

The links between terrorism and organized crime in Mali

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“Over the past decade, numerous analyses have highlighted the growing fragility of the Sahel region, exacerbated by the expansion of terrorist and criminal activities.”

In West Africa, terrorist groups have intensified their operations and expanded their influence, threatening not only the Sahel but also coastal countries. At the same time, criminal networks play a major role in regional dynamics, exploiting economic and logistical opportunities for illicit purposes.

Based on desk research and interviews¹ with 39 key stakeholders across 6 regions of Mali, this study sheds light on complex dynamics in which the interdependence between crime and terrorism is both economic and logistical. These relationships fluctuate between cooperation and rivalry, influenced by strategic interests and local contexts. The observed criminal dynamics reveal a deep entanglement between organized crime and ter-

rorism, fuelled by the isolation of certain regions, their cross-border positioning, weak state presence and socioeconomic precariousness.

Current trends indicate a geographic expansion of illicit activities into new areas, a diversification of trafficking (drugs, weapons or cultural property) and a growing convergence between terrorist groups and criminal networks, sometimes described as “cooperation” (cooperation and competition).

Beyond a strictly security-based approach, combating these phenomena requires a comprehensive effort to reduce population vulnerability and strengthen local governance. Rapid-impact actions (road improvements, youth reintegration programmes, vocational training, entrepreneurship support for women) must go hand in hand with strengthened support for local authorities, the justice system and security forces in order to build trust and reinforce the rule of law. The diversity of contexts between the north and the south of the country also calls for differentiated and tailored responses.

¹ Based on desk research and interviews conducted in 2024.





Key findings

The elements described below were identified through a combination of sources including desk research, meetings with specialized magistrates and in-depth interviews involving a total of 39 key actors. These included representatives of the State and local authorities, community and religious leaders, civil society actors, artisanal gold miners, self-defence militias, transport organizations or drivers' unions, and representatives of the chamber of commerce.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in six administrative regions of Mali involving some of the areas most directly impacted by terrorism and organized crime, as well as less affected ones. They took place in nine major cities and included:

- Administrative authorities (representatives of the State and local authorities).
- Community and religious leaders.

- Civil society actors (e.g., artisanal gold miners, representatives of youth and women's organizations, transport organizations and the chamber of commerce).

Terrorism

Cattle theft is a widespread phenomenon that particularly affects herders and represents a lucrative activity for criminal and terrorist groups. Livestock buyers in major cities are sometimes involved in these networks.

The regions of Timbuktu and Gao are the main hubs for migrant smuggling, with thousands of migrants arriving each month and engaging with smugglers to reach border areas irregularly. The activities of terrorist armed groups and illicit migrant smuggling remain largely distinct; the link between the two is mainly in the form of extortion or a transaction resembling a right of passage through controlled territory.



“The illicit arms trafficking market has expanded in response to increased demand from several actors: terrorist groups; militias; community self-defence groups such as Dan Na Ambassagou; and local communities seeking to protect themselves or to fuel intercommunal conflicts.”

