



**ORGANIZED CRIME  
AND CONFLICT IN THE  
SAHEL-SAHARA REGION**

**Wolfram Lacher**

**MIDDLE EAST | SEPTEMBER 2012**

**CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT**

**FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE**

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel. +1 202-483-7600  
Fax: +1 202-483-1840  
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# Contents

Summary	1
The Growing Impact of Organized Crime	3
The Rise of Organized Crime in the Sahel	4
The Impact of Organized Crime: Collusion, Corruption, and Competition	9
The State–Organized Crime–Conflict Nexus in Mali	11
State Complicity With AQIM	13
Organized Crime and Current Conflict Dynamics in Mali	14
Policy Conclusions	17
Notes	21
About the Author	25
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	26



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## Summary

For the past decade, increasing instability in the Sahel and Sahara region has been a source of growing concern in Europe and the United States. Western governments have worried that the weakness of state control in the area would allow al-Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM) and other jihadist organizations to expand their influence and establish safe havens in areas outside government control. Such fears appear to have been vindicated by the recent takeover of northern Mali by AQIM and organizations closely associated with it.

Western governments have focused heavily on AQIM's presence, providing technical assistance in an attempt to strengthen the capacity of the security sectors and justice systems to combat the group. But Western governments have underestimated, if not ignored, the destabilizing impact of organized crime in the region. AQIM itself is in part a criminal network, kidnapping Western nationals with the double aim of extorting ransoms and freeing the group's imprisoned members. And up until Mali's military coup of March 2012, state complicity with organized crime was the main factor enabling AQIM's growth and a driver of conflict in the north of the country. Actors involved in organized crime currently wield decisive political and military influence in northern Mali.

As they have in the past, Sahel governments will be tempted to use organized crime as a political resource by allowing their allies to benefit from criminal activities—which has clear implications for policy. Concentrating on capacity building in the judicial and security sector is the right approach only if governments stand behind efforts to combat criminal networks. Donors should thus focus more on political engagement, encouraging strategies that make the political accommodation of influential players contingent upon their disengagement from the illicit economy and commitment to containing drug and weapons smuggling. This will be especially difficult in Mali, where the government will have to strike deals with local forces, including temporary alliances with at least some of the north's criminal networks, to gain back control of the territory. The challenge is ensuring that a settlement of the conflict there does not consolidate the power of criminal networks and expand their ability to operate.

But with few alternative sources of income in the region and none that can rival the gains to be made from criminal activity, taking strong steps to break up criminal networks could do more harm than good. The best external actors can do is to help incrementally weaken the networks in Mali's north by developing a coherent international approach to limiting ransom payments, one of AQIM's main sources of funding, and to help strengthen regional cooperation.

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## The Growing Impact of Organized Crime

Over the past decade, the United States and Europe have become increasingly focused on security in the Sahel and Sahara region—defined here as Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, as well as adjacent areas in Algeria and Libya—for fear that the territory could become a new safe haven for extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda. These fears appeared to have been borne out by the 2012 insurgency in northern Mali that saw northern cities fall under the control of two groups closely linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—Ansar Eddine and the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).

Meanwhile, the growth of organized criminal activity in the region received much less attention. External observers and Malian government officials readily acknowledged the importance of drug trafficking, but focused above all on the involvement of AQIM while ignoring or downplaying the links of state officials and political leaders to criminal networks. Moreover, Western policymakers primarily perceived the regional al-Qaeda franchise as a terrorist group, despite the fact that its most notorious activity consisted of abducting foreign nationals to extort ransoms.

In order to understand the crisis in northern Mali and more broadly the growing instability of the region it is necessary to go beyond the role of AQIM and other jihadist organizations. Rivalries over the control of smuggling and state officials' tolerance of criminal activity by political allies allowed extremist groups to flourish. The complicity and involvement of Malian officials, and the willingness of Western governments to pay ransoms, also caused the kidnapping industry to thrive. Moreover, these factors were key to the dynamics that caused the eruption of renewed conflict in northern Mali in 2012.

Researching organized crime is a task fraught with problems and pitfalls. In the Sahel, accusations and rumors about the actors involved abound, but little hard evidence is available. In various interviews the author carried out in Nouakchott and Bamako in July 2012, interlocutors were quite willing to make accusations against specific individuals, who were in most cases players in the conflict in northern Mali. Though it was often difficult to establish whether the accusations were valid or were weapons used to discredit political enemies, triangulation of information provided by multiple sources from different political backgrounds and with different agendas allows the author to feel reasonably confident of the accuracy of this analysis. Unless otherwise noted, the conclusions made here are based on those conversations and research in Mauritania and Mali, in addition to research in Libya in 2012.



## The Rise of Organized Crime in the Sahel

The Sahel and Sahara region is far from a pivotal area for transnational organized crime. The importance of organized criminal activity there stems from the fact that there are few alternative activities that produce similar profits and

**The importance of organized criminal activity in the Sahel-Sahara region stems from the fact that there are few alternative activities that produce similar profits and rapid enrichment.**

rapid enrichment. This particularly applies to three undertakings that have expanded significantly since around 2003: smuggling of Moroccan cannabis resin, cocaine smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom. Individuals and networks involved in these activities have converted their wealth into political influence and military power. Contraband trade in licit goods, which had developed across the region in previous decades, laid the institutional basis for the development of these high-profit activities.

