

# Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali

CRU Report

Fransje Molenaar  
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# Abstract

In 2016, an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 migrants transited through Mali on their way to Algeria and Libya. One major dilemma facing policy makers that want to stop irregular migration through Mali is that state authorities are either complicit in migration, such as by providing migrants free passage in exchange for a toll at roadblocks or by issuing false passports, or that they lack the effective presence and/or capacity to counter human smuggling. This problem is particularly salient in the north, where armed groups have taken over territorial control and offer protection to, and feed off, the human smuggling industry. At the time of writing, a solution to the internal conflict appears to lie in the distant future, meaning that addressing the issue of irregular migration remains one of the lowest priorities on the government's agenda. Regaining political stability is its number one concern.

# Executive Summary

In 2016, an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 migrants will transit through Mali on their way to Algeria and Libya. Admittedly, this flow is not as big as the migration streams passing through neighbouring Niger, which are some six to eight times larger. Understanding these routes is nevertheless crucial to grasp the larger picture of human smuggling and political stability in the Sahel. Conventional wisdom tells us that the closing down of one human smuggling route generally leads to other routes opening up. The Malian state's absence in the north, where human smuggling is salient, has already laid the foundation for an alternative road northwards should the Nigerien route shut down.

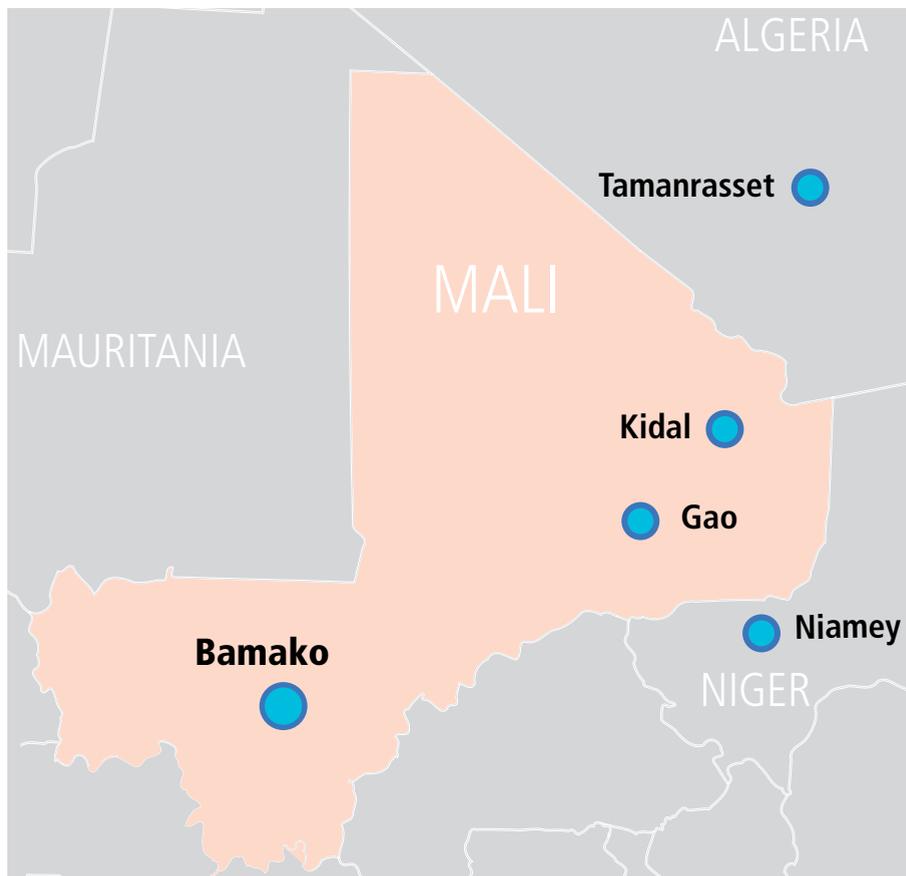
One major dilemma facing policy makers that want to stop irregular migration through Mali is that state authorities are either complicit in migration, such as by providing migrants free passage in exchange for a toll at roadblocks or by issuing false passports, or that they lack the effective presence and/or capacity to counter human smuggling. This problem is particularly salient in the north, where armed groups have taken over territorial control and offer protection to, and feed off, the human smuggling industry. At the time of writing, a solution to the internal conflict appears to lie in the distant future, meaning that addressing the issue of irregular migration remains one of the lowest priorities on the government's agenda. Regaining political stability is its number one concern.

