

# The lawless roads: an overview of turbulence across the Sahel<sup>1</sup>

**By Pietro Musilli  
and Patrick Smith**

## ■ Executive summary

The political, economic and social crises that stretch across Africa's Sahel region are connected via trade routes that were established centuries ago. The Sahel is now the main area of conflict and desperate poverty on the continent, but with implications for countries thousands of miles away. For example, the conflict in Mali is undermining stability in oil- and gas-rich Nigeria and Algeria, respectively.

The lack of jobs, education and health services is drawing more young people into a criminal-political economy. The links between drug lords and kidnappers, on the one hand, and opportunistic politicians and jihadists, on the other, mean that the proceeds of crime have become an important political resource.

Civic leaders and independent activists in Mali say political dialogue and widely agreed reforms are necessary if this worsening social breakdown is to be stopped. They warn that attempts by the political class in Bamako, encouraged by Western governments, to organise a quick-fix election could reverse some of the tentative progress in recent months and prolong the conflict.

From Mauritania in the west to Somalia and Sudan in the east stretches a belt of interconnected political, economic and social crises. While economic conditions have been improving in the rest of Africa – with countries recording average annual growth rates of over 5% a year – unemployment and poverty levels have remained stubbornly high across this axis from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

Political and religious radicalism is putting down roots in response to successive failures of governance in the region. The lack of jobs, basic social services and effective state institutions has drawn more young people into the criminal economy. Centuries-old trade routes have become conduits for a newer commerce – the trafficking of arms, people, drugs and other contraband – that is financing activists and

insurgents. The linkages among smugglers, kidnappers and drugs lords, on the one hand, and politicians and insurgents, on the other, mean that the proceeds of crime have become an important political resource.

It is a resource that has been exploited as much by mainstream politicians, despite the damage that it does to formal institutions, as by insurgents. The unique feature of northern Mali was the willingness of the political centre in Bamako to tolerate and sometimes encourage the spread of the criminal economy. As one politician in Bamako told us: "The state started devouring itself in northern Mali, until not even the bones were left. Now we have to start all over again."

<sup>1</sup> This report is based on several research trips by the authors to Mali, the most recent being in late March 2013. They interviewed several politicians, activists and religious leaders, as well as individuals with direct knowledge of the operations of drug-smuggling and kidnapping gangs in the Sahel.



Such views are not shared across the incumbent regime in Bamako. For example, Yoro Diakite, the technical adviser to Prime Minister Diango Sissoko, told us in Paris on April 4th 2013 that the political transition was unstoppable and that elections would be held by the end of July 2013, partly because of pressure from France and the U.S. He added that the political divisions within the army – between the followers of coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo and the commando units – had been resolved. On April 5th France's foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, announced on a trip to Bamako that his country would cut its forces in Mali by more than half to 2,000 at the end of July, just after the planned elections.

Diakite also spoke as if Mali were past the worst. He said the government was pushing ahead with job creation plans and announced a new gold refinery that would employ over 1,000 people. Reinforcing this outlook is a determinedly positive forecast for Mali's economy from the International Monetary Fund, which predicts that it will grow by 4.8% in 2013, compared to 1.2% in 2012. Given the impossibility of collecting reliable economic data from northern Mali in the

past, it seems this most of that growth will be in the more prosperous and populous south of the country.

Accordingly, there is little chance of a national debate to discuss how northern Mali can be reintegrated into the country and how the concerns that have fuelled successive rebellions can be addressed. As former foreign minister Tiéble Dramé told us in Bamako: "We need to think about the crisis and the lessons we can learn from it ... how did the state get taken hostage by drug traffickers? How did al-Qaeda install itself in the north?" Dramé and his reform-minded allies want an "inter-Malian dialogue" ahead of the elections. They also speak about the next elected Malian president playing a transitional role: "The next president should launch this new phase and organise reforms: a new constitution, restructured institutions, and a new framework for relations between local governments and the central state."

