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Drug trafficking in northern Mali

A tenuous criminal equilibrium

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Summary

Northern Mali has been and continues to be a transit zone for regional and global drug-trafficking networks transporting narcotics through Africa to Europe. However, the ways in which those involved in narcotics trafficking position themselves within political, economic and security structures have changed. The result is a tenuous criminal equilibrium that allows drug trafficking to continue. Efforts to control it, however, could threaten the already fragile peace process in which several actors involved in trafficking are participating.

Recommendations

- The government is unable to tackle the problem of drug trafficking meaningfully through law enforcement.
- Pursuing a militarised approach is risky, given the mistrust between the government and many communities in northern Mali.
- Participants in the peace process could work to demilitarise drug trafficking to avoid clashes that might undermine peace-building efforts.
- The focus of stakeholders should be on providing security, helping to implement peace agreements and providing basic services to local populations, while continuing to better understand and monitor drug-trafficking activities in northern Mali

Acronyms and abbreviations

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad
CMAS	Coordination des Mouvements, Associations, et Symphisants
CMFPR I	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance
CMFPR II	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance
CNSP	Comité National pour le Salut du Peuple
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUCAP	European Union Capacity and Assistance Program
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
Frente Polisario	Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen
M5-RFP	Mouvement du 5 Juin, Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques
MAA-Plateforme	Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (aligned with the <i>Plateforme</i>)
MAA-CMA	Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (aligned with the CMA)
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad
MOC	Mécanisme opérationnel de coordination
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
Plateforme	Plateforme des Mouvement du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger

Executive summary

Despite the political and security turmoil of the past eight years, the pattern of narcotics trafficking in northern Mali has largely returned to the pre-2012 status quo and the region continues to be a transit zone for both regional and global drug-trafficking networks transporting cocaine and cannabis resin.

This resilience, however, should not be misinterpreted as evidence that 'little has changed'. The ways in which those involved in narcotics trafficking position themselves within formal and informal political, economic and security structures have changed to conform with the new realities on the ground. The result is a tenuous criminal equilibrium that allows drug trafficking through northern Mali to continue, despite the fact that the region remains divided among rival armed groups.

Drug trafficking poses a threat to local and regional stability. Competition over lucrative smuggling routes and hubs risks inciting new rounds of violence among armed groups that are participants in the ongoing peace process. In the short term it also complicates the implementation of the peace process, while undermining the development of durable institutions in the long term.

As a result, the options available to the international community and the Malian government for combating drug trafficking have changed considerably since the comparatively less complex days of the late 2000s and early 2010s. These options, however, remain severely limited and there is a risk that some possible responses might be counterproductive.

This report seeks to update existing narratives about the scope, scale and impact of cocaine and cannabis resin trafficking in the region. To that end, it is divided into five main sections. The first provides a brief background to the problem in the context of current political and security events; the second considers the evidence basis for claims that northern Mali remains a transit zone for cocaine and cannabis resin trafficking, while the third outlines the ways in which competition for drug-trafficking routes and hubs has shaped security dynamics in the region.

The fourth section considers how a tenuous equilibrium has re-emerged which enables various traffickers to carry on their activities despite competition and rivalries among the armed groups with which many of them are affiliated. The report concludes with a section that considers the options available to the international community and the Malian government for tackling the issue, highlighting the need to consider it within the broader context of security, governance and local political economies. An annexure outlines the key individuals associated with drug trafficking in northern Mali.

The findings of the report are based on 25 interviews carried out in October 2019 with individuals in Bamako, building on various research trips since 2012. Subsequently, telephonic interviews were conducted between November 2019 and August 2020. Interviewees included government officials, representatives of several armed groups, foreign diplomats, members of the European Union delegation, representatives of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), key informants familiar with the dynamics of drug trafficking in the region as well as experts outside of Mali.

The report draws on open-source material, including press accounts, reports by international organisations, academic literature and non-public reports produced by various governments and international organisations that have been made available to the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (Global Initiative). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic sources were granted anonymity.

Background

Northern Mali has long served as a crossroads linking sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa and beyond. In centuries past, towns and cities like Timbuktu emerged as vibrant centres of commerce and scholarship where goods and ideas were exchanged within networks that spanned empires and continents.

The fabled camel caravans of the Sahara have given way to Toyota 4x4s and lorries, and the global economic importance of overland routes through the region has dissipated due to maritime networks and air travel. Yet northern Mali, situated on the northern edge of the Sahel and straddling the southern edge of the Sahara, remains an important transit zone for people and goods within the region.

Entire communities rely for their livelihoods on the movement of goods across borders. Far from being isolated islands in the middle of a vast desert expanse, the towns and cities of northern Mali form a constellation of nodes within sprawling economic networks that move a range of legal and illicit goods across borders.¹

Robust informal economies predicated on the smuggling of consumer goods such as foodstuffs, automobiles, fuel and cigarettes, as well as illicit goods such as narcotics and arms, are enmeshed not only

within the formal economy but also within formal and informal political and security structures. Thus, contraband economies of northern Mali cannot easily be isolated or analysed separately from the formal and informal politics of the region.

From the early 2000s traffickers began moving large consignments of cocaine through northern Mali, tapping into criminal networks that initially developed around the trafficking of cannabis resin and contraband cigarettes.² Cocaine shipped from South America would arrive at ports in coastal West Africa, from which traffickers would move it overland through northern Mali. Traffickers operating along other segments of these networks would facilitate onward movement to North Africa for shipment across the Mediterranean to consumer markets in Europe and the Middle East.

The contraband economy of northern Mali cannot be analysed separately from the politics of the region

As these networks matured, increased competition for control of trafficking routes and their associated profits began to change the local economic and the political and military balance of power as actors involved in narcotics began to invest the proceeds in the formal economy. This newfound economic power associated with trafficking began to penetrate political parties, leading to the establishment of patronage networks that further undermined state institutions.³

During the same period Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) became more prominent in northern Mali, generating tens of millions of dollars in revenue by kidnapping foreigners for ransom, as well as through banditry, smuggling and protection rackets.

The emergence of cocaine trafficking in Mali, in tandem with an increased AQIM presence in the country's north, gave rise to warnings of a narco-jihadist nexus in which cartels in South America were working with jihadists in the Sahara. The expert consensus, however, is that these narratives were specious, and the extent to which jihadist groups in northern Mali were directly involved in or benefited from cocaine trafficking was vastly overstated.⁴

In 2009 a Boeing 727 aircraft registered in Guinea-Bissau took off from Venezuela allegedly carrying between seven and 11 tons of cocaine from Latin America and landed near the small town of Tarkint, in Gao region. This 'Air Cocaine' incident garnered international headlines and attention and confirmed the direct involvement of Malian government officials in cocaine trafficking.⁵

In the early 2010s the Malian government increasingly outsourced the role of providing security and regulating informal economies in northern Mali to various military commanders and leaders of ethnic militias, many of whom were former rebels integrated into the Malian military in the aftermath of uprisings in the 1990s.⁶

These arrangements would prove untenable. By 2012 the delicate socio-political balance of power in northern Mali was destabilised by a renewed separatist rebellion that was emboldened by an influx of fighters and weaponry from Libya in the aftermath of Muammar Gaddafi's downfall. By then, competition among rival groups in northern Mali over drug trafficking routes had been thoroughly militarised.⁷

In March 2012 elements within the Malian military that were dissatisfied with the government's handling of the rebellion in the north carried out a haphazard, though ultimately successful *coup d'état*, ousting the democratically elected president, Amadou Toumani Touré. In the post-coup chaos rebels fighting under the banner of the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), with assistance from jihadist gunmen affiliated to AQIM, managed to drive a disorganised Malian army out of northern Mali altogether.

Soon afterwards the jihadist coalition comprised of AQIM, *Ansar Dine* (led by veteran rebel Iyad Ag Ghali) and AQIM-offshoot Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), turned its guns on its onetime allies of convenience and pushed the MNLA out of the major towns and cities in the region. Even during this period, however, several key drug traffickers managed to reach agreements and form alliances with relevant actors, enabling them to continue their activities despite the fact that the area was under 'Islamist control'.⁸

By the end of 2012 Mali, once a darling of the international community and considered a model for the region, had collapsed.⁹ In January 2013 France intervened militarily at the request of the Malian

government to halt a push by jihadist forces southward toward the capital city of Bamako.

This military mission, dubbed Opération Serval, was aided by regional African forces operating under an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) mission (AFISMA), which would eventually be folded into a United Nations peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) months later. After several weeks of combat operations the international coalition successfully drove the jihadist coalition from its strongholds in northern Mali.

Mali, once a darling of the international community and considered a model for the region, had collapsed by 2012

In August 2013 Mali held elections which, in addition to bringing Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to power (Keïta was subsequently reelected in 2018), also opened the door for negotiations between the government and non-jihadist rebel groups. A peace agreement was signed in 2015 but, after several years of delays and disagreements between the parties, it has barely been implemented.