A second major dilemma facing policy makers is that the group of actors behind irregular migration in Mali—the human smuggling networks—are not necessarily organised in a hierarchical manner. Instead, they build on a history of transnational (illicit) trade relations spanning across the region. Given human smuggling networks' horizontal, interconnected nature, solving the issue of human smuggling should start in the origin countries themselves. In addition, it should be recognised that these networks involve local elites that have an important stake in (local) political life and/or that are linked to armed groups. As such, human smuggling functions as but one node in these larger relationships between smuggling, authority and the empowerment of nonstate armed forces in northern Mali more generally.

In terms of policy advice, this means that investments in a robust and inclusive political settlement for the north remain critical in addressing the issue of human smuggling. Given that the conflict's proliferation depends to a substantial degree on the control of, and competition over, illicit trafficking routes, policy makers should continue to invest in mapping out local power dynamics to identify potential partners for action. Policy

makers should also be realistic about the extent to which the Malian state's institutions are capable and/or willing partners in the fight against irregular migration. In a situation as complex as Mali, short-term or one-sided technical solutions are doomed to fail.<sup>1</sup>

#### Map of Mali



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1 This report is part of the research project 'Turning the Tide: The Politics of Irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya.' For policy recommendations to address irregular migration in Mali and beyond, see Molenaar, F. and El Kamouni-Janssen, F. 2017. *Turning the Tide: The Politics of Irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya*, CRU report, The Hague, the Clingendael Institute.

# Introduction

Mali has always been both a migrant sending and a transit country, characterised by a high fluidity of population movements inside the territory and across its borders.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, circular migration in the Sahel region consisted of pastoralist populations and seasonal workers moving across Mali towards neighbouring states such as Algeria, Libya, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.<sup>3</sup> In the present day, these movements are facilitated by the freedom of travel that exists between states that belong to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and by bilateral agreements between certain countries of the Sahel and North Africa, such as Mali and Algeria and Mali and Morocco.<sup>4</sup>

Current estimates suggest that some 30,000 to 40,000 migrants will be passed through Mali in 2016.<sup>5</sup> These numbers can be explained with reference to the fact that, over the last decades, Mali has become a transit country for West African migrants that attempt to reach Northern Africa and Europe.<sup>6</sup> While the exact trans-Saharan migration routes change continuously as a consequence of interdiction efforts as well as fluctuating conditions in origin, transit and destination countries, the main route in Mali appears to have remained relatively stable despite the internal conflict that has been ongoing since 2012. Even though an armed rebellion in northern Mali and the subsequent military coup of early 2012 have led to the internal and external displacement of refugees, migrants continue to use the Malian-North African road. They rely on established, but decentralised, smuggling networks to facilitate their passage across Malian borders.

It is unclear how the networks facilitating the irregular migration flows—called human smuggling networks hereafter—connect to this broader political economic framework. This question is all the more pressing given that the smuggling networks operate in a

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2 International Organization for Migration (IOM). 2013. *The Mali Migration Crisis at a Glance*, IOM, Geneva.

3 United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). 2011. *Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel*, Geneva, UNEP.

4 No visa is needed to travel from one ECOWAS country to another. Mali concluded bilateral agreements with Morocco and Algeria that grant the right to Malian citizens to freely enter Algeria, without a visa, and remain for a period of three months. See: Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T. 2015. *The Roots of Mali's Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, CRU report, The Hague, the Clingendael Institute.

5 Personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July; also see: *Mali Flow Monitoring Report #7*, IOM, Bamako, 2016, <http://www.globaldtm.info/mali-flow-monitoring-report-7-1-15-october/> (accessed October 2016).

6 Diarra, B. 2001. *Communication sur l'apport des Maliens de l'étranger dans le développement de l'économie nationale et la politique de retour du conseil économique, social et culturel*, premier forum des Maliens de l'Extérieur.

country where state authority is divided between the government-run south and the militia-controlled north. Examining the linkages between smuggling networks and these (non)state authorities provides insights into the way in which human smuggling networks contribute to the empirical manifestation of political order in Mali, and into the opportunities and threats that these linkages pose for political stability.<sup>7</sup> In turn, this also allows for an exploration of the way in which antismuggling policies could be designed in an effective as well as a politically and conflict-sensitive manner.