Yet few of the leading candidates for office in Mali – such as Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Soumaïla Cissé – envisage this kind of restructuring after the elections. Instead, there are

likely to be deals to win over community and political leaders in northern Mali to accept the terms of reintegration dictated by Bamako.

These terms will include cutting deals with many of the criminal networks, according to politicians and diplomats. This holds out the prospect of a dangerous and continuing bifurcation of the country: a growing formal economy in the south that attracts international investment and a marginalised trading economy in the north facing sporadic insurgencies.

Criminal gangs have won a form of social legitimacy by providing paid work and money that can be channelled back into communities. These patterns of criminal-political alliances are repeated across the region from Mauritania to Somalia and beyond. Links between traders, smugglers, activists and insurgents are flexible and pragmatic. The quantities of drugs, guns and people being smuggled across borders will ebb and flow, depending on demand and supply.

Europe's economic downturn seems to have reduced the flow of migrants northwards; instead, people smugglers are targeting Asian and Middle Eastern countries with more buoyant economies. This means less south-north traffic and more west-east traffic, but the Sahel remains an important crossroads for the business.

In the short-term France's military intervention in Mali and the remobilisation of Mali's own military in the north of the country have disrupted smuggling operations, while more sophisticated detection and surveillance methods have blocked some routes across the region. So the bigger operators are changing tactics. Some are using containers on ships in preference to air couriers. Nigerian groups that are pre-eminent in cocaine shipments are taking over from the more established Latin American groups.

Newer drugs made in West Africa, such as metamphetamine, are being smuggled to East Asia and Southern Africa. Arms smuggling has lessened mainly because of a massive influx from Libya: an estimated 10,000-20,000 weapons were taken out of Libya during the military campaign that overthrew Qaddafi. These weapons armed the Tuareg nationalists and then the jihadist militias in northern Mali.

A February 2013 UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) assessment of smuggling in West Africa reports that the flow of cocaine through the region declined last year to about 18 tons (worth some \$1.25 billion wholesale in Europe) from a peak of 47 tons in 2007. International action such as the arrest on the high seas of Guinea-Bissau's Rear Admiral José Americo Bubo Na Tchuto by U.S. agents on April 4th will step up the deterrent effect. U.S. officials accuse him of organising drug-smuggling operations involving U.S. nationals and want to prosecute him.

But other operators and new rackets are starting up. The counterfeit-medicine trade is growing strongly, as is maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Pirates operating out of Benin and Togo have siphoned the fuel from tankers on the high seas into smaller boats to supply the booming parallel market for fuel in West Africa and the Sahel, alongside the more established supply routes of illegal exports of subsidised fuel from Nigeria.

In 2013 the flow of subsidised fuel and other goods from Algeria and Libya to northern Mali and the rest of the Sahel was cut by France's military action and Algeria's closure of its southern borders. Such disruptions to the shadow economies are likely to be temporary. Irrepressible and innovative, the crime bosses will find ways to reassert themselves unless there are credible deterrents and far less official complicity. Trafficking has proved hugely profitable for the gangs and insurgent groups in the Sahel, and there is little incentive for them to come to the negotiating table. In 2013 survival tactics mean keeping out of the way of the French military.

Corrupt payments are an essential tool for the smuggling networks: as the value of the trade and the payments rise, so does the political weight of the network until, in extreme cases such as Guinea-Bissau, it takes over the government. This was the direction in which northern Mali was going. But because of the diffuse centres of power, many different networks had to compete with each other for influence, resulting in political and social fragmentation in Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu.

Not only have criminal networks undermined politics and governance in northern Mali, but they have further weakened the prospects for economic development. Communities along regional frontiers have become indirectly more dependent on trafficking revenues, and legitimate traders and investors stay away. Yet the biggest beneficiaries of transnational organised crime in Mali will take most of the proceeds out of the region.

