ISSUE 4

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

How do illicit economies build and degrade armed group legitimacy?

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Photo: Social media

This report explores how armed groups gain or lose legitimacy among communities in territories over which they have influence through their engagement with illicit and licit economies. It emphasizes the importance of spaces in which armed groups' goals of revenue generation, obtaining operational resources and building legitimacy align. These spaces often develop where illicit economies fulfil the needs of resident communities, where the state criminalizes livelihoods that residents see as legitimate and where illicit economies offer revenue or resources to armed groups. Such spaces are thus particularly valuable to armed groups and dangerous to states as armed groups derive significant benefits from their operations in these spaces and become harder to dislodge. This report highlights two such spaces – artisanal gold mining sites and national parks – that are key to consider for stakeholders' analyses and designing interventions to disrupt armed group embeddedness in West Africa.

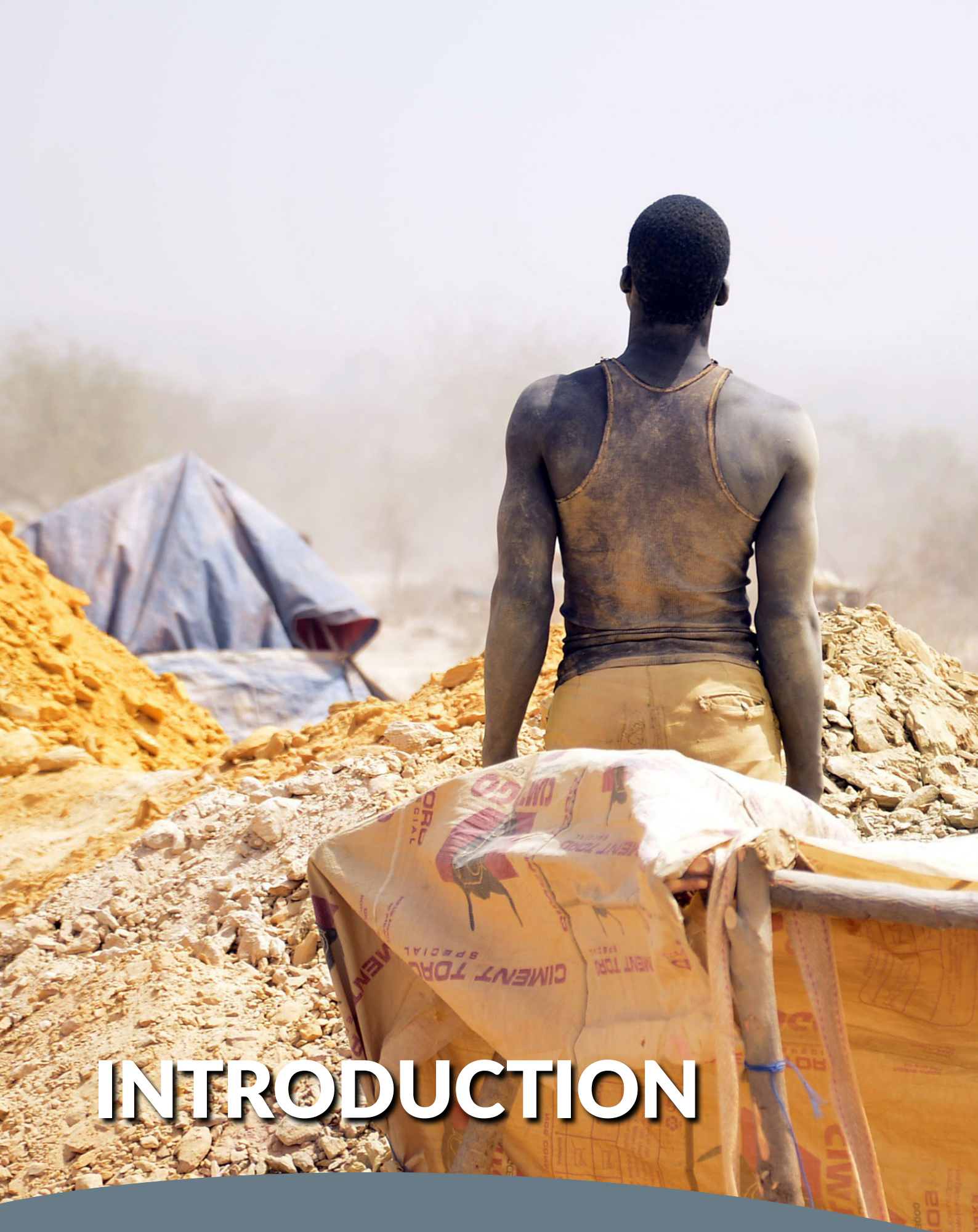
Different types of armed groups operating across West Africa, from violent extremist organizations to separatist movements and armed bandit groups, have, to different degrees, gained legitimacy from engaging in illicit economies. This legitimacy has been a crucial element that underpins their relationships with communities and their ability to operate without friction, recruit, position themselves as credible alternative governance providers and hold territory. Put simply, legitimacy is not the same as popularity. For the purposes of this report, legitimacy means having enough local acceptance to allow the armed group to operate efficiently. Legitimacy, therefore, underpins armed group operations – crucial to all types of armed groups – and not merely armed group governance, which is not the stated aim of some groups.

The degree to which groups enjoy legitimacy and prioritize building it is a central factor in how they use violence against civilians to achieve their goals. Where groups are perceived to be defenders of community rights, or at the very least enablers of socio-economic opportunities, violence may become less necessary in shaping community behaviours that facilitate armed group operations.

This report is the fourth in the 'Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa' series, a collaboration between the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).[1] Earlier reports provided in-depth case studies of three different armed groups operating in West and Central Africa. First among these was a report on Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a violent extremist group currently operating across swathes of Mali, Burkina Faso, to a lesser extent Niger, and increasingly in the northern areas of some coastal states, including Benin and Togo. The second report looked at the constellation of armed bandit groups currently operating in Nigeria's North West region, which have transformed the region into a hotspot of intense violence in the country, exceeding other regions plagued by violence primarily from violent extremist and separatist groups.[2] The third report considered the Anglophone separatist groups that have been operating in Anglophone regions of Cameroon since 2017, when they unilaterally declared the secession of the territory from the Francophone state in Yaoundé and the formation of a separate Ambazonian state.

Each case study considered the structure of the armed groups, how they draw revenue and operational resources from illicit and licit economies, and the groups' activities. The case studies explored how different groups exert forms of 'governance', understood for the purposes of this series as attempts by an armed group to establish itself as a governing authority in local areas through the regulation of residents' behaviour, service provision and the control of local finances and economies.[3]

While the case studies in this series focused on a specific armed group as the unit of analysis, this report focuses on the crosscutting theme of legitimacy and the characteristics of spaces – and illicit economies prevalent within them – that facilitate legitimacy gain.



INTRODUCTION

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To date, revenue generation has broadly constituted the primary lens of analysis of armed group behaviour in relation to both licit and illicit economies. While this is pivotal to armed group dynamics, it has risked overshadowing the importance of legitimacy gain for many armed groups in their interactions with these economies.

In turn, this focus on revenue generation has contributed to shaping state interventions that seek to stamp out the illicit economies that sustain armed groups without considering that civilians may also depend on those illicit economies. This has sometimes proved counterproductive, resulting in short-term disruption of the flows of illicit goods but long-term damage to the relative legitimacy of state and armed groups. This report seeks to correct this historic weighting by focusing on armed group legitimacy and how this is shaped by and shapes engagement in revenue-generating activities.

The benefits of gaining legitimacy have been most commonly considered in relation to armed groups pursuing explicit governance goals. However, recognizing that these benefits include reducing the operating friction in areas under armed groups' influence makes legitimacy a question of efficiency rather than popularity. For the purpose of this paper, 'legitimacy' refers to a level of local acceptance that allows an armed group to operate relatively efficiently. This does not equate to popularity or enthusiastic support but rather represents a functional relationship between armed group and resident population. Through this lens, legitimacy benefits a wide range of armed groups, regardless of their governance aims.

Armed groups' gains are multiplied when legitimacy can be gained in parallel to resource extraction. Findings from the series highlighted particular types of spaces in which illicit economies fulfil key functions for communities and provide armed groups the opportunity to generate resources and legitimacy simultaneously. Where armed groups can position themselves as providers of socio-economic opportunities forbidden by the state, their legitimacy gain is multiplied. This is due to the relative nature of legitimacy. Authority is typically perceived to be legitimate by communities when it is 'fairer' than the 'available alternatives', underscoring the critical – and variable – role that state regulation and enforcement can play in shaping armed group entry points.[4]

The paramilitary group Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland continues to clash with violent extremist groups in Burkina Faso. *Photo: Wikipedia*

The series analyzes how armed groups from across a range of 'traditional' typologies – violent extremist, criminal and separatist – engage with illicit economies.[5] Importantly, in these spaces where civilian life depends on illicit activity and state regulation is resented, namely artisanal gold mining sites and national parks in West Africa, even armed groups that do not seek to 'govern' or win over civilians can still gain substantial legitimacy while also extracting resources from these spaces. From a policy and programming perspective, these spaces are priority areas for states to consider in shaping approaches to disrupting armed groups' abilities to sustain themselves over time.

By highlighting key themes that emerged across the series, this report seeks to provide potential entry points for policymakers who design stabilization interventions in West Africa. First, this report explores the distinct types of armed groups, questioning their value and positing that they exist on a spectrum of clusters of characteristics rather than neatly fitting into distinct groupings. In doing so, it challenges distinctions between 'political' and 'criminal' violence. The report then outlines a framework for identifying conditions conducive to the simultaneous generation of revenue, resources and legitimacy for armed groups of distinct 'classifications', with contrasting emphases on building legitimacy.

Methodology

This report draws on the findings of the preceding case studies, which focused on JNIM in the Sahel and northern areas of littoral states, the separatist groups operating in Cameroon's Anglophone regions and armed bandit groups operating in Zamfara and Kaduna in Nigeria's North West region. It also draws on the primary data collected from these case studies, including fieldwork. Further details regarding the methodology of each case study are included in the individual case study reports.

Findings were further explored through numerous workshops and brainstorming sessions between the series authors and wider GI-TOC and ACLED teams. This was complemented by a wider literature review and a roundtable discussion held with 10 experts on armed group activity, which focused on key hypotheses and themes emerging from the series. This roundtable discussion, held in November 2023, was co-hosted by the GI-TOC and ACLED. Preliminary findings were then discussed and tested through additional key stakeholder interviews.

This report also analyzes ACLED and mine site geolocated data. For ACLED incidents referred to as 'near' artisanal gold mining sites, the report includes incidents within a 0.8 kilometre (0.5 mile) radius of known artisanal gold mining sites. This radius recognizes that ACLED data is geolocated to a centroid point within each location (often a central area of a town or village) instead of specific areas such as a mine site. Furthermore, only a small proportion of incidents within a 0.8 kilometre radius of an artisanal gold mining site include 'miners' as a coded actor or actor mentioned in the coding notes. This reflects the challenges of conflict reporting: a recording of violence near a mine site may indicate the broad details of an event but will rarely specify the identity or affiliation of victims such as miners. It is key to recognize that reporting of incidents within remote areas under growing threat from armed groups – as is common for artisanal mining areas and national parks, two spaces of analysis – represents only a portion of dynamics on the ground. This is partly due to the categories of violence reflected in the ACLED dataset[6] and practical challenges in accessing data in these areas, such as the difficulties for journalists or reporters to access these areas and the strong bias of armed groups conducting their own reporting.

WHAT'S IN A NAME: CLASSIFICATION OF ARMED GROUPS

Armed groups engage in overlapping revenue, resource and legitimacy-generating activities. The actions and motivations of a particular group are often interpreted in line with the label the group is given, even though other 'types' of armed groups also engage in such actions with similar effects. For instance, violence against civilians is used by a variety of armed groups, but analyses of that behaviour will be affected by whether the group is thought of as a 'violent extremist' group, a 'criminal' group, and so on. There is an ongoing debate about how to classify different types of armed groups and how 'criminal' groups might be distinguished from more 'political' groups. Do labels such as 'insurgency', 'violent extremist group', and 'criminal group' thus aid understanding and analyses of particular groups, or do they obscure them? The critique of such typologies is that armed and criminal groups are dynamic organizations whose objectives, priorities and modes of operation change over time.[7] Likewise, within each group are many different individuals with different opinions and actions that carry different weight.[8]

Here, we argue that typologies, or rather the names given to typologies (e.g. insurgent, rebel, criminal, extremist), are indispensable for describing groups but should be seen as 'clusters' of characteristics that will not all apply to any one group at any one time. Similarly, any armed group will also have a cluster of different traits from different typologies, which will be important at different times.

This series has examined the myriad ways armed groups engage in and interact with illicit economies and networks. It has reconsidered the extent to and ways in which armed groups can be distinguished from criminal groups. This is an important consideration, given that states frequently describe armed groups that oppose them as 'criminals' or 'bandits', implying that their actions are not moral.[9] For example, the Islamist insurgency involving JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) was initially framed as criminal by government authorities in Burkina Faso,[10] and later in Benin, during the earlier phases of infiltration.[11] Branding insurgent violence as such served to protect the image of these states as able to preserve their territorial integrity long after this was no longer the case, thus serving a political goal rather than constituting an accurate reference to the involvement of JNIM and IS Sahel in criminal activities.[12]

Separatist groups in Cameroon's Anglophone regions have taken up arms against the government. *© Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images*

Following the approach suggested by Jackson, Weigand and Tindall, who view armed groups on a spectrum rather than trying to establish whether a particular group is 'criminal', 'jihadist', 'rebel' or other, we consider how clusters of traits and motivations may evolve.[13]

For instance, the Anglophone armed groups in Cameroon certainly have political motives and are referred to as 'separatist groups' due to their objectives of creating a separate state called Ambazonia. However, illicit activity and criminality have proven equally powerful influences on many armed groups to the extent that they have lost substantial legitimacy in the eyes of the community members they claim to represent. Indeed, in this case, there was a 'positive feedback loop', in which the armed groups' initial forays into kidnapping cost them funding from diaspora supporters, which in turn led them to become even more reliant on criminality, including kidnapping. Since this collapse of support has diminished the armed groups' political legitimacy, they may become increasingly 'criminalized' over time, to the extent that the ways in which they are labelled change.