### The Origins and Evolution of Illicit Regional Flows

While the bulk of commercial flows across the Sahara are in licit goods, which often rely on informal arrangements with security and customs services, the boundaries between licit and illicit trade are blurred. Long-standing commercial and social networks that are frequently based on families and communities specializing in trade are spread across trading hubs in different countries; those networks have been growing closer since decolonization in the 1960s. From the 1970s onward, the links that had survived the collapse of the long-distance caravan trade in the late nineteenth century began to expand, thriving on contraband of subsidized Algerian and Libyan goods traveling to northern Mali and Niger.<sup>1</sup>

Like consumer goods imported to Mauritanian ports and traded through Timbuktu in Mali by Arab merchants, these flows bypassed the official customs system in a process that led to the establishment of informal arrangements between traders and officials. In parallel, exports of camels from Mali and Niger to Algeria and Libya grew, often relying on the same networks. While this trade was dominated by Algerian and Libyan merchants, Malian and Nigerian Arab traders increasingly established themselves in the sector.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1990s, cuts to Algeria's subsidy budget caused a partial economic slump, but the embargo imposed on Libya stimulated contraband; in addition, conflicts in Algeria, northern Niger, and Mali turned the region into a major arms trafficking hub. Weapons smuggling was sometimes run by the same networks controlling contraband, as illustrated by the case of Hadj Bettou, who during the 1980s and early 1990s dominated contraband and weapons smuggling in southern Algeria, benefiting from the protection of senior security officials.<sup>3</sup> Contraband from Mauritania, Algeria, and Libya continues today and has intensified with the conflict in northern Mali, where supplies in food and petrol now overwhelmingly come from Algeria. The

illegal sale of subsidized Algerian fuel to Mali is managed by local officials in the Algerian administration and security apparatus.<sup>4</sup> The regional trade in weapons has increased as a result of the conflict in Libya and growing demand from northern Mali since early 2012.

Cigarette smuggling in particular has greatly contributed to the emergence of the practices and networks that have allowed drug trafficking to grow. The smuggling of cigarettes to North African markets began to thrive in the early 1980s, and it developed into a large-scale business controlled by a few major players. Cigarettes, imported through Mauritania, supplied a large portion of the Algerian and Moroccan markets, while those imported through Cotonou in Benin and Lome in Togo were routed through Niger and Burkina Faso to Libya and Algeria. In 2009, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated cigarettes smuggled along these routes accounted for around 60 percent of the Libyan tobacco market (or \$240 million in proceeds at the retail level) and 18 percent of the Algerian market (or \$228 million).

The key actors in this trade are legal cigarette importers and distributors, who import their merchandise from free trade zones such as Dubai. The trade is therefore best interpreted as a deliberate strategy by tobacco companies to circumvent tax regimes or break North African state monopolies on cigarette distribution.

This system has led to the erosion of the customs services because of corruption and collusion between smugglers and state officials. For part of its journey, the merchandise is transported in large trucks on the main roads, with the connivance of Malian and Nigerian security officials. In Libya, cigarette smuggling is controlled by networks in the security apparatus dominated by members of the Qadhafda tribe. In the triangle between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, Sahrawi networks—often with the direct involvement of officials in the Polisario movement, which seeks independence for Western Sahara—trade subsidized Algerian goods and humanitarian aid southward and cigarettes northward to Algeria and Morocco.<sup>5</sup> Cigarette smuggling has also contributed to the emergence of smaller gangs of smugglers charged with transporting the merchandise from Mauritania, Mali, and Niger into Algeria. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who later acquired notoriety as one of the leading figures in AQIM's Sahelian operations, is widely reputed to have long run a cigarette smuggling racket across the Sahara.<sup>6</sup>

Like contraband of licit goods and cigarette smuggling, the migrant business also helped spawn the emergence of carriers in the region specializing in off-road transport or in establishing arrangements with corrupt officials. Irregular migration flows from sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and on to Europe grew beginning in the early 1990s. Gao in northern Mali and Agadez

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in neighboring Niger, which are also hubs for cigarette smuggling, emerged as major hubs for migrants' journeys to Morocco (via Algeria) or Libya.

Across the Sahara, the migration business did not produce transnational networks on a significant scale. Irregular migration across the region generally follows a “pay-as-you-go” rather than a “full-package” system. That is, as outlined by the UNODC, one group or network does not typically manage the entire process; transportation and the negotiation of bribes with customs and

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**The emergence of multiple militias controlling parts of the Libyan territory has made the country more dangerous for migrants, who now risk being intercepted in many different locations.**

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police officials typically takes place in several separate legs across Niger and Mali, with Algerian or Libyan carriers taking over at the borders. Only in Libya was the control of migration and its profits monopolized by members of one tribe—the Qadhafya—with close links to the security apparatus.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of multiple militias controlling parts of the Libyan territory has made the country more dangerous for migrants, who now risk being intercepted in many different locations.

### **The Development of Drug Smuggling**

During the last decade, the smuggling of legal merchandise based on price differentials between countries and avoidance of taxes was supplemented by the smuggling of illicit drugs. Two distinct flows across the Sahel have expanded rapidly, their diverse routes intersecting at times: since around 2005 that of South American cocaine to Europe, including via Libya and Egypt, and that of Moroccan cannabis resin to Libya, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>8</sup> The growth was driven by rising demand in Europe and the Mashrek, as well as by tightened controls along the Moroccan-Algerian border, off the coasts of Spain and the Canary Islands, and in European airports, which made routes across the poorly controlled Sahel region appealing to smugglers.