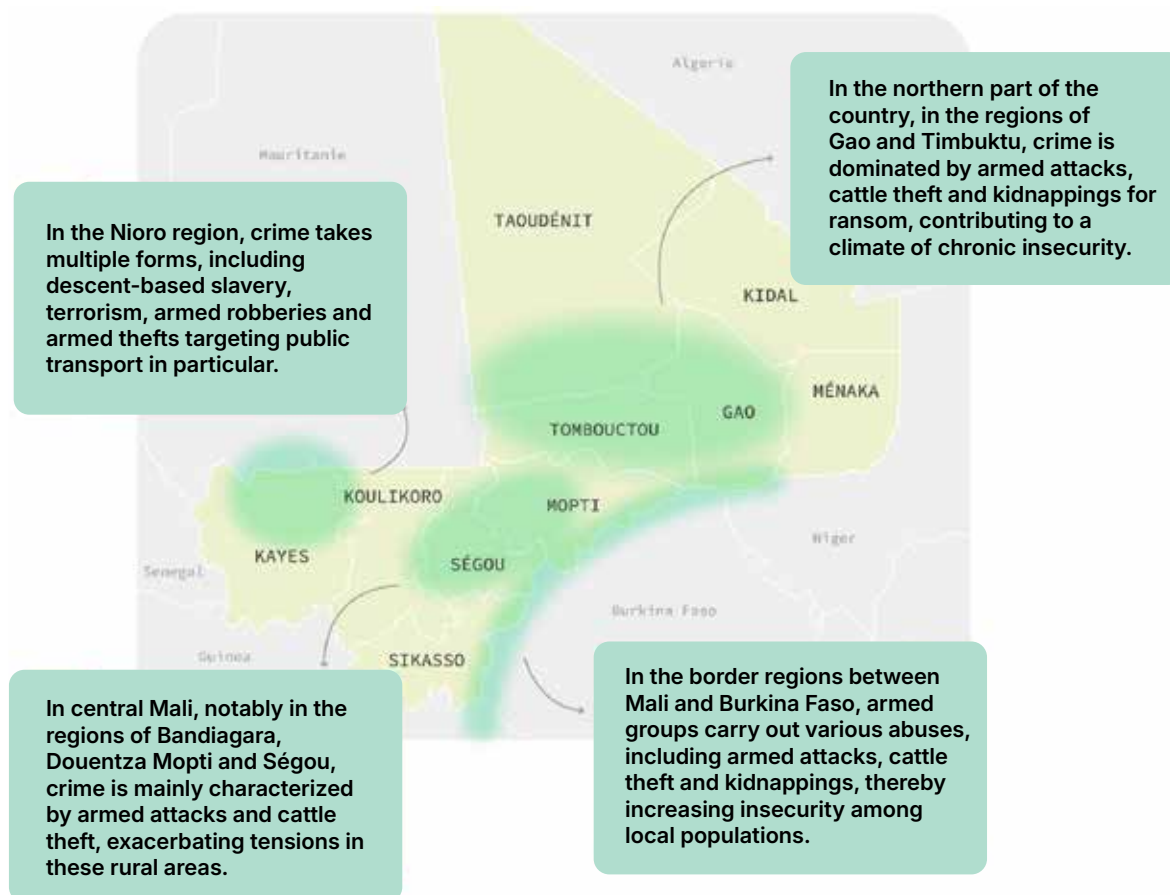
Trafficking in cultural property is a phenomenon that has intensified in Mali since 2012 with the looting of archaeological sites, notably those in Djenné-Djeno and in the Central Delta. Thousands of objects have been removed and sold.

Kidnapping is a lucrative activity for terrorist groups who target civilians, humanitarian workers, journalists, military personnel and civil servants. Criminal networks often facilitate the capture, detention

and transport of hostages, as well as the management of ransom payments. Several court cases have highlighted collaboration between these networks and militias or terrorist groups. This activity is growing rapidly and numerous investigations are ongoing.

“Terrorist and criminal groups often establish a form of forced zakat (a payment traditionally for charitable and religious purposes), requiring communities to pay a sum calculated according to the number of people or livestock”

(typically around CFA 5,000 per head). In the north, zakat is generally paid in animals or cash, while in central and southern areas the levy may take the form of agricultural produce. Armed groups sometimes entrust the storage and resale of animals to



intermediaries responsible for converting livestock into cash, in exchange for a payment of between CFA 200,000 and 500,000 per operation. Actors involved in customary governance may also participate in the collection of these levies, while religious leaders are generally not involved in this dynamic. "Taxes" may also be imposed on specific activities, such as trade, artisanal gold mining or attending Christian church services. At artisanal mining sites, a weekly tax (ranging from CFA 5,000 to 250,000) is imposed to access the site, while merchants, transporters and food vendors also pay fees to operate there. Terrorist groups have succeeded in taking control of several gold mining sites in the Gao and Kidal regions, where they can

recruit new members and access explosive materials.

Taxes are paid to authorize access to the various sites in exchange for protection. In some of them, miners are required to pay to be protected, to gain access to water and food, and to obtain the right to establish camps at the gold extraction sites. Gold extracted in the Kidal and Gao regions is transported overland to several destinations, mainly Burkina Faso and Niger, and southward to Bamako, often to be exported onward to Southwest Asia.

Terrorist groups use shell companies, parallel markets and complex banking transactions to launder

money derived from criminal activities. The Financial Intelligence Unit (Cellule nationale de traitement des informations financières) has worked with other relevant Malian authorities to trace suspicious financial flows. Individuals involved in the financing of terrorism have been arrested in Bamako, Kayes and Ségou, and several of their assets have been seized as part of ongoing investigations.

“Mali constitutes a major transit point for cocaine trafficking between Europe, South America and other regions.”

Terrorist groups profit from these routes by imposing taxes on shipments or using drugs as a means of payment to acquire weapons. Currently, more than a dozen ongoing judicial cases are seeking to clarify possible links between drug trafficking and terrorism.

Analysis of the links between organized criminal groups and terrorist groups

BOX 1:

Illicit trafficking and criminal activities often serve as a point of convergence between the two types of groups, with a strong economic interdependence. Terrorist and criminal groups collaborate in specific activities such as cattle theft, crop destruction, kidnappings for ransom and vehicle hijackings in order to ensure an essential financial and logistical flow for their operations.

