an end to the Algiers Peace Agreement, which had overseen relations between the government, its coalition of affiliated armed groups (known as the Plateforme, but referred to as 'pro-government groups' in this report) and Tuareg rebel groups, now under the banner of the Azawad Liberation Front (Front de Libération de l'Azawad – FLA).

In response to the significant changes in security and the political environment, cocaine trafficking networks adapted by finding safer, albeit longer, routes, which were still in place as of January 2026. Previously, convoys could be escorted by multiple competing armed groups. Since 2023, routes have reflected heightened hostilities and territorial influence. Transporters operate on itineraries where either the FLA or the pro-government groups can guarantee their security, depending on which group they have a closer affiliation to.²²

Pro-government groups and allied networks also suffered losses and disruption to trafficking, especially around the logistical nodes they had previously controlled along the RN18 national road linking Gao to the Kidal region (Tarkint and Tabankort). Following the breakdown of their agreements with the FLA, they were no longer able to guarantee the safety and predictability of convoys on trafficking routes in the Kidal region. This area had previously been spared high levels of violence due to a series of arrangements between pro-government armed groups and the FLA, including on trafficking routes.²³ Given the high level of instability, these networks now mostly use routes from Gao, heading east through the Ménaka region towards Niger.²⁴ This is not a new route, but it has become more important.

Overall, as of early 2026, cocaine trafficking in northern Mali has not been disrupted so much as reconfigured. Flows persist but are more fragmented and costly, and increasingly shaped by the need to navigate a far more volatile and contested security landscape.

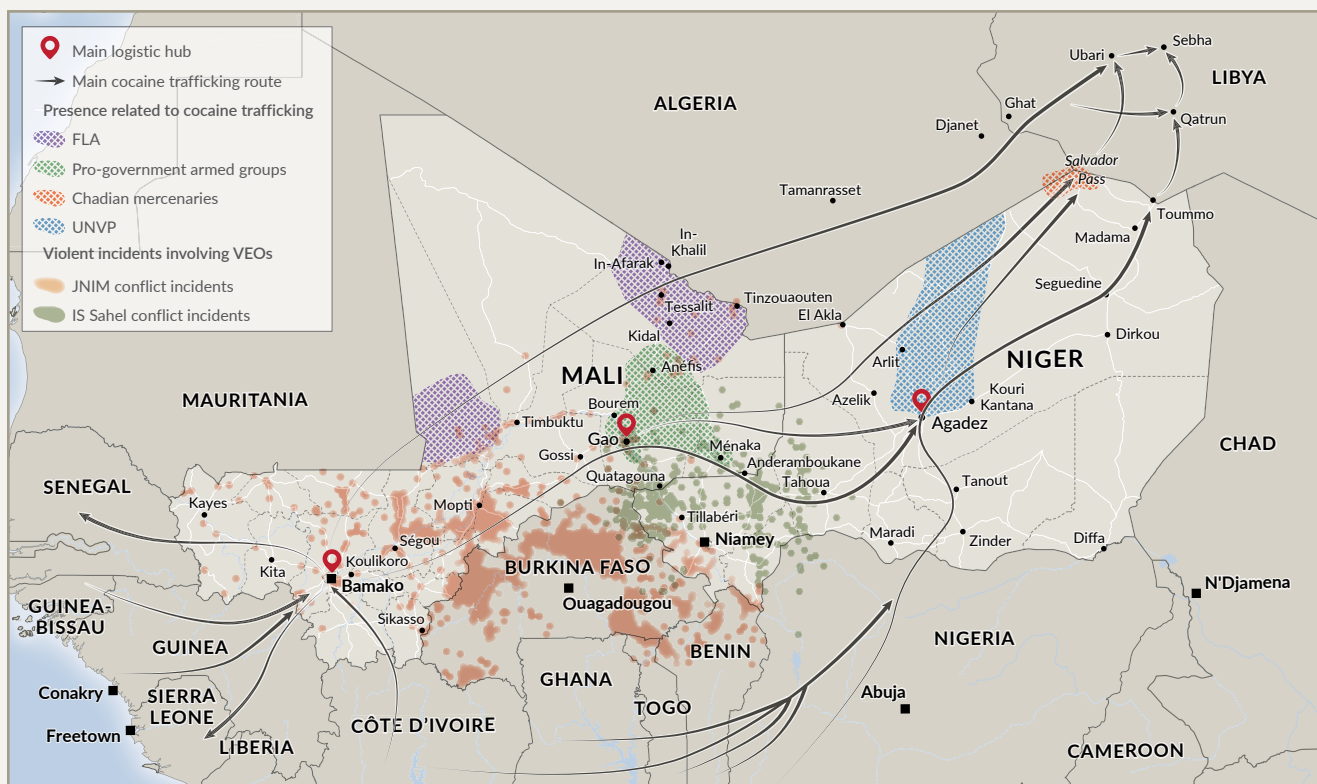


FIGURE 2 Cocaine routes and presence of armed actors in Mali and Niger, as of January 2026.

Niger

In Niger, the July 2023 coup that brought the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie – CNSP) to power marked a major rupture in long-standing trafficking arrangements. The collapse of protection mechanisms linked to the previous administration exposed networks that had relied on political cover at senior levels. In the immediate aftermath, multiple trafficking circuits, particularly those linked to cocaine and cannabis, were severely disrupted. Sources report reduced volumes, the suspension of certain routes, and the temporary withdrawal of several intermediaries as risks increased and guarantees disappeared.²⁵

This phase of disruption lasted until the end of 2024. During this period, trafficking activity was not fully suspended, but became more fragmented and opportunistic. Actors shifted into other illicit economies – notably informal gold trading in northern Niger and southern Algeria – or operated at lower intensity.²⁶ From mid-2025 onwards, however, multiple sources reported the gradual reconstitution of drug trafficking networks, reflecting adaptation to the post-coup security and political environment rather than a return to configurations seen prior to 2023.²⁷

A central trend in this reconstitution is the growing entanglement between trafficking activities and pro-regime security auxiliaries who formally present themselves as partners of the junta in stabilization and counter-trafficking efforts – namely, the Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism (Union des Nigériens pour la Vigilance et le Patriotisme – UNVP). Rather than operating purely as enforcement actors, elements within these groups appear to be providing protection, escort and recovery services for illicit convoys, effectively internalizing functions that were previously outsourced to political



Seized cocaine is burned in the Nigerien capital of Niamey – which forms part of a major transport corridor between Niger and Mali – in June 2023. Photo: UNODC

patrons or security officials. This blurring of enforcement and protection has enabled traffickers who were initially sidelined after the coup to re-enter the drug trade under new institutional cover. According to various law enforcement sources, the situation had facilitated the resumption of cocaine and cannabis flows through northern Niger by late 2025, though evidence on volumes remains unclear. The reconstitution of networks is described in the section on state-embedded actors below.