A closer look at some common typologies found in the study of armed groups is merited to illustrate how armed groups' evolutions force us to re-evaluate these typologies. This is especially important for distinguishing between armed 'criminal' groups and other types of armed groups and between 'criminal' violence and 'political' violence. To illustrate the shortcomings of typologies and an alternative approach that sees armed groups as having clustered traits and motivations, we examine one of the most politicized classifications of armed groups to illustrate this, namely the classification of armed groups as 'criminal.'

'Political' and 'criminal' groups, and associated violence

The distinction between 'criminal' groups and other types of armed groups is further muddied when the notion of governance is considered, particularly as the literature on 'criminal governance' grows. While criminal groups might not see governance as a primary aim, they recognize that relationships with local populations must be managed to protect their interests – either by building legitimacy or through more coercive forms of control, including the strategic use of fear.[14] Additionally, a 'criminal' group might not be chiefly motivated by political change, but its activities and violence can have profound political consequences.

Groups that might be labelled 'criminal' because their activity is motivated predominantly by profit are as varied as armed groups with more 'political' motives. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) defines an organized criminal group very broadly, requiring only a structured group of three persons or more acting in concert for a period of time, with the aim of committing a serious crime for financial or material benefit.[15]

Subcategories of criminal organizations – such as gangs, organized crime networks and bandits – all have loosely recognizable organizational tendencies and each of these classifications carries connotations.[16] However, several often-cited distinctions exist between these various 'criminal' groups and more politically motivated armed groups. As mentioned above, their key objectives are typically recognized to be financial – not to create new, systemic political orders – and they do not typically seek to challenge or overthrow state regimes.[17] They also do not typically present an existential threat to state authority, even if they may challenge or usurp state authority in places.[18]

However, there is substantial evidence to challenge these generalizations. Firstly, 'criminal' groups – be they gangs, cartels or otherwise – have a long record of intervening in state politics, including through violent means. Urban gangs in Kenya played a notorious role in electoral violence in the 2007/8 crisis and continue to serve as enforcers and mobilizers for local politicians during election season.[19] Similar dynamics in Nigeria undermine democracy, with political violence perpetrated by actors who are deeply involved in criminal markets outside elections.[20] Here, political assassinations – both to influence the group's domestic political agenda or on behalf of other political powers – are a known criminal phenomenon.[21]

It is for these reasons that ACLED periodically categorizes violence by nominally 'criminal' groups as political. Notably, five of the 10 countries experiencing the most extreme levels of conflict according to ACLED's Conflict Index 2024 are experiencing criminal and political violence.[22] Nigerian armed bandits, who engage in kidnapping, cattle rustling and gold mining, are one example of traditionally 'criminal' actors perceived to be perpetrating violence that has a deeply political impact.[23] Among the large array of bandit groups in Nigeria's North West region, some also portray themselves as defenders of Fulani herding communities. Bandit group members cite a wide range of drivers for recruitment, including addressing grievances, protecting themselves and their families, and financial reasons.[24] Some bandit groups also impose rules on communities in the manner of 'criminal governance.' While the bandits are not overly concerned with challenging the Nigerian state, their activities and the local power they have

amassed have profoundly damaged the state's access to the area and, by extension, its legitimacy.[25]

The sometimes shifting membership and alliances between groups deemed 'political' and 'criminal' further complicate distinctions. Some examples from the case studies examined in the series can shed light on how criminal and political tendencies exist in different groups. In the Sahel, JNIM militants have provided bandits with weaponry and a measure of social credibility by associating them with a cause beyond banditry, while bandits can serve as temporary manpower – a crossover phenomenon dubbed the 'jihadization of banditry'.[26] Similarly, some JNIM units – including several JNIM fighters in the Centre-Sud and neighbouring Centre-Est regions of Burkina Faso – have switched between active combat to focus primarily on revenue extraction. In the Centre-Sud case, JNIM – probably temporarily – appeared to shift towards focusing primarily on artisanal gold mining, demonstrating changing priorities over time.

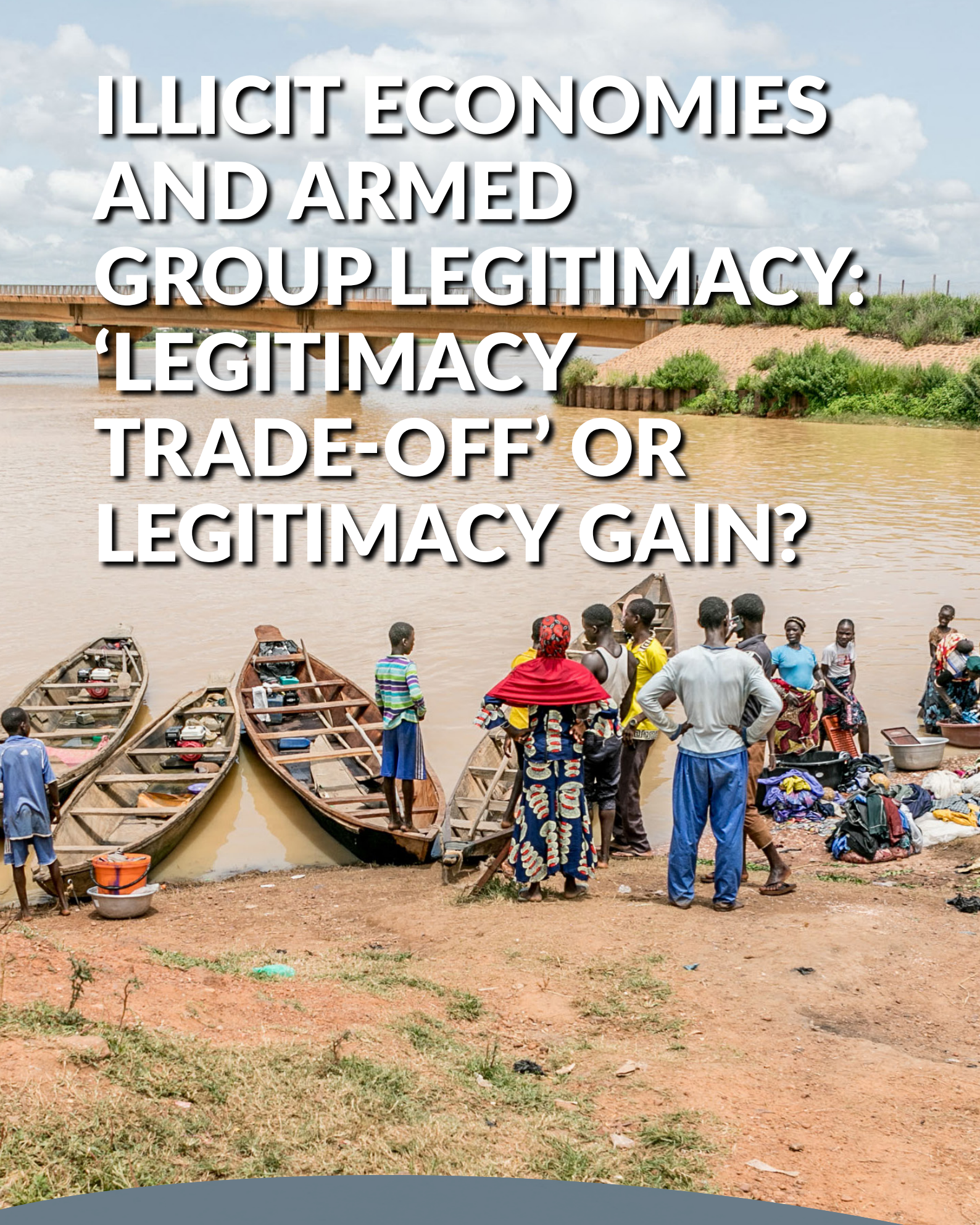
In Nigeria's North West region, bandits periodically cooperate with armed groups that clearly aim to challenge the Nigerian state and impose religious governance on communities – namely Ansaru and elements of Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[27] Bandits have even gained recruits from the ranks of these armed groups, who were apparently swayed by the opportunity to accumulate wealth. Nigeria's bandits are thus a clear case of 'clusters' of different motives and tendencies. While the more socially inclined bandit groups might portray themselves as protectors and authorities of sorts, they are primarily engaged in revenue-generating activities – typically through targeting civilians, including through the destabilizing practices of robbery and looting, kidnapping and cattle rustling, as well as through taxation of farming and mining activities. Yet they are also able to influence individuals in other more ideological groups and present a fundamental challenge to state authority.[28]

This interchangeability between 'criminal' and 'political' behaviour is also evident throughout the history of Cameroonian separatist groups. Prominent figures in the separatist conflict were originally part of 'anti-gang' vigilantes in the early 1990s, groups that were ostensibly set up to defend communities from crime but engaged in profuse violent crime themselves. Many disbanded anti-gang members later became influential in militant youth wings of political parties and then in the separatist armed groups.[29] However, as the groups became increasingly fragmented and prospects for political change waned, separatism became a less salient motive than profit-seeking within separatist groups. In turn, their behaviours and characteristics increasingly resemble 'criminal' groups, even though they remain recognizable as separatists.[30] These shifts are tracked in further detail in the series of case studies.

There are also myriad exceptions to every rule of a typology. A typology's label can be a useful descriptor but not a robust classification tool. Rather than thinking in terms of typologies that aim to impose boundaries on the characterization of a group, the typology labels that tend to be imposed on armed groups (e.g. extremist, insurgent, terrorist, rebel, criminal) should instead be treated as clusters of characteristics and motives. More than one typology's cluster of traits will apply to any group and its importance will fluctuate over time.

ACLED monitoring suggests that a number of combatants operating in the Nazinga Game Ranch in southern Burkina Faso have temporarily ceased activities there. *Photo: Eusebio 20/Wikipedia*

ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND ARMED GROUP LEGITIMACY: 'LEGITIMACY TRADE-OFF' OR LEGITIMACY GAIN?



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All the armed groups studied in this series draw revenue, operational resources and legitimacy from illicit economies. However, the illicit economies the groups engaged with and how they engaged in these economies vary significantly. While the armed groups' different goals partly shape this variance, it is also dictated by the nature of the relevant illicit economy and how the group extracts resources or revenue from it.

Asal, Rethemeyer and Schoon explored the 'legitimacy trade-off' groups face when they are seeking social support on the one hand and revenue and operational resources on the other: engagement in illicit economies can damage groups' attempts to build social support, albeit to differing extents, depending on the illicit economy in question.[31] This study found that the legitimacy trade-off appeared greatest in relation to kidnapping, followed closely by robbery, and was not statistically significant for engagement in drug crimes, extortion, or smuggling.[32] In other words, the legitimacy trade-off kicked in most clearly for illicit economies that most directly caused harm to communities, particularly through the deployment of direct violence.

This aligns with perceptions of 'criminality' among many communities in West Africa. Illicit economies are often deeply integrated into the daily lives of local communities and serve as central livelihoods when licit alternatives are scarce, particularly in contexts of widespread informality, which include swathes of West and Central Africa. Trafficking and smuggling of a wide range of commodities rendered illegal by state regulation are, therefore, often not perceived as criminal among many communities but are merely seen as revenue-generating activities. This creates a disjunct between community and state perceptions of licit and illicit behaviour.[33]

For many communities, 'criminal' thus becomes a category reserved for activities that directly harm community members, broadly encompassing violent crimes such as armed robbery, murder and kidnapping – crime types that overlap with those found to carry the greatest legitimacy trade-off.[34] In other words, the legitimacy trade-off most clearly kicks in when armed groups engage in activities that are branded 'criminal' by local communities. When groups seek recognition as political actors nationally or internationally, concepts of criminality and the legitimacy trade-off are likely to differ, in line with the perceptions of this wider set of stakeholders beyond those of the local community.

However, while engagement in illicit economies can damage groups' legitimacy goals, conflict actors can also build political capital through engagement in certain revenue-generating activities, including illicit economies.[35] As Professor Freedom Onuoha notes: '[G]roups must demonstrate to civilians that their engagement in illicit economies aligns with the interests and struggles of both the groups and the communities, particularly in regions where government presence is limited. If these illicit economies enable armed groups to construct a narrative that resonates with the sentiments of the local community, it significantly contributes to strengthening their legitimacy.'[36] Onuoha underscores the role of illicit economies in building armed group narratives and the benefits of perceived alignment between armed groups and community interests.

A degree of legitimacy is desirable for many armed groups – not necessarily for ideological reasons, but because it lowers the cost of retaining control; facilitates access to rents, intelligence and resources; and frees up resources for achieving organizational goals, whether these be profit accumulation or territorial expansion.[37]

Much of the existing literature has focused on legitimacy in the context of overtly political groups, whose stated aims include governance of populations.[38] Less emphasis has been placed on the benefits of legitimacy gain for groups that place less emphasis on ideology and political goals. The groups considered in this series have contrasting governance goals and view building legitimacy among local communities differently. Yet a degree of legitimacy gain is valuable to their distinct interests.