The cocaine trade from South America to Europe via West Africa expanded rapidly in 2005–2007, and it remains important, despite a contraction after 2008. The UNODC estimated that around 14 percent of Europe's cocaine—or 20 tons, amounting to a wholesale value of \$1 billion in Western Europe—transited through West Africa in 2008. Most of the cocaine passing through West Africa on its way to Europe first arrives in one of the coastal states—notably Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, as well as Togo, Benin, and Ghana—and is then either transported by air or boat. Alternatively, cocaine is sent by air couriers to Europe, including from airports in the West African interior. Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey airports are among the hubs for air couriers, some of whom transit via Algiers airport. These routes remain active, as seizures during 2011 and 2012 at these airports underline.<sup>9</sup> Mauritania briefly emerged as a major transit country for air, sea, and overland transport in 2007–2008, the two biggest seizures being made in Nouadhibou airport in May 2007 (630 kg of cocaine) and in Nouakchott in August of the same year

(830 kg of cocaine).<sup>10</sup> Since 2008, however, Mauritanian annual seizures have drastically declined.

The overland routes across the Sahel and Sahara toward Europe are diverse, and there is little evidence for sustained major flows on any single route. Cocaine is transported from the coastal hubs—in this case, Guinea or Mauritania—overland to northern Mali and on to Morocco, Algeria, or Libya (via Algeria or northern Niger for Libya). Several reports that aircraft were being used to bring cocaine to northern Mali suggested that the overland route acquired greater importance during 2009 and 2010, at the same time seizures along the West African coast declined. By far the most spectacular of these reports was the discovery of a Boeing 727 carcass that had either crashed on takeoff or been set on fire near the town of Tarkint in Gao Region in November 2009. The plane, subsequently nicknamed “Air Cocaine” by the media, was registered in Guinea-Bissau and had taken off from Venezuela. According to the state prosecutor in the ongoing investigation, the plane carried between 7 and 11 tons of cocaine that was subsequently smuggled overland to Morocco by a network including Spanish, French, Moroccan, Malian, and Senegalese nationals.<sup>11</sup> While there is no evidence that a transaction of this magnitude was anything more than a one-off incident for northern Mali, there have been several reports of smaller aircraft being used to carry cocaine from the coastal hubs to Mali’s north.<sup>12</sup>

Since early 2011, however, there have been no incidents in the region that could indicate how cocaine smuggling routes and volumes have evolved since the collapse of the regime in Libya and since the eruption of conflict in northern Mali in early 2012. It is likely that overland smuggling across the Sahel and Sahara has declined because smuggling across West Africa dropped and the overland routes are by and large dependent on the hubs in coastal states.

In contrast, all available evidence suggests that the other major flow, of Moroccan cannabis resin toward Libya, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula, continues unabated. Moroccan production, considered the world’s largest or second largest, was estimated by the UNODC to be 877 tons in 2008. The Mauritanian intelligence services reportedly estimate that around one-third of Moroccan production transits the Sahel states, partly to circumvent the Algerian-Moroccan border.<sup>13</sup> Cannabis resin arrives in Mauritania overland (via Algeria or Western Sahara) or by boat, and then takes either a northern route to enter Mali in its far north, or it is transported along the Nouakchott-Nema road to enter Mali in Timbuktu Region.

The cannabis resin trade is dominated by mixed networks of Moroccan, Sahrawi, and Mauritanian nationals—as well as, allegedly, Algerian army officers—until it arrives in northern Mali. Across northern Mali and Niger, the bulk of cannabis resin smuggling is run by networks from Malian Arab communities that can often draw on family and tribal ties in Mauritania and Niger.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, Sahrawi cannabis resin smugglers with close ties to the

Polisario have been known to take cocaine to Morocco on their way back from Mali.<sup>15</sup> From northern Mali, cannabis resin smuggling routes partly overlap with those serving the cocaine trade, traversing northern Niger or southern Algeria toward Libya. The drugs are then either exported to Europe via the Balkans or transported to Egypt and Israel. Another route runs via Chad and Sudan to the Arabian Peninsula.

Seizures of 2 tons of cannabis resin off Nouadhibou (western Mauritania) in January 2012 and of 3.6 tons in Timbedra (eastern Mauritania) in May 2012 show that this trade is thriving. Instability in Libya and conflict in northern Mali does not appear to have disrupted this route, with 4 tons of cannabis resin seized in Tripoli in May 2012, suggesting that the city has become a major hub for the trade.<sup>16</sup>

There is little evidence to support allegations of direct AQIM involvement in drug smuggling. AQIM does not appear to be an actor in reported clashes between drug smugglers in the region. In addition, the link allegedly established by a court in New York between AQIM, the Colombian FARC, and cocaine smugglers does not hold: the case involved an undercover U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent presenting himself as a FARC representative to three Malian nationals, who in turn asserted they could arrange protection from AQIM for a cocaine shipment across the Sahara. There is nothing to suggest that this was anything more than a false claim made to impress their supposed business partner. It is plausible, however, to assume that AQIM, as other armed groups in northern Mali, has sought at times to impose transit fees on drug smugglers or lent its protection to smuggling convoys.