Proposed solutions to the regional spread of the criminal networks sound excellent on paper. The United Nations, European Union and World Bank talk enthusiastically about technical co-operation, mutual legal assistance, market reforms, and strengthening police and customs, but success is critically dependent on political will.

Communities cannot be expected to shun the criminal networks in the absence of alternative livelihoods. This dynamic is common across the region. What makes it so potent in Mali is the stark contrast between the harsher climes of the war-torn north and the apparently brighter prospects of the south.

## When crime and insurgency met: a brief history

Tuareg demands for self-determination in the Sahel date back a century. A Tuareg rebellion against the French in 1916-17 in what is now northern Niger was the first of many attempts to carve out a Tuareg state, often backed by Berber groups across the Sahel and North Africa. After Mali's independence in 1960 Tuareg rebels started insurgencies in 1962-64, 1990-95 and 2007-09. Each rebellion ended with a political deal brokered between Tuareg chieftains and Bamako's political elite.

In January 2012 a Tuareg nationalist uprising, led by the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, or MNLA) launched a devastating attack on Menaka, near the border with Niger. Those forces, including several units trained and armed in Libya during Qaddafi's rule, won the first of several victories against Mali's national army. These developments triggered protests in Bamako, a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré's government and the cancellation of scheduled national elections.

The short-lived MNLA dominance of northern Mali after the withdrawal of the national army to a line of control just north of Mopti gave way in mid-2012 to the three northern provinces of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu being controlled by three jihadist organisations: Ansar ed-Din, the *Mouvement pour l'unité et le jihad en Afrique de l'ouest* (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, or MUJAO) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

However, many of the key people in these organisations have been established in the Sahel for a decade or more. Jihadists under pressure in Algeria, Libya and Tunisia based themselves in northern Mali, forming local business and political alliances. In a largely lawless zone their smuggling operations, let alone their ideological disposition, attracted little scrutiny.

This southwards migration grew as the Sahel gained importance as a transit route for cocaine smuggling a decade ago. The gangs brought in the drugs from South America to West African ports and airfields, particularly in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, then drove them in convoys through to northern Mali, to staging points in Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao. From there the cargo followed the Sahara route that runs along the borders of Algeria, Mali, Niger and Libya.

Organised crime bosses boosted their political influence in the north as the trade expanded. For example, Baba Ould Cheikh, the Telemsi mayor of Tarkint, was the intermediary who helped secure the release of Robert Fowler, the Canadian diplomat held by AQIM for 130 days in 2008-09. Fowler has remarked on the camaraderie between his captors and Ould Cheikh.

Apart from a few exceptional incidents, such as the abduction of 32 European tourists in southern Algeria in 2003, kidnapping was not big business for Sahelian insurgents until 2007. In that year AQIM kidnapped and killed four French tourists in southern Mauritania. Since then, hostage taking has proved to be a lucrative business for AQIM.

In one case, two Kidal-based Tuaregs kidnapped two French aid workers in Hombori on November 24th 2011 and sold them on to an AQIM cell. The stepbrothers, both sons of Timtaghene mayor Habala Ag Bakaye, were later captured and sent to prison in Bamako. AQIM's African affiliate, MUJAO, also entered the kidnapping business after 2011.

Their motives were primarily financial: generally to extract ransom payments, not to make political demands. However, some groups have secured the release of jailed members in hostage swaps, while former AQIM leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who masterminded the attack on the In Aménas gas plant in southern Algeria, had wanted to use the attack to extract ransoms and rally the jihad against the French intervention in Mali.

Some Tuareg and Arab leaders served as intermediaries during hostage negotiations and were said to have received a commission from the kidnapers. Vicki Huddleston, former U.S. ambassador to Bamako, estimated that European governments, including those of France and Germany, had paid as much as \$90 million to kidnapers in the Sahel since 2008.