Meanwhile, the high number of casualties sustained by MINUSMA peacekeepers has earned it the distinction of being the most dangerous peacekeeping mission in the world and a new regional French counterterrorism mission, Opération Barkhane, has largely failed to defeat jihadist groups in the region.

An internationally backed African counterterrorism force, known as G5 Sahel Joint Force, has also been launched within the framework of the G5 Sahel. Yet another international military effort, consisting of special forces from various European countries, is also set to launch in late 2020 under a new task force named Takuba.

Aside from isolated military bases and encampments in the regions, the Malian state does not have a presence in most of northern Mali, with the exception of a few municipalities. The violence that was once largely contained in northern Mali has spread south.

Violence in central Mali has reached unprecedented levels, with jihadist groups such as the katibat Macina and ethnic militias, such as Dan Na Ambassagou, as well

as the Malian military, targeting civilians and carrying out attacks on entire villages and communities.¹⁰

In response to Keïta's mishandling of Mali's multiple crises and questions over the legitimacy of recent legislative elections, tens of thousands of Malians took to the streets in Bamako to call for his resignation on 5 June 2020. The demonstrations were led by a coalition civil society groups and opposition parties, as well as by Imam Mahmoud Dicko, one of Mali's most influential religious leaders.

Keïta tried to defuse the situation by reshuffling his government and taking to national TV to call for dialogue. These concessions did little to assuage the protest leaders, who continued organised mass demonstrations throughout June and July under the banner of the *Mouvement du 5 juin, Rassemblement des Forces patriotiques* (M5-RFP). Protests took a violent turn on 10 July, when amid calls for civil disobedience by the M5-RFP, demonstrators occupied government buildings and set up barricades throughout the city. Malian security forces responded by shooting live rounds, with eleven people reported killed and more than 100 injured.

With Mali on the brink of a full-blown socio-political crisis, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) dispatched former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan to lead mediation efforts between Keïta and the M5-RFP. Other heads of state from the region, including Senegal's Macky Sall, Niger's Mohamadou Issoufou and Ghana's Nana Akufo-Addo, also became directly involved in the ECOWAS mediation efforts. Yet despite this high-level diplomatic engagement, negotiations stalled and the M5-RFP continued to call for Keïta's resignation.

On 18 August 2020, mid-ranking Malian military officers arrested President Keïta. Hours later, a detained Keïta dissolved the Malian government and announced his resignation on national TV. Keïta's downfall marked the second time in eight years that Mali's military had intervened to depose a president who – at least in the eyes of international observers – was democratically elected.

After securing Keïta's resignation, the coup leaders introduced themselves on national TV as the Comité National pour le Salut du Peuple (CNSP) and promised to 'organise general elections to allow Mali to equip itself with strong institutions within a reasonable time

limit,' and to oversee a 'political transition leading to credible elections for the exercise of democracy through a roadmap that will lay the foundations for a new Mali.'¹¹

Additionally, the CNSP announced it would continue Mali's partnerships with international military and peacekeeping deployments in Mali, and support the implementation of the peace process stemming from a 2015 Algiers agreement signed by the government and various former rebels based in northern Mali.¹²

While the August coup undoubtedly represents a new phase of political uncertainty for Mali, at the time this paper went to publication, there is little evidence to suggest that the CNSP intends to take actions that will fundamentally alter Mali's underlying formal and informal political, economic, and security structures. Given that the CNSP appears to be calling for a reset, rather than a revolution, the drug trafficking networks and systems described below are unlikely to be seriously affected by Keïta's departure in the short and medium term.

New seizures, old habits

The extent to which Mali remains a transit zone for South American cocaine is still largely unknown and not easily quantifiable. Figures reflecting the quantities of cocaine that pass through the country are often based on estimates derived from seizures, which are not only few and far between, but are a poor indicator in contexts where law enforcement capacity is low and government authorities may be complicit.¹³

Cocaine trafficking through West Africa reached its apex in about 2008 and 2009

The prevailing opinion among experts, although there is by no means a consensus on this issue, is that cocaine trafficking through West Africa reached its apex in about 2008 and 2009, with estimates in the range of 47 tons in 2007-2008, and have decreased in more recent years to about half that amount as recently as 2017.¹⁴ In 2013 the Institute for Security Studies estimated that 13% of the cocaine trafficked to Europe transited through Guinea-Bissau.¹⁵ In 2018 a high-ranking United

Nations (UN) official in Bissau estimated that ‘no less than 30 tons’ of cocaine was coming into Guinea-Bissau annually¹⁶ but there are no reliable estimates of what percentage is moved through Mali.

The small quantities of narcotics that have been seized in Mali, such as the 5kg of cocaine and 10kg of heroin seized in 2017 and the 56kg of crack cocaine seized in 2018, were found in Bamako and do not involve armed actors in northern Mali.¹⁷ Similarly, cannabis (marijuana) cultivated in Ghana is trafficked to Mali for domestic consumption or to consumers in Senegal, but these routes do not pass through northern Mali and those involved in transporting it are not linked to armed groups in the region.¹⁸

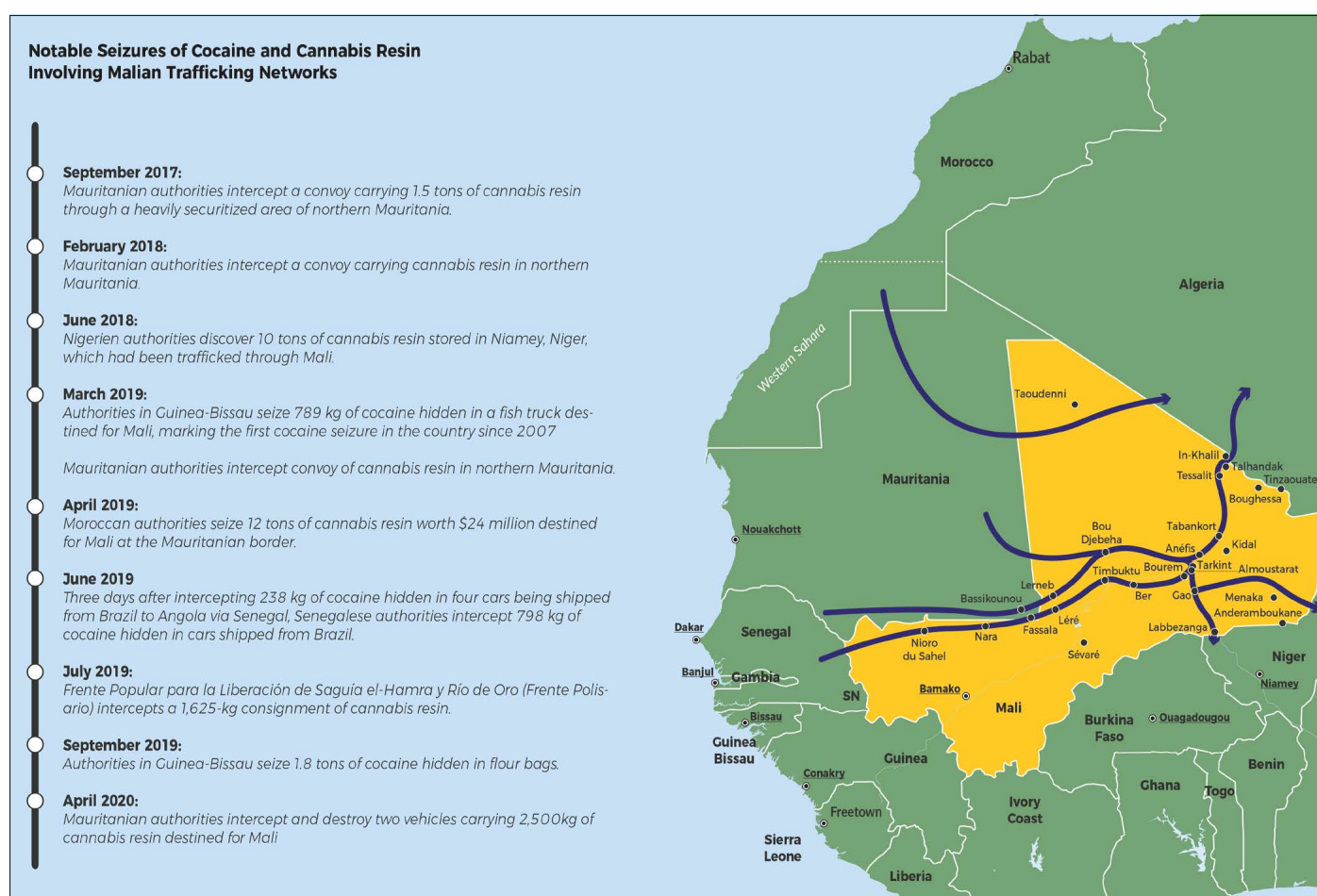
Synthetic consumer drugs such as tramadol, for which there is a growing domestic demand, are widely available, but seizures to date have been relatively small scale and do not specifically involve armed groups in northern Mali.¹⁹

A recent spike in global cocaine production, which has reached record highs in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, has created a situation where manufacture is exceeding demand.²⁰ This production boom has coincided with a spate of large, and in some cases record-breaking, seizures in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal (see Figure 1).