Libya

The trafficking situation in Libya remained broadly stable between 2020 and early 2025. Although there were tensions between the LAAF/Government of National Stability (GNS) and the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), no serious hostilities emerged between the two sides or their affiliates.

Nonetheless, the political situation in north-western Libya remained fractious, defined by competing armed groups built on tribal or municipal affiliations. In nearly all cases, these groups are nominally part of state bodies – such as the Ministry of the Interior or Ministry of Defence – or receive state salaries, but the GNU's hierarchical control over them is weak at best. In its attempts to exert influence, the GNU has had to engage in complex negotiations with armed groups and tribal leaders, indicating a substantial degree of autonomy and impunity at the local level in western Libya.

This has complicated efforts to counter cocaine trafficking. Systems of control are notably unstable and prone to rapid change as the balance of power among armed groups shifts. One such change occurred in May 2025, when the killing of Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli (aka Ghnewa), the head of a powerful, quasi-official armed group known as the Stabilization Support Apparatus, by GNU-linked actors, led to intense urban combat within Tripoli.

Al-Kikli was directly implicated in cocaine trafficking, and his death and the subsequent fighting reordered alliances between armed groups in western Libya. This helped to re-empower a security actor in western Libya, whose role in the cocaine trade has subsequently expanded.²⁸

In December 2025, Ahmed al-Dabbashi – a UN-sanctioned human smuggler who was allegedly deeply involved in cocaine trafficking – was killed. His cocaine business was reportedly taken over by the security actor mentioned above, further concentrating control in the area. At the time of writing, the GI-TOC had not received any information suggesting that al-Dabbashi's death has had a pronounced durable negative impact on cocaine trafficking.

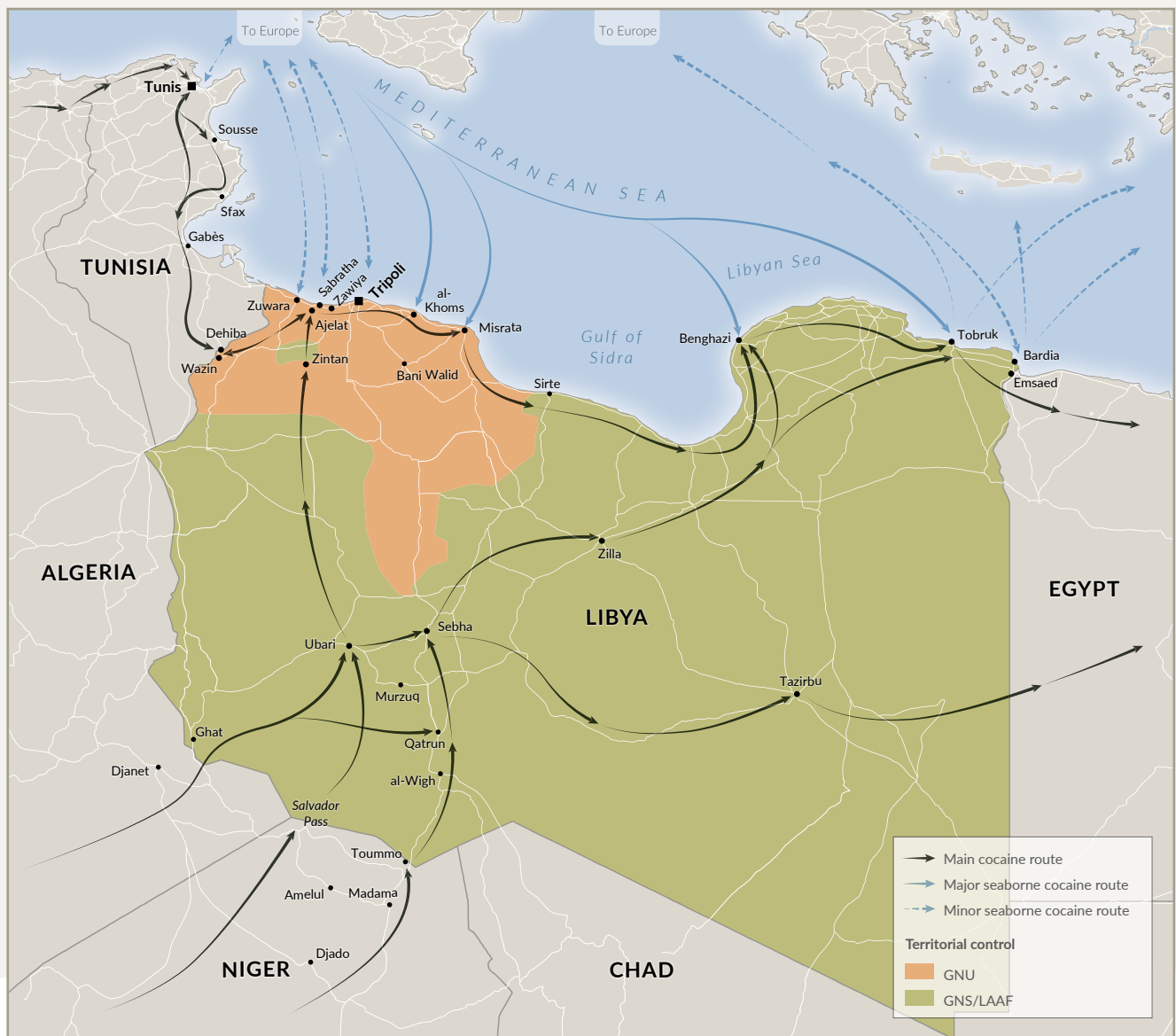


FIGURE 3 Territorial control and cocaine routes in Libya.