For example, several Nigerian bandit groups exhibit some behaviours constituting forms of governance in their interactions with local communities. They prioritize political capital

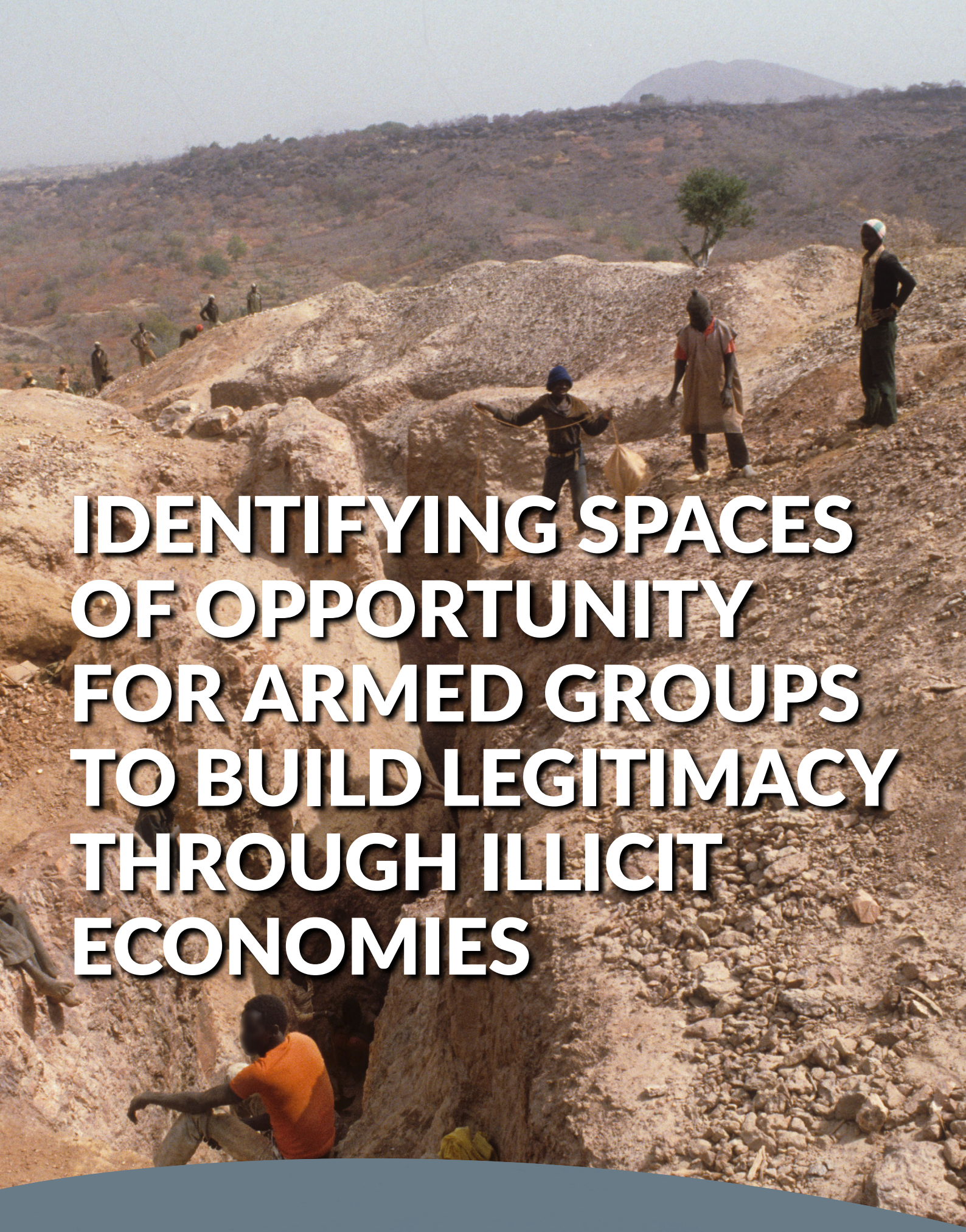
Thousands of Nigerians have fled to Maradi in Niger to escape escalating kidnappings and attacks by bandits. © *AFP via Getty Images*

gain less than JNIM and the Anglophone separatist groups, who pursue a clearer governance agenda in line with their political goals. However, the governance behaviours bandit groups exhibit remain largely focused on enhancing the effectiveness of revenue extraction, diminishing operating risk (by preventing intelligence from being fed to law enforcement) and minimizing friction with communities to facilitate their operations. In other words, in building legitimacy, as defined for this paper. These are often ignored because bandits groups' overarching objectives remain focused on revenue generation, with the provision of services or 'governance' being a secondary result.

While building legitimacy among communities may not be a priority for the Nigerian bandit groups studied, it is nevertheless a valuable outcome of engaging in illicit and licit economies, enhancing their ability to generate revenue and influence territory. Put simply, legitimacy should be understood to relate to efficiencies rather than popularity, underpinning armed groups' ability to operate, not always govern. According to Peer Schouten, an academic specializing in the study of armed groups, illicit economies can be key in shaping how distinct actors within a conflict environment position themselves in the 'market of legitimacy'.[39]

Findings from this series underscored how different spaces and the illicit economies prevalent within them shape how armed groups position themselves in this market of legitimacy. Resource-rich spaces, with localized illicit economies and semi-static populations, more commonly (though by no means exclusively) operate as areas where armed groups' objectives of revenue generation, operational resource extraction and legitimacy gain align (even where the latter is not necessarily a priority). In West Africa, an analysis of the case studies identified two such spaces: artisanal gold mining areas and national parks.

Structural factors – particularly climate change and state responses to it – are increasing the vulnerability of these spaces. Climate change is placing increasing pressure on traditional agricultural activities, which have been the mainstay of many communities across West Africa and the Sahel for a long time. Many Sahelian residents are turning to artisanal gold mining, which is at odds with state efforts to limit the sector or prioritize industrial mining interests. Dwindling agricultural yields and shrinking pastureland are also contributing to some communities' increasing reliance on resource extraction within protected areas, similarly exacerbating conflicts with the state and creating openings for armed groups to position themselves as gatekeepers to prohibited resources.[40]



IDENTIFYING SPACES OF OPPORTUNITY FOR ARMED GROUPS TO BUILD LEGITIMACY THROUGH ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Spaces in which armed groups can meet each of their distinct goals – namely, generating revenue, operational resources and legitimacy – by engaging with illicit economies offer particular opportunities for armed groups and pose particular risks to state governance. Identifying the clusters of characteristics that make specific spaces conducive to this alignment of goals provides a framework for identifying these areas of vulnerability. This can then support policymakers in allocating scarce resources to priority areas where interventions can maximize the impact of stabilization efforts.

State regulations that criminalize or restrict certain revenue-generating opportunities – and the enforcement thereof – are key to shaping opportunities for armed groups. Reconsidering such regulatory frameworks or assessing what alternatives can be provided to local communities should be a priority for policymakers. This is key not only for states facing existing threats from armed groups but for states on the fringes of territories in which armed groups operate and states that seek to pre-empt the entrenchment of armed groups into vulnerable areas from which they are difficult to displace.

This report applies this framework for identifying spaces of maximum potential for armed group legitimacy, revenue and resource generation, and therefore also maximum impact for stabilization projects for artisanal gold mining areas and national parks in West Africa. The conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis go beyond the case studies considered in this report and can be applied to identify areas of vulnerability in other regions. Rather than creating a new concept, we build on existing analyses to establish a framework for identifying priority spaces that require interventions to disrupt armed group entrenchment. This analysis takes the spaces – their characteristics, the communities that tend to populate them and the illicit economies they engage in – as the central unit of analysis. This contrasts with many assessments of armed group engagement with illicit economies which take the group itself as the unit of analysis. Adopting this spatial approach highlighted how clusters of characteristics can shape similar outcomes for armed groups whose modus operandi, behaviour towards communities and aspirations vary significantly.

Spaces in which armed groups are able to generate the following simultaneously should be prioritized for responses seeking to disrupt their ability to sustain themselves:

1. Indirect revenue through taxation. When armed groups generate revenue indirectly from illicit economies by taxing civilians engaging in them, they become reliant on the communities for resource extraction. Although not without exception, this reliance often shapes more collaborative relationships. While collaboration is enforced through violence in some cases, this strategy requires greater investment from armed groups and often gives way to efforts to align community interests with those of the armed group over time. This contrasts with direct forms of revenue extraction from communities – such as kidnapping or looting – that are not underpinned by community collaboration and thus require no alignment of interests.

   And/or

2. Operational resources, particularly those critical to armed group functions, such as fuel, motorbikes and weapons, underpin the groups' ability to sustain themselves and launch attacks.

   And

3. Legitimacy gain. This is likely to be the case where (i) prevalent illicit economies fulfil a key function for local communities and (ii) the criminalization of the relevant activity by the state is considered unjust by these communities.

Illicit economies that fulfil important community functions[41] – most typically the generation of livelihoods – are characterized by being labour intensive, with relatively low barriers to entry, limited direct harm to communities[42] and a widely dispersed profit-sharing settlement.[43]

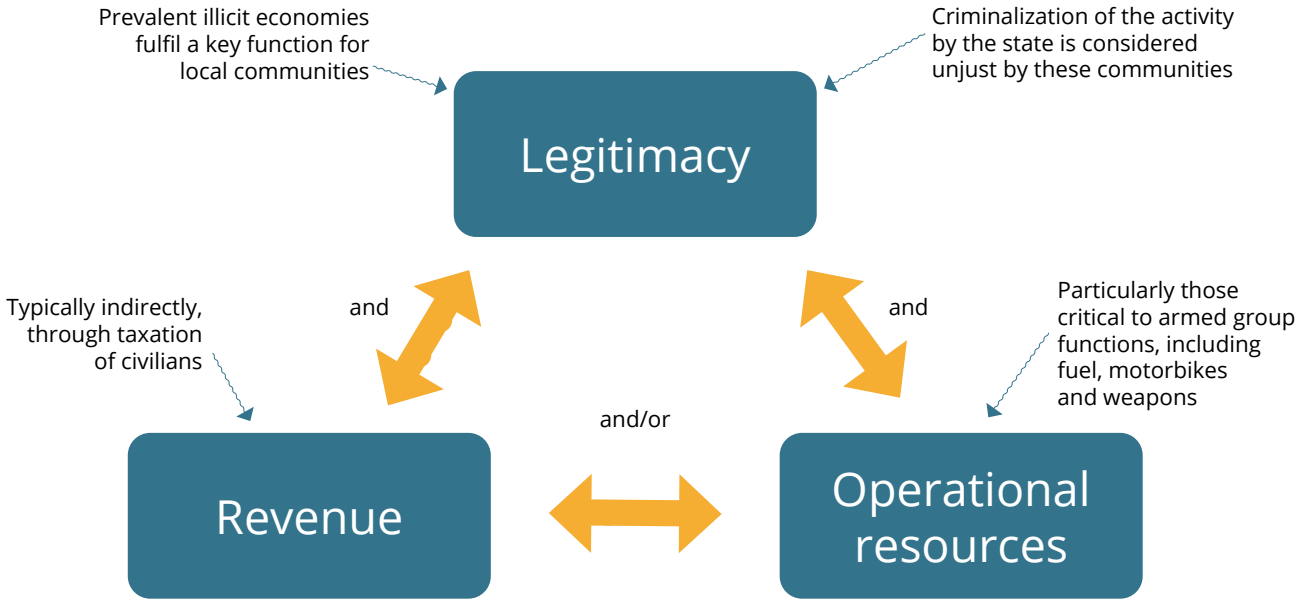


FIGURE 1 **Identifying spaces of maximum potential for armed group legitimacy, revenue and resource generation.**

This is often the case for commodities produced or cultivated in a particular area or with a local consumption market. Transit commodities with no local market typically benefit a narrower group of stakeholders and are less likely to fulfil important community functions.

The characteristics of an illicit economy can vary across its supply chain and be distinct in different spaces. For example, while artisanal gold mining sites are important livelihoods for many, in areas that operate as transit points in the gold supply chain, the resource-sharing settlement is narrower, concentrated among those directly involved in trafficking the commodity and the political elites sponsoring the activity. This underscores why the unit of analysis is the space and not the principle illicit economy of that space.

Armed groups can enable or facilitate illicit economies that fulfil central functions for communities, positioning themselves as providers of socio-economic opportunities in the areas where they exert influence or control.[44] The need to deploy violence against civilians typically diminishes when groups can adopt gatekeeper roles. This is because civilians may be convinced that they have an interest in cooperating with the armed group. Monitoring levels of violence can provide insights into where on the spectrum between coercion and cooperation the armed group/community relationship lies at any given moment.

State regulation of such spaces is the second critical characteristic that shapes armed group opportunities. Socio-economic opportunities the state forbids in a manner considered unfair by communities can enhance armed groups' legitimacy gain. This is due to the relative nature of legitimacy: authority (whether exercised by state or non-state actors) is typically perceived to be legitimate by communities when it is 'fairer' than the 'available alternatives'.[45] Legitimacy is thus not built or damaged in a vacuum but is a relative concept shaped by the legitimacy of other governance providers, including the state.[46]

There are a number of licit economies where the state's position is considered unjust by many communities – for instance, the livestock trade, which is criminalized (in whole or in part) by the state across much of West Africa but not perceived as 'criminal' by communities.[47] Economies and spaces in which there is a disjunction between what the state deems to be legal and what local communities (often also actors in transnational networks and individual representatives of the state) consider to be legitimate offer opportunities for armed groups to build revenue and/or operational resources and legitimacy simultaneously.[48] The more the state position is enforced, the greater the damage to state legitimacy and relative legitimacy gain by non-state groups.

Applying the framework above to the engagement of JNIM and Nigerian bandit groups in illicit economies prevalent at artisanal gold mining sites and national parks highlights the similarities in the legitimacy gain of these two highly contrasting actors.

Artisanal gold mining sites

JNIM in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso

We apply each framework element above to JNIM's engagement in artisanal gold mining in Burkina Faso. We first consider artisanal gold mining sites as a source of indirect revenue for JNIM and then how JNIM's engagement in these spaces results in legitimacy gain for the group, given the function of these sites as a source of livelihoods for communities, which is criminalized by the state in a manner considered unjust. Unpacking the importance of artisanal gold mining sites for both JNIM and local communities and how the state's stance has consistently been at odds with communities' livelihood needs highlights the group's financial and legitimacy gains from engaging in these spaces.

The Sahel region of Burkina Faso, which has been under increasing JNIM control since 2018, has the country's highest concentration of artisanal gold mining sites, with 21% of the total mining areas (see Figure 2).[49] This makes it a key area to consider JNIM's engagement in artisanal gold mining and its implications for the group's legitimacy. Artisanal mining refers to mining conducted by individual miners, with low levels of production and capital investment and limited machinery and equipment.