Anecdotal evidence provided to the Global Initiative by key informants indicates that there is probably less cocaine moving through Mali than there was in the late 2000s until 2012, but that cocaine is still passing through for onward transport to Niger and, to a lesser extent, Algeria.²¹ It is not possible to derive reliable estimates from this anecdotal evidence, in part because even key informants who are close to those trafficking narcotics do not always have a clear understanding of what, exactly, is being trafficked.²²

Similarly, the conversation about drug trafficking has become considerably more muted among alleged traffickers and those affiliated with them who want

Figure 1: Notable seizures of cocaine and cannabis resin involving Malian trafficking networks



to avoid scrutiny or sanction from the international community, even if they enjoy relative impunity within Mali.

There is a general sense that many actors in the north are positioning themselves to be the recipients of international donor largesse, in the form of aid and humanitarian funds, military partnerships, government contracts or border management²³ and lucrative positions within government. Being officially labelled a drug trafficker (as opposed to simply being known as one) comes with serious reputational risk.²⁴

Being officially labelled a drug trafficker comes with serious reputational risk

Despite the lack of drug seizures in Mali, there are good reasons to conclude that at a time when global cocaine production is at an all-time high and Morocco continues to be one of the largest producers of cannabis in the world, drug trafficking in the country continues under the radar, with seizures in the sub-region constituting only a fraction of the drugs that pass through northern Mali.

Recent seizures in Guinea-Bissau, for example, confirm West Africa's continued role as a transit point for cocaine trafficking and involvement by Malian networks. In March 2019 police in Guinea-Bissau found 789kg of cocaine in the false bottom of a truck.²⁵ At the time this was the largest cocaine bust in the country's history and the first there since April 2007, when authorities intercepted 635kg.²⁶ Six months later, in September 2019, authorities in Guinea-Bissau seized an even bigger shipment, consisting of more than 1.8 tons of cocaine hidden in flour bags.²⁷

In both these cases there were strong indications that Malian traffickers were involved. The 789kg shipment in March, for example, was found in a fish truck registered in Senegal and allegedly bound for Mali.²⁸ One of the men arrested, Sidi Ahmed Mohamed, is a close associate of well-known Malian narcotics trafficker Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri, also known as 'Rougi'. Although Ahmed Mohamed was travelling with a Nigerien passport and an identification card of the National Assembly for Niger, Nigerien authorities assert that he is Malian.²⁹

In the case of the 1.8 ton shipment in September 2019, police arrested four Bissau-Guineans, three Colombians and a Malian.³⁰ International law enforcement and intelligence sources in Mali indicated to the Global Initiative that networks associated with Mali's Lamhar Arab community were almost certainly involved, but could not confirm whether they intended to move the narcotics through Mali.³¹

However, the United Nations Panel of Experts reported in February 2020 that the parcels in both shipments carried similar logos, indicating at least some overlap between the organisations that sent, and possibly received, them. The report also indicated that the same logo was on packages of cocaine intercepted in Senegal in June 2019.³²

Several recent seizures of cannabis resin in the region further underscore Mali's role as a key transit hub and the heavy involvement of Malian networks. In September 2017 Mauritanian authorities intercepted a convoy carrying 1.5 tons of cannabis resin through a heavily securitised region of northern Mauritania.³³

In 2018 authorities in Niger seized a large quantity of cannabis resin in a compound in Niamey that was hidden in boxes normally used to transport oranges from Morocco. According to the United Nations Panel of Experts, 10 tons of cannabis resin were transported in cooling trucks that would have travelled from Morocco through Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso and eventually to Niger.

A portion of this consignment had been stolen by a competing network and subsequently transited through Agadez, Niger, in the direction of Libya.³⁴ As with the March 2019 cocaine bust in Guinea-Bissau, one of the men arrested, Sid'Ahmed Ben Kazou Moulati, is a close associate of Ben Ahmed Mahri. According to documents obtained by the UN Panel of Experts, Ben Kazou Moulati is listed as manager of one of the transportation companies owned by Ben Ahmed Mahri.³⁵

In April 2019, Moroccan authorities intercepted 12 tons of cannabis worth an estimated \$24 million at the border with Mauritania.³⁶ According to an August 2020 report by the United Nations Panel of Experts, the consignment was destined for Bamako, hidden in a truck that was registered to the same company Ben Ahmed Mahri' accomplice, Sidi Ahmed Mohomad, used in the aforementioned March 2019 cocaine seizure in Guinea-Bissau.³⁷

In July 2019 the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario) intercepted a 1 625kg consignment of cannabis resin in the southern sector of Morocco Western Sahara. The four men arrested were allegedly travelling to Mali.³⁸ The United National Panel of Experts reported that the shipment was due to be received and transported by Badi Ould Oumar, a Malian trafficker from the northern Mali's Bérabiche Arab community.³⁹

Most recently, in April 2020, Mauritanian authorities intercepted and destroyed two vehicles that had come from Western Sahara en route to the Mauritanian border with Mali. Information collected by the United Nations Panel of Experts indicates that the two vehicles were carrying a total of 2 500 kg of cannabis resin, and that Malian traffickers who operate in Timbuktu and Taoudenni were the intended recipients of the consignments.⁴⁰

In all, individuals and companies associated with Malian citizen Mohamed 'Rougi' Ben Ahmed Mahri have been directly implicated in at least four of the largest seizures of both cocaine and cannabis resin in the region since 2018. The fact that these seizures, as well as those involving other Malian trafficking networks, took place in five different countries and involved cocaine from South America and cannabis resin from Morocco which either passed through or were intended to pass through Mali, further highlights the extent to which northern Mali is still used as a transit zone by transnational criminal networks.

Control of trafficking routes

In addition to high-profile examples like the recent large-scale seizures in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Morocco, Mauritania, and Niger in which Malian nationals were involved, competition over control of strategic trafficking corridors and fighting over drug consignments within Malian territory further underscore the extent to which high-value narcotics are still trafficked through the country.⁴¹

In April 2018, for example, a convoy carrying four tons of cannabis resin was being escorted by a member of the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad-*Plateforme* (MAA-*Plateforme*) and by Ahmoudou Ag Asriw, a leader of the Groupe d'autodéfense touaregs Imghad et alliés (GATIA), when it was attacked by elements associated with MNLA. Three people were killed in the clashes and the

stolen cargo was reportedly trafficked to Algeria via the crossing at Tinzaouaten.⁴²

This incident highlights some of the ways in which drug traffickers have inserted themselves and their interests into the structures of armed groups that are signatories to the peace accords.

Ag Asriw, a Tuareg, now a military chief of staff within GATIA, was operating with assistance from a member of the MAA-*Plateforme*, a signatory group used by certain Lamhar Arab traffickers as a vehicle to represent their interests within the peace process. The attackers in this case were associated with the MNLA, a rival Tuareg group, which, in addition to representing the interests of Ifoghas Tuaregs and their allies, is aligned with certain Kounta Arab communities under the banner of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA).

Drug traffickers have inserted themselves and their interests into the structures of armed groups

In a similar incident, cannabis resin consignments believed to belong to Malian trafficker Hussein Ould Ghaname, also known as 'Guigoz', were attacked in 2018 by gunmen reportedly acting on behalf of the late Settar Ould Ahmed Hairi.⁴³

Ould Ahmed Hairi, a Bérabiche Arab businessman operating out of Taoudenni, was reportedly an associate of well-known trafficker Hanoun Ould Ali Mahara of the MAA-*Plateforme*,⁴⁴ who was assassinated by unknown gunmen in 2018. In yet another example of drug-trafficking rivalries linked with armed group affiliations, Ould Ghaname allegedly relies on military protection provided by the MAA faction aligned with the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (MAA-CMA) in Ber.⁴⁵

In addition to these two cases, several other violent confrontations involving actors affiliated with the MAA-*Plateforme* and the MAA-CMA took place in northern Mali in 2019 and 2020, with competition over drug consignments and disputes over protection payments playing central role.⁴⁶

While these armed groups and affiliations may only have been created in the past eight years, the pattern of current competition over drug-trafficking routes in northern Mali can largely be traced back to the alliances that predated the 2012 crisis.

Alliances of convenience

Drug trafficking in northern Mali was initially monopolised by specific Arab communities, with other Arab and Tuareg communities becoming involved in the mid-2000s. Increased competition over the trade led to militarised protection economies, which also became intertwined within state security structures.⁴⁷

In the years leading up to the coup in 2012, for example, cocaine and cannabis resin trafficking in northern Mali were facilitated by increasingly entrenched alliances among high-level government officials, elements within the Malian military and pro-government militias. Having rejected the terms of the 2006 and 2008 Algiers Accords between the government and an alliance of Tuareg rebels, a rebel faction led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga continued a low-level rebellion targeting Malian military installations.