The security situation in LAAF-controlled territories has generally been far more stable, with the force broadly exerting unchallenged control over the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. Over the past five years, the LAAF's security presence has limited the occurrence of banditry, easing freedom of movement for both civilians and traffickers. Even as some forms of criminal activity were limited, actors close to the LAAF leveraged their dominance in southern and eastern Libya to secure and expand other illicit revenue streams, including the drug trade.²⁹ These groups strengthened their control over drug trafficking routes, particularly those moving high-value shipments of hashish and cocaine from Algeria and the Sahel through south-western Libya to the north-east. In effect, this created an environment that was stable, practicable and conducive to trafficking, which, in turn, helped the trade to expand.

However, this predictability was shaken by events in the Fezzan in 2025 and early 2026. On 12 February 2025, fighting broke out in Qatrun between an LAAF military police unit and a Chadian mercenary group led by Saleh Anakazi. The LAAF had employed the Chadians as a component unit

of the 128 Brigade until its dissolution in January 2025. The clashes resulted in the deaths of at least 12 LAAF fighters and an unknown number of mercenaries.

Following the conflict, the LAAF reportedly carried out a heavy crackdown in Qatrun. As the city is a major centre for various illicit activities, this led to a freeze in cross-border smuggling between Niger, Chad and Libya, including of migrants and drugs. The disruption to cocaine trafficking was only temporary, with most traffickers simply adapting their logistical bases and routes.³⁰ For example, one cocaine trafficking network was initially affected but reportedly responded by shifting most of its routes towards the Salvador Pass, and using cache locations in smaller towns in the Murzuq district, a pattern allegedly followed by other traffickers.³¹ According to actors close to the network, its operations are functioning well. Several sources within these networks (including traffickers and transporters) claim that between 60 and 70 kilograms of cocaine transit the Salvador Pass every month.³²

On 31 January 2026, tensions in the Fezzan surged when a new armed group, the Revolutionaries of the South, launched coordinated attacks on three strategic LAAF positions along the Niger border. In the following months, the group kept up a regular operational tempo, launching sporadic hit-and-run attacks on LAAF units.

From a military perspective, the attacks pose a limited threat to the LAAF's control of the Fezzan. However, they have sparked an increasingly harsh set of LAAF responses in the region, including a sharp heightening of border security and a crackdown on southern tribes, particularly the Tebu. The GI-TOC is still assessing the effects of the clashes and the crackdown on cocaine trafficking; however, it is likely that they will further disrupt and displace flows.

The broader impact of the 2025 and 2026 clashes on the relationships between traffickers and senior LAAF actors who allegedly protect routes across the Fezzan remains unclear. However, it is unlikely that these relationships have broken down entirely. For large-scale overland trafficking in Libya, engaging with the LAAF is the only option. Nevertheless, the conflict and subsequent crackdown have introduced an element of uncertainty into a situation that had been broadly stable for the past five years.

General aviation and cocaine trafficking in the Sahel

General aviation has long played a role in the trafficking of cocaine from Latin America to West Africa, exploiting a combination of poorly monitored official airports, informal airstrips and extensive 'dark' flight practices (whereby aircraft operate with their transponders switched off for most of the journey). Although seizures linked to this modality remain relatively rare, investigations, arrests and GI-TOC field data consistently suggest that private aircraft are used extensively for this purpose.

Since the early 2000s, 'narco-flights' from Latin America have repeatedly landed in Mali, with consignments arriving

in Bamako or at secondary airstrips before being moved southwards towards coastal exit points or northwards overland through Niger and Libya. Mali is by no means alone in this. Private aircraft linked to cocaine trafficking have been tracked or seized in several other West African countries, including Sierra Leone and Ghana.³³ However, existing data does suggest that Mali is among the preferred landing points for such flights.

The use of general aviation in cocaine trafficking came to international attention in 2009 with the so-called 'Air Cocaine' incident. In November of that year, a Boeing 727

registered in Guinea-Bissau departed from Venezuela and landed near Tarkint, a small town in the Gao region of northern Mali, allegedly carrying between 7 and 11 tonnes of cocaine. Just a couple of months later, in January 2010, another plane departing from Latin America landed near the Mauritanian border.³⁴ Subsequent investigations pointed to the direct involvement of senior Malian officials and drug lords, who remain key figures in today's trafficking networks. These incidents marked a pivotal moment in the international community's understanding of the degree to which state actors were embedded in cocaine trafficking across the Sahel.³⁵



The wreckage of the so-called 'Air Cocaine' aircraft, which reportedly transported several tonnes of cocaine from Venezuela before crashing in the desert in northern Mali in 2009. © Serge Daniel/AFP via Getty Images

A recent indicator of the continued relevance of this trafficking modality was the seizure of 2.6 tonnes of cocaine from a private aircraft that departed from Venezuela and landed at Bissau's international airport in September 2024. This seizure underlines both the volumes that can be moved using general aviation and Venezuela's ongoing role as a prominent point of origin for cocaine flights bound for West Africa.³⁶ According to investigations by Bissau-Guinean authorities, the plane was originally destined for Bamako.³⁷ Investigations by international authorities confirmed this analysis.³⁸

Although the Venezuelan government has denied that the aircraft originated in its territory,³⁹ existing evidence

continues to suggest the use of this route.⁴⁰ Venezuela has long operated as a key departure zone for narco-flights, because of its many clandestine and secondary airstrips, high level of state protection and proximity to cocaine production areas in Colombia. The border regions between Colombia and Venezuela, where armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) operate, host many informal landing sites and are believed to serve as important launch points for cocaine flights bound for West Africa.⁴¹ Sources have also pointed to the involvement of the Cartel de los Soles, a loosely affiliated Venezuelan criminal network allegedly composed of high-ranking military officers, in facilitating air shipments of cocaine – sourced from Colombian groups such as the Clan del Golfo – to West Africa.⁴²

While most documented cases relate to transatlantic movements, there is also growing evidence that general aviation is used to move cocaine within West Africa and within individual countries, including Mali.⁴³ There are credible reports that cocaine is regularly flown northwards from Bamako to Gao using commercial airlines, military aircraft or private jets, highlighting the role of domestic and short-haul flights in sustaining Sahelian trafficking corridors.⁴⁴

The limited number of documented cases should not be viewed as isolated incidents, but rather as indicators of a much broader and largely unseen phenomenon. While only a handful of cases have been formally identified – primarily involving flights from Latin America to West Africa – there are growing concerns that private aircraft are also being used to move cocaine onwards to Europe. Regional and international authorities now recognize this modality as a priority,⁴⁵ yet it remains a major intelligence gap, suggesting that existing cases are only the tip of the iceberg.