This case study forms part of a larger research project that focuses on trans-Saharan human smuggling networks and their implications for political stability and conflict in the region. The contribution of the Malian case is that it outlines how smuggling proceeds have contributed to the reconfiguration of the state, with newly empowered groups in the north defying the central state's control over the northern region. The case thereby provides insights into the role that smuggling activities play in the prolongation of political instability in the north. This same instability also poses important obstacles to both the Malian state's and the international community's ability to address human smuggling effectively.<sup>8</sup>

The report proceeds as follows. The first section provides a historical overview of the development of trade, trafficking and (human) smuggling networks in northern Mali. It discusses how the proliferation of these networks contributed to the (prolongation of the) internal conflict that started in 2012 and the extent to which current domestic and EU policies address these issues. The next three sections discuss migratory dynamics and the organisation of human smuggling along the three legs of the migratory route: the road from West Africa to Gao, the smuggling hub of Gao and the road from Gao to Algeria. These sections show how each leg functions according to different dynamics that each poses its own consequences for the organisation of human smuggling and irregular migration. The manifestation of irregular migration varies in line with its ties to the distinct political economies—with unique policy consequences.

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7 The focus on the empirical manifestation of political order implies that state authorities need not necessarily uphold order and that nonstate actors may play an important role in the exercise of (political) authority as well.

8 The report builds on reviews of existing academic and policy-based literature on Mali, as well as consultations with noted scholars. In addition, a systematic review of online Malian newspapers served to identify relevant sociopolitical incidents. Seven days of fieldwork in Bamako in July 2016 provided additional data for this report in the form of 16 extended interviews with relevant members of the international community, intelligence officers, domestic experts, journalists, civil society groups—such as migrant organisations—and members of the armed forces. Given the nature of the subject, all these interviews were carried out under strict conditions of anonymity.

# 1 (Human) smuggling and instability in Mali

## Historical transnational trade connections

The roots of contemporary human smuggling networks are found in Mali's past. Historically, the structural weaknesses of the north's economy, the region's vulnerability to shocks and its abandonment by the central state pushed nomadic populations, such as the Tuareg and Arab tribes, beyond Mali's borders. Looking for economic opportunities or seeking refuge in response to climatic challenges, these populations settled temporarily in neighbouring countries such as Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Libya.<sup>9</sup>

Libya formed an important emigration destination due to the ties that existed between the Tuareg tribal communities that spanned across both states' borders. In the 1970s, many Tuareg migrants were also lured into joining the Libyan Qadhafi's 'Islamic Legion' with the promise of cash salaries, taking part in several wars waged by the Libyan regime (e.g., the 1978–1987 war in Chad).<sup>10</sup> Algeria, with its 1,316-km border with northern Mali, formed a second natural emigration destination for northern populations. Commercial ties that had developed over the years between southern Algeria and northern Mali saw many Malian traders and seasonal workers cross the Algerian border to find work in regions such as Tamanrasset and Ghardaia.<sup>11</sup> Algerian and Malian populations could circulate freely, selling and buying merchandise without any constraint or customs and police formalities.<sup>12</sup>

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- 9 Cissé, P., Malicki, Z., Barbier, B. and Maïga, A. 2010. 'Les migrations, une stratégie d'adaptation à la variabilité climatique en zones sahéliennes', *Revue de Géographie du Laboratoire Leid*, 8, 184–196.
- 10 After the fall of Qadhafi, these combatants would form the bulk of the rebels involved in the 2012 rebellion in north Mali. See: Guichaoua, Y. 2014. *Transformations of Armed Violence in the Sahara*, Sahara Knowledge Exchange, Washington, DC, World Bank, 8–9 and Nossiter, A. 2012. 'Gadhafi's Weapons, Taken by Old Allies, Reinvigorate an Insurgent Army in Mali', *New York Times*, 5 February.
- 11 Bensassi, S. et al. 2015. *Algérie-Mali: la normalité de l'informalité*, World Bank working paper, Washington, DC, The World Bank Group.
- 12 Cantens, T. and Raballand, G. 2016. *Fragile Borders: Rethinking Borders and Insecurity in Northern Mali*, Geneva, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

The central state turned a blind eye to the informal trade economy due to this economy's stability-inducing tendencies: since the central state was unable to provide basic goods and services to the northern populations, it allowed the informal economy to sponsor (limited) economic development in the region.<sup>13</sup> The urbanised areas of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, as well as border towns such as In Khalil, became the main sites where goods were exchanged and consumed. The trade patterns formed here relied on intricate long-distance personal trade connections—a principle termed 'connectivity.' Ethnic and kinship ties, rather than physical proximity, bound—and continue to bind—the crossborder trade networks together.<sup>14</sup> These ties laid the foundations for today's human smuggling networks.