There are over 2 200 artisanal mining areas across Burkina Faso that produced around 44.9 tonnes of gold in 2018, worth roughly US$2.7 billion at commodity prices in 2022.[50] Many of these sites are in areas that JNIM controls or frequently threatens.[51] JNIM established systems for collecting tax in exchange for security provision, or at least non-interference, at artisanal gold mining sites across the Sahel region.[52] Taxation of these sites serves as a critical source of revenue for the group.[53] Although there are instances of JNIM groups directly engaging in mining activity,[54] more often the group permits local communities to continue mining and taxes this activity. JNIM's taxation levels are often considered acceptable by mining communities and comparatively lower than those imposed by other armed groups or state auxiliaries. In the case of Burkina Faso, these auxiliaries tend to be Dozo hunters, members of the paramilitary Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie – VDP) or other state-backed militias.[55]

Prevalent economies at artisanal gold mining sites – not only gold extraction but informal ancillary businesses providing mining communities with resources and services – are a

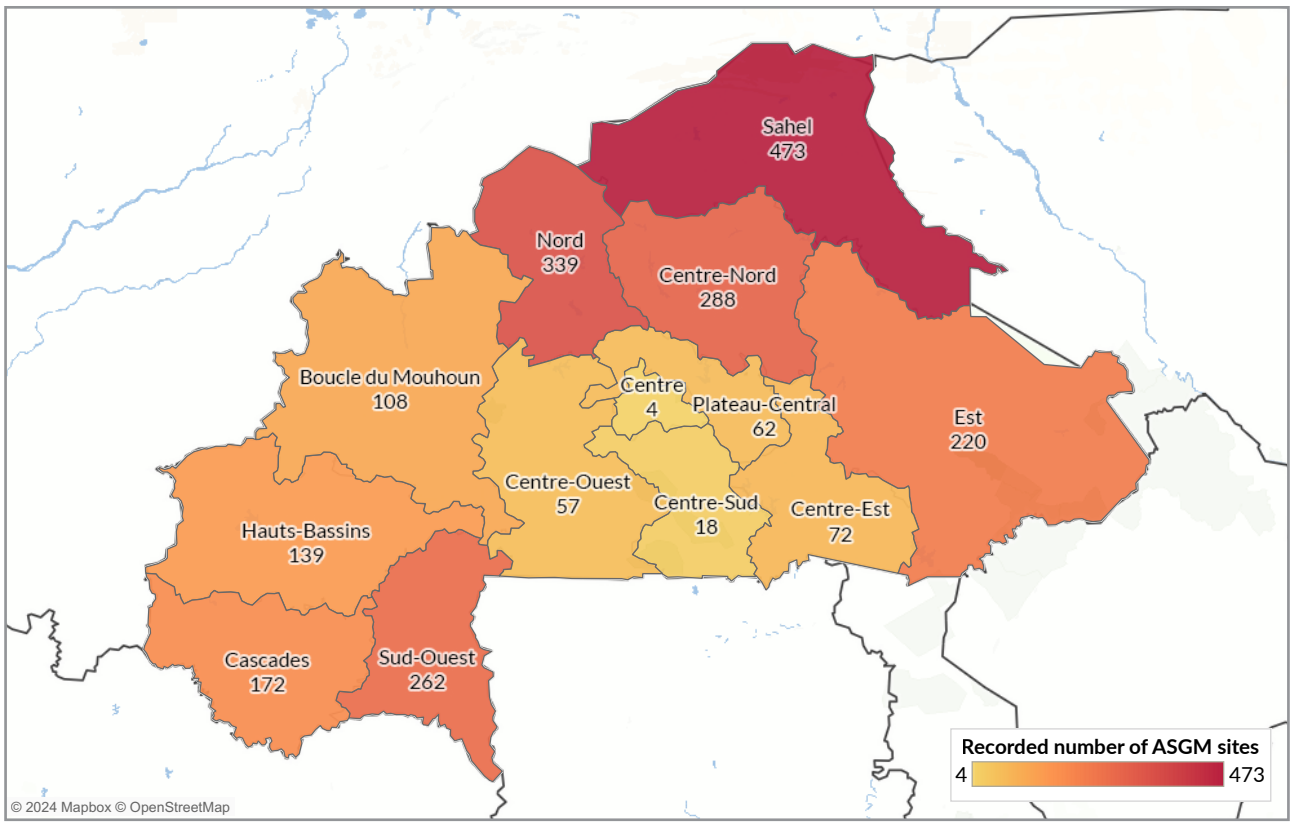


FIGURE 2 Artisanal and small-scale gold mining sites in Burkina Faso, 2019.

SOURCE: Burkinabe National Agency for the Supervision of Artisanal and Semi-mechanized Mining Operations (ANEEMAS)

Benin has heightened the militarization of conservation efforts with the deployment of the African Parks rangers in the Pendarji National Park. © *Stefan Heunis/AFP via Getty Images*

significant and growing source of livelihoods for communities, particularly in a context of diminishing alternatives.[56] While artisanal gold mining therefore fulfils a key function for communities, the vast majority of this mining across Burkina Faso falls outside regulatory frameworks, with estimates suggesting the informal sector is 13 times bigger than the formal sector.[57]

The Burkinabe state has adopted two key approaches in response to the role artisanal gold mining plays in financing JNIM. In areas of the country under state control, it has sought to accelerate efforts to enhance the regulation of artisanal gold mining and bring more artisanal activity under its purview to nationalize profits and divert financial flows from insurgent groups. Such efforts have the potential to be beneficial to communities and states alike. However, the strengthened regulatory requirements are perceived as burdensome by many mining communities and the enforcement of such regulations, such as the need for an artisanal mining licence, merely adds to the high vulnerability of communities.[58]

In areas under JNIM control – including the vast majority of the Sahel region – the state has systematically targeted artisanal gold mining sites with airstrikes, particularly those in more rural areas. This has displaced many mining communities from rural artisanal gold mining sites to sites closer to cities under state control, which are not aerially targeted.[59] State objectives to reduce the proceeds of artisanal gold mining flowing to JNIM appear, at least at one level, to be working, as gold extraction rates at many rural sites have reportedly dropped (although quantitative data are not available).[60]

However, such tactics also position the state as an aggressor that targets artisanal gold mining communities. Some communities displaced from rural mining sites by airstrikes moved to industrial mining concession areas. Here, some groups of miners have fought against state forces seeking to enforce prohibitions on artisanal gold mining at industrial mining concessions, in some cases resulting in fatalities.[61] Other miners have expressed grievances at being forced by state elements to pay bribes to circumvent restrictions on artisanal mining in the areas they have moved to. Such communities have expressed frustration that the state is not only unable to guarantee their security (and is indeed the aggressor) in rural mining areas but that it refuses them access to safer industrial sites or extorts them for access.[62]

Industrial mining surged across Burkina Faso in the early 2000s as industrial mining interests were formally prioritized above those of artisanal mining by the 2015 national mining legislation, leading to feelings of marginalization among artisanal mining communities.[63] JNIM has tapped into these frustrations in its narratives for building legitimacy, reportedly saying that airstrikes are designed not only to displace artisanal gold miners but to clear additional areas for industrial mining concessions in its communications to these communities.[64]

JNIM has strategically positioned itself as a defender of artisanal gold mining community interests, pushing out previous industrial and elite mining operators in the Sahel region and Burkina Faso more broadly, effectively democratizing access to mining sites. For example, until 2021, Burkina Faso's national gendarmerie kept close control of the Inata industrial mine site in the country's northern Soum province, repeatedly pushing out artisanal miners seeking to take advantage of the rich gold seam and limiting artisanal activities.[65] In November 2021, JNIM attacked the gendarmerie post at the industrial mine, resulting in 54 fatalities. JNIM-affiliated Ansaroul Islam claimed the attack in a video showing fighters overtaking the base. In the wake of the attack, there was an influx of artisanal miners to the resource-rich area, including from the Centre-Nord and other regions of the country, leading to a surge in artisanal mining activity.[66]

Recognizing the opportunities offered by artisanal gold mining sites, JNIM has effectively leveraged tailored communication campaigns that target communities around these sites.[67] In the words of one Burkinabe artisanal miner, 'The Salafists came to our mine and told us, "We have come to fight against the injustice that the authorities show towards you orpailleurs for the benefit of the industrial mining companies."'[68]

JNIM repeatedly targets artisanal mining communities with this messaging, promising to return access to rich mining areas that the state pushed artisanal miners out of in favour of Western companies.[69] In doing so, JNIM has framed its approach to taxing mining activity in a way that aligns with the interests of mining communities.

JNIM's deployment of violence at artisanal gold mining sites – whether against state forces or civilians – has also largely aligned with its governance goals of pushing out industrial operators and state interests and establishing behavioural rules that demand adherence to the group's religious mores. ACLED records 250 political violence events within 0.8 kilometres of known artisanal gold mining sites across Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2023, making up 5% of the total political violence during the same period (see Figure 3). Reflecting the high concentration of artisanal gold mining sites in the Sahel region (21%), the region also suffered the highest degree of recorded political violence near mining sites over this period (47% of the total).

Between 2020 and 2021, violence in the Sahel region – including near artisanal gold mining sites – surged as JNIM established its influence. As detailed above, clashes between JNIM and state forces increased as JNIM pushed out previous

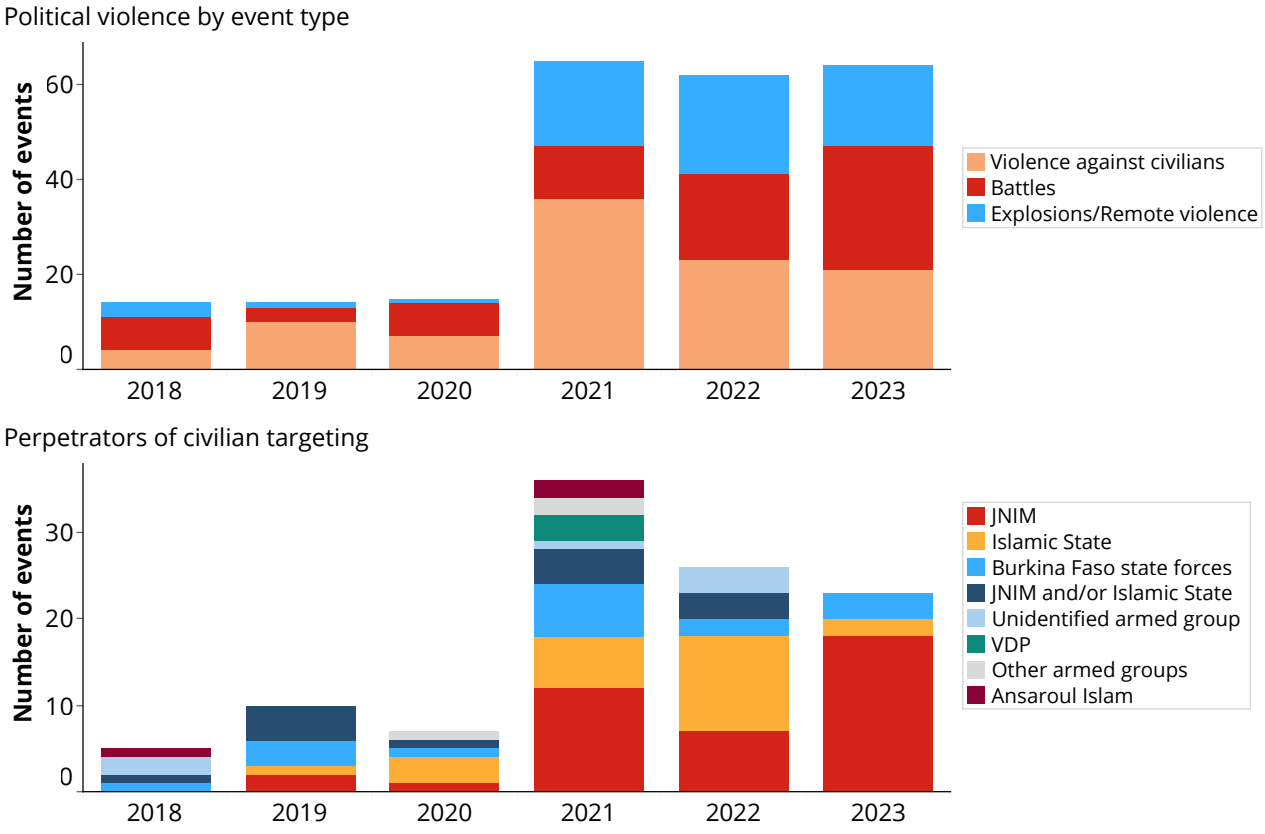


FIGURE 3 Political violence in Burkina Faso within a 0.8 kilometre radius of artisanal gold mining sites, 2018–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data

operators to enable artisanal mining. However, the majority of this surge was driven by an increase in violence targeting civilians, largely by JNIM (who was behind 37% of recorded incidents near artisanal gold mining sites in the Sahel region in 2021). A number of these incidents of civilian targeting were directly related to JNIM's efforts to consolidate its influence at mine sites, including through the enforcement of behavioural rules with punishments such as whipping. For example, in May 2021, suspected JNIM elements reportedly attacked people for not obeying behavioural rules imposed on a mine site near the village of Souma in the Soum province of the Sahel.

From 2021, as JNIM consolidated its grip over the Sahel region, violence targeting civilians perpetrated by JNIM near artisanal gold mining sites dropped sharply. Such incidents stopped in 2022, with the only exception being one recorded incident in 2023. Civilian targeting near artisanal gold mining sites after 2021 was almost exclusively at the hands of actors other than JNIM, predominantly IS Sahel, which has far more limited operations in the Sahel and has tended to devote less effort towards legitimacy-building among communities.