Looking ahead, there are indications that the use of general aviation for trafficking could increase in the Sahel, including in Mali, to avoid the risks associated with the volatile security situation. The opacity surrounding private aviation, combined with limited airspace monitoring, makes this method attractive to trafficking networks seeking to move large consignments discreetly. ■



MAPPING THE ACTORS

Cocaine trafficking across Mali, Niger and Libya is structured around the interaction of three interdependent sets of actors: entrenched regional drug lords, state-linked protection systems and a diverse array of armed groups.⁴⁶ Trafficking patterns in the Sahel are primarily shaped by local and regional dynamics, but regional intermediaries rely on international connections to move cocaine. As this section shows, where these protection arrangements remain intact, trafficking continues at scale regardless of surrounding instability. But where they collapse, flows contract sharply, as the divergent trajectories of Mali, Niger and Libya illustrate. The sections below examine each of these actor types in turn, before considering how their interaction produces the relatively predictable trafficking corridors observed across the region.

Regional intermediaries

Across Mali, Niger and Libya, cocaine trafficking is dominated by a relatively small number of entrenched intermediaries operating at scale (widely referred to in French as '*barons*') whose networks have existed for decades, surviving political transitions, coups and shifting conflict dynamics. These individuals typically have control over logistics, are embedded in local trading and patronage networks, and have access to protection systems. Their expertise and operational capacity are also rooted in their proximity to security apparatuses in Sahelian states. They have repeatedly exploited the institutional protection available to them, as well as the dependencies they have fostered around access, intelligence and high-level negotiations (such as ransom negotiations for foreign hostage taking by VEOs), in order to evade prosecution and expand their criminal enterprises. Alongside these figures, a more fragmented set of intermediaries and facilitators operates at a smaller scale, generally handling lower-volume consignments, without the capacity to coordinate bulk transit across borders.

In Mali, there are two main groupings. The largest volumes of cocaine are coordinated by a web of Arab trading families originating from the Tilemsi valley (Gao region), referred to in this report as the Tilemsi Galaxy.⁴⁷ Members of this network are connected by family and tribal ties, and its composition has remained largely unchanged since the early 2000s.

Within the network, notable suspected individuals include Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri (aka Rougeot or Rougi/Rougy)⁴⁸ and Cherif Ould Attaher.⁴⁹ Both are Lamhar Arab businessmen believed to be involved in cocaine and cannabis resin trafficking across Mauritania, Mali, Niger and the wider region.

The network also involves a handful of other important suspected intermediaries, who are not named in this report due to legal reasons. Rougi and Cherif are the best-known and most well-documented figures. Rougi, like other key players in the Tilemsi Galaxy, was listed under the former UN sanctions regime and remains on the current Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctions list.⁵⁰ Cherif has not been formally designated under any sanctions regime.

A well-established method employed by the Tilemsi Galaxy network involves using closely affiliated companies (often legally owned by a brother or cousin) to conduct trafficking operations – for example, transporting cocaine from southern Mali to Gao by road in private vehicles or on buses operated by their transport companies. These companies are also used to launder proceeds. This method was also used to circumvent the asset freeze measures imposed by the UN until 2023. The UN Panel of Experts on Mali has documented how Rougi, in particular, operates through several companies registered under the Tilemsi name (including Tilemsi Holding, Tilemsi Distribution-TILDIS and Tilemsi Transport Voyageurs), which generate cash flows on his behalf in direct violation of sanctions. Beyond these Tilemsi entities, Rougi is also known to exploit a broader ecosystem of shell companies established in Mali and neighbouring countries, including Niger, Algeria and Morocco, through which illicit proceeds are laundered. These profits have also underpinned the construction of large houses in Gao (in an area nicknamed ‘Cocainebougou’, meaning ‘village of cocaine’ in Bambara), as well as the purchase of buildings and establishment of front companies in Bamako.⁵¹

From southern Mali to Gao, the Tilemsi Galaxy moves cocaine either by road (as explained above) or air. Multiple sources have alleged that aircraft, including military planes, are used to move cocaine from Bamako to Gao to avoid dangerous roads and JNIM blockades.⁵² A source in Gao with in-depth knowledge of trafficking operations confirmed that the city is a hub for this activity: ‘The storage locations for drugs such as cocaine depend on the person bringing them in. Cocaine transported by road [from Bamako] comes directly to Gao, where it is stored in the private homes of traffickers in the Quartier Château or in shops they own in the Washington market [one of the city’s open-air markets]. Cocaine also leaves Bamako by military plane.’⁵³

Sources say that Rougi and Cherif do not manage the day-to-day activities of the network, but rather oversee overall operations, maintaining a regional network, ensuring a regular drug supply and managing relationships with power holders in Mali. Their resilience stems from their long-standing role as key intermediaries for the Malian authorities, a position they have maintained despite regime changes through elections and coups.⁵⁴ Both Rougi and Cherif regularly engage in discussions and negotiations with armed groups, particularly IS Sahel and JNIM, on behalf of the Malian intelligence agency (Agence Nationale de la Sécurité de l’Etat – ANSE), assisting with hostage negotiations, blockade lifting and local mediation.⁵⁵ This mediator role shows how they are able to maintain communication with all actors (state and non-state), which is central to their alleged involvement in the cocaine trade and explains how their network has sustained itself for more than 20 years. Family links have also allowed these actors to maintain protection networks (see the section on state-embedded actors below) and regional networks. For example, Rougi is the son-in-law of Cherif Ould Abidine (‘Cherif Cocaine’), who was the main drug lord operating in Niger until his death in 2016. This gave Rougi’s Mali-based trafficking network a direct family tie into Abidine’s Niger-based operation, linking the two sides of the border into a more integrated smuggling chain.⁵⁶

As in Mali, trafficking dynamics in Niger rest on a limited number of long-standing intermediaries and logistical nodes that have shaped the trafficking market over time. Many of these figures have operated for years within northern Nigerien circuits and maintain cross-border links, including with

Malian networks. (One example of such an intermediary is Ghoumour Itouwa Bidika, whose role is described in the section on state-embedded actors below.⁵⁷) However, from late 2025 onwards, these intermediaries have reconstituted their roles by becoming more deeply embedded within the state or state-adjacent structures that emerged after the coup. For this reason, they are examined in detail in the section on state-embedded actors.