### Kidnapping for Ransom

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the Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali and Niger in the mid-1990s, the so-called “residual banditry” affecting the Sahara included occasional kidnappings of foreign nationals for political or financial ends. The abduction of 32 European tourists in 2003 in southern Algeria—seventeen of whom were freed on Algerian territory, while the fifteen remaining hostages were released in northern Mali after six months of captivity—was a novelty both in its scope and with regard to the responsible party. The kidnappings were carried out by the Algerian insurgent Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which in early 2007 changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. However, the case remained a one-off incident for several years. Excluding an attack on the Mauritanian border post of Lemgheity in 2005, there was little evidence that the group had a significant presence, leading some observers to question whether it was a fact or fiction.<sup>17</sup>

This changed in December 2007 when four French tourists were killed by AQIM members in southern Mauritania. Soon afterward, in early 2008, a series of kidnappings across the region began. By April 2012, 42 foreign nationals had been targeted; of those, 24 were released, five were killed while being taken hostage or in captivity, and thirteen were still being held hostage as of the end of August 2012. The locations of these abductions included southern Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Niger, as well as northern Mali, but in all cases the hostages were held and released in northern Mali by AQIM or, beginning in late 2011, by the AQIM offshoot Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The kidnappers focused on nationals of states that were known to be willing to negotiate ransom payments.

Political motives to spread terror played a limited role in AQIM's hostage takings. Although political demands were at times voiced by AQIM in messages posted on the Internet, available evidence suggests that all releases of Western nationals were secured through ransom payments, in some cases coupled with the release of prisoners linked to AQIM or MUJAO by Mali or Mauritania. In a number of instances, attempted rescues or the refusal to pay ransoms led to the death of hostages.<sup>18</sup>

Reports of ransom payments are never officially confirmed by the governments concerned and media reports vary on the amounts involved, although most range between \$1.5 and \$4 million per hostage.<sup>19</sup> The only reliable information in this respect comes from the Swiss. In 2009, the Swiss government authorized the use of \$5 million in relation to the negotiations over the release of three of its nationals, of which \$2 million appears to have been set aside for the ransom payment.<sup>20</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom has developed into a highly lucrative industry that has allowed AQIM to become a significant political and military force in the Sahel and Sahara. Extrapolating from available information, the income derived by AQIM, MUJAO, and associated mediators from kidnappings is likely to have totaled between \$40 million and \$65 million since 2008, paid mostly by Western governments. At the same time, repeated hostage takings have caused tourism in the Sahel and Sahara to collapse, thereby further limiting opportunities for employment and profit outside of criminal activity.

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## **The Impact of Organized Crime: Collusion, Corruption, and Competition**

The link between organized crime and conflict is obvious in the kidnapping-for-ransom business operated by AQIM and MUJAO. However, tensions

related to the growing drug traffic, and the erosion of state institutions through complicity with organized crime, played even more important a role in the dynamics that led to the outbreak of conflict in northern Mali in January 2012. Officials' collusion with organized crime of all sorts has been present to varying degrees across the region.

In Mauritania, the final years of former president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's rule (1984–2005) saw the high-level involvement of security officials and businessmen in contraband and weapons smuggling. Ould Taya's rule was based on an alliance between members of the Smacid, Ouled Bou Sba, and Rgeybat tribes, and these tribes' control of smuggling activity was a key building block in their coalition.<sup>21</sup>

The major cocaine seizures of 2007 and 2008 demonstrate the linkages between regime figures and the drug trade. The seizures coincided with a period of political instability, and senior figures wielded arrests on drug charges as a tool in power struggles within the ruling elite. Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya, the former president's nephew and Interpol liaison officer in Mauritania, was arrested in connection with a 2007 cocaine smuggling transaction at Nouadhibou airport, as was Sidi Mohamed Ould Haidallah, the son of another former president.

The current Mauritanian president, Ould Abdel Aziz, took power following a 2008 military coup, and with the consolidation of this rule, seizures and arrests have receded, making it difficult to discern whether high-level involvement continues. Some incidents have certainly raised eyebrows, including the president's decision to reduce the prison sentences of five convicted cocaine smugglers in February 2011 and a Nouakchott appeals court's inexplicable decision to release 30 convicted smugglers in July 2011. While the verdict was subsequently reversed, several key high-level players had fled in the meantime.<sup>22</sup> In another case, a cannabis resin smuggling network dismantled in January 2012 sought to evade checkpoints using special permits allegedly issued by the former head of police,<sup>23</sup> and a retired senior military officer was allegedly linked to a May 2012 cannabis resin seizure in Timbedra. Moreover, the Mauritanian security and judicial apparatus clearly stops short of investigating the sudden fortunes amassed by some individuals in recent years, many of which are suspected of being built on drug smuggling. But there is insufficient evidence to conclude that smuggling is today managed by senior Mauritanian officials as a political resource, as it was during the final years of Ould Taya's rule.

The boundaries in Niger are similarly murky. Contraband of licit goods and irregular migration takes place openly and with the full connivance of the authorities. Moreover, the fact that seizures of drug and weapons shipments are rare in northern Niger, a major transit area for both, cannot be explained simply by the Nigerien security forces' limited capacities. At least in some

cases, the government has turned a blind eye to drug and weapons smuggling in order to preserve stability in the north.