A contributing factor to this drop in violence targeting civilians is that JNIM established and sustained cooperative arrangements with mine site land owners and mining communities around many artisanal gold mining sites. These mutually beneficial arrangements reduced JNIM's need to use violence to enforce rules. The group also typically avoids excessive violence towards civilians, recognizing that it damages their governance goals. Other factors in the Sahel region also played a role in decreasing violence targeting civilians by JNIM near artisanal gold mining sites, including the displacement of some mining communities from sites in the wake of high-fatality incidents and a lower presence of state forces and auxiliaries.[70]

JNIM'S TARGETING OF CIVILIANS

In line with broader national trends, violence near artisanal gold mining sites surged in 2021. However, in contrast to overall escalating violence year-on-year more broadly, violence near artisanal gold mining sites has remained at similar levels since (81 events in 2021, 73 in 2022 and 75 in 2023). The 2021 surge was predominantly driven by a spike in civilian targeting, largely at the hands of JNIM. As JNIM sought to control growing numbers of artisanal gold mining sites, kidnapping constituted one-third of incidents targeting civilians near artisanal gold mining sites; by 2022, the proportion had dropped to 20%. This illustrates JNIM's reliance on kidnapping as a tool in the early stages of infiltration, predominantly for intelligence gathering, coercion and intimidation, a reliance which diminishes at later stages of territorial infiltration.

Overall, JNIM was the most prominent perpetrator of violence against civilians between 2020 and 2023. They were behind 44% of incidents, followed by IS Sahel, which carried out 25% of incidents, a disproportionately high number of the total events given the group's far smaller membership and more limited territorial presence. Compared to JNIM, IS Sahel engages in higher levels of civilian targeting as a proportion of their overall levels of violence. In Burkina Faso, IS Sahel civilian targeting made up 61% of their total operations between 2020 and 2023 compared to 54% for JNIM during the same time period.[71] While JNIM's targeting of civilians near artisanal gold mining sites and in the Sahel region dropped sharply in 2022, this surged again in 2023 in other regions, especially the Centre-Nord region. Civilian targeting events at artisanal gold mining sites have a 41% higher reported number of fatalities per event than overall civilian targeting (3.6 fatalities per event) in Burkina Faso. It is likely that this is largely due to the fact that mining sites tend to be areas of high population density, as villages and economies emerge to revolve around mining activities, magnifying the impact of attacks.

As violence soared between 2020 and 2021, battles near artisanal gold mining sites rose more sharply than overall battles (56% compared to 25%). This perhaps reflects artisanal gold mining sites' role as important spaces of contestation between states and insurgent groups. Battles near artisanal gold mining sites have continued rising each year since.[72] Each year, the VDP (auxiliary state forces composed of volunteers) has become more involved in protecting artisanal gold mining sites in many regions, increasingly clashing with insurgents in some mining areas.

Nigerian bandit groups

In Zamfara and Kaduna states in Nigeria's North West region, bandit groups have increasingly turned to the gold mining industry for financing as revenues from kidnapping and cattle rustling have declined. When bandits gain revenue from gold mining areas, they typically exert less violence against community members than with cattle rustling and kidnapping, creating opportunities for legitimacy gain with communities. Armed bandits' mode of revenue extraction from the gold mining industry in these states has evolved from robbing mining communities, often corresponding with high levels of violence and multiple casualties, towards taxation of mining activities, which has resulted in a subsequent decline in violence.[73] While bandit group engagement with artisanal gold mining in Nigeria's North West appears less focused on building legitimacy – remaining focused on resource extraction – than in the case of JNIM, the need for collaboration with mining communities shaped arrangements with them in some artisanal gold mining areas in Zamfara that are far more cooperative than those typically seen elsewhere in the North West region. This has empowered communities to an unusual degree in their ability to push back against bandit decrees and influence dynamics around artisanal gold mining sites.

Mining communities have reached negotiated settlements in some artisanal gold mining areas, which is uncommon in other parts of Zamfara and Kaduna, where armed bandit groups operate. For example, from about October 2023, in the Anka local government area, bandit groups reportedly sought to force miners to work for them on designated days in return for independent work on other days. The miners resisted and a number ceased working at the mines. The bandit groups agreed to requests for cash payments instead and have coexisted with the mining communities since.[74]

Seeking to limit armed bandit groups' financing from the gold sector, the federal government banned all mining activities in Zamfara in April 2019. However, Nigerian forces had limited capacity to enforce this ban, particularly as bandit groups restricted state access.[75] Thus, bandits continued to allow mining in the areas under their control and levied even higher taxes in the wake of the bans.

Mining communities in Zamfara reported that continuing mining activities in areas controlled by the bandits was preferable to ceasing mining in line with the 2019 prohibition. This is despite the significant taxes imposed by the bandits; with taxation rates reaching 10%, communities perceive them as punitive.[76] The state bans therefore led to mining communities' interests aligning with those of the bandits in these areas and the continuation of mining activities. Bandit groups such as JNIM thus gained both legitimacy and revenue through their engagement in the artisanal gold mining areas, despite a lack of strategic focus on gaining popularity among mining communities.

National parks

JNIM and the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex in the tri-border area of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger

National parks are hubs of resource-based illicit economies such as the charcoal trade and are often bisected by key trafficking corridors. This is particularly true when they are positioned in border areas, such as the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex (WAP Complex) in the north of Benin on the border with Niger and Burkina Faso (see Figure 4). The WAP Complex lies on long-standing smuggling corridors through which commodities from coastal countries, where they are typically cheaper, are moved into the Sahel. This offers a plethora of revenue-generating opportunities for armed groups.[77]

The enforcement of state regulatory frameworks that criminalize resource extraction from protected areas without providing viable alternatives – rendering many traditional practices and livelihoods illegal – has given rise to community grievances around the WAP Complex and, more broadly, across the African continent.[78] Trends towards greater securitization of conservation efforts in Benin through the deployment of the African Parks Network, a non-profit conservation organization known to deploy militarized approaches to securing protected areas, have further heightened tensions between the state, rangers and local communities.[79]

This has created openings for non-state armed groups such as JNIM to gain relative legitimacy by positioning itself as a gatekeeper that enables community access to

state-controlled resources.[80] JNIM has also occasionally taxed some of the smuggling flows through the WAP Complex and relied on these illicit supply chains for critical resources – most importantly fuel but also foodstuffs, medicines and motorbikes.[81]

For example, JNIM has granted pastoralists access to the WAP Complex so that their cattle can graze in exchange for a flat access fee (calculated at FCFA2 000, or approximately US$3.30 per cattle head).[82] Another way they accept payment is through zakat, often in the form of cattle which they then sell in urban markets.[83] Zakat constitutes a customary income contribution, ordinarily paid to religious authorities in the area, which JNIM has usurped for its own purposes. Stepping into these pre-existing frameworks of authority is a way of formalizing the armed group's authority over the community.

Similarly, restrictions on hunting within the WAP Complex created conditions for alignment between the interests of some hunting groups and JNIM, on which the latter has capitalized. Hunters were a key group for JNIM's entrenchment in the WAP Complex and among the first groups targeted for intelligence and supplies. Hunters' activities in the WAP complex had been rendered illegal by growing state restrictions on hunting within the park, particularly when the African Parks Network became charged with managing Pendjari National Park in 2017 and W National Park (Park W) in 2020.[84] (Notably, more recently African Parks has increased engagement with communities surrounding the park and enhanced relationships.)

Since extremist groups started operating in these areas in 2019, hunters operating in Pendjari and Park W often collaborated with violent extremist groups (predominantly JNIM) by providing them with food, other resources and intelligence.[85] For example, according to a security source, in one instance, a hunter from the Karimama area operating in Park W was provided with a mobile phone and regular credit top-ups to feed the violent extremist groups with information on the movements of the Beninese military.[86] In exchange for this support, extremist groups allowed the hunters to continue operating in the protected parks. Although JNIM has demonstrated a mixed stance on poaching, the group's partially successful attempts to push rangers out of the WAP Complex have enabled a sharp increase in the practice.[87] This relationship between JNIM and hunters broke down in 2021 as increased pressure from state armed forces heightened the risks of association with violent extremists, and hunters also reportedly resented religious behavioural codes increasingly

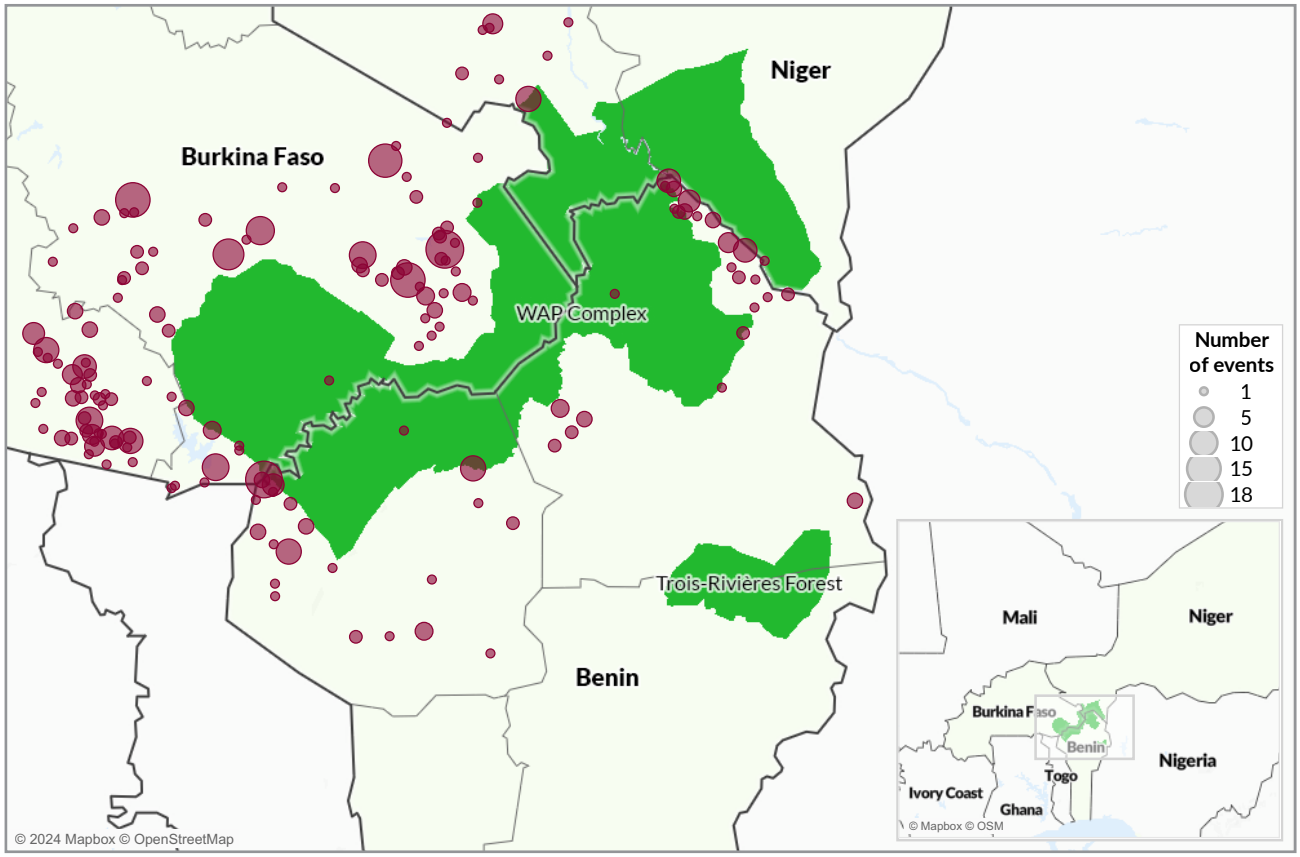


FIGURE 4 Political violence involving JNIM in the tri-border area of Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso, 2020–2023.
SOURCE: ACLED data

Violent extremist groups leverage the resource extraction opportunities provided by national parks such as Pendjari in Benin. © *Fawaz Tairou*

imposed by insurgent groups.[88] Nonetheless, these entry points for engagement with hunting communities were central for JNIM to successfully entrench and sustain itself in and around the WAP Complex.

Nigerian bandit groups: Dansadau Forest and other protected forested areas in Nigeria's North West

In northern Nigeria, forested areas such as protected parks and game reserves play a strategically important role not only for bandit groups but also for other armed groups operating in the North West region, including Ansaru. Such forested areas include the Rafi Forest in Zamfara state and Falgore Forest in Kano state (see Figure 5). Bandit camps are often located within forested areas, which serve as key reserve bases. Bandits have long used parks, including Kamuku National Park in Kaduna and the Dansadau Forest in Zamfara, as resourcing areas and bases from which to launch attacks. Such attacks are often launched on nearby roads (the Kaduna–Birnin Gwari road in Kaduna state and the Gusau–Dansadau road in Zamfara state, key corridors linking hubs in the North West region, have both been particularly vulnerable to attacks launched from neighbouring forested regions). National parks fulfil functions for armed groups beyond revenue generation and operational resourcing, although these remain key, partly through taxation of logging activities in the park.

Several forested spaces that are key to bandits' areas of operation – including Kamuku National Park, Kanji Lake National Park and Dansadau Forest – are protected by laws that prohibit or regulate resource extraction. Some residents living near several of these protected areas, such as the outskirts of the Dansadau Forest, rely on logging as a key source of their livelihood.

Historically, limited state enforcement of such protections has meant that communities have had few limitations in accessing and extracting resources. However, as armed bandit groups became an increasing threat to the state and their taxation of the informal logging market became recognized as an important source of their financing, more emphasis has been placed on prohibiting logging within protected areas. In response to reported links between illicit timber operators and bandit groups, described as a 'mutual understanding of give and take' by the Zamfara state commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, governments in Zamfara in 2019 and Kaduna in 2021 banned logging and the associated charcoal trade across local government areas affected by banditry.[89] These prohibitions were part of a wider set of restrictions intended to cut off revenue and operational resources flowing to bandit groups. It also targeted the fuel trade, which was rightly perceived as the key to bandits' mobility.[90]

State forces struggled to enforce restrictions on logging. For example, in Kaduna, where the heavily armed bandits outgun forest guards, they have reportedly focussed instead on establishing roadblocks on roads leading out of Kamuku National Park to intercept trucks laden with illegally felled timber. This has created a lucrative system of extortion at these roadblocks (making taxation systems between bandits and state patrols at these roadblocks barely distinguishable).[91]

In the wake of the bans, bandits merely continued taxing loggers and farmers working agricultural land within the forested areas in exchange for ongoing access to the forest.[92] While

bandits have not leveraged narratives of exclusion in the same way JNIM has, and there were no long-standing grievances against the state from communities relating to the management of these protected spaces, the state bans nonetheless positioned such bandit groups as enablers of state-prohibited livelihoods. Even without the bandits seeking to govern, this put them in a beneficial position for gaining legitimacy vis-à-vis communities relative to the state.