## Criminal groups and the 2012 conflict

From the early 1990s onwards, the combination of regional marginalisation, the outsourcing of development to irregular, transnational trade networks and the Malian government's tacit acceptance and instrumental support of this informal scheme resulted in the empowerment of criminal and rebel groups in the north. This process started in 1992, when the fragmentation of authority was institutionalised through the adoption of a National Pact. Responding to the Tuareg rebellion that had started in 1990, this agreement focused on decentralisation as a means to empower people locally. In practice, this process resulted in rebel commanders and other local leaders gaining access to power and economic resources at both the local and national level—thereby contributing to the personalisation and fragmentation of political authority as well as inter- and intragroup power struggles.<sup>15</sup>

In that same decade, Algeria's battle with both a civil war and an unprecedented terrorist threat resulted in an inflow of suspicious trade stocks such as arms, drugs and contraband. These flows blended in with the existing barter economy, taking advantage of the freedom of movement of individuals that had been institutionalised between Mali and Algeria.<sup>16</sup> Connectivity formed an important element in this blending of trade flows, as drug and cigarette smugglers were rooted in transnational tribal and ethnic

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13 Personal interview, Malian expert on domestic politics, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 26 July.

14 Scheele, J. 2012. 'Garage or Caravanserail: Saharan Connectivity in Al-Khalil, Northern Mali', in: *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, eds. Scheele, J. and McDougall, J. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 222–237.

15 Bøås, M. 2015. 'Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery', *African Security*, 8(4), 229–319.

16 Briscoe, I. 2014. *Crime After Jihad: Armed Groups, the State and Illicit Business in Post-conflict Mali*, CRU report, The Hague, the Clingendael Institute.

fraternities.<sup>17</sup> Emerging terrorist groups also fed off this new illicit economy, seeing it as an opportunity to finance their activities.<sup>18</sup>

The empowerment of criminal and armed groups culminated in the 2000s, when coastal West Africa became a significant drop point for Andean cocaine in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and north Mali started to be used as one of the main routes for overland cocaine trafficking.<sup>19</sup> With the inflow of drugs from coastal West African states, the wealth acquired by trafficking networks was converted into political influence and military power.<sup>20</sup> As had been the case for the older forms of illicit trade networks, the government continued to turn a blind eye and instrumentally embraced some of these networks to foster stability in the north.<sup>21</sup>

The political and security crisis of 2012—composed by a swift and victorious rebellion in the north that sparked a military coup in the south—was the result. Initially, a renewed expression of Tuareg discontent towards the Malian state, the armed Islamist groups and other criminal networks that had been empowered by the profits made in the illicit trade hijacked the rebellion. The government's inability to counter this uprising sparked popular and military unrest, leading to the fall of the government in March of that same year.<sup>22</sup> In January 2013, fears that the armed Islamist threat would spread to the capital resulted in French air strikes under the aegis of Opération Serval. Several months later, the UN established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeeping mission to stabilise the north.<sup>23</sup>

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17 These new traffickers followed age-old trade routes and used their knowledge of the desert terrain and their historical alliance with partners in southern Algeria to conduct their activities with ease. *Ibid.*

18 Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for instance, commander of an Algerian-based terrorist frontrunner of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), and long settled in the north through marriages with local Malian women, made a name for himself by smuggling cigarettes through north Mali on to southern Algeria. Boeke, S. 2013. 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar: a Loose Cannon?', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, <https://icct.nl/publication/mokhtar-belmokhtar-a-loose-cannon/> (accessed August 2016).

19 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2011. *Estimating Illicit Financial Flows Resulting from Drug Trafficking and Other Transnational Organized Crimes*, Vienna, UNODC. Also see: *Id.* 2013. *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, Vienna, UNODC.

20 Reitano, T. and Shaw, M. 2013. 'Failure to Control Drug Trafficking Aggravates Mali Crisis', *Institute for Security Studies*, <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/failure-to-control-drug-trafficking-aggravates-mali-crisis> (accessed August 2016).