The most prominent recent example was the release of the former Arab rebel leader Abta Hamidine in March 2012. Hamidine had been arrested in June 2011, following a clash between the Nigerian army and a convoy carrying explosives and weapons from Libya, apparently destined for delivery to AQIM in northern Mali. Also implicated in the case was Aghali Alambo, a former Tuareg rebel leader who had been appointed adviser to the president of the Nigerian legislative assembly (after spending time in Libya leading Nigerian Tuaregs fighting for Muammar Qaddafi). He was briefly arrested in March 2012 and then set free shortly afterward, along with Hamidine, in a move that appeared designed to prevent Hamidine's and Alambo's associates from taking up arms against the government.<sup>24</sup>

The collusion also stretched to southern Algeria and Libya. In Algeria, the complicity of senior officials appears to be organized at the provincial (wilaya) rather than the national level.<sup>25</sup> In Libya, smuggling was managed by senior officials until the demise of the Qaddafi regime; since then, arms smuggling out of Libya to Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and the Sahel has been thriving and has created vested interests that will be difficult for any future Libyan government to dismantle. Moreover, rivalries over the control of illicit activity have helped fuel violent conflicts in southern Libya between militias along tribal lines.

But nowhere in the region were state institutions more implicated in organized crime than in northern Mali. The former Malian leadership tried to use organized crime as a resource for the exercise of influence in the north by allowing its local allies to engage in criminal activity. It eventually lost control over the conflicts this generated, while the rule of law and the legitimacy of state institutions were eroded through complicity with organized crime.

## **The State–Organized Crime– Conflict Nexus in Mali**

Organized crime truly began to take hold in northern Mali at the time of a rebellion led by several Tuareg officers from Kidal, a northern region bordering both Niger and Algeria, that began in May 2006. While the outbreak of the rebellion was due to wider political grievances, rivalries over the control of smuggling gradually became more prominent in the dynamics of the conflict. The rising profits to be made from drug smuggling spawned a drive by different networks to control smuggling routes or to impose transit fees on smugglers from other groups.

The Malian leadership deliberately exploited these tensions to exert its influence by playing leaders from certain communities against others and relying on select tribes to keep the north under control. To counter the Ifoghas



and Idnan Tuareg rebels, the leadership around the then president, Amadou Toumani Toure, allied itself with those rebels' rivals—primarily leaders from the Arab Berabiche and Lamhar tribes, as well as from Imghad Tuareg tribes.

From August 2007 onward, only a small group of rebels drawn from a subsection of the Ifoghas continued to fight, repeatedly attacking Berabiche and Lamhar drug smuggling convoys. Clashes related to cocaine smuggling played out in 2007 and 2008.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes state officials directly intervened, as Lieutenant Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, a Malian army officer with close ties to then head of state security, did in a clash in August 2007 over a cocaine shipment, arranging the return of the shipment in exchange for a large payment.

Prominent Arab figures from the Timbuktu and Gao regions sought to protect their business interests by establishing militias. That stance aligned with the interests of the Malian leadership, which remained intent on mobilizing Arab leaders to fight the rebels. The irregular forces, financed by businessmen like Dina Ould Daya and Oumar Ould Ahmed, were thus temporarily headed by members of Mali's military, such as Colonel Mohamed Ould Meydou and Lieutenant Colonel Bou.<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between the state, local notables and businessmen, and the drug trade can be seen in the supposedly huge November 2009 cocaine shipment transported to northern Mali by plane. According to an Algerian journalist with close links to the security apparatus, after landing in Tarkint, north of Gao, the shipment was most probably handled by Lamhar notables, including Tarkint mayor Baba Ould Cheikh, who was close to the Malian leadership. Prominent Lamhar businessmen Cherif Ould Taher and Mohamed Ould Laghwinat were also likely in attendance.<sup>28</sup>

Tensions came to a temporary head in January 2010. Then, an armed group made up of Ifoghas and Kounta had seized a large cocaine shipment transported by government-aligned Lamhar and Imghad smugglers. Members of the Lamhar tribe responded by kidnapping the leader of the Kounta Arabs in Gao Region.<sup>29</sup>

Such smuggling-related conflicts had a wider political dimension as well. The rift exposed by the latter incident corresponded to the division between the Malian leadership's allies and its enemies. Moreover, the Lamhar and Imghad tribes had historically been vassals of the Kounta and Ifoghas, respectively. And this was not the first time that conflicts involving contests over the vassal relationship had erupted. Clashes broke out during the 1990s, including after the end of the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali.<sup>30</sup> Over the next decade, Lamhar leaders used their wealth derived from smuggling to increase their political influence in Gao Region, including through local and national legislative elections.<sup>31</sup>

A similar process occurred in Timbuktu Region, where Berabiche leaders involved in smuggling began to play a more prominent political role. Figures associated with drug smuggling successfully lobbied the Malian leadership for

the creation of a separate administrative region (Taoudeni) and several new districts in an administrative reform adopted just before the outbreak of the most recent rebellion. In addition, profits derived from smuggling were often invested into livestock and associated infrastructure, such as wells, fueling tensions between communities over resources.

## State Complicity With AQIM

The alliance between the Malian leadership and local notables based on organized crime also applied to AQIM's kidnapping for ransom business. These arrangements go a long way to explain why the Malian security apparatus by and large stopped short of confronting AQIM and its practice of using northern Mali as a safe haven for its hostage cases.