Desperate to keep a lid on the rebellion in the north, Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré deployed a 'remote control'⁴⁸ strategy in which he relied on individual military units and ethnic militias,⁴⁹ notably those led by Tilemsi Arab Colonel-Major Abderahmane Ould Meydou and Imghad Tuareg Colonel El Hadj Ag Gamou.⁵⁰

The merger of protection economies with state security structures created a new dynamic in which, broadly speaking, government-supported Bérabiche Arab, Lamhar Arab and Imghad Tuareg military units – led by Lieutenant-Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, Colonel-Major Ould Meydou and Colonel Ag Gamou respectively – were called upon to counter the influence of Ifoghas and Idnan Tuareg rebels, who were allied with the Kounta Arabs.⁵¹ The intertwining of drug-trafficking networks with armed actors not only led to the increased militarisation of trafficking, it also upended traditional hierarchies and created disputes within and between communities.⁵²

During this same period, leading up to 2012, the overlap between drug traffickers and electoral politics became undeniable. Key figures associated with trafficking included Mohamed Ould Mataly, a member

of Parliament representing Bourem; Deity Ag Sidimou, a member of parliament from Tessalit,⁵³ and Baba Ould Cheikh, the mayor of Tarkint, who was not only involved in the 2009 Air Cocaine incident but was referred to by then President Touré as 'my bandit', in reference to Ould Cheikh's role as a facilitator in negotiating the release of foreign diplomats kidnapped by AQIM.⁵⁴

One person who typifies this era is Mohamed Ould Awainat, a well-known drug trafficker implicated in the 'Air Cocaine' case, who was released from prison in January 2012 on condition that he support pro-government Arab militias under the command of Ould Meydou. As part of the deal the government promised to make him a parliamentarian with full legal immunity.⁵⁵

The overlap between drug traffickers and electoral politics became undeniable

In hindsight, the infiltration of drug-trafficking interests into formal and informal political and security structures is easy to identify, but at the time these dynamics were obscured within the context of increasing corruption and self-dealing among Mali's political and economic elites. A notable example of drug-related wealth and power that did garner attention, however, was the emergence of a neighborhood on the outskirts of Gao, northern Mali's largest city and a key trafficking hub, known as 'cocaine-bougou' (literally 'cocaine village' in the Bambara language).

It is not clear to what extent the large, conspicuous villas of 'cocaine-bougou' were actually financed by drug trafficking, as opposed to other sectors of informal and contraband economies, but the name indicates the extent to which narratives of 'narcos' and 'drug barons' became part of the social discourse among a Malian population increasingly frustrated with the political class.⁵⁶

After the collapse of northern Mali in 2012, all the major towns and cities were captured by a coalition of jihadist groups. Practically speaking, this meant the collapse of the trafficking system that had existed before the coup in Bamako in that year, as various actors who were central to the protection economies were either pushed out or marginalised. However, those associated with drug trafficking quickly formed the new alliances

necessary to continue their activities, recalibrating their networks of protection and patronage to fit in with the region's new realities.⁵⁷

The ability of various actors, specifically those with ties to the Lamhar Arab community, to cut deals with whichever group in northern Mali had the upper hand at any given time during this period underscored the extent to which drug traffickers can adapt to changing security and socio-political dynamics.

The flexibility of these networks was demonstrated again in the wake of the French-led military intervention to oust armed jihadist groups from the major towns and cities in the region. By that time some who had initially been aligned with separatist rebels, only to realign with jihadist groups, or at least act adjacent to them, were able to reposition themselves as indispensable allies and partners in the international counterterrorism effort.⁵⁸

After Serval

In the aftermath of Opération Serval, non-jihadist armed groups began positioning themselves according to divisions that were nominally 'pro-government' and 'anti-government'. A pivotal moment came in February 2013 when French aircraft bombed an armed convoy that was preparing to capture the strategic smuggling hub of In-Khalil, on the border with Algeria.

The official account given at the time was that France conducted the strike in order to protect elements within the MNLA, who had been fighting alongside French troops in the area, from jihadists. But the unofficial version, and one that is more widely shared among those involved,⁵⁹ is that the convoy heading for In-Khalil was in the service of Arab traders who were seeking to recover millions of euros worth of goods – including drug consignments – that had been stolen from them by their Idnan Tuareg rivals.⁶⁰

The fallout from In-Khalil lingered as various communities in northern Mali, and their associated armed groups, formed alliances in the aftermath of Opération Serval. Rival factions eventually coalesced into two main groupings, both signatories to the 2015 peace agreement. One grouping, the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), is comprised of the MNLA, the Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) and factions of the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, (MAA-CMA) and of the Co-ordination des mouvements et Forces patriotiques de résistance (CMFPR II).

On the opposite side is the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger, known as the 'Plateforme', an alliance of nominally 'pro-government' armed groups such as the Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (GATIA), and factions of the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, (MAA-Plateforme) as well as the original faction of the Co-ordination des mouvements et Forces patriotiques de résistance (CMFPR I).

Between 2013 and 2015 rival armed groups regularly clashed over key trafficking hubs

Although the CMA is largely comprised of former separatist rebels (as well as actors previously associated with Ansar Dine) and the Plateforme consists of 'pro-government' armed groups, these labels are simplistic and not particularly helpful in understanding the actions and motivations of armed actors in northern Mali. Alliances between and within armed groups often reflect their position against rivals and are the product of tactical choices made at a micro level, rather than a reflection of ideology, grand strategy or a shared vision of the future of Mali.⁶¹

While competition over trafficking routes and hubs was not the only consideration, disputes over trafficking did play a role in splitting the MAA into rival factions as well as complicating the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Accord.⁶² Between 2013 and 2015 rival armed groups regularly clashed over key trafficking hubs, notably Lerneb, Ber and Tabankort, while local mediation initiatives known as Anéfis I (2015) and Anéfis II (2017) sought to diminish these conflicts.

Figures influential in trafficking were involved in these processes, which, among other goals, aimed to reduce armed competition, theft and banditry in northern Mali so as to avoid escalations leading to direct conflict among signatories to the Algiers agreement.⁶³

A (re)new(ed) criminal equilibrium

Enduring routes and itineraries

Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania are the most common entry points on the African continent for cocaine shipments that eventually enter Mali, while

cannabis resin cultivated in Morocco is transported into Mali overland via Mauritania, for onward transport to Niger and Algeria.⁶⁴

Within Mali there are numerous key trafficking hubs, which include, but are not limited to, the towns and cities of Lerneb, Boujbeha, Léré, Nioro du Sahel, Nara, Timbuktu, Ber, Bourem, Almoustrat, Tarkint, Gao, Menaka, Labbezanga, Anderamboukane, Anéfis, In-Khalil, Taoudenni, Tessalit, Talhandak, Tinzaouaten, Kidal, Tabankort, and Boughessa.⁶⁵

While cocaine and cannabis resin flows through Mali generally move from west to east, there are no defined itineraries and routes are constantly altered according to the groups involved and the security dynamics at the time a particular consignment arrives.⁶⁶

Both cocaine and cannabis resin are trafficked through northern Mali into southern Algeria and Niger (sometimes via Burkina Faso). Once in Algeria narcotics may continue north to the Mediterranean coast or be smuggled directly into Libya for shipment by sea to Europe.

Southern Algeria also serves as a transit zone for onward trafficking to Niger, where narcotics may be routed toward Libya, or onward through Chad and even Sudan, for eventual arrival in Egypt. In the vast majority of cases the destinations are coastal states in North Africa, from where both cocaine and cannabis resin are shipped to larger consumer markets in Europe and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East.⁶⁷

Mali's southern border with Burkina Faso is attracting growing attention among analysts of organised crime, in part because the Burkinabe state has retreated from large swathes of territory in the past two years, which are now controlled by jihadist groups. Clashes between jihadists and state security forces on both sides of the Mali-Burkina Faso border have resulted in new zones and corridors of instability, which, in theory, provide opportunities for criminal actors to profit from weak or non-existent state structures.

Some key informants indicated that cocaine may be entering Mali through Burkina Faso, where certain actors associated with cigarette trafficking, for which Burkina Faso has long served as a major regional hub. These shipments allegedly arrive in Mali overland via the Sahel and Nord regions of Burkina Faso, from where they feed into trafficking networks in northern Mali.

The Global Initiative was not able to substantiate this information and several sources questioned the validity of the claims, suggesting that other illicit flows of cigarettes and perhaps cannabis hemp were being conflated with cocaine trafficking.⁶⁸ Certain illicit economies are already thriving in these zones, particularly the illegal gold-mining sector, from which jihadist groups linked with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are deriving direct profits.⁶⁹

Revamped networks, reset political economies

One oft-repeated truism about drug trafficking in the Sahel is that traffickers seek to exploit 'ungoverned' or 'lawless' spaces in order to carry out their activities. But despite the fact that the Malian government is barely present in northern Mali, illicit economies are, in fact, quite highly regulated through systems of patronage networks, protection economies and informal agreements. These systems allow a diversity of actors to carry out illicit and informal activities with a degree of predictability, despite the fact that no one group enjoys a monopoly on force.