21 Briscoe, I. *Op. cit.*; Guichaoua, Y. *Op. cit.*; Bøås, M. *Op. cit.*

22 Among these groups were Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). For more information on the topic, see Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T. *Op. cit.*; Guichaoua, Y. *Op. cit.* These groups also capitalised on the many Tuareg fighters that migrated back to Mali from Libya after the fall of Qadhafi. See: Tinti, P. and Reitano, T. 2016. *Migrant Refugee Smuggler Saviour*, London, Hurst.

23 Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T. *Op. cit.*

The crisis and interventions had important consequences for irregular migration and human smuggling. Firstly, they sparked a wave of internal displacement and Malian refugees. At the height of the crisis, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identified 334,550 displaced individuals within Mali itself.<sup>24</sup> Malians also fled in larger numbers to refugee camps in Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the security situation made the irregular migration route through north Mali an unpopular one, with West African migrants resorting to the route passing through Burkina Faso and Niger instead.<sup>26</sup> This did not mean, however, that the northern route died down altogether. Having become *de facto* authorities in the region, the armed Islamist networks gained control over irregular migration and the human smuggling industry, as the local businessmen running the human smuggling operations turned to the armed Islamists for the transportation and protection of migrants during the conflict.<sup>27</sup>

## Criminal competition and the prolongation of internal conflict

Neither the signature of a 2013 interim peace agreement in Ouagadougou and the 2015 peace agreement in Algiers, nor the major Malian and foreign military presence in the north have managed to secure the region: 'access to the northern towns of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal remains complex with inhabitants living in a state of quasi-siege, movements of goods and people are subject to the threat of banditry, clashes still occur between armed groups and operations are still carried out by both Malian and foreign armies.'<sup>28</sup> In the process, a hybrid form of governance has emerged with local governments, security forces and other state institutions starting to function again, albeit in a formal manner and in urban areas only. Meanwhile, armed groups continue to fight each other, the state and international actors over territory and the spoils of peace.<sup>29</sup>

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24 *Matrice de suivi des déplacements – Mali (Juillet 2013)*, IOM, Geneva, 2013, [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B\\_3VYzW3ndOTVkJRueW9UVDIDemc](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_3VYzW3ndOTVkJRueW9UVDIDemc) (accessed November 2016).

25 *Mali UNHCR Operational Update 01-30 September 2016*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Geneva, 2016, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Mali%20Operational%20Update%20-%20September%202016.pdf> (accessed November 2016). At the time of writing, these camps continue to attract Malian refugees due to ongoing conflict dynamics in North and Central Mali. *Factsheet Malian Refugees*, UNHCR, Geneva, 2016, <https://data.unhcr.org/SahelSituation/download.php?id=2110> (accessed November 2016).

26 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July.

27 Telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 9 November; personal communication, Sahel migration expert Luca Raineri, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 1 November.

28 Cantens, T. and Raballand, G. *Op. cit.*, 2.

29 Guichaoua, Y. *Op. cit.*; A. Jouve, 2016, 'Forces et groupes armés au Mali: qui est qui?', *Jeune Afrique*, 24 March.

The somewhat normalisation of day-to-day relations in the north has resulted in the reestablishment of human smuggling routes that had been upset by the conflict—regardless of the fact that violence is much more widespread nowadays than it was in 2013.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, human smuggling networks have to navigate a complex physical terrain where they are up against an increasingly fragmented number of armed groups seeking to collect spoils. This situation will likely endure in the near future, as several stakeholders of the peace agreement have little to no interest in seeing the central state's presence enforced in the north. Although not discussed directly, criminal interests set the agenda for the talks surrounding the peace agreement. This is best visible in the fact that armed groups are sometimes represented in these talks by known traffickers.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, more than a year after the signature of the Algiers accord, little progress has been made to implement the peace agreement, and tensions remain present in the north of the country. Control over drug and cigarette trafficking routes drive many ongoing armed conflicts,<sup>32</sup> to the extent that side accords have been concluded between armed groups engaged in trafficking activities.<sup>33</sup> These criminally driven conflicts overlap with, and strengthen, inter- and intratribal tensions. While subordinated castes use smuggling proceeds to advance their own interests and societal position, tribal aristocracies fight back through the revival of the historical *droits de passage* (right of passage) that

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30 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July.