On February 7th 2013 Attorney General Daniel Tessougue issued a warrant in Bamako for the arrest of several leaders from the MNLA, MUJAO and Ansar ed-Din, as well as drug traffickers. The names of the traffickers, militants and politicians on the indictments show how blurred the lines between business, crime, politics and insurgency have become in Mali.





## How the north was lost: a region-by-region survey of the rise and rise of criminal networks and the political consequences of this process

### Kidal

The Kidal region is a crossroads for the drug trade. Through it passes a corridor along which cocaine is transported to the east and north. The drugs arrive from the west and south, sometimes by land, sometimes flown directly to the airport at Tessalit, a village in north-eastern Kidal, about 70 km from the Algerian border.

The first signs of the trade were spotted in Kidal in 2002-03. According to local sources, the smuggling of cocaine and other drugs increased sharply in 2004. These reports are consistent with UNODC studies. The rise of the drugs trade coincided with policy changes in the European war on drugs in 2003, when the traditional Caribbean route faced tighter controls on flights arriving in Europe.

Kidal's role as a base for the traffickers was critical in the 2006-07 Tuareg rebellion. Although the rebels focused on political demands, competition over control of the drug routes became part of the fight. The Bamako government under President Touré countered the rebels from the Ifoghas and Idnan groups of the Tuareg by backing the Berabiche Arabs and Lamhar ethnic group in their attempts to take over the trade.

From this point on drug trafficking became highly politicised and militarised. Drugs bosses in Gao and Timbuktu formed militias to protect their routes. They also used drug

earnings to lobby officials in Bamako for political favours, such as the redrawing of administrative boundaries. Locally they built up their positions by using smuggling profits to buy cows and provide some local services, and to influence regional politicians outside the crime syndicates.

The range of smuggled goods in Kidal varied. Drugs were the most lucrative product, typically cocaine and hashish. For example, in 2010 two Spanish speakers arrived in Tessalit. They opened a restaurant there, but were suspected of trafficking. In November 2011 they suddenly decamped, saying they were headed for Spain. The flow of drugs through Tessalit continued, however. During the occupation in 2012 at least three small aircraft landed in Tessalit. They were said to carry cocaine, and jihadist occupiers supervised the operation.

Many of the drug-trafficking routes were established in the 1990s by cigarette smugglers. In an earlier example of the smuggling-politics link, Algeria's jihadist leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar earned the soubriquet "Mr Marlboro" for his cigarette smuggling, which had been so lucrative that some asked whether he was driven by financial gain or religious zeal. Until the late 2000s there was also much trafficking of sub-Saharan Africans from Gao to Algeria via Kidal. Weapons were usually smuggled in for local use and exchanged among clans, or sold or used as payment.

Over the last five years in Mali AQIM established links to criminal organisations, politicians and public servants. These relations were almost wholly based on economic interest. Many local officials swiftly changed alignments as

the political climate changed: after the jihadist takeover of the north in mid-2012 some officials cut deals and stayed put, but others fled to Bamako or beyond.

France’s intervention in January 2013 allowed the MNLA to take back Kidal, where it has positioned itself as an ally against the jihadists. Other mainly Tuareg groups such as Ansar ed-Din have split: Alghabass ag Intallah, leader of the Tuareg’s Kel Afella clan, left Ansar ed-Din to set up the *Mouvement islamique de l’Azawad* (Azawad Islamic Movement, or MIA) and was the first force into Kidal after Ansar ed-Din and AQIM fighters had fled.

**Trafficking routes through Kidal**

There are three main relay points in the Kidal region: In-Khalil, Tin Zaouatine and Tin Essako. Contraband travels along routes that run from the Sahrawi region in the west to In-Khalil in the east, just 13 km from the border with Algeria.