Drug trafficking is facilitated by overlapping sub-regional illicit networks, not by defined armed groups or criminal organisations

Once again, the case of Ahmedou Ag Asriw, who holds a leadership position within GATIA, is instructive. After several violent clashes between rival criminal networks over cannabis resin consignments in 2018 and 2019 Ag Asriw and his partners within the MAA-Plateforme sought a rapprochement with networks associated with the CMA.⁷⁰

These overtures ultimately resulted in new levels of coordination among rival armed groups to ensure the safe passage of drug consignments through the regions of Gao and Kidal, with MNLA commander Mahamed Ag Akly and Mahamoud Ag Attayoub, who acts on behalf of Khalid Ag Mohamed, the son of HCUA leader Mohamed Ag Intallah.⁷¹

Leaders of the Plateforme and CMA maintain that drug trafficking is not a key driver of conflict in northern

Mali and is confined to a relatively small set of actors whose loyalties and affiliations are spread across both coalitions.⁷² International experts based in Mali tend to agree with this assessment. 'When we talk about traffickers, we are talking about individuals, not groups,' explained one expert analysing trends in security and organised crime in the country.⁷³

Drug trafficking is facilitated by overlapping sub-regional illicit networks, not by defined armed groups or criminal organisations, which, in part, explains why there is such a diversity of trafficking routes for South American cocaine through Africa to Europe, as well as Moroccan cannabis resin throughout the region.⁷⁴

Malian government officials also push back against narratives that consider drug trafficking a key driver of conflict in northern Mali. 'There were no drugs during the rebellions of the 1960s and the 1990s. So, you can't just say this is about drug trafficking,' explained one minister, whose dossier includes the implementation of the Algiers peace process.⁷⁵

The same official emphasised that there is only so much that Mali can be expected to do, given that the country is neither a producer nor a major consumer of narcotics; a sentiment echoed by several other government officials interviewed.⁷⁶

According to the abovementioned government official, the most destructive component of the narcotics trafficking is not the violence associated with competition among armed groups over routes but the ways in which regional criminal economies infiltrate more innocuous informal economies.⁷⁷

Others noted that by embedding themselves within armed groups that are signatories to the 2015 peace accords, some traffickers who would previously have been considered mere spoilers have now been given undue legitimacy within the peace process.⁷⁸

As was the case before the 2012 coup drug-trafficking proceeds are laundered through legitimate companies, notably transport companies in Mali and their regional subsidiaries, and invested in legal economic activity, including land and real estate purchases, construction projects, livestock and agribusiness, as well as in assets and enterprises throughout West Africa and the Maghreb.⁷⁹

Profits are also invested in the patronage networks on which drug traffickers rely, making sure that paths of

corruption are smoothed and the necessary political protection is assured.⁸⁰

Although some of these illicit proceeds are laundered in Bamako (notably through property purchases and business investments), a lot of the money 'stays up north'.⁸¹ In the city of Gao, for example, companies technically owned and operated by people outside the Lamhar Arab community, are widely cited as fronts for illicit money.⁸²

'Trafficking is a lot more banal than people think,' explained one UN source, who focuses on security in Mali, describing how individual businessmen have networks and connections that span countries throughout the region. 'Money goes back into communities, not necessarily armed groups,' the expert explained, emphasising the fact that powerful individuals, not groups, form the core of these networks.⁸³

Trafficking is a lot more banal than people think, money goes back into communities, not necessarily armed groups

Due to the nature of armed groups in northern Mali and the ways in which these groups represent the interests of certain communities, it is not always possible to differentiate legal investments from 'support' for armed groups.

Several sources confirmed, for example, that drug-trafficking proceeds are invested in the rapidly-growing artisanal gold-mining sector in Kidal.⁸⁴ These investments are both an effort to launder illicit money and to maximise returns, which can then be parlayed into greater power or influence.

Several of these gold-mining sites are directly controlled by individuals affiliated with the CMA, which means drug-trafficking proceeds in these cases are being invested in economic activity that provides direct revenue to the CMA.⁸⁵ Furthermore, some of the actors investing in the gold economy are traffickers affiliated with rivals of the CMA (notably GATIA and MAA-Plateforme), meaning that drug-trafficking proceeds are dispersed across communities and even among rivals, if indirectly.⁸⁶

The extent to which jihadist groups profit directly from narcotics trafficking is not believed to go beyond payments and rents for protection and passage through certain territory. Prices quoted to the Global Initiative indicated several thousand dollars per convoy, but these estimates varied and there is contradictory information about how often traffickers have to pay for such protection.⁸⁷ Thus, there are no reliable estimates of the size of the protection economy and the extent to which jihadists profit from it directly.

While the profits earned on a given consignment might be quite large, they are by no means an important source of revenue for jihadist groups, who rely on other activities, including kidnapping for ransom, collecting rents, wealthy patrons and banditry. For example, the vast majority of the weapons and materiel they have assembled were obtained by looting Malian stocks via direct attacks on the military.⁸⁸

That said, several individuals involved in drug trafficking were once members of or allied with jihadist groups during the period in 2012 in which a jihadist coalition controlled northern Mali. The fluid nature of alliances within and between armed groups in northern Mali is further complicated by the fact that in the past two years there has been an ostensible détente among some of those who are parties to the peace process and jihadist elements operating in northern Mali.

In the past five years in particular, jihadist groups have carried out targeted assassinations of individuals and entire communities who have collaborated with the French military and the international community in counterterrorism operations. Whereas certain groups and individuals once openly courted partnerships with the French military,⁸⁹ or considered forming alliances in order to counter jihadist groups,⁹⁰ many of those involved in the peace process are deliberately avoiding confrontation with jihadist groups.⁹¹

'The war on terror is a "Western war", it is not my war,' one leader within the Plateforme coalition told the Global Initiative in October.⁹² A prominent military commander in the CMA expressed similar sentiments, arguing that the situation in northern Mali constitutes a proxy war between jihadist groups that are funded by outsiders and Western powers who want 'Africa's resources'.⁹³ There is a general sense among certain influential leaders within armed groups that 'strategic neutrality' is the best path forward, at least in the short term.⁹⁴

Thus, even though jihadist groups are not directly involved in drug trafficking and claims of a narco-jihadist nexus remain unproved, there is an equilibrium within northern Mali that works in the interests of both sets of actors. This ostensible non-aggression pact among key elements within the CMA and Plateforme and jihadist groups enables narcotics traffickers to carry out their activities. It has also led to instances of collaboration when it comes to monitoring the movements of international forces, sharing human intelligence and, in some cases, sharing the spoils of raids and attacks on Malian military bases.⁹⁵

Limited options

The ways in which narcotics trafficking is intertwined with the formal and informal political, economic and security structures outlined above limit considerably the options available to the international community and the Malian government in tackling the trafficking issue.

Given that it is such a lucrative activity, those involved are unlikely to give it up unless the government or the international community can persuade or coerce them into doing so. The problem is that tackling drug trafficking within Mali would require targeting individuals who hold considerable influence in groups that participate in the peace process, and who have high-level connections in Bamako.

The drug traffickers have made concerted efforts to endear themselves to the communities through charity

The drug traffickers are prominent members of their communities and, in addition to laundering their money by investing it in the formal economy, have made concerted efforts to endear themselves to the communities through charity, the construction of mosques and sponsoring music and cultural events. They are well positioned to portray moves against them by the Malian government or the international community as attacks on the community as a whole, and can also threaten to play the role of spoilers in the ongoing implementation of the peace agreement.⁹⁶

The work of the United Nations Panel of Experts and the resultant sanctions imposed on certain individuals involved in drug trafficking has been an important step in documenting and naming those involved. These efforts are essential not only in 'naming and shaming' the perpetrators but also in making it impossible for people to ignore the problem or claim ignorance.

Yet there is still the question of who, if anybody, is capable of countering drug trafficking in northern Mali. The government lacks the presence and capacity to tackle the problem meaningfully through law enforcement, and pursuing a militarised approach is fraught with risk, given the deep mistrust between the government and many communities in northern Mali.

Targeting illicit economies is likely to alienate the very communities that are inherently sceptical about the government

A focus on targeting illicit economies and thereby potentially compromising the resources on which entire communities rely, is likely to alienate the very communities that are inherently sceptical about the government. Given the long history of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Malian army against certain communities in northern Mali, any intervention perceived as disruptive or parasitic should be avoided at all costs.

Another option is to bolster and clarify the roles and mandates of MINUSMA, Barkhane, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and Takuba as they pertain to drug trafficking. Yet to do so still carries the risk of perceptions that groups and individuals who are participants in the peace process are being targeted by outsiders. In addition, relationships between local populations and these forces, which are already strained in the cases of MINUSMA and Barkhane, could quickly deteriorate should they be seen as meddling in internal community affairs rather than providing security.

Given that Mali is a transit country in which the drugs in question are neither produced nor consumed in large quantities, it stands to reason that efforts to counteract drug trafficking should focus on other parts of the supply chain. The fact that global production

of narcotics is at an all-time high and global efforts to prevent narcotics flows have forced traffickers to use more circuitous routes through places like Mali is hardly Mali's fault.