31 Raineri, L. and Galletti, C. 2016. *Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition*, policy brief. London, International Alert. Also see: personal communication, Sahel migration expert Luca Raineri, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 1 November.

32 International Crisis Group. 2015. *Mali: la paix à marche forcée*, Africa Report n.226, Brussels, International Crisis Group. The recurring fights between the *Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies* (GATIA) and the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) over the summer of 2016 can be understood as a power struggle between a historically dominated group—the Imghad (GATIA)—using trafficking resources to change the established order and a traditionally noble group—the Ifoghas (MNLA)—trying to preserve the status quo. In this conflict, the spoils earned through organised criminal activities are a means to an end. Raineri, L. and Strazzari, F. 2015. *State, Secession and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali*, *African Security*, 8(4), 249–271.

33 In October 2015, after weeks of violent conflict, all armed groups and tribal factions present in the northern regions gathered several times in Anéfis in order to 'air their dirty laundry in the family' (i.e., without the Malian government or the international community getting involved) and to sign pacts. To the majority of observers, the sharing of trafficking routes was the main driving force behind the signature of these pacts. See, for instance, the interview of Laurent Bigot, former diplomat of the *Quai d'Orsay*, Deputy Director for West Africa, on RFI: Olphand, M-P. 2015. 'Les routes de la drogue sont un enjeu évident', *Radio France Internationale*, 10 September.

allows them to extract rents from traffic, such as human smuggling, crossing through their territories.<sup>34</sup>

Through its linkages to this criminal economy, human smuggling profits contribute to the prolongation of the armed conflict. As one expert suggests, 'the north of the country is a locomotive of illegality pulling several wagons: drugs, cigarette trafficking, fake currency, armed groups, jihadists, arms and human smugglers. All of these wagons are linked and one cannot talk about one of them without mentioning the others.'<sup>35</sup> It follows that any attempt to address irregular migration and human smuggling in Mali, particularly in the north, will have to be part of a more comprehensive approach addressing insecurity and illicit criminal trade as a driver of conflict and instability.

## Domestic and international migration policies

In 2015, the government of Mali launched its national migration policy—*Politique nationale de migration* (National Migration Policy; PONAM), with a budget of 120 billion CFA (183 million EUR). The policy is articulated around two main elements: managing migration within the framework of international norms and addressing the root causes of migration through development.<sup>36</sup> The PONAM ambitions include, among other things, to create jobs in the main emigration zones of the country to provide a future for the population there, to have a better understanding of migration flows in order to better fight irregular migration, to offer better social and judicial protection of Malian residing outside of their borders and to support returnees in order to ensure their reinsertion in the Malian economy.<sup>37</sup> This is a rather isolated approach to migration that does not address irregular migration and human smuggling as part of the larger conflict and stability dynamics outlined above.

Irregular migration in Mali has also come under increased scrutiny from international policy makers. In the aftermath of the deal between the European Union (EU) and Turkey, which shut down boat journeys across the Aegean Sea, it has become painstakingly clear that the Central Mediterranean migration route continues to function unhindered. Boat departures from Libya have been on the rise since the fall of Qadhafi in 2011, and the migratory flows streaming into Italy are unlikely to abate in the near future. Frequent media reports of drowned migrants washing up on Libya's shores drive an international effort to 'do something.' Combined with the EU's increasingly intolerant

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34 Raineri, L. and Strazzari, F. *Op. cit.*

35 Personal interview, Malian journalist with a track record in migration stories, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 27 July.

36 Tienou, G. 2015. 'Mali: migration—la politique nationale de migration lancée', *Le Reporter*, 27 May.

37 Kone, T. 2016. 'Mali: politique nationale de migration: 120 milliards de FCFA pour faire de la migration un facteur de développement', *L'Indépendant*, 22 May.

domestic climate towards migrants, this has fuelled a push to contain migration in origin regions. Trans-Saharan irregular migration, which connects West Africa to North Africa and Europe through Mali (and more importantly, through Niger), has thereby become the latest target of EU foreign policy aimed at stemming irregular migration flows.