In-Khalil serves as a strategic gateway to the east and an important contact point for Malian and Algerian agents. From In-Khalil a route runs south-east along the border before arriving in Tin Zaouatine, where it crosses into Algeria and continues east. Tin Essako, east of Kidal town, is another staging point. Drugs arrive from In-Khalil or

Tessalit and proceed from Tin Essako toward the border with Niger. The route continues along the Niger/Algeria border, into Libya, and onward to Egypt, from where the cargo is transferred to local agents by car or helicopter.

**Gao**

The area of Gao, Bourem and Al Mustarat is a subregional hub for drug smuggling. The trade in Gao, a city of about 87,000 people, is led by Telemesi Arabs. Profits from the trade built the notorious “Cocaine bougou”, a district of luxury villas on the edge of town. MUJAO seized control of Gao in June 2012 and, with the assistance of Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s *Les Signataires par le sang*, held it until the French offensive in January 2013.

The area is dominated by Arab and Kounta ethnic groups. The two groups were not considered divided until 1979, the year of the death of Badi Ould Hamama, the spiritual leader of both communities. Wrangling over the succession led to a split between the Kounta and Arabs. There were clashes in 2006 in the area of Mt Aouchi, east of Gao, partly over control of drug-trafficking routes.

The two most powerful figures in regional drug traffic are now Baba Ould Cheick and Hanoun Ould Ali, both of mixed Kounta and Arab descent.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Baba Ould Cheick, the mayor of Tarkint, is known for his involvement in the “Air Cocaine” incident in November 2009, when the burnt-out fuselage of a Boeing 727-200 was found near Tarkint. The plane had carried a cargo of cocaine from Venezuela to the town and was subsequently either destroyed by the traffickers or, according to U.S. diplomatic cables, crashed shortly after takeoff from Tarkint. A French citizen, Eric Vernet, whose company chartered the plane, was arrested and imprisoned before being freed in mid-2012. Ould Cheick and his associate, Mohammed Ould Aweynat, were accused of masterminding the smuggling operation. It highlighted Mali’s role in smuggling between South America and Europe. It also showed the audacity of the smugglers in chartering such a large aircraft.



## Timbuktu

The historical and busy trading city of Timbuktu, with a population of 55,000, is another centre of drug traffic. Ansar ed-Din captured Timbuktu in May 2012 and, with the support of AQIM troops, held sway over the north-west region of the country. The jihadists were driven from the city in late January 2013.

Many of the main players retain their close ties with AQIM. This is due to the Berabiche, an Arab ethnic group living in the region. They have greater cultural proximity to Mauritians and south Algerians. Their location allows them to foster closer ties with Mauritania and AQIM *katiba* (cells) operating in that country.

## Conclusion

Although the French-led campaign in northern Mali early in 2013 returned the cities of Gao and Timbuktu to the control of the national government in Bamako, many political questions – both national and regional – still need to be resolved.

The most pressing question is over control of Kidal. Until the end of May the Tuareg-dominated MNLA, which is based in Kidal, was refusing to return the city to national government control, although it was prepared to co-operate with French and Chadian troops.

Kidal's status has become still more pressing with the confirmation by Malian president Diancounda Traoré that national elections would be held on July 28th. Traoré told a fund-raising conference hosted in Brussels by the European Union on May 15th, which was seeking €1.96 billion (\$2.5 billion) for a post-war reconstruction plan, that the election timetable was designed for both "the people of Mali and the international community, which has stood by

us during this crisis". In the end the conference raised €3.25 billion, including funds frozen after last year's military coup.

However, many Malians and political activists across the region have doubts about the electoral programme and timetable, specifically the lack of progress on national political reforms. Some have proposed that presidential and parliamentary elections should be held on separate dates. Others argue that the resulting national government should have a transitional role and establish a broad-based administration that would implement wide-ranging political and economic reforms.