In the case of cocaine, greater emphasis on prevention at the initial ports of entry on the African continent would help reduce Mali's role as a transit country. Cannabis resin presents a different challenge because it is cultivated in the region. Yet actors in Mali, particularly participants in the peace process, could work to demilitarise drug trafficking so that clashes do not risk undermining peacebuilding efforts.

The transnational nature of these flows highlights a clear need for greater intelligence sharing and coordination among regional governments, but many of the same uncomfortable questions of state complicity also apply to Mali's neighbors. Malian government officials, for example, often stress that key actors within the networks that move drugs through the country spend much of their time, or may be based, in Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco and Algeria.

Thus, while individual states have limited capacity to counter drug trafficking meaningfully, there is also a lack of political will within various governments to discuss frankly the ways in which various politically connected individuals are either directly involved or complicit. Delicate, nuanced initiatives at the diplomatic level would be a useful starting point here, rather than a narrow, clinical focus on law enforcement.

International actors such as MINUSMA, the European Union and the French military have thus far preferred to focus on countering jihadist groups, building the capacity of the Malian state and implementing the peace process.

Most analysts agree that these priorities are more important than trying to tackle drug trafficking, in part because of all the potential pitfalls described above. But that does not mean that the Malian government or the international community can afford to ignore the deleterious effects of drug trafficking. One of the key lessons from 2012, after all, is the extent to which the political economy of narcotics trafficking can prevent both state and non-state institutions from developing in ways that meet the needs of Malians.

Given the lack of viable options for the Malian government and the international community, the best policy in the near and medium term is one of strategic

patience and renewed focus on building the capacity of law enforcement and legal structures. Many of these capacity-building efforts are already underway via MINUSMA, the EU Training Mission (EUTM) and the EU Capacity and Assistance Program (EUCAP), but they are still long-term endeavors unlikely to yield results on the scale necessary in the short term to build a case against and prosecute powerful drug traffickers. Furthermore, many of these training efforts have been disrupted and in some cases suspended in response to the August 2020 coup.

The focus of relevant stakeholders, therefore, should be on supporting existing formal and informal institutions in order to provide security and help implement peace agreements, while continuing to better understand and monitor drug-trafficking activities in northern Mali.

As Bamako enters a new phase of political uncertainty and political transition, the governance outlook is as complicated as ever. Drug traffickers are able to operate with impunity do to their political connections, and in the rare cases when individuals have been arrested for drug trafficking, they have almost always been released under dubious circumstances.

One of the high-level officials arrested by the CNSP after the coup, however, was General Moussa Diawara. According to a recent United Nations Security Council report, Diawara, who was the head of Mali's intelligence services, had been providing protection and promises of impunity to traffickers from the Lamhar Arab community in exchange for monthly payments from Mohamed Ould Mataly.⁹⁷

In addition to being a representative in Mali's recently dissolved national assembly, Ould Mataly is on the United Nations sanctions list for activities that have been deemed detrimental to the peace process. Ould Mataly has also long been tied to drug trafficking, particularly through his son-in-law, Mohamed 'Rougi' Ben Ahmed Mahri, whose involvement in several incidents involving large consignments of cocaine and cannabis resin are outlined above.

It is unclear at this time if the junta arrested Diawara because of his alleged connections to drug traffickers, or simply because he was part of Keïta's inner circle, but Diawara is at least one concrete example of the connections drug traffickers have with individuals at the highest levels of Malian government. If recent history is any guide, drug trafficking networks in northern Mali will quickly adapt to whatever new realities emerge out of Bamako in the coming weeks and months, reinforcing existing patronage networks and developing new ones where necessary.

Northern Mali could be a space where informal political, economic and security structures attuned to the needs of the communities coexist with an administrative state that safeguards and enhances – rather than hinders – livelihoods. And there is a pressing need to move beyond the false choice between turning a blind eye to narcotics trafficking for fear of disrupting balances of power on the one hand and pursuing militarised approaches that will likely do more harm than good on the other.

Facile descriptions of drug trafficking as a discrete criminal activity that takes place on the margins of northern Mali's political economy are somewhat defensible when intended as a corrective to breathless accounts of 'narco-jihadism', but analysts and policymakers should be careful not to accept the status quo or enable impunity through essentialist explanations.

In the end, it is Malian citizens who have the most to lose from a status quo in which criminal networks, including drug trafficking networks, heavily influence governance outcomes in Mali. Effectively combatting drug trafficking in Mali would require large structural political, economic, and security reforms. At present, however, there is little indication that any of the key actors involved – in Bamako, in northern Mali, or in capitals abroad – are interested in radical change.

Annexure

Key individuals associated with drug trafficking in northern Mali

Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri aka Mohamed Ould Ahmed Deya or Mohamed Ould Mahri Ahmed Daya, commonly referred to as 'Mohamed Rougi' or just 'Rougi' (also spelled Rouggie, Rouggy, and Rouji): A Lamhar Arab businessman from Gao region who previously collaborated with MUJAO and is currently on the United Nations sanctions list. He has long been associated with narcotics trafficking in northern Mali and the Malian government issued a warrant for his arrest in February 2013, which was withdrawn in October 2013. Individuals and companies associated with 'Rougi' were directly implicated in at least one large cocaine bust in Guinea-Bissau in 2019, as well as the seizure of cannabis resin consignments in Niger (2018) and Morocco (2019). He is the son-in-law of Mohamed Ould Mataly.⁹⁸

Ahmedou Ag Asriw aka Amadou Ag Asriw or Ahmedou Ag Isrew: A senior commander within GATIA, Ag Asriw has been accused of facilitating the passage of drug convoys through northern Mali. In April 2018 he was involved in escorting a convoy carrying four tons of cannabis resin that was attacked by elements associated with MNLA. In 2019 he was appointed chief of staff of a new GATIA branch that sought rapprochement with the rival CMA, an effort that appears to have enabled increased coordination among criminal networks associated with the MAA-*Plateforme* and CMA to ensure the safe passage of drug convoys through their respective territories.⁹⁹ Ag Asriw was placed on the United Nations sanctions list in December 2018.

Mohamed Ould Mataly: A Lamhar Arab businessman and influential member of the MAA-*Plateforme*, Ould Mataly is the former Mayor of Bourem and is currently a parliamentarian, representing Bourem as a member of the Rassemblement pour le Mali party. He has long been associated with illicit trafficking in the region and is currently on the United Nations sanctions list. He is the father-in-law of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri and it is widely believed that his principal role in drug trafficking is providing political protection to traffickers as well as intelligence about government activities.¹⁰⁰ Mataly has denied these allegations in interviews with the Global Initiative.

Hanoun Ould Ali Mahara aka Hanoune Ould Ali: A well-known Arab drug trafficker who is the political leader of the MAA-*Plateforme*, Ould Ali Mahara is a close associate of Ould Mataly and the late Mahri Sidi Amar Ben Daha. He has also allegedly acted on behalf of Ben Ahmed Mahri and was reportedly involved in trafficking a consignment of ten tons of cannabis resin seized in Niger in June 2018.¹⁰¹ He also enjoys close ties with prominent members of various jihadist groups in the region and is believed to be an interlocutor between the MAA-*Plateforme* and both JNIM and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).¹⁰²

Sidi Ahmed Mohamed: An alleged Malian national who was arrested in Guinea-Bissau for his involvement in facilitating the movement of 789kg of cocaine from Guinea-Bissau to Mali via Senegal. He was traveling in Niger with a Malian passport and carrying an identification card for the National Assembly of Niger. He is an associate of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri.¹⁰³

Ahmadou Ag Badi: A Malian national arrested in Niamey, Niger, in June 2018 for his involvement in trafficking 10 tons of cannabis resin seized in Niger. He was convicted of the 1999 carjacking and murder of a Danish citizen in Mali but, according to leaked US Diplomatic cables, 'escaped' from prison in 2004 and reemerged in 2008 as one of the leaders of a militia led by El Hadj Ag Gamou that would later become GATIA.¹⁰⁴ He is believed to have been operating out of Agadez, Niger, in recent years.¹⁰⁵

Mahri Sidi Amar Ben Daha aka Yoro Ould Daha, Yoro Ould Daya or Sidi Amar Ould Daha and commonly referred to as 'Yoro': A notable within the Lamhar Arab community in Gao, Ben Daha was a high-ranking officer in the Islamic Police when MUJAO controlled Gao in 2012 and later became the military chief of staff of the MAA-*Plateforme*.¹⁰⁶ A close associate of Ould and Hanoun Ould Ali Mahara,¹⁰⁷ he was the regional commander of the Mécanisme opérationnel de coordination (MOC) and was placed on the United Nations sanctions list in 2019. He was assassinated by unknown gunmen in Gao on 9 February 2020.