When the European tourists were abducted in 2003, the Malian and European governments relied on a former Tuareg rebel leader and current head of AQIM-linked Ansar Eddine, Iyad ag Ghali, and Tarkint's mayor Baba Ould Cheikh to act as intermediaries in the ransom negotiations. Beginning in 2008, the same figures would surface time and again as mediators in hostage cases, in some cases competing with each other, in others cooperating. In addition to Baba Ould Cheikh and Iyad ag Ghali, this included Ibrahim Ag Assaleh—a member of the National Assembly for Bourem (a district that includes Tarkint) and later a leading figure in the Tuareg rebel National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)—and Mustafa Ould Limam Chafi, special adviser to the Burkinabe president.<sup>32</sup>

Although there is no hard evidence, it is generally assumed that successful intermediaries took a significant cut of the ransom payments and shared this with their political protectors in the Malian (or Burkinabe) leadership. U.S. diplomats observed in May 2009 that “an enormous influx of cash likely linked to the Canadian and European hostage crisis” had complicated the local elections in Tarkint, where several of the intermediaries were themselves running. Lamhar militiamen and suspects in kidnapping cases had shown up in the town on election day to intimidate voters.<sup>33</sup> For the Malian leadership, backing certain mediators was, at the least, a way of rewarding its allies in the north—and, possibly, a source of financial gain for senior officials.

Complicity between security officials and AQIM went beyond collusion in ransom negotiations as evidenced by the June 2009 assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Lamana Ould Bou by AQIM. Several sources, including Malian army officers, consistently explained the death as related to an arms deal with AQIM gone awry. Bou had been known to feed information to AQIM, as had several other Berabiche army officers, many of whom had close relations with relatives and fellow tribesmen in the group.<sup>34</sup>

By the fall of 2010, Malian officials' complicity with AQIM and drug traffickers had emerged as a major obstacle to regional security cooperation. After

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**Hostage deals in which European states successfully pressured Mali and Mauritania to release convicted kidnappers or AQIM members further undermined regional cooperation, with Algeria and Mauritania protesting strongly against Mali's release of their nationals.**

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the Mauritanian army suffered heavy casualties during a raid in northern Mali in September 2010, the Mauritanian defense minister visited Mali's capital to demand in vain that a Malian army officer suspected of having informed AQIM about the offensive be prosecuted. Several Algerian journalists, operating as mouthpieces for the regime, publicly pointed to the Malian leadership's complicity, as did senior Algerian officials in talks with U.S. diplomats.<sup>35</sup> The Mauritanian army continued to fight AQIM in northern Mali, restricting cooperation and information sharing with the Malian army to a minimum. Hostage deals in which European states successfully pressured Mali and Mauritania to release convicted kidnappers or AQIM members further undermined regional cooperation, with Algeria and Mauritania protesting strongly against Mali's release of their nationals.

In northern Mali, the government lost all credibility in view of widespread evidence of collusion with AQIM and organized crime. Northern leaders, including future key players in the Tuareg rebel MNLA, publicly denounced such collusion.<sup>36</sup> Even former senior government officials recognize today that complicity with criminal interests had "entirely taken over government policy in the north" in the final years of President Amadou Toumani Toure's rule. This was the context in which the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya altered the balance of power in the north and thereby paved the way for a new rebellion.

## **Organized Crime and Current Conflict Dynamics in Mali**

The current conflict in Mali is not exclusively or even predominantly a clash between competing criminal networks. Other interests and grievances contributed to the eruption of the conflict in January 2012. Nevertheless, actors involved in organized crime play leading roles and wield decisive political and military influence—a fact that will have to be taken into account in any approach to containing or solving the conflict.

This is most obvious in the alliance that has dominated the conflict—that of Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghali and other members of the Ifoghas tribal establishment with AQIM. By all accounts, ag Ghali made a pact with the AQIM leadership after his ambitions for leadership in the Tuareg rebellion were thwarted in January 2012.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, he was able to build on the business relations he had established with AQIM through various ransom negotiations since 2003.

AQIM's financial and military power, acquired principally through its kidnappings for ransom, is likely to have been central to ag Ghali's tactical

considerations. Perhaps equally important was the fact that AQIM continued to hold several hostages at the outbreak of the conflict, meaning that major future revenues were to be expected. In the rapidly evolving balance of power between various armed groups in the north, AQIM emerged as the key arbiter due to its financial clout. The alliance allowed ag Ghali's Ansar Eddine movement to rapidly supersede the MNLA as the main Tuareg military force.

If ag Ghali saw this as a necessary tactical alliance that could be discarded once Ansar Eddine's proximity with AQIM became a liability in power-sharing negotiations, ties may not be that easily severed. Close observers of developments in Timbuktu and Gao between May and July 2012 generally agree that AQIM commanders were the real decisionmakers behind Ansar Eddine and, to a lesser extent, the AQIM offshoot MUJAO. Whether ag Ghali will be able to retain his political and military influence after breaking with AQIM is unclear.

### **MUJAO in Gao**

MUJAO emerged as the main force in Gao in May and June 2012, illustrating the role of criminal interests even more clearly. The group, whose two most prominent public figures have close ties to AQIM, first surfaced in October 2011, claiming the abduction of two Spaniards and an Italian from the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria's far southwest.<sup>38</sup> At first, the group represented a hard core of jihadist and criminal elements, but it quickly became a front for drug smugglers from Gao. While the group does include some convinced jihadists, it only became a powerful force through its integration or association with organized crime networks—and they are likely to see MUJAO as a convenient temporary instrument.