Community members who rely on logging from the protected Dansadau Forest have repeatedly said that, while they did not view bandit groups particularly positively, bandit control was preferable to that of the state because of bandits' role in facilitating access to the park.[93] Again, despite far more limited attempts to gain popularity among communities than in the case of JNIM, the bandit groups nevertheless gained legitimacy, revenue and resources simultaneously from their engagement in these national parks.

Armed groups generate revenue by taxing illegal logging in national parks. *Photo: Ugoji John/Wikipedia*

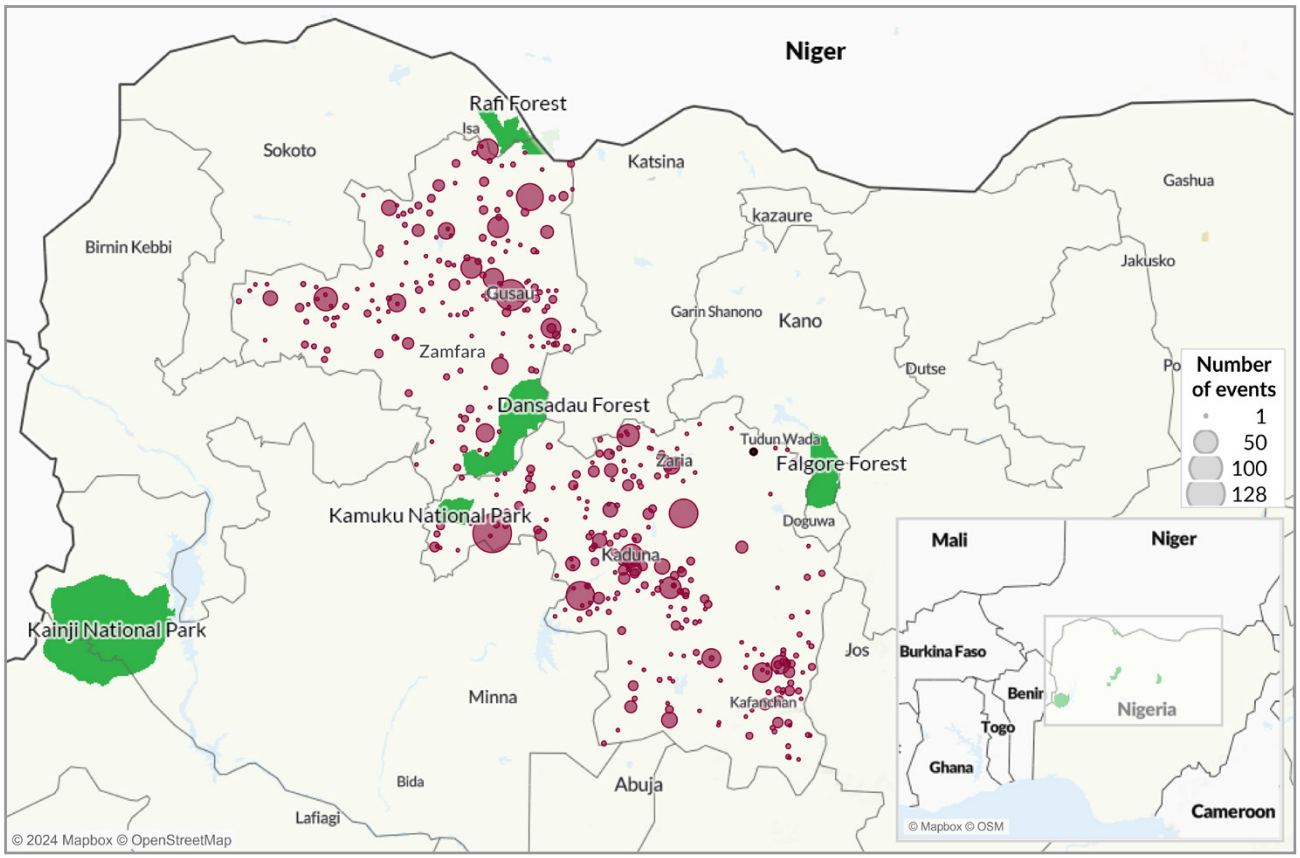


FIGURE 5 Political violence involving banditry in Kaduna and Zamfara states, 2020–2023.
SOURCE: ACLED data

GROUP STRUCTURES: LEGITIMACY, VIOLENCE AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Each of the groups researched for this series had different internal group structures and compositions, ranging from the more centralized and hierarchical organization of JNIM to the more fragmented Anglophone separatist movement and the constellation of groups that make up the banditry landscape in Nigeria's North West. Group structure shaped the groups' use of violence against civilians, how they engaged in licit and illicit economies and consequent group legitimacy.[94] Many of the findings supported traditional understandings of legitimacy, violence and territorial control;[95] namely, more organized groups and stronger territorial control correlated with lower levels of violence targeting civilians. However, the series also brought new insights into how more organized armed groups with stronger control over an area can facilitate illicit economic activities to foster legitimacy with local populations.

When comparing the case studies in the series, internal centralization, a clear command structure between leaders and armed group units, and higher levels of organization corresponded to lower levels of civilian targeting. More structured groups such as JNIM, with evident governance aspirations, engage in violence against civilians, although in a targeted and predictable fashion. JNIM grew from an umbrella of local armed groups to a more organizationally cohesive armed group with a clear hierarchical structure. In turn, civilian targeting diminished following structural reforms in late 2017 and early 2018.[96] Between the beginning of JNIM's process of consolidation in early 2018 and the end of 2023, civilian targeting by JNIM on average comprised a third of total political violence annually, meaning it carried out the lowest levels of violence targeting civilians when compared to Anglophone separatists in Cameroon and bandit groups in Nigeria.

The disparate Anglophone separatist groups in Cameroon shifted from clear command structures and hierarchical decision-making to smaller, independent entities with rising levels of indiscriminate violence targeting civilian populations (see Figure 6). This civilian targeting diminished their political capacity (a capacity that they arguably lost interest in) and created a negative feedback loop, requiring ever-increasing coercion to exert their influence in the Anglophone region. Their shifting civilian targeting reflected the evolving structure of the groups as far from static and changing over time. As the movement splintered into numerous independent armed groups, civilian targeting began to increase. While in 2017 – when violence in the Anglophone region began to escalate – civilian targeting made up 12% of events involving Anglophone separatists, by 2023, the proportion rose to 50%. The shifting violence of the Anglophone separatists came amidst broader organizational changes, namely a breakdown in both local and diaspora leadership.[97] This speaks to the correlation between the level of organization and civilian targeting as groups' structures change over time.

While findings from the series showed some cooperation and organization of armed bandits in Nigeria, bandit groups carry out the highest levels of civilian targeting compared to JNIM or Anglophone separatists. Civilian targeting by bandit groups in Kaduna and Zamfara averaged 79% of their total violence between 2018 to 2023. The limited organization and collaboration within and between bandit groups pose high risks to local civilian populations and contribute to limited efforts to build legitimacy.[98]

While the relationship between organization and civilian targeting is important, it is also affected by additional factors such as territorial control.[99] A higher degree of territorial control typically results in lower levels of violence. Even when highly organized, civilian targeting by armed groups often rises during expansion into new territories or when facing competition from other armed groups or the state. In the case of JNIM, civilian targeting surged as it infiltrated the Est region of Burkina Faso: from 30 events in 2020 to 176 events in 2021 – over 75% of JNIM's total political violence for the year in the Est region. As JNIM consolidated control in this area, levels of civilian targeting decreased.

Many of the bandit groups in Nigeria do not exert territorial control but tend to base themselves in camps away from civilian populations and conduct itinerant raids.[100] Without the need to control territory and the local population, bandits carry out high levels of civilian targeting as a proportion of their total operations. The limited efforts to reach agreements with civilian populations are often driven by revenue-generating mechanisms which require collaboration between the bandit groups and relevant communities. In contrast to bandit groups and Anglophone separatist fighters in recent years, JNIM tends to live among civilians and governs through building legitimacy and behaving less violently towards civilians.[101]

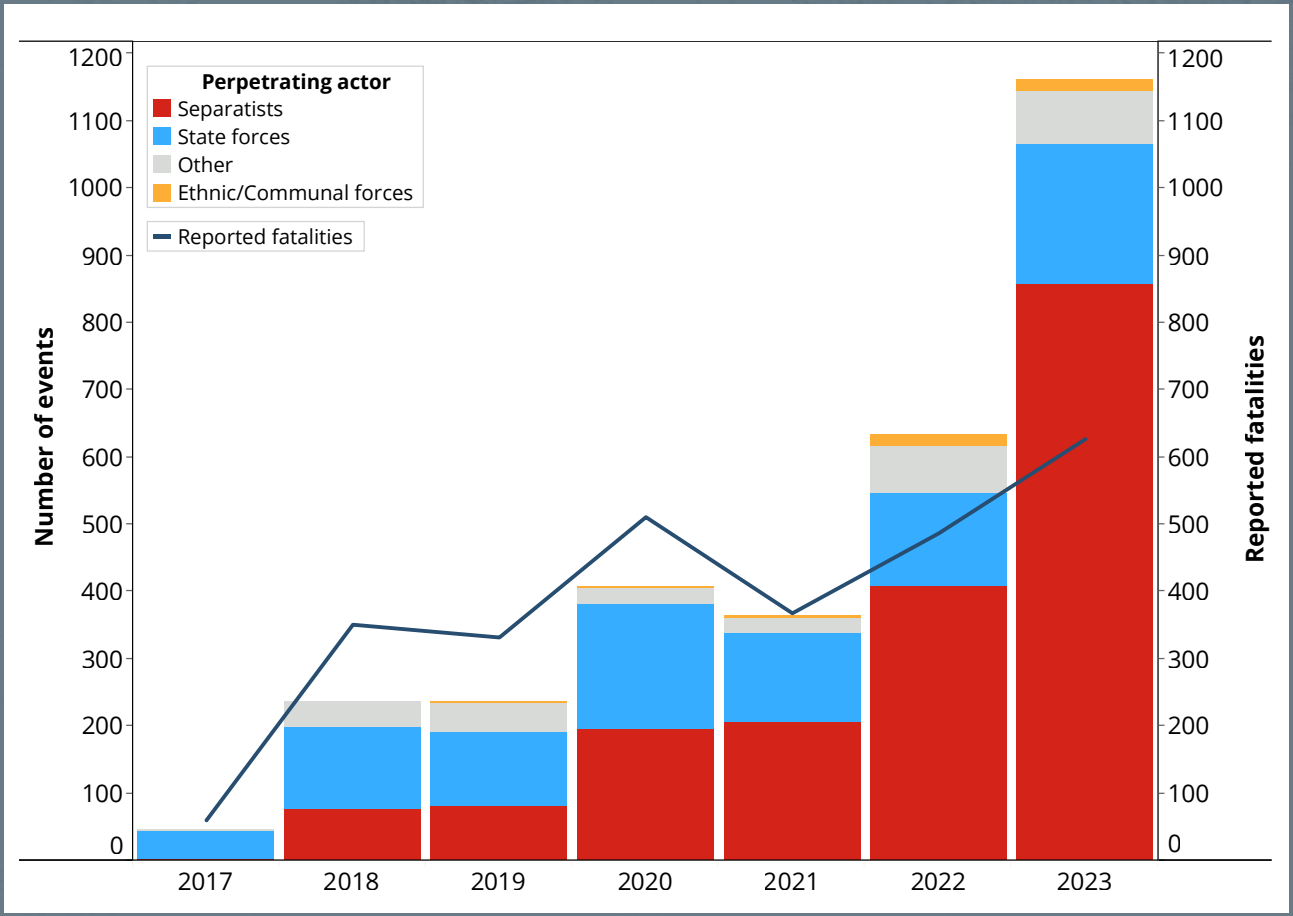


FIGURE 6 Violence targeting civilians in Anglophone Cameroon, 2017–2023.
SOURCE: ACLED data

The research series also highlights the ways funding strategies and legitimacy must be considered alongside levels of territorial control. Anglophone separatist fighters initially lived among civilian populations.[102] However, as separatist fighters began using kidnapping and looting to fund their operations, this diminished their legitimacy and funding from diaspora supporters. Separatists could no longer live in many populated areas without being reported to state forces, effectively raising the costs of controlling territory. This led many separatist fighters to move into more rural areas and carry out higher levels of insurgent violence toward state forces and kidnapping of civilians to generate revenue. JNIM also tends to use kidnappings in new territories for financial gain, intelligence gathering and intimidation of residents. However, after gaining a degree of control, kidnapping diminishes but continues at lower levels to provide JNIM with a method of forced recruitment and vetting of militants.[103]

Structure also shapes resource sharing within groups: a more cohesive organizational structure permits greater sharing of resources, even for geographically disparate militants. The cohesion of JNIM across several countries permits the group to direct resources to where they are most required. Illustratively, JNIM has repeatedly funnelled cars it steals to operational sites where they are needed, often crossing national borders to do so. JNIM's approach to car theft is targeted and focused almost exclusively on the types of cars that meet their operational needs, with a preference for 4x4s.[104] Anglophone separatist fighters' integration with the diaspora allowed for transnational funding and resource sharing, eventually breaking down and moving towards local revenue generation and competition between separatist fighters.