In Libya, trafficking is dominated by influential barons embedded in business, political and security power structures, though their profiles differ by region. In the Cyrenaica, some of the most prominent known traffickers are legitimate businesspeople. Generally deeply networked into senior government and military circles, they tend to be involved in a number of different illicit markets, alongside their licit pursuits. According to multiple sources, a prominent businessperson in the coastal town of Tobruk is one of the most significant drug traffickers in the east.⁵⁸ Before the 2011 revolution, it is claimed that his family was tacitly permitted to traffic drugs in exchange for loyalty to the regime. In the wake of the revolution, the family – along with other criminal networks in Tobruk – helped fund the development of armed groups to protect the town. This enabled the network to transfer its pre-revolution prestige and influence to the post-revolution era, even as it expanded its involvement in various illicit markets in eastern Libya.⁵⁹ It currently employs many individuals in Tobruk. Given the close-knit tribal nature of society in the town, this communal standing has allowed the network to enjoy a high degree of impunity.

In the Fezzan, intermediaries tend to be a combination of criminal figures – often involved in various illicit markets – and security personnel who help to organize and protect the trade. One prominent alleged actor is a trafficker based in Qatrun,⁶⁰ who is said to be involved in trafficking different types of drugs, including cocaine and synthetics. His operations reportedly rely heavily on local armed groups for transporting drugs and providing protection.⁶¹ Since February 2025, he is said to have shifted routes to smaller and less surveilled localities after being displaced from Qatrun due to the outbreak of conflict between the LAAF and local armed groups.⁶²

Finally, in the Tripolitania, many of the main actors in the cocaine trade are current or former intelligence and security officials, including some who served under the Qaddafi regime. These actors leverage their official and tribal connections to facilitate trafficking operations.

State-embedded actors

Across Mali, Libya and Niger, cocaine trafficking is enabled by state-linked protection systems involving political elites, intelligence services and senior security actors. During periods when these systems remain intact, trafficking continues at scale. When they collapse, typically due to political transitions, high-volume flows contract sharply, as evidenced in Niger between mid-2023 and late 2025. This demonstrates a consistent regional pattern whereby cocaine trafficking depends less on the intensity of conflict in transit areas than on the continuity of these protection systems.

In Mali, the Tilemsi Galaxy has remained close to successive governments and is even mandated by the government to participate in mediation and negotiations, as outlined above. The network has operated for decades thanks to the robust protection systems it has maintained with political elites throughout successive regimes, an arrangement that persists to this day.

ANSE has long been central to these arrangements, and reportedly functioned as the core pillar of protection under previous civilian administrations. Multiple reports, including by a UN Panel of

Experts, describe how these arrangements have operated for decades.⁶³ For years, the Tilemsi Galaxy relied on Mohamed Ould Mataly, father-in-law of Rougi and a former member of the now-dissolved Malian parliament, to secure political cover for the network.⁶⁴ He reportedly purchased political protection directly from the previous head of the intelligence services,⁶⁵ General Moussa Diawara, who was dismissed by the junta in July 2021.⁶⁶

In Niger, after a period of post-coup disruption, trafficking networks re-emerged from late 2025. Actors close to the UNVP have been central to this reconstitution.⁶⁷ The UNVP is a Nigerien civil society organization that was formally established by an interior ministry decree in 2023, with the objective of supporting the military government through public meetings and declarations backing the government's actions. Originally active mainly in Agadez, the organization has opened several local and regional branches. Adopting a nationalist, sovereignist and anti-foreign influence rhetoric, it presents itself under the banner of 'vigilance and patriotism'. By 2024, it had been integrated into Niger's security apparatus, and granted the authority to conduct patrols and set up checkpoints, and armed to carry out counter-trafficking operations. Several informed sources claim that elements associated with the group have played an active role in trafficking cannabis resin and cocaine since mid-2025.⁶⁸

The UNVP is largely composed of former rebels and elites from the Agadez region, several of whom are known to have ties to trafficking networks. Within these networks, Ghoumour Itouwa Bidika, a close associate of the late Cherif Ould Abidine, has long been associated with the drug trade in Niger.⁶⁹ Bidika is a former Nigerien rebel leader who was active during the 2007–2009 rebellion. He was arrested in connection with the seizure of 17 tonnes of hashish in Niamey in 2021, and was released in early 2023, following reported procedural irregularities.⁷⁰ Bidika and the Tilemsi Galaxy have long enabled transporters to move cocaine from Gao into Niger and on to Libya with no interruption.

After the coup disrupted his business, Bidika reportedly diversified into other illicit economies, particularly the informal gold trade in southern Algeria and northern Niger, including Tchibarakaten.⁷¹ But since the last quarter of 2025, he appears to have re-emerged as a central actor in the trafficking of cocaine and cannabis through a new protection system linked to the UNVP, especially around Agadez.⁷² Though Bidika does not have an official position within the UNVP, he is regularly seen at official ceremonies and events organized by the organization, including those attended by officials and local authorities.⁷³

Armed soldiers protect a convoy crossing the Sahara Desert from Niger into Libya. Ostensibly carrying gold miners, these convoys have been implicated in transporting cocaine. © Scott Peterson/Getty Images



Bidika, it seems, is Niger's equivalent of Rougi or Cherif in Mali, in that he oversees the overall operations and makes sure the associated protection is in place. For Bidika, as with others, individuals close to the UNVP currently act as core elements of the reconstituted protection ecosystem. This includes protecting drug convoys and providing transport logistics support.⁷⁴

In September 2025, in the Djado area near Tagharaba in northern Niger, a convoy of multiple vehicles was attacked. According to several interviewees, the convoy, officially described as carrying gold miners from the Tchibarakaten mining site, was in fact transporting cocaine.⁷⁵ The convoy was allegedly attacked by elements of the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad – FACT), a Chadian rebel group operating in southern Libya. The FACT appeared to have had advance knowledge of the shipment's true cargo, as they attacked the only two vehicles – out of 15 – that were carrying cocaine. UNVP forces, accompanied by Nigerien security personnel, reportedly subsequently launched a two-day armed pursuit, in an operation reportedly led by Bidika.⁷⁶ During the recovery mission, the FACT captured eight UNVP members. Two sources with direct information on the captured personnel claimed that most of these UNVP fighters were close associates of Bidika, who unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate with the FACT for their release.⁷⁷

A statement from a well-informed observer sums it up: 'The networks [referring to the protection system] operate with sophisticated business structures. Key actors are not hiding: they maintain legitimate enterprises, community standing and government advisory roles. We maintain comprehensive documentation on individuals with documented trafficking histories who now hold official positions.'⁷⁸

Similar protection systems are also crucial to the success of the cocaine trade in Libya. Cocaine trafficking in the country is underpinned by protection and facilitation from state-embedded actors associated with the GNS, its military affiliate the LAAF, and the internationally recognized GNU. State-embedded actors linked to the GNS/LAAF arguably play a particularly essential role in the cocaine trade, given that most major entry and exit points and trafficking routes in Libya are under the control of the eastern-based administration.