Hussein Ould Chaname aka 'Guigoz': A Malian trafficker involved in smuggling cannabis resin through the Timbuktu region. His consignments were attacked on multiple occasions by gunmen reportedly acting on behalf of the late Settar Ould Ahmed Hairi. He reportedly relies on military backing by the MAA-CMA in Ber.¹⁰⁸

Settar Ould Ahmed Hairi: A Bérabiche Arab businessman operating out of Taoudenni who, according to the United Nations Panel of Experts, had gunmen acting on his behalf attack cannabis resin convoys belonging to Housane Ould Ghaname. Assassinated in 2018, Ould Ahmed Hairi was a business associate of Hanoun Ould Ali Mahara.¹⁰⁹

Baba Ould Cheikh aka Baba Ould Cheick: An Arab businessman who was the Mayor of Tarkint at the time of the 'Air Cocaine' incident in 2009. Ould Cheikh, who has long been alleged to have ties to drug trafficking as well as to jihadist groups in the region, has played the role of facilitator in negotiating the release of foreign diplomats kidnapped by AQIM.¹¹⁰ He was briefly arrested by French troops in February 2013 only to be released and subsequently re-arrested by the Malian government in April 2013 and released again.¹¹¹ In January 2018 he was kidnapped from his home by gunman connected with ISGS but was released in February of that year.¹¹²

Mahamadou Ag Attayoub: An Ifoghas Tuareg who, according to a February 2020 report by the United Nations Panel of Experts, acts on behalf of Khalid Ag Mohamed, the son of Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) leader Mohamed Ag Intallah, to coordinate the transport of drug consignments through Gao and Kidal with Ahmedou Ag Asriw.¹¹³

Deity Ag Sidimou: A member of Parliament from Tessalit, Deity Ag Sidimou was detained by Algerian authorities for his alleged involvement in trafficking a 500kg cannabis resin consignment between Algeria, Mali and Niger, but was reportedly released due to his status as an elected foreign official.¹¹⁴ Malian authorities issued a warrant for his arrest on drug-trafficking charges in February 2013, which was subsequently withdrawn in October 2013.

Chérif Ould Tahar aka Chérif Ould Sidi, Chérif Ould Ataher or Chérif Ould Taher Mohamed: A Lamhar Arab from the Tilemsi area with an established reputation as a drug trafficker, Ould Tahar was allegedly involved in the 'Air Cocaine' incident.¹¹⁵ Malian authorities issued a warrant for his arrest on drug-trafficking charges in February 2013, which was withdrawn in October 2013. Ould Tahar is widely cited as a key figure within the cohort of local traffickers who formed alliances with MUJAO in 2012 in order to protect their business interests and has also acted as a facilitator in hostage negotiations between the Algerian government and MUJAO.¹¹⁶

Oumar Ould Mohamed: A Malian national who, according to the United Nations Panel of Experts, was involved in arranging the logistics for the 789kg of cocaine hidden in a fish truck seized in Guinea-Bissau in March 2019. He is an associate of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri.¹¹⁷

Mohamed Ould Awainat aka Mohamed Ould Awaynat or Mohamed Ould Laweinate: A well-known trafficker implicated in the 'Air Cocaine' case, who was released from prison in January 2012 on condition that he support pro-government Arab militias under the command of Ould Meydou. As part of the deal the government in Bamako promised to make him a parliamentarian with full legal immunity.¹¹⁸ He is now an influential figure in the MAA-CMA and has represented it at formal and informal gatherings of key figures in northern Mali.¹¹⁹

Badi Ould Oumar: An alleged drug trafficker who, according to an August 2020 report by the United Nations Panel of Experts, was the intended recipient of a 2 500 kg consignment of cannabis resin intercepted by Mauritanian authorities. Affiliated with the MAA-*Plateforme*, Ould Oumar was also reportedly involved in a violent clash near Boujbeha over a 1 ton consignment of cannabis resin being transported through northern Mali in November 2019.¹²⁰

Sid'Ahmed Ben Kazou Moulati aka Zaneylou: A Malian national arrested in Niamey, Niger, in 2018 for his involvement in trafficking ten tons of cannabis resin seized in Niger. According to documents obtained by the United Nations Panel of Experts, Ben Kazou Moulati is a close associate of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri and is listed as manager of one of the transportation companies owned by Ben Ahmed Mahri.¹²¹

Dina Ould Daya: An alleged narcotics trafficker who is a leader of the MAA-CMA.¹²² A prominent businessman, he was a key figure in Arab militias operating in Timbuktu before the Islamist takeover in 2012. Malian authorities issued a warrant for his arrest on drug-trafficking charges in February 2013, which was withdrawn in October 2013 and he remains an influential powerbroker in Timbuktu and the Taoudenni region.

Mohamed Ag Akly: A commander of the MNLA who, according to a February 2020 report by the United Nations Panel of Experts, works with Ahmedou Ag Asriw (GATIA) to facilitate the movement of drug consignments through the Gao and Kidal region.¹²³

Figure 2: Timeline of key political and military events

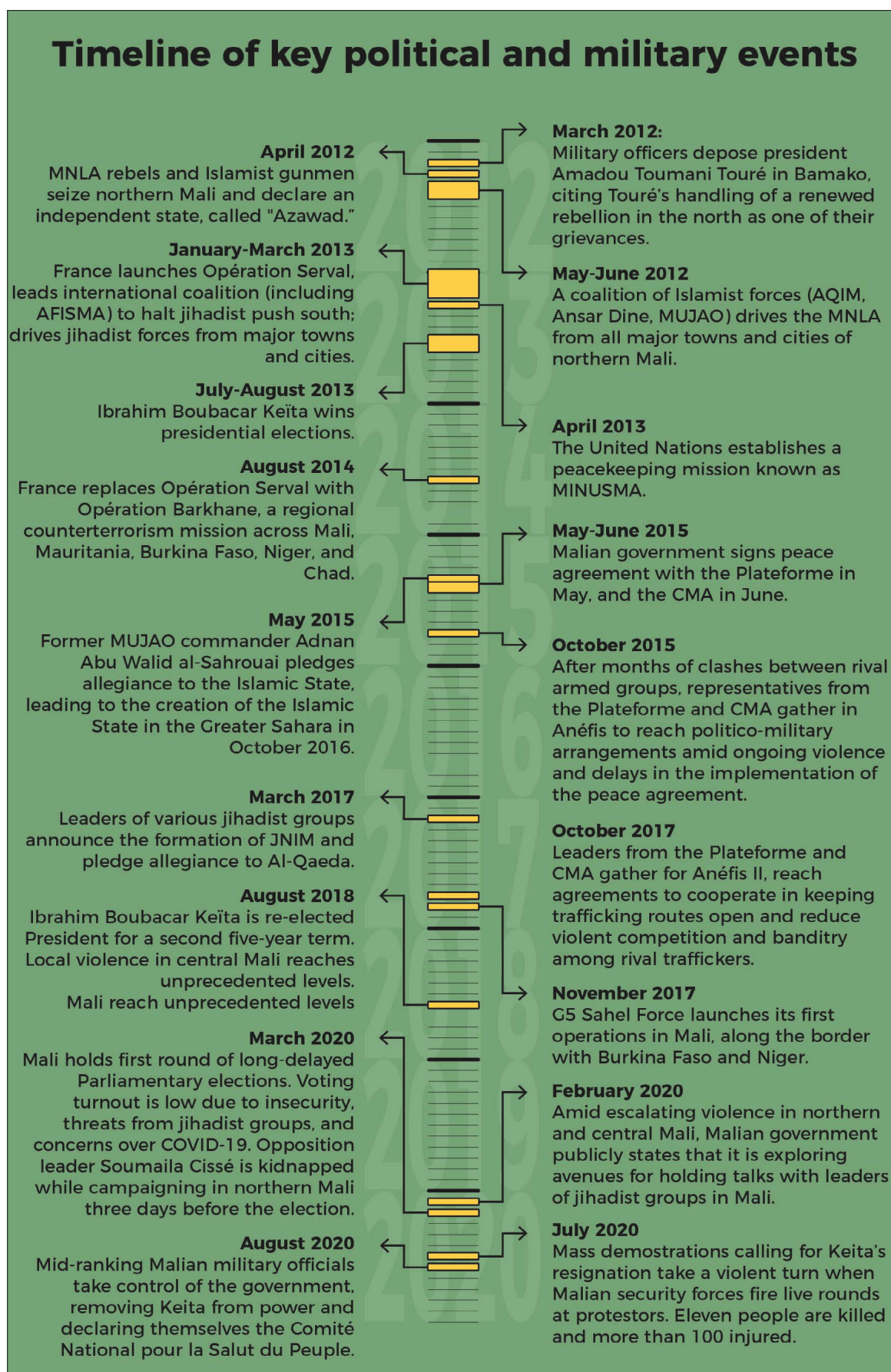
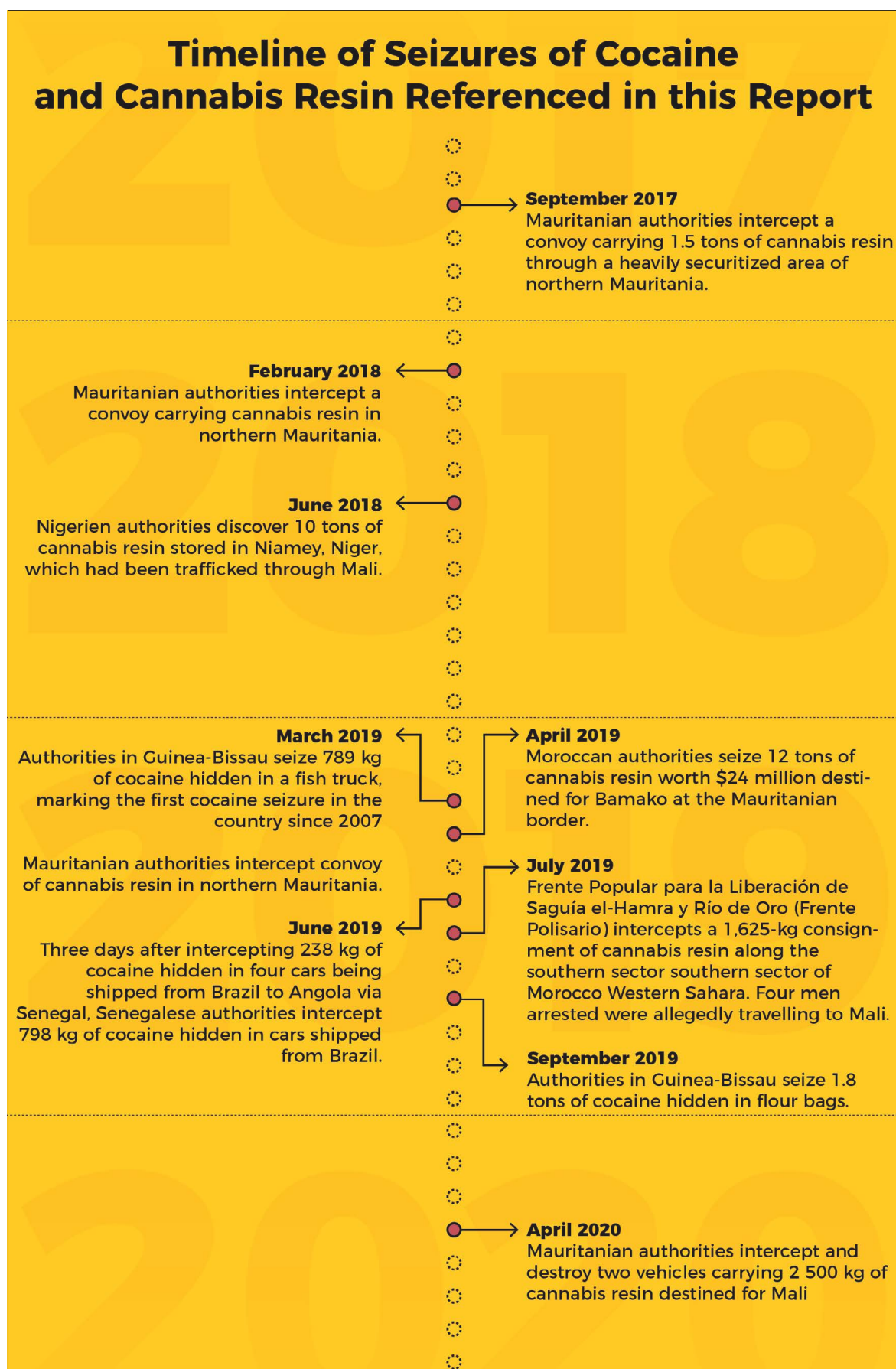