Yet with Bamako's political class regrouping to fight the July elections there is little prospect of the emergence of a reform-oriented power-sharing government. The former ruling party, the *Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali* (ADEMA), has picked a Traoré protégé – the former director of mining, Dramane Dembélé – as its presidential candidate. Former president Alpha Oumar Konaré, one of ADEMA's founders, is thought to be backing a bid by ex-prime minister Modibo Sidibé for the presidency. Another Bamako politician, Soumaïla Cissé, leader of the *Union pour la république et la démocratie*, has concluded an alliance with the *Union des mouvements et associations pour le Mali*, whose leader is Chamber of Commerce head Jeamille Bittar. The two are putting together a joint ticket.

Former foreign minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga has quit ADEMA and is linking up with Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who founded *Rassemblement pour le Mali* and is also preparing for a presidential bid. A further complication is the role of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, whose coup in March 2012 deposed the elected president, Amadou Toumani Touré. Sanogo's supporters want radical change and oppose the retaking of national power by old guard politicians.



These national political concerns cannot be separated from the increasingly turbulent regional politics. To start with, 500,000 Malians have been displaced by the crisis, over 200,000 of whom are in informal camps in neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. According to aid workers, the security in these camps – on both sides of the borders – is becoming more problematic. Many of the jihadist fighters chased from Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal by the French and Malian offensive are understood to have sought shelter in these camps, where they are currently reorganising for fresh attacks.

This may explain the latest wave of attacks against state and commercial targets – including France’s Areva uranium mining company – in Niger. With the U.S. establishing a base for drones in Niger and signing a new military agreement with Burkina Faso, Mali’s political crisis is critically linked to regional dynamics. In the short term this presents the disturbing possibility that the country’s national elections in July could trigger a fresh round of jihadist attacks, this time launched by groups based in neighbouring states.

## Appendix 1: Key armed groups

### MNLA

The MNLA was formed in 2011 and led by Bila Ag Cherif, general secretary, and Mohamed Ag Najim, chief of staff. It fights on behalf of the minority Tuaregs. Many members had served in Qaddafi’s militias. After his fall in 2011 they returned to Mali, bolstering the MNLA and bringing with them their own weapons. The MNLA launched an uprising in January 2012 and four months later declared the independent state of Azawad in northern Mali – a state that went unrecognised. The MNLA’s power was soon displaced by the Ansar ed-Din and MUJAO forces that had initially fought alongside it.

### Ansar ed-Din

Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghaly set up Ansar ed-Din in late 2011 after he failed in his bid to lead the MNLA. His avowed aim was to enforce *sharia* law across Mali. Ansar ed-Din captured Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu between March 30th and April 1st 2012 and held influence over the north-west region of the country. It was supported in its administration of these cities by AQIM troops.

### MIA

Alghabass ag Intallah, an Ifoghas, was a former MNLA and Ansar ed-Din leader until he broke away in January 2013. In what appeared to be an overture to French forces, he claimed to represent the moderate element of Ansar ed-Din, rejecting terrorism and extremism. In mid-March he told the Voice of America that he had agreed to co-operate with the MNLA, with links to be formalised at a congress in May 2013.

### AQIM

In 2007 the *Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat*, an Algerian militant group, announced its affiliation with al-Qaeda. Operating across the Sahara and Sahel, AQIM levies taxes on drug shipments in exchange for security and logistical assistance. It also arms and trains affiliated jihadist groups.

### MUJAO

MUJAO was formed as an AQIM offshoot in late 2011. Despite its jihadist roots, its growing strength in 2012 came from striking alliances with powerful businessmen in Gao, such as the traffickers Baba Ould Cheikh and Mohamed Ould Mataly. It comprises a strong contingent of Lamhar Arabs from Gao. With Ansar ed-Din, MUJAO took control of Gao in June 2012, but was driven out by the French offensive in January 2013.

### Les Signataires par le sang (Signed in Blood Battalion)

This group is led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Algerian who broke from AQIM in late 2012. It maintained ties with both Ansar ed-Din and MUJAO and helped to occupy Gao in 2012. Chadian president Idriss Déby claimed that Belmokhtar had been killed by Chadian forces in March 2013.



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