Notably, this includes senior officers and officials. Over the past five years, the GI-TOC has received multiple reports of the dominant role played by a senior level LAAF official in protecting and profiting from shipments of cocaine and other drugs. Multiple contacts have referred to him as being 'at the top of a pyramid' composed of criminal actors and senior government officials. His protection of cocaine trafficking is also reportedly salient for the activities of a separate set of networks operating in the coastal regions of the Cyrenaica.

High-level protection of cocaine trafficking is equally important in the Tripolitania. However, the region's fractured security landscape, in which multiple armed groups affiliated with the ruling GNU exercise security dominance over their own areas, means that protection is provided by different militias involved at various points along trafficking routes.

State-affiliated armed groups in the Tripolitania are generally paid to facilitate transportation and protect shipments between cities. According to multiple sources, payment is usually made in kind or in the form of a discount on the cost of the drugs. These armed groups then reportedly sell this 'peel-off' cocaine on the local market.⁷⁹

Despite the unstable security situation, protection in the Tripolitania reportedly costs less than in areas controlled by the LAAF, such as the Fezzan. In 2024, a law enforcement contact in the Tripolitania claimed that 'large shipments are protected, and major traffickers are not arrested'.⁸⁰

The findings of this report, and in particular the contrast between the situation in Niger and that in Mali and Libya, show that cocaine trafficking is underpinned by predictable protection arrangements. Fragmentation alone does not disrupt trafficking if elite protection persists, as demonstrated in Libya's divided security landscape and Mali's protracted conflict and coups. Conversely, abrupt political ruptures that dismantle protection systems without immediate replacement can significantly constrain trafficking for extended periods, as seen in Niger.

Armed groups

Across the Sahel, cocaine trafficking intersects with a wide range of armed actors, from rebel and pro-government groups to mercenaries, militias and VEOs. Rather than controlling trafficking chains, individuals within these groups typically provide protection, transport or territorial access along specific segments of routes in exchange for payment.

In northern Mali, trafficking of cannabis resin and cocaine has long been a source of financing and a driver of conflict among armed groups. Tensions resulting from trafficking led rebel and pro-government groups to engage in the Anéfis talks, a series of three pacts signed in October 2015, October 2017 and January 2021, each time following clashes over control of strategic locations or checkpoints along vital smuggling routes.⁸¹ As of January 2026, these armed groups continue to play a direct role in cocaine trafficking. By controlling territory, routes and protection arrangements, both pro-government and rebel-allied groups are central to the movement of cocaine, with their territorial influence directly shaping trafficking corridors.

Once cocaine is in Gao, the responsibility for securing consignments reportedly lies with pro-government armed groups. Despite experiencing disruption following the breakdown of agreements with the FLA, particularly around logistical nodes, pro-government groups have shown greater resilience than FLA-linked networks. Their alignment with state forces and sustained relationships with trafficking intermediaries, particularly the Tilemsi Galaxy, have enabled their continued involvement in cocaine movements. The Gamou branch of the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés – GATIA-Gamou) acts as an intermediary for the Tilemsi Galaxy, securing movements of cocaine from Gao onwards, on roads within their territories of influence.⁸²

Within GATIA, three senior individuals are allegedly responsible for the security of these drug convoys, which sometimes use GATIA vehicles. GATIA members also conceal cocaine within military logistics convoys, sometimes without the knowledge of the FAMa, which relies on GATIA as its security auxiliary with knowledge of the region's terrain.⁸³ A source has reported similar practices on routes from Gao leading to the Kidal region.⁸⁴

Rebel armed groups currently clustered under the FLA are largely dominated by Tuareg intermediaries and have historically operated in Mali's northern regions. Although the FLA is more frequently associated with cannabis resin trafficking, particularly in the Timbuktu and Taoudenni regions, it has also been playing a role in the cocaine trade.

It is likely that trafficking associated with FLA-linked networks has declined since the group lost significant territorial influence in clashes with state forces in mid-2023, although the FLA retains influence over northern corridors along the Mauritanian and Algerian borders, where it continues to organize and protect some convoys.⁸⁵ Developments since January 2026 fall outside the scope

of this report, but the coordinated FLA–JNIM attacks across Mali in April and July 2026 are likely to eventually restructure some of the dynamics outlined here, given that the coalition regained territorial influence over parts of the Kidal and Gao regions. Were this influence to hold, it could reshape the trafficking ecosystem described above.

In Libya, a wide range of armed groups affiliated with the GNS and GNU provide protection along specific segments of trafficking routes in exchange for payment, often in kind through discounted cocaine that is later sold locally. These groups are repeatedly cited as providing escorts, securing storage sites and controlling key corridors, enabling large shipments to move smoothly across Libya, despite the country's political fragmentation. However, in nearly all cases these groups have a degree of affiliation with government bodies – including the defence and interior ministries – and draw official salaries, making their activities as properly defined as those of state-embedded actors.

Violent extremist organizations

There have long been concerns that the VEOs operating across large parts of the region – such as JNIM and IS Sahel – are involved in and drawing financing from the lucrative cocaine trade.⁸⁶ However, these concerns are broadly recognized to have been overblown in some reporting in the early to mid-2000s that centred on an alleged 'narco-jihadi nexus'. Evidence that either organization benefits from the cocaine trade centres on the taxation of consignments trafficked through territory under their influence, in return for protection of the drug convoys.⁸⁷ This taxation is not unique to drugs; it is levied on all commodity flows.