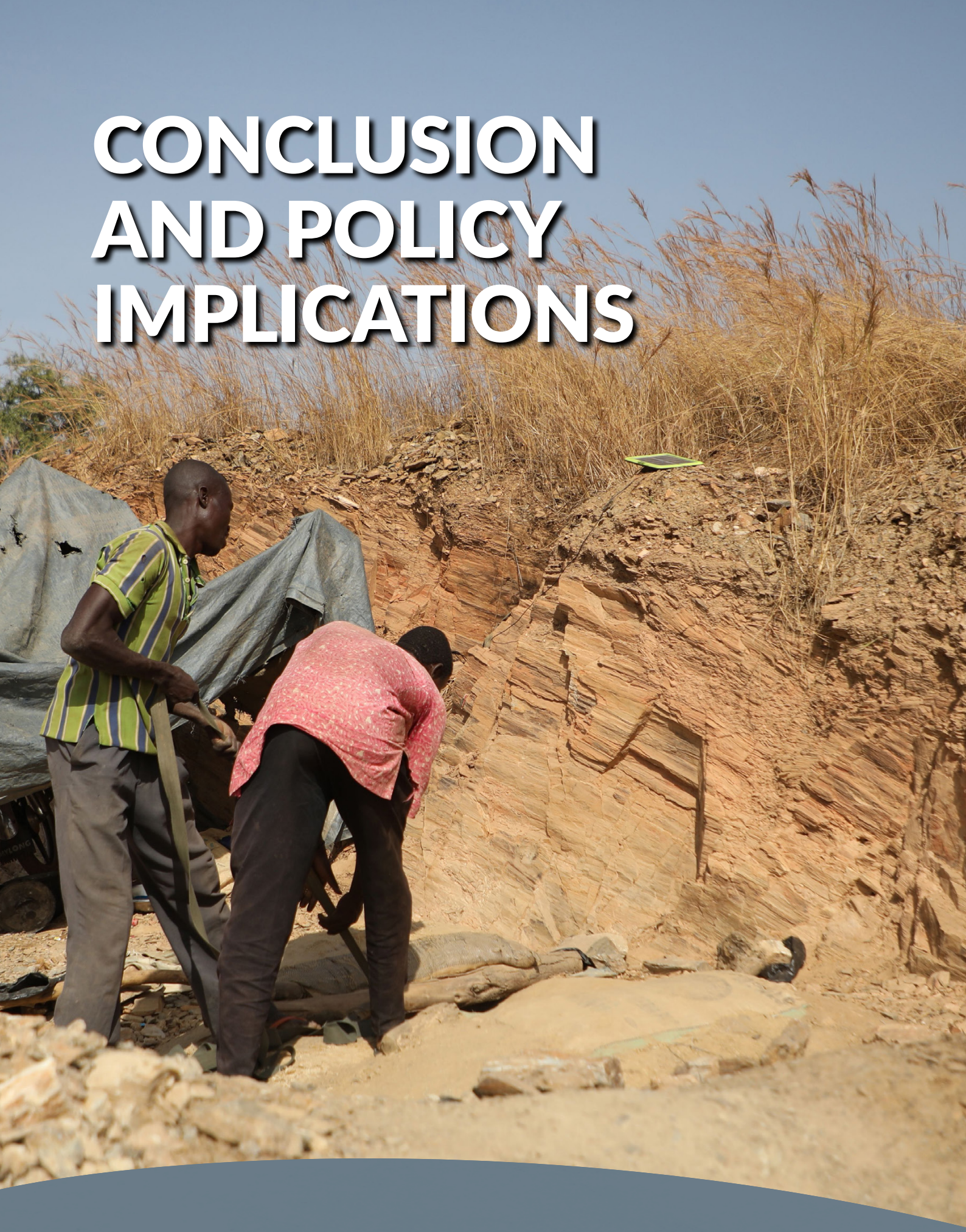
A key finding suggests that more organized armed groups can facilitate illicit economic activity as a way to generate legitimacy from local populations. In several areas, JNIM limits the state's regulation of artisanal mining or hunting and engage in a degree of regulating these activities and dispute arbitration.[105] Anglophone separatists also facilitate and tax the smuggling of illicit fuel from Nigeria. Given the lack of licit fuel options in Anglophone Cameroon, the separatists' permission for residents to import and sell alternative fuels

generates local support compared to the Yaoundé government's interdiction on such supplies. Although JNIM and Anglophone separatists still require rent to sustain their armed activities, this is lower than that charged by the state and opened up activities deemed illegal by the state, creating support from segments of the population.

In contrast to the facilitation of illicit economic activities by JNIM and Anglophone separatists, bandits in Nigeria similarly generate revenue by exerting a degree of control over mining sites. Yet, instead of generating legitimacy, the bandits' lack of organization and extortionate fees negatively affect how local communities view them. For example, in the Ahrawa community in Maru, more than 15 distinct bandit groups extracted levies from local miners. This lack of coordination among bandits limits their capacity to generate legitimacy by controlling artisanal mining areas. Instead, individual profit maximization leads to miners ceasing operations.

Collectively, findings from the series examined the varying organizational structure of armed groups, their use of violence against civilians, involvement in licit and illicit economies and the different ways of generating legitimacy. The research across various armed groups in West Africa provided fresh perspectives on ways armed groups can facilitate illicit economic activities to foster legitimacy. For an armed group to generate legitimacy among local populations from illicit economic activities, actors require both territorial control and stronger internal coordination. Examples from Nigeria and the Cameroonian separatist rebellion showed that armed group fragmentation limited an armed actor's capacity to generate legitimacy due to coordination failures despite enabling activities considered illicit by the state.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS



This series has underscored the importance of considering armed group legitimacy in analyzing armed groups' intersections with illicit and licit economies and their use of violence, particularly against civilians. Understanding legitimacy as relating to efficiencies rather than popularity and therefore underpinning armed groups' ability to operate, not always govern, makes legitimacy relevant and beneficial to armed groups with contrasting objectives.

Armed groups' standing in communities can be undermined or bolstered by their involvement in illicit economies. Given the benefits of legitimacy, the latter is desirable. Spaces in which armed groups' goals of revenue generation, obtaining operational resources and building legitimacy through their engagement with illicit economies can align are particularly valuable to armed groups and dangerous to states. Illicit economies that fulfil key functions for armed groups and communities and instances in which the state's position in criminalizing livelihoods is at odds with communities' perceptions shape the opportunity these spaces present for armed groups. Understanding the functions of illicit economies for local communities in these spaces – and the roles they play, or could play, for armed groups – is thus a key step in spotting spaces of opportunity for armed groups.

Considering where these characteristics manifest can help prioritize areas for stabilization interventions, not only in states under direct threat by armed groups but also in neighbouring states that are vulnerable to incursion. While the framework above is applied to West Africa, it can provide entry points for prioritization in other contexts.

Shrinking opportunities for armed groups: Rethinking the 'criminal'

The formation of economic policies to determine 'illicit' and 'licit' financial activities must consider local livelihoods. JNIM has gained support in northern Benin from certain local communities who can now use forests and parks for hunting and logging. In Cameroon, separatists have facilitated fuel smuggling, which brought a valuable commodity into the region that was in short supply. If the state determines certain activities to be illicit or restricts access to an area, it must also consider suitable alternatives. When illicit economies offer widespread livelihood opportunities to communities, it may be best to rethink their criminalization, prioritize the provision of viable alternatives, or – if no other option is available – turn a blind eye to their proliferation. The goals of stabilization and shutting down illicit economies are not always aligned, despite persistent perceptions among policymakers, and this must be recognized in shaping crime-sensitive stabilization interventions or determining approaches to illicit economies.

Recommendations for policymakers in West Africa

In West Africa, national parks and artisanal gold mining sites are two key areas where regulatory frameworks may need consideration, alongside investment in providing alternative livelihoods and legitimacy-building initiatives by the state. Interventions should consider how to erode resource flows to armed groups and bolster relative state legitimacy, which is a central factor shaping long-term outcomes.

Formalize and support or ignore the artisanal gold mining sector

The artisanal gold mining sector is for armed group governance in West and Central Africa what opium cultivation was to the Taliban in Afghanistan and coca cultivation to political and criminal groups in Latin America – a sector in which state regulation is at odds with community perceptions of legitimacy and livelihood opportunities, at significant expense to the relative legitimacy of the state and armed groups.[106] Stabilization interventions across the globe have repeatedly failed. Seeking to prohibit economies that provide widespread economic benefits to communities has been a central error states have made that has helped legitimize alternative governance providers, even though artisanal gold mining (as opium and coca cultivation in other contexts) undisputedly provides significant revenue streams to armed groups.

State attempts to enforce restrictions on artisanal gold mining in West Africa without providing alternatives create spaces that are extremely vulnerable to armed group entrenchment and undermine a significant economic and stabilization opportunity for the region. Artisanal gold mining is a potentially lucrative livelihood in spaces with extremely scarce alternatives. This, together with the relatively low barriers to entry, means that it is well-positioned to offer communities and armed group members alternatives to banditry and insurgency.[107]

However, formalizing and supporting artisanal gold mining is fraught with obstacles. Formalization efforts have often merely increased administrative burdens on artisanal mining communities and yielded limited benefits. Consequently, where formalizing and supporting the artisanal gold mining sector is not feasible, it may be preferable not to intervene or to simply provide greater security for mining activity, limiting armed group presence and allowing the sector to continue, than to expend limited state resources on seeking to enforce prohibitions that can prove counter-productive. Additional support to limit the most harmful impacts of artisanal gold mining could include safety equipment, equipment to mitigate the most environmentally harmful processes (typically linked to mercury and cyanide in amalgamation processes) and educational support for underage miners.

Align community interests with conservation

Communities living in the corridors of national parks have repeatedly proven vulnerable to the infiltration of armed groups. Conservation goals are often at odds with livelihood opportunities available to communities in protected areas. However, compromises must be sought to accommodate communities living in the peripheral corridors of parks, efforts must be made to align incentives – including through channelling more funds generated by the park to communities – and flexibility is required for informal and illicit economies. Communities have often proved willing to adapt to restrictions as long as the benefit they receive from the parks is proportionate to the income lost from farming and grazing on protected land. Benefits to local communities from national parks must thus be consistent and evenly spread out to support them. This is difficult when the benefits of many parks depend on tourism, which is unlikely to resume in the foreseeable future in areas experiencing the most chronic instability, including northern Benin and Nigeria. Donors contributing to conservation must be open to innovative schemes that ensure a more consistent income for residents around the biosphere. National parks are extremely expensive to run. Nevertheless, there is little prospect of preserving the area's biodiversity without local support, which should be factored into donor planning and budgets.

NOTES

1 Héni Nsaibia, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ACLED and GI-TOC, October 2023; Kingsley L Madueke et al, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024; Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Anglophone separatists, ACLED and GI-TOC, September 2024. The reports are housed at https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

2 For the purposes of this report, 'Nigerian armed bandit groups' refers to the constellation of distinct armed bandit groups operating in the region, recognizing that they are not monolith.

3 Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hiberg Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen, Reviewing jihadist governance in the Sahel, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2021, https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/23380/file/NUPI_Working_Paper_894_RupesingheNaghizadehCohen.pdf; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba, Jihadist ideological conflict and local governance in Mali, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2022, pp 1–16, https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/BBETSM1.pdf.

4 Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid (eds), Local orders in an age of international disorder, in *Militants, Criminals and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder*, Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

5 Hanna Pfeifer and Regine Schwab, Politicising the rebel governance paradigm. Critical appraisal and expansion of a research agenda, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34, 1 (2022), pp 1–23, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2022.2144000.

6 ACLED records five types of events in its database: battles, protests, riots, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians. There are 25 subcategories within these events. This would capture violence by armed groups writ large but would not reflect instances of coercion, intimidation or violence perpetrated by other criminal groups. For further detail on the ACLED database methodology, see the ACLED codebook at https://acleddata.com/knowledge-base/codebook.

7 Benedetta Berti, What's in a name? Re-conceptualizing non-state armed groups in the Middle East, *Palgrave Communications*, 2 (2016), pp 1–8, https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201689; Moritz Schuberth, The challenge of community-based armed groups: Towards a conceptualization of militias, gangs, and vigilantes, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 36, 2 (2015), pp 296–320, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13523260.2015.1061756.

8 Livia Isabella Schubiger and Matthew Zelina, Ideology in armed groups, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50, 4 (2017), pp 948–952, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ps-political-science-and-politics/article/abs/ideology-in-armed-groups/FFB382363C40F61EC701A63077CC3CD5.

9 Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Anglophone separatists, ACLED and GI-TOC, September 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

10 Héni Nsaibia, In light of the Kafolo attack: The jihadi militant threat in the Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast borderlands, ACLED, August 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/08/24/in-light-of-the-kafolo-attack-the-jihadi-militant-threat-in-the-burkina-faso-and-ivory-coast-borderlands.

11 Kars de Bruijne, Conflict in the Penta-border area, Clingendael, November 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/conflict-penta-border-area. See also Farid Bathily, *Deux morts suite à une attaque dans le nord du Bénin*, Voice of America, 15 September 2022, https://www.voaafrique.com/a/deux-morts-suite-%C3%A0-une-attaque-dans-le-nord-du-b%C3%A9nin/6749167.html.

12 International Crisis Group, Containing militancy in West Africa's Park W, January 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w. Government narratives in Benin and Burkina Faso have significantly changed since and currently explicitly recognize the insurgent threat. National-level authorities in Benin openly recognized the threat of terrorism in the country as late as May 2023, although individual members of parliament were speaking to this risk previously. See Government of the Republic of Benin, *À Banikoara : Le gouvernement affiche détermination et fermeté face au terrorisme*, 18 May 2023, https://www.gouv.bj/article/2239/a-banikoara-gouvernement-affiche-determination-fermete-face-terrorisme; Marc Mensah, *L'Assemblée en croisade contre le terrorisme à Parakou L'Assemblée en croisade contre le terrorisme à Parakou*, 24 Heures au Benin, 3 February 2022, https://www.24haubenin.com/spip.php?page=sum&id_article=35855.