The bulk of MUJAO's core membership was drawn from Lamhar Arabs in Gao Region—at least until July 2012, when it began a wider recruitment effort. Local sources consistently named a handful of Lamhar businessmen with known involvement in drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom as MUJAO's real masters and financiers—including Cherif Ould Taher and Mohamed Ould Ahmed "Rouji." Prominent Lamhar and Songhai notables and businessmen such as Mohamed Ould Mataly, Baba Ould Cheikh, and Ali Badi Maiga also quickly adapted to and supported the joint MUJAO–Ansar Eddine–AQIM administration in Gao to protect their interests.<sup>39</sup>

The group appears to be doing well financially. MUJAO likely made a significant profit in return for its release of an Italian and two Spanish hostages in July 2012. It also gained in prestige following the Burkinabe-mediated deal, as three suspects in the kidnapping case who were imprisoned in Mauritania and Niger were also released as part of the agreement. The group gained the support of the wider Gao population by using its financial clout to distribute food to the people.<sup>40</sup> It also claimed responsibility for suicide attacks targeting Algerian security forces in March and June 2012, as well as the capture of

seven Algerian consular officials in Gao in April. Whether the group's quarrels with Algeria are related to its smuggling activities is open to speculation.

### **AQIM and Arab Militias in Timbuktu**

A somewhat different situation has prevailed in Timbuktu, where, as in Gao, criminal networks and jihadist militants initially entered into an alliance. The government-allied militias protecting the town split in late March 2012 as MNLA and Ansar Eddine forces neared. One group of forces led by Colonel Mohamed Ould Meydou left Timbuktu while others remained to negotiate Timbuktu's handover. The forces that remained were led by three prominent businessmen reputed to be involved in cannabis resin smuggling who had been key to the militia mobilization effort since 2008: Oumar Ould Ahmed, Dina Ould Daya, and Moulay Ahmed. According to several consistent accounts, they delayed the MNLA's takeover of the town and in the meantime allowed AQIM to enter the city and take control.

Subsequently, however, AQIM ordered the militia out of town. The forces that were expelled then emerged as the National Liberation Front of Azawad (FNLA), seeking to distance themselves from the Islamist groups controlling Timbuktu.<sup>41</sup> When the Berabiche community held a meeting at the Malian-Mauritanian border in June 2012, notables and army officers publicly attacked the FNLA's leaders as known drug smugglers who shared responsibility for the escalation of conflict in northern Mali and had willingly handed over Timbuktu to AQIM. Consequently, the FNLA was isolated among the Berabiche community at the meeting.<sup>42</sup>

As of August 2012, the group, which has changed its name to Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), apparently considers that its interests are best served, for the time being, by dissociating themselves from the jihadist groups without confronting them. Given FNLA leaders' family and commercial ties to AQIM and Ansar Eddine members, it is doubtful whether they would be willing and able to confront AQIM. But the group remains a force to be reckoned with, as are the smuggling-related interests it represents.

### **Fluid Dynamics**

While the role of criminal networks is clear in the above groups, the dynamics at play here are ever-evolving. The lines between groups are often blurry, alliances are temporary, and networks overlap. The boundaries between the MNLA and Ansar Eddine, for instance, remain fluid, making further reconfigurations within the Tuareg movements likely. The Ifoghas leaders backing Ansar Eddine have continually—and often successfully—sought to rally the support of other Tuareg rebel leaders and fighters, including several notables from the Kidal region. Those important political and military players are reputed to be involved in drug smuggling and have at times switched their

loyalties between the MNLA and Ansar Eddine.<sup>43</sup> The formerly government-allied Imghad militias, some of which have joined Ansar Eddine while others fled to Niger under the leadership of Colonel Elhadji Gamou and were inactive as of July 2012, have also often been associated with drug smuggling.

Current conflict dynamics are characterized by tactical alliances in which networks involved in kidnapping for ransom and drug smuggling play a decisive political and military role. Some of these networks currently call the shots in radical Islamist movements, most obviously in the case of MUJAO. Others maintain an ambiguous relationship with such movements, such as in the case of the FNLA's and Ansar Eddine's relations with AQIM. Their aversion to clear and open positions in the current stage of the conflict betrays a readiness to rearrange their alliances once doing so becomes opportune, in order to promote their political and business interests. These groups are constantly looking for the next most-advantageous arrangement.

This poses a dilemma for the Malian government, as well as northern community leaders siding with the government: Should they seek the support of notables and businessmen involved in criminal activity and currently allied with the armed groups controlling northern Mali in order to weaken AQIM and MUJAO? Or would such alliances with criminal interests undermine the credibility of their enterprise, likening it to the former Malian leadership's approach to the north? Many politicians in the north believe a temporary alliance with drug traffickers commanding armed groups is unavoidable if the jihadist elements controlling northern cities are to be defeated.

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## Policy Conclusions

Though the entire Sahel and Sahara region is affected by state-criminal collusion, the role of organized crime in northern Mali's descent into conflict is particularly vivid, and it offers lessons not just for Mali's donors but also for neighboring states.

Organized criminal activity escalated in northern Mali during a period when the country was a major recipient of foreign assistance from the United States, the European Union (EU), and individual EU member states. External security-related aid was heavily focused on counterterrorism and state capacity, with donors providing training and technical assistance. Leading donors—particularly the United States and France—grew increasingly frustrated by the Malian leadership's reluctance to tackle AQIM but saw this mainly through the lens of counterterrorism, paying much less attention to the wider problem of state complicity with organized crime.

As the situation deteriorated, the EU began promoting a major push to expand the state's administrative and security presence in northern Mali

known as the Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development of North Mali. Like other donor assistance in the security domain, the plan was primarily designed to boost state capacity but neglected the fundamental political issue of state collusion with organized crime. Moreover, despite donors' increasing frustration with the Malian leadership's inaction vis-à-vis AQIM, they did not exert stronger pressure on the government by leveraging the substantial development aid allocated to Mali.