However, at least in northern Mali, negotiations for the safe passage of cocaine are handled differently to those for other commodities. This is true for both JNIM and IS Sahel. For ordinary merchandise, arrangements can be ad hoc, with transporters paying a right-of-passage fee according to the truck's load, typically about 100 000 CFA francs (€152) per tonne. As one driver operating on roads where IS Sahel is present explained, 'We pay the passage fee on every trip. They have their toll post not far from Indelimane on the RN20 and at Ouatagouna on the RN17.'⁸⁸ Large transport companies that regularly use these roads may make more stable arrangements, paying a monthly or quarterly lump sum to either IS Sahel or JNIM.⁸⁹ These fees are negotiated by the unit manning the checkpoint in the case of ad hoc arrangements, or by the zone commander in the case of more permanent ones.

By contrast, taxation of cocaine trafficking in northern Mali typically relies on negotiations between high-level individuals within the trafficking networks – usually the regional intermediaries described above – and a senior 'focal point' within IS Sahel or JNIM.⁹⁰ According to a local observer in Gao with good knowledge of trafficking dynamics in northern Mali, 'JNIM is organized in such a way that they have a representative to negotiate or to represent them for each sector of activity. From negotiation of access with humanitarians, to dealing with the finances through businessmen, to negotiating with traffickers.'⁹¹ The individuals in charge of these agreements within VEOs typically have a broader negotiation or logistics portfolio (particularly for negotiating hostage ransoms or any commodity with high intrinsic value), or they are high up in the combat hierarchy, ranking above zone or even regional commanders.⁹²

Within IS Sahel, Moussa Moumini is reportedly one of the two main interlocutors for traffickers. A senior Nigerien member of the group, he is one of six commanders of the Military and Operations Office, ranking above zone commanders in the organization's hierarchy.⁹³ The arrangements between traffickers and IS Sahel reportedly rely on Moumini's close ties with traffickers from the Tilemsi Galaxy.⁹⁴

Violent extremist groups such as JNIM are thought to deriving financing from the lucrative cocaine trade through taxation. *Photo supplied*



Secure passage for the cocaine is organized and authorized in advance. In northern Mali, traffickers only give the green light for vehicles (often Toyota Hilux models) to depart when they have received the necessary guarantees from all the relevant armed actors (VEOs and the FLA or pro-government groups, depending on the route chosen).⁹⁵ These prior negotiations ensure that, once the convoy starts to move, no one will open or check the consignment. The VEO representatives who negotiated with the network inform the relevant regional or unit commander of the agreement reached, providing strict instructions to ensure the convoy is given free and safe passage.

Payments are made to purchase this protection, either in cash or through barter arrangements. The amounts paid are reportedly far higher than those for lower-value commodities, although it was not possible to obtain exact data. Barter exchanges involve commodities such as weapons, ammunition and vehicles. According to a source closely following IS Sahel dynamics in north-eastern Mali, a senior IS Sahel commander reportedly received six pick-up trucks from Rougi in 2022 as part of a deal, although no further details were given.⁹⁶ Several sources noted that VEOs have a vested interest in maintaining good relationships with major cocaine traffickers, who typically operate as interlocutors for hostage negotiations and as suppliers of other commodities required by these groups.⁹⁷

Similar arrangements are reportedly in place between key traffickers and JNIM in northern Mali. A JNIM logistician at the Mali–Mauritania border explained that the leadership is pragmatic in recognizing the need to work with traffickers because both sides stand to gain. However, the arrangements are also a source of concern: ‘Given the nature of the product, it can’t be something known by everyone. Because it could tarnish their image, their ideology and the recruitment.’⁹⁸ Negotiations are therefore limited to a handful of individuals. The desire to limit the number of people involved in these arrangements is also shaped by the fact that, according to the same source, ‘They’re careful to make sure their own guys aren’t caught up in it. They don’t want their people using it [the drugs].’⁹⁹ Keeping the arrangements in the hands of a select few mitigates the risk of cocaine leaking into the retail drug market through overspill dynamics. This would be more likely if multiple zone commanders or unit commanders were involved in cutting deals. Similarly, having a consignment mistakenly seized by lower-level JNIM elements is considered dangerous, partly because of the risk of it leading to local consumption. Therefore, it is in the interests of both JNIM and the trafficking network for the consignment to continue its journey out of the country undisturbed.

Given the significant territorial influence gained by JNIM since 2015, all traffickers – whether from the Tilemsi Galaxy, pro-government groups or rebel groups – have needed to negotiate safe passage for their convoys with this group at some point.¹⁰⁰ These arrangements mostly concern key corridors bisecting the Timbuktu and Kidal regions. JNIM’s rapid expansion southwards since 2022 has brought

an increasing number of crucial trading corridors under its influence. This has become particularly evident since 2025, when the group strengthened its grip on the roads supplying Bamako. However, it is currently unclear whether these developments have resulted in similar negotiated arrangements relating to the cocaine trade in southern Mali.

For IS Sahel, arrangements related to the cocaine trade reflect the group's consolidation of influence over territory in Mali, and are therefore more recent, deepening particularly since 2023. IS Sahel has established a stable presence in north-eastern Mali, including the Ménaka region (excluding the town of Ménaka) and some eastern districts of the Gao region. This includes control of major transport corridors such as the RN17 (Gao–Ansongo–Niamey) and the RN20 (Ansongo–Ménaka). This higher level of influence has enabled IS Sahel to become more involved in economic activities in these territories, both licit and illicit.¹⁰¹

In parallel, since mid-2023, instability in the Kidal region has disrupted the cocaine trade, as the volatility of the security situation has made it far more dangerous to transit the area. The sharp decrease in the safety and predictability of trafficking routes in the region drove networks associated with the Tilemsi Galaxy – the main network moving cocaine in northern Mali – to increasingly move cocaine shipments from Gao directly east through the Ménaka region towards Niger on roads and corridors entirely under the control of IS Sahel.¹⁰²