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14 Ashley Jackson, Florian Weigand and Theo Tindall, Crime and communities: Life under criminal group control, Overseas Development Institute, March 2023, https://odi.org/en/publications/crime-and-communities-life-under-criminal-group-control; ACLED, Annual report on violence targeting local officials 2023, May 2024, https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Violence-Targeting-Local-Officials-2023-Report-Final.pdf.

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17 Ashley Jackson, Florian Weigand and Theo Tindall, Crime and communities: Life under criminal group control, Overseas Development Institute, March 2023, https://odi.org/en/publications/crime-and-communities-life-under-criminal-group-control.

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20 Kingsley L Madueke et al, 'Do not come out to vote': Gangs, elections, political violence and criminality in Kano and Rivers, Nigeria, GI-TOC, November 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/political-violence-gangs-kano-river-nigeria.

21 Nina Kaysser and Ana Paula Oliveira, Killing in silence: New research uncovers sheer magnitude of assassinations linked to organized crime, GI-TOC, November 2021, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/global-assassination-monitor.

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23 ACLED, Gang violence: Concepts, benchmarks, and coding rules, 2 November 2023, https://acleddata.com/knowledge-base/gang-violence-concepts-benchmarks-and-coding-rules.

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25 Kingsley L Madueke et al, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa; Oluwole Ojewale, The bandits' world: Recruitment strategies, command structure and motivations for mass casualty attacks in northwest Nigeria, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 35, 2 (2024), pp 228–255.

26 Héni Nsaibia, Insecurity in southwestern Burkina Faso in the context of an expanding insurgency, ACLED, 17 January 2019, https://acleddata.com/2019/01/17/insecurity-in-southwestern-burkina-faso-in-the-context-of-an-expanding-insurgency.

27 James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, Northwestern Nigeria: A jihadization of banditry, or a 'banditization' of jihad?, *CTC Sentinel*, 15, 1 (2022), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad.

28 Ibid.

29 Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Anglophone separatists, ACLED and GI-TOC, September 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

30 Ibid.

31 The study considered the engagement of 140 groups in drug crimes, extortion, smuggling, kidnapping for ransom and robbery. Groups engaged in social service provision (a strong indicator of those seeking to build social support) were identified to be less likely to engage in 'episodic crimes' (i.e. crimes not requiring organizational investment and providing unstable revenue) than those not providing such support. The difference was less stark in relation to 'institutional crime types' (namely those requiring established material and social infrastructures to manage ongoing criminal operations). See Victor H Asal, R Karl Rethemeyer, Eric W Schoon, Crime, conflict, and the legitimacy trade-off: Explaining variation in insurgents' participation in crime, *The Journal of Politics*, 81, 2 (2019), https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/701492.

32 Comparing the involvement of groups engaged in social service provision (used as an indicator of those pursuing legitimacy) and those not engaged in such activities (suggesting a lower focus on legitimacy and social support) in distinct illicit economies (drug crimes, extortion, smuggling, kidnapping for ransom and robbery) provided an empirical framing for where the legitimacy trade-off is largest.

33 Itty Abraham and Willem Van Schendel (eds), Introduction: The making of illicitness, in *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things*, Bloomington, 2005; Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, People's perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel, Institute for Security Studies, April 2014, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper254.pdf.

34 Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, People's perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel, Institute for Security Studies, April 2014, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper254.pdf.

35 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War On Drugs*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

36 Expert roundtable discussion hosted by the GI-TOC and ACLED, 6 November 2023.

37 Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid (eds), Local orders in an age of international disorder, in *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder*, Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

38 For the purposes of this report and the broader series on illicit economies and armed groups, governance by non-state armed groups is conceptualized as regulating the behaviour of residents, providing services, and taking control of local finances and economies. See Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hiberg Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen, Reviewing jihadist governance in the Sahel, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, May 2021, https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/reviewing-jihadist-governance-in-the-sahel; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba, Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2022, pp 1–16, https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/BBETSM1.pdf. Given the typical – though somewhat contested – classification of Nigerian bandit groups as criminal rather than political or insurgent groups, we also consider definitions of criminal governance, framed by Benjamin Lessing to be when the lives, routines, and activities of a local population are impacted by rules or codes imposed by a criminal organization. See Benjamin Lessing, Conceptualizing criminal governance, *Perspectives on Politics*, September 2021, https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5894706/mod_resource/content/1/Lessing%20-%202020%20-%20Conceptualizing%20Criminal%20Governance.pdf.

39 Expert roundtable discussion hosted by the GI-TOC and ACLED, 6 November 2023.

40 Mouhamadou Kane and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, Climate change, illicit economies and community resilience: Niokolo-Koba National Park, Senegal, GI-TOC, November 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/climate-change-illicit-economies-and-community-resilience-niokolo-koba-national-park-senegal.

41 It is key to consider the 'functions' that illicit economies fulfil in societies, as this grants key insights into why they persist. See Heather Marquette and Caryn Peiffer, Corruption functionality framework, Global Integrity, 2021, p 8, https://ace.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GI-ACE-Research-Paper-Corruption-Framework.pdf. This is a similar point to that made by Michel Foucault in 1975 in *Discipline and Punish*, with regard to the need to set aside any moral judgment and simply understand how the gulag functions and to which purposes. See Eli Lichtenstein, Explanation and evaluation in Foucault's genealogy of morality, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 31, 3 (2023), pp 731–747, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ejop.12809.

42 Indirect harm such as environmental degradation resulting from artisanal gold mining activities or timber felling are considerable.

43 This contrasts, for example, to the characteristics typical of high-value transit trades such as cocaine trafficking, where profits are concentrated in very few hands, and is instead more comparable to production areas in illicit economies like cultivation areas for illicit drugs. See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown's analysis of drug cultivation and counter-narcotic policies in *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War On Drugs*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

44 Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War On Drugs*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

45 Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid (eds), Local orders in an age of international disorder, in *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder*, Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

46 Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid (eds), *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder*, Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

47 The criminalization of an economy typically shapes the state's position. Either the prohibition or regulation is enforced (often through 'crackdowns' by either law enforcement or military); state representatives engage in corrupt practices, seeking rents in exchange for evading the regulation or prohibition; or it is simply ignored (either because the state is absent or because there is merely no engagement with the law). The first two approaches have repeatedly given rise to grievances among communities that perceive the prohibition of revenue-generating opportunities to be unjust, undermining the legitimacy of the state.

48 Itty Abraham and Willem Van Schendel (eds), Introduction: The making of illicitness, in *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things*, Bloomington, 2005; Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, People's perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel, Institute for Security Studies, April 2014, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper254.pdf.

49 United Nations Environment Programme, Glossary: Artisanal mining, https://leap.unep.org/en/knowledge/glossary/artisanal-mining.

50 The average London Bullion Market Association spot price for gold in November 2022 was US$1 722.58 per ounce. One kilogramme of gold is equal to 32.1507 troy ounces. As such, at these prices, 44.9 tonnes of gold would be valued at over US$2.7 billion. See UNODC, Gold trafficking in the Sahel, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Gold_v5.pdf.

51 Data on artisanal mines from the Burkinabe National Agency for the Supervision of Artisanal and Semi-mechanized Mines (ANEEMAS).

52 Typically, local landowners own the areas in which particular mine shafts are situated. Miners seeking to exploit a particular shaft enter into an agreement to hand over a percentage of extracted gold. The landowner then has a direct agreement with JNIM around payment of a proportion of their earnings in exchange for ongoing access and security at the mine site.

53 Cristiano Lanzano, Sabine Luning and Alizèta Ouédraogo, Insecurity in Burkina Faso – beyond conflict minerals: The complex links between artisanal gold mining and violence, The Nordic Africa Institute, September 2021, https://www.planetgold.org/sites/default/files/The%20Nordic%20Africa%20Institute.%202021.%20Insecurity%20in%20Burkina%20Faso-beyond%20conflict%20minerals.pdf.

54 ACLED monitoring suggests that a number of combatants operating in Nazinga Game Ranch and Kabore Tambi National Park temporarily ceased operations after a brief period of combatant activity in 2019, and in particular in the wake of a military operation in the Kadro area of Nahouri province, which resulted in the killing of several JNIM militants who had reportedly become involved in informal artisanal gold mining. According to one source, while engaging in informal artisanal gold mining, the JNIM elements continued observing the activities of the eco-guards and military in the area, which is home to many Fulani transhumance pastoralists, a community to which the militants in the area belong. A different source indicated that the fighters on the Ghana–Burkina Faso border remained actively involved in logistics for the wider JNIM group, including the procurement of night-vision goggles for JNIM fighters in Macina in central Mali. The same source suggested that this group may resume its militant activities, but had been awaiting orders from the leadership at the time, while continuing to primarily focus on artisanal gold mining in the meantime.

55 Héni Nsaibia, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), ACLED and GI-TOC, October 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

56 The wide distribution of resources and lack of direct harm to communities shapes the high degree of legitimacy that artisanal gold mining enjoys across the Sahel region. As climate change diminishes agriculture, reliance on artisanal gold mining is only increasing. See Cristiano Lanzano, Sabine Luning and Alizèta Ouédraogo, Insecurity in Burkina Faso – beyond conflict minerals: The complex links between artisanal gold mining and violence, The Nordic Africa Institute, September 2021, https://www.planetgold.org/sites/default/files/The%20Nordic%20Africa%20Institute.%202021.%20Insecurity%20in%20Burkina%20Faso-beyond%20conflict%20minerals.pdf.

57 Ibid.

58 Interview with a Burkina Faso security analyst and international security analyst, May 2023, by phone.

59 Such moves are not without risk. Many gold-rich areas remain heavily contested, and mining communities become vulnerable to JNIM or IS Sahel attacks by moving to areas under protection of the VDP.

60 Interview with a Burkina Faso security analyst and international security analyst, May 2023, by phone.

61 For example, in one incident monitored by ACLED, clashes between artisanal miners and the gendarmerie in the Tui region of Burkina Faso, in the Hauts Bassin region, resulted in the death of an artisanal miner.

62 Interview with a Burkina Faso security analyst and international security analyst, May 2023, by phone.

63 Article 73, Code Minier du Burkina Faso, Law No. 036-–2015/CNT, 2015, https://www.droit-afrique.com/uploads/Burkina-Code-minier-2015.pdf.

64 Interview with an expert in gold mining dynamics in Burkina Faso, July 2024, by phone.

65 Interview with a security and artisanal gold mining analyst in Burkina Faso, May 2024, by phone.

66 Repeated airstrikes have contributed to displacing mining communities from the Inata site, particularly since 2023, leading to a drop in activity but probably contributing to grievances from the artisanal gold mining community, as outlined.

67 For example, when JNIM militants arrived in Burkina Faso's Cascades region in mid-2021, they said they would allow unrestricted access to several gold mines in the Dida Forest, near the Côte d'Ivoire border, in return for contributions from the extracted gold. In the east of Burkina Faso, jihadist preachers target their sermons at people who do not have access to gold deposits, positioning jihadist groups as alternative providers of livelihoods.

68 In Fritz Brugger and Tongnoma Zongo, Salafist violence and artisanal mining: Evidence from Burkina Faso, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 100 (2023), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016723000955.

69 Interview with Burkina Faso security analyst, May 2023, by phone.

70 This occurred, for example, in the wake of the May 2021 violence in which suspected JNIM elements reportedly attacked people for not obeying behavioural rules imposed on a mining site near the village of Souma in Soum province of the Sahel.

71 This statistic groups IS Sahel together with the IS Greater Sahara Faction.

72 By 56% in 2021, 64% in 2022 and 35% in 2023.

73 Growing cooperation between bandit groups and some mining communities appears to have contributed to decreasing levels of violence recorded by ACLED in some mining areas, such as in Birnin Gwari, a bandit stronghold in Kaduna state. It is key to note that ACLED data (and other datasets premised on incidents of measurable violence) must be treated with care in this analysis, as only a fraction of political violence is measurable. The threat of violence, built up through consistent use of violence in preceding years, is also powerful in shaping ongoing behaviours and does not necessarily indicate enhanced willing compliance with bandit rules by artisanal gold mining communities.

74 Kingsley L Madueke et al, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

75 Tony Ailemen, FG bans mining activities in Zamfara, *Business Day*, 7 April 2019, https://businessday.ng/uncategorized/article/fg-bans-mining-activities-in-zamfara.

76 Kingsley L Madueke et al, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria, ACLED and GI-TOC, July 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa.

77 For example, actors in northern Benin's informal fuel trade report that JNIM taxes actors that transit through key routes that bisect the WAP complex, although systematic taxation by JNIM in this area appears limited. In the words of an informal fuel wholesaler in Natitingou, northern Benin, reporting on smuggling of fuel via Atakora region in northern Benin towards the east of Burkina Faso: 'If you're not in touch with the people in the bush, that's it for the eastern region, you can no longer trade peacefully. They're the ones who decide whether fuel gets through. […] For some time now, they've been controlling roads like Arly, Nadiagou and Pama, so if a lorry, tricycle or motorbike gets through with petrol, they're forced to take their share. Sometimes they even take everything.' Interview with an informal fuel wholesaler in Natitingou, October 2023, by phone.

78 Mouhamadou Kane and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, Climate change, illicit economies and community resilience: Niokolo-Koba National Park, Senegal, GI-TOC, November 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/climate-change-illicit-economies-and-community-resilience-niokolo-koba-national-park-senegal.

79 Similarly, communities in contexts as varied as the Niokolo-Kobba Park in Senegal and rangers of the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (L'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature) in Virunga National Park in Congo cited excessive force deployed by park rangers as a key source of tension. Daan van Uhm, Milou Tjoonk and Eliode Bakole, Business as usual? Illegal charcoal and timber trade in eastern DRC, GI-TOC, 2022; Mouhamadou Kane and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, Climate change, illicit economies and community resilience: Niokolo-Koba National Park, Senegal, GI-TOC, November 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/climate-change-illicit-economies-and-community-resilience-niokolo-koba-national-park-senegal.

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