As West Africa's supposed democratic success story, Mali remained the region's "donor darling" until the regime crumbled under a mutiny of low-ranking officers in March 2012. Arguably, the takeover of the state and politics in the north by criminal elements could have been avoided had donors used their influence to push for officials involved in organized crime to be prosecuted or dismissed. Donors' strong and largely unconditional support for the regime of Amadou Toumani Toure, accused by Mauritania and Algeria of failing to tackle AQIM, merits critical self-evaluation.

A possible implication for donors from the Malian trajectory is that greater attention should be paid to the risks of state collusion with organized crime in Mauritania and Niger. Concentrating on capacity building in the judicial and security sector is the right approach only as long as there is political backing from governments for combating criminal activity—and in Mali, this was clearly not the case. Focusing more on the drug and weapons trade in Mauritania and Niger should impact Mali, given that most flows transiting the country also pass through these two neighbors.

In Mauritania, donor support since 2009 has been largely based on the Ould Abdel Aziz regime's tough approach to counterterrorism, after what had been perceived as a lenient stance by his predecessor. But that focus is too narrow. Donors should balance that approach by placing greater emphasis on action against corruption and organized crime.

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In Niger, the government is treading carefully in its approach to the thriving smuggling networks in the country's north because upsetting the vested interests at stake can easily provoke renewed instability in the region. As in Mali and Mauritania, Niger's government finds itself having to choose between allowing its political allies to benefit from smuggling and risking that a zero-tolerance policy spawns the rise of hostile smuggling networks. To help address this problem, donors could encourage and support a strategy that makes the political accommodation of influential players in Niger's north contingent upon their disengagement from the illicit economy and commitment to containing drug and weapons smuggling. Across the region, donors could also support initiatives to promote public debate and the dissemination of information on criminal activity through media outlets, in order to undermine the political backing criminal networks receive from the state or community.

But tackling the smuggling networks in Mali itself will be impossible as long as the north is outside government control. In northern Mali, extremist Islamist groups draw their power from their alliance with local criminal networks and business interests, and any approach to the conflict must include strategies to break these alliances. In all likelihood, this will have to include the co-optation of some criminal elements by the Malian government or guarantees from the state and from their communities that they will be shielded from prosecution.

The local northern communities should be at the heart of any future approach. Many of these communities hold the criminal actors responsible for the collapse of state institutions there, which has resulted in the isolation of those actors. Such pressure from local communities is likely the most effective means of containing criminal networks.

Ultimately, any settlement to the conflict should tackle the practices and structures that allowed state complicity with organized crime to thrive. Those practices include the maintenance of government-allied militias that were given a green light to engage in smuggling, and the absence of strong judicial and legislative checks and balances on the executive at the regional and local level.

It may be tempting for outside forces looking to take action now to recommend a decisive crackdown on smuggling to cut off funding sources and disrupt criminal networks. But zero-tolerance policies toward smuggling are not only unrealistic given the huge expanses over which these networks stretch and the security forces' limited resources; they are also counterproductive. In northern Mali and Niger, there are no alternative sources of income and employment that could rival those of contraband and drug smuggling. The collapse of tourism in parallel with the development of the kidnapping industry has further aggravated the situation, and the return of that income source will likely take many years even once the situation has stabilized and abductions cease. Until there are viable economic alternatives, clamping down on smuggling would further alienate local communities from their states.

There may be no definitive way to break up these criminal networks quickly. But beyond encouraging domestic political solutions, there are two areas over which external actors can perhaps wield a degree of influence: kidnapping for ransom and regional cooperation. Western governments have been playing an overwhelmingly negative role by paying ransoms and supplying what is most likely AQIM's and MUJAO's most important source of financing. Hiding behind the secrecy that surrounds the deals, Western governments have contributed to the growth of mafia-like networks linking the kidnapers with the intermediaries. Negotiators and their supposedly high-placed political backers also profit from the deals. Western forces have undermined regional cooperation by pressuring governments into releasing suspects or convicted

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criminals as part of the agreements, repeatedly irritating other governments in the region that had sought the detention of these individuals for crimes committed on their territories.

While outright rejection of ransom payments—let alone their criminalization, which was proposed by Algeria—is unrealistic, there is a clear need for a coherent international approach to the issue. Western governments should refrain from pushing regional governments to release criminals as part of ransom deals. They should also work to exclude any intermediaries from the negotiations and the ransom payments and pressure regional governments to

prosecute intermediaries benefiting from such payments. The questionable role played in this regard by Burkina Faso, whose mediators are involved in both political talks with northern Malian representatives and negotiations over the release of hostages, should be revisited by its international supporters.

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In addition, the distrust between the former Malian leadership and Mauritania, as well as Algeria, is a major obstacle to security cooperation in the region, including on organized crime. Further, Algeria is split between its desire to assert its pivotal role in tackling the issue and its reluctance to take the lead, a stance that will also continue to pose a challenge. But the demise of the regime of Amadou Toumani Toure represents an opportunity for improved regional security cooperation, including on organized crime. Western governments should seize the opportunity by supporting regional initiatives to improve cooperation, rather than try to play a leading role themselves.

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## About the Author

**Wolfram Lacher** works on North Africa at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) in Berlin. His research focuses on Libya and security issues in the Sahara-Sahel region.

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