The consolidation of IS Sahel's influence over the Ménaka region, coupled with growing use of routes bisecting it, has led several sources to suggest that IS Sahel may have benefited from cocaine trafficking through taxation since late 2023.¹⁰³ This analysis is supported by the accounts of several sources, who confirmed the protection arrangements outlined above.¹⁰⁴ However, three sources suggested that IS Sahel's involvement has become deeper. They explained that because of the group's sole influence over key corridors in the Ménaka region, the Tilemsi Galaxy has now included IS Sahel in their logistics, as they have done for decades with pro-government armed groups in the Gao region. These sources described that while GATIA-Gamou secures convoys for the beginning of the journey when the shipment leaves Gao, the cocaine is handed over to IS Sahel near Talataye to be transported further east throughout the Ménaka region and into the neighbouring region of Tahoua in Niger. This handover is reportedly required because IS Sahel is the sole armed actor present in these zones, and the only one able to ensure the safety of convoys.¹⁰⁵ A trafficker interviewed in Gao recalled a specific incident: 'There is a small village ... called Indagouba; that is where the shipments depart from [for IS Sahel]. It is not far from Inkadewane, where clashes occurred between the FAMA/Russians and IS Sahel on 29 December 2025. That day, a cocaine shipment passed through towards Ubari in Libya. This shipment belonged to Rougi and [another trafficker not named in this report].'¹⁰⁶

Both JNIM and IS Sahel continue to derive financing from cocaine trafficking, largely through taxation arrangements. However, developments since 2023 appear to have benefited IS Sahel, enabling the group to play a deeper role in the trade. By gaining sole control over key routes in the Ménaka region, and becoming integrated into established trafficking logistics, IS Sahel appears to be capturing a growing share of taxation revenues from flows moving eastward towards Niger and then Libya. It is unclear whether this will change once more in the wake of the May and July 2026 FLA–JNIM attacks, and the restructuring of territorial influence these triggered.

Although the cocaine trade is one (largely indirect) source of revenue for JNIM and IS Sahel, other sources, such as the kidnapping industry and the gold mining sector, are likely to remain far more important for their financing.



CONCLUSION

Overland cocaine trafficking routes that bisect the Sahel and Libya are deeply embedded in the region's conflict and political economies, linking coastal entry points, trans-Saharan corridors and North African exit hubs, and enabled by complex and resilient systems of protection and control. As a result, although overland trans-Saharan flows represent a far smaller volume of cocaine than their maritime counterparts, they are critically important in shaping the region's conflict, crime and political landscapes, and are intricately interconnected with armed actors and state-linked power structures.

Across Mali, Niger and Libya, access to political protection and territorial control continues to determine who can move large volumes of cocaine. While VEOs are not primary organizers of the trade, they benefit from it indirectly, particularly through taxation and facilitation. Trafficking revenues contribute to the resilience of armed groups and reinforce the incentive to maintain a status quo that allows illicit economies to flourish.

Trafficking ecosystems linking the Sahel to Europe are likely to remain adaptive, shaped by shifting conflict dynamics, political change and the developing strategies of trafficking networks. The existing evidence base forecasts the following future trends:

- **Cocaine remains an important source of financing for a number of armed groups, sustaining instability.** Continued trafficking along the key roads under their control could provide revenue for these groups, including former Chadian rebels disbanded in early 2025. This supports the continued existence of semi-permanent armed groups and creates incentives for them to protect trafficking routes as an economic lifeline.
- **The growing prominence of cocaine trafficking routes through IS Sahel's territorial influence.** Since 2025, increased flows through eastern Mali, combined with the group's expanded control in the area, have positioned IS Sahel to benefit financially from eastward trafficking into Niger. If this were to continue, sustained revenues would strengthen IS Sahel's economic resilience, potentially facilitating continued insurgent activity and the further expansion of cocaine trafficking across the Sahel.
- **Risks of consolidation and strengthened institutional capture.** There are indications that certain state structures may be consolidating control over the cocaine trade. This could be seen, for example, in GNS-governed areas of Libya, as the LAAF consolidates its direct military control over the Fezzan.

- **The strengthening position of criminally linked power brokers in western Libya.** As in eastern Libya, key actors with government access will continue to consolidate control over segments of the cocaine trade. This may increase the influence of a volatile actor within Libya's fragmented political and security landscape, with implications for governance and for cocaine trafficking towards Europe, including by sea.
- **Expanding consumption of crack, and to a lesser extent powder, cocaine in urban hubs across the Sahel and in Libya.** While remaining well below levels of synthetic drug consumption, this upward trend mirrors patterns observed in other major transshipment regions, such as Brazil, and is likely to continue. It will place additional strain on already limited public health resources.
- **General aviation may be set to play a larger role.** Several indicators suggest that general aviation may play a greater role in trans-Saharan cocaine trafficking in the future, enabling networks to avoid highly volatile areas and enhancing the efficiency of their operations.

These dynamics and future trends carry significant implications for governance, security and regional stability. Cocaine trafficking reinforces protection economies, distorts security institutions and entrenches relationships between criminal networks, armed actors and political elites. Addressing overland trafficking therefore requires approaches that account not only for routes and volumes, but also for the conflict systems and power structures that sustain them.

Recommendations

- **Forge law enforcement partnerships across the cocaine supply chain.** Greater collaboration and coordination are required between countries and regions across the cocaine supply chain, prominently including Latin America, West Africa, North Africa and Europe. While partnerships and cooperation mechanisms exist, they are less developed than international collaboration platforms elsewhere and could be significantly strengthened. Within the Sahel, more regular convening of key stakeholders – remotely and in person – could facilitate more established data sharing, brainstorming around key challenges and strengthened networks for engagement.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, drug trafficking is a regional challenge across West Africa and the Sahel, and it is therefore vital to mitigate any decrease in intelligence sharing and operational cooperation driven by the withdrawal of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- **Prioritize targeted sanctions and strategic pressure on traffickers and facilitators.** Many individuals facilitating large-scale cocaine trafficking have operated for years, move across borders and hold assets across the region. Targeted sanctions, travel restrictions and asset freezes at national and regional levels could help limit their ability to sustain trafficking activities and launder their illicit finances. Rather than focusing solely on individual traffickers, such measures should take into account the facilitators within the ecosystem who play critical roles, particularly with regard to finances.
- **Improve understanding of cocaine trafficking using general aviation.** The use of private aircraft to move cocaine from Latin America to West Africa, across the Sahel, and potentially from West Africa to Europe, remains poorly understood. Given indications that this modality could expand, closing evidence gaps should be a priority to inform future responses.



NOTES

- 1 Lucia Bird, Kingsley Madueke and Mouhamadou Kane, Cocaine markets in West Africa: Mapping impacts, routes and actors, GI-TOC, March 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/mapping-drug-markets-in-west-africa>.
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