Box 2:

The nature of the relationship adapts to the context. The majority (60 per cent) of respondents in Gao observed the emergence of a form of “coopetition” between terrorists and criminals, combining rivalry and collaboration depending on shared interests (financing, logistics, protection). By contrast in the south, which is not as affected by both phenomena, competition and confrontation predominate making cooperation more discreet.

Vulnerability and resilience

Vulnerability factors

Geographic characteristics can exacerbate vulnerability to criminal activities. Strategic transit points for illicit trafficking, the vast extent of porous borders and the isolation of certain desert areas create favourable conditions for the development of these activities while making surveillance particularly complex. Local carriers involved in the transit of illicit goods, such as drugs or weapons, as well as local populations identifying secure routes, become essential links in the logistical chains of criminal networks. This collaboration creates interdependence, strengthening ties between criminal groups and the communities involved, who find mutual interest in these illicit partnerships.

Economic precariousness pushes many communities to engage in illicit activities as a means of survival. Young people, particularly those living in rural areas, are the most vulnerable, often recruited due to the lack of legitimate economic opportunities.

Social factors also play a significant role: rivalries between community leaders, local conflicts, corruption, economic hardship as well as feelings of exclusion and marginalization, weaken the social



capital, erode governance structures and undermine local authorities. In some regions, community pressure or social norms encourage involvement in criminal activities such as traditional artisanal gold mining, which is perceived as a means of collective survival. Traditional leaders may also be called upon to collect funds and provide support to communities. In areas controlled by armed and/or terrorist groups, local communities are often forced to collaborate under threat or in exchange for protection.

Resilience factors

Awareness and understanding of the interconnections between illicit markets, organized crime and terrorism contribute to strengthening community resilience in the face of these threats. Activities such as artisanal gold mining and smuggling ben-

efit from a certain level of local legitimacy, while crimes such as cattle theft or kidnappings for ransom are perceived much more negatively. This distinction in local perceptions can influence the level of community tolerance, complicity, involvement or, on the contrary, resistance and resilience to illicit activities.

Areas with strong social cohesion have managed to limit complicity and reduce participation in illicit activities. In Bourem Cercle, for example, a strong social fabric based on trust, cooperation and mechanisms of community solidarity has helped limit the influence of criminal and terrorist groups.

Economic alternatives are a crucial element in strengthening resilience to illicit activities, as demonstrated in Sangha by a financing project providing monthly support to each household.

Basic infrastructure – such as electricity, road networks, schools and water supply – plays a central role by facilitating security interventions, strengthening social cohesion and reducing the economic and social vulnerabilities exploited by criminal networks.

The deployment of armed forces to combat violence, restore order and apprehend criminals also plays a decisive role in strengthening community resilience. Military intervention along the road between Gao and Niamey, for example, has significantly reduced crime and restored a climate of security.

“Inclusive, transparent local governance structures capable of responding to population needs also help reduce the appeal of illicit economies and criminal networks.”

In Sangha, for example, a social cohesion consultation framework – bringing together the mayor, village chiefs, religious and community leaders, as well as women and youth – organized public debates broadcast live on local radio stations with the aim of countering terrorist propaganda designed to divide communities and fuel tensions.

Self-defence groups have become a key form of community resilience in certain areas such as Bandiagara. Their knowledge of the terrain and local dynamics enables them to monitor suspicious movements and contribute to reducing certain forms of crime, such as cattle theft and attacks on villages. However, their proliferation also poses challenges, including risks of abuse of power, human rights violations and the exacerbation of intercommunal tensions.

Strategic recommendations

1 | Security and infrastructure

Restore protection for vulnerable populations, particularly in the north, and strengthen essential infrastructure (health, education, water). In the south, secure urban areas and prevent the expansion of criminal networks.

2 | Countering corruption

Strengthen transparency and the rule of law to restore citizens' trust, particularly in rural areas, through citizen audits and awareness-raising campaigns.

3 | Strengthening community networks

Mobilize communities to monitor, raise awareness and combat organized crime and terrorism, promoting social cohesion and cooperative security.

4 | Coordination of stakeholders

Improve cooperation among non-governmental organizations, the State and local structures to strengthen resilience against illicit markets and terrorism.

5 | Local and traditional governance

Support local leaders in conflict prevention and resolution, using a human rights-based and gender-sensitive approach.

6 | Improving state-citizen relations

Build trust through transparent communication and mutual accountability mechanisms, notably through spaces for citizen dialogue.

7 | Community protection

Support local councils and networks in conflict prevention and the sharing of security information, particularly through municipal security advisory committees (comités consultatifs de sécurité communaux).

8 | Regulation of non-state security actors

Regulate local defence groups to limit abuses and ensure their legitimate contribution to security.

9 | Strengthening the role of women

Promote women's role in community resilience and their involvement in prevention and awareness-raising efforts against organized crime.

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