Figure 3: Timeline of seizures of cocaine and cannabis resin referenced in this report



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Read more about drug trafficking and counterfeit medicines at www.enact.africa



POLICY BRIEF



Issue 04 | June 2018

Tackling heroin trafficking on the East African coast

Simone Hayson, Peter Gastrow and Mark Shaw

Summary

In recent years, the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of maritime routes in East and Southern Africa appears to have increased considerably. An integrated regional criminal market has developed, shaped and shaped by political developments. Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use worldwide, and a spectrum of criminal networks and political elites in East and Southern Africa are substantially enmeshed in the trade. New policy approaches are urgently needed.

Key points

- Responses should address the challenge as a cross-border criminal system.
- Progressive action should be targeted in major drug hubs along the southern route, focusing on vulnerable areas and potential sources of regional instability, such as northern Mozambique.
- The relationship between politics, business and organised crime must be adequately researched and addressed.
- Vetted private sector actors should be engaged to prevent or reverse the criminalisation of key ports.
- Support must be increased for community-based initiatives that mitigate the effects of drug use.
- Programming interventions to reduce violence in the most vulnerable communities affected by the heroin trade in Southern and East Africa should be considered.

This brief focuses on:



RESEARCH PAPER



Issue 04 | June 2018

The heroin coast

A political economy along the eastern African seaboard

Simone Hayson, Peter Gastrow and Mark Shaw

Summary

In recent years, the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of maritime routes in East and southern Africa appears to have increased considerably. Most of this heroin is destined for Western markets, but there is a spin-off trade for local consumption. An integrated regional criminal market has developed, both shaped and shaped by political developments in the region. Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use worldwide and a spectrum of criminal networks and political elites in East and southern Africa are substantially enmeshed in the trade. This report focuses on the characteristics of the heroin trade in the region and how it has become embedded in the societies along this route. It also highlights the features of the criminal-governance systems that facilitate drug trafficking along this coastal route.

Recommendations

- The East African heroin market forms an integrated regional criminal economy based on the transit of heroin from Afghanistan to the West.
- The transit economy relies on international ports and other infrastructure, and high levels of political protection.
- There is a rapidly growing consumer drug market in the region – one that is much larger than is commonly acknowledged.
- Despite some positive trends in drug users' ability to access health services in several locations in the region, there are nevertheless gaps in appropriate drug treatment interventions.

This paper focuses on:



POLICY BRIEF



Issue 06 | November 2018

The rise of counterfeit pharmaceuticals in Africa

Robin Cartwright and Ana Baric

Summary

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) places significant emphasis on populations' health, and sub-target 3.8 specifies access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all. Yet, remarkably missing from the discourse around achieving this goal is the need to address the growing phenomenon of counterfeit medicines, which disproportionately affects developing countries. Counterfeit medicines put people's lives at risk, finance criminal groups and cause profound public health challenges. The full scale of the challenge in Africa is not fully understood, but research suggests that the problem and its impact are severe. If the continent is to make headway in achieving SDG 3, the issue of counterfeit medicines must move higher up on policy agendas. Experience elsewhere suggests that there would be scope for significant positive results.

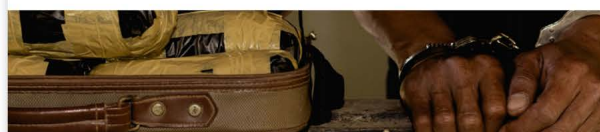
Key points

- Addressing counterfeit medicines in Africa may help prevent widespread loss of life, including an estimated 64 000-158 000 avoidable deaths from malaria alone, as well as mitigating other public health and public safety risks.
- Much greater prioritisation of the issue by African states and continental or regional bodies is needed. The response should include a substantial overhaul of the analytical, legal, educational, regulatory and enforcement systems around medical supply chains. The legal and regulatory frameworks for combating medicine fraud will need strengthening.
- These responses would need to be coordinated within a global effort, including setting up a database of intelligence on counterfeits, and improved awareness-raising and training campaigns. National medicines regulation authorities should investigate mass serialisation forms of track-and-trace.

This brief focuses on:



RESEARCH PAPER



Issue 05 | June 2018

Analysing drug trafficking in East Africa

A media-monitoring approach

Ciara Aucoin

Summary

By analysing drug-related incidents reported in the media in three key East African nations over the past decade, this paper provides insights into drug trafficking in the region. This includes the different drug types in circulation across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda; the quantities and trafficking methods used, as well as the origin, transit, and destination hubs. The report also suggests patterns in the actors involved, the nature of state responses and the reporting styles of the African and foreign press. The potential for improved sourcing using this methodology, and for greater public awareness of drug trafficking-related harms, lies in the development of stronger and more capable journalism in the region.

Key points

- East Africa plays an increasing role in the continent's illicit drug trade, particularly as a corridor for flows of heroin and cocaine.
- Media monitoring is an innovative way of gathering data to help illustrate trends in transnational organised crime, including drug trafficking trends.
- Findings show interesting patterns in reporting on major harmful drugs in the region, and the many challenges faced by journalists in investigating and publishing drug trafficking stories.
- The paper calls for greater press freedom and increased training and financial support for investigative journalism in East Africa, and across the continent more generally.

This paper focuses on:





About the author

Peter Tinti is a Senior Research Fellow at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and independent journalist, focusing on conflict, human rights and organised crime. As part of his work for the Global Initiative, Tinti has written and contributed to several reports on organised crime in the Sahel and Central America, as well as migrant smuggling networks in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

About ENACT

ENACT builds knowledge and skills to enhance Africa's response to transnational organised crime. ENACT analyses how organised crime affects stability, governance, the rule of law and development in Africa, and works to mitigate its impact.

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