To address the issue of irregular migration, the EU has adopted a complex and multifaceted response, now loosely organised under the 2015 European Agenda on Migration.<sup>38</sup> The EU builds on the 2015 Valletta Agreement, which brought ‘the EU and African countries together to work in a spirit of partnership and find common solutions to mutual challenges,’ to implement this Agenda in Mali. Under the Valetta Agreement, the EU and African countries collaborate in areas such as addressing the root causes of migration, tackling smuggling networks and improving return and readmission.<sup>39</sup> In June 2016, the EU launched the additional Partnership Framework to mobilise and focus EU actions in the region even further. Under this Framework, the EU agrees on tailored compacts with third countries, such as Mali, that outline ‘financial support and development and neighbourhood policy tools [that] will reinforce local capacity-building, including for border control, asylum procedures, counter-smuggling and reintegration efforts.’<sup>40</sup>

Although the EU-Mali compact negotiations are still underway in early December 2016, accounts from within the negotiation process suggest that the EU aims to invest in technical solutions such as improved border control and capacity-building programs targeting Malian security services.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the EU proposes a ‘broad, integrated approach’ addressing migration through projects focusing on economic development and good governance that ‘are expected to have a mitigating effect on

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38 *European Agenda on Migration – Factsheets*, European Commission, Brussels, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/index_en.htm) (accessed November 2016).

39 *2015 Valletta summit on migration – background on EU action*, European Council, Brussels, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-valletta-summit-press-pack/> (accessed November 2016).

40 *Commission Announces New Migration Partnership Framework: Reinforced Cooperation with Third Countries to Better Manage Migration*, press release, European Commission, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-2072\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2072_en.htm) (accessed November 2016).

41 *Letter of 14 December 2016 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the House of Representatives Answering Factual Questions regarding the Dutch Contribution to MINUSMA in 2017*, The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, 2016, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/12/14/kamerbrief-beantwoording-feitelijke-vragen-nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-minusma-in-2017/kamerbrief-beantwoording-feitelijke-vragen-nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-minusma-in-2017.pdf> (accessed December 2016).

violent extremism and that contribute to stability in Mali.<sup>42</sup> The continued presence of MINUSMA is similarly expected to contribute to the mitigation of migration through its role in stabilising the northern region.<sup>43</sup> Although this focus on conflict as a root cause of migration is spot-on, these rather technical responses miss one important insight: that irregular migration and human smuggling cannot be understood as mere consequences of conflict. Indeed, and as outlined above, human smuggling networks in Mali cannot be understood in isolation from the larger dynamics of crime, coping and resistance that define the north.

In this context, it should be recognised that local populations do not hold a favourable view of the Malian state and the international community. Both are commonly understood as but one among a larger number of political actors—rather than as separate entities. In addition, and given that their activities do not necessarily improve the security of local populations, the state and international community are often perceived as illegitimate political actors at that.<sup>44</sup> Proposing technical solutions, such as border management and capacity building for security services, misses this crucial element and runs the risk of putting the cart in front of the horse. A clearer understanding of the local political economies that human smuggling networks operate in is needed to design migration policies that are both politically and conflict-sensitive and that contribute rather than undermine institution building in the region. In addition, it should be recognised that the state is not a neutral interlocutor *per se* and that it is involved in the facilitation of irregular migration itself as well.

The following sections entangle these dynamics through an analysis of three distinct political economies along the migration route: 1) the state-controlled route running through south Mali, 2) the migrant smuggling hub of Gao and 3) the contested route running from Gao to the border with Algeria.

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42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 Cantens, T. and Raballand, G. *Op. cit.*

## 2 The road from West Africa to Gao

### Bus companies' facilitation of irregular migration

The historical trade and migratory patterns described above explain the ease with which current waves of West African irregular migrants transit through Mali. These migration streams also respond to contemporary developments. Oppressive or corrupt regimes, such as the ones in Gambia, or regimes that experienced recent political crises, such as the ones in Ivory Coast and Guinea, have pushed people to leave their country in search for a brighter future. The economic crises that hit Gambia, Nigeria and Ghana in 2013 and 2014 constitute additional drivers of migration.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the fall of Gadhafi in August 2011 has added an important pull-factor for trans-Saharan migration. The Libyan crisis resulted in the end of the 2008 Italian-Libyan friendship treaty that had shored-up antimigration efforts on Libya's part—leading to a substantial decrease in the number of migrants departing from Libya for Europe. Following Gadhafi's demise and the internal turmoil in Libya, the number of irregular migrants departing from Libya's coasts started to increase again.<sup>46</sup>

#### Box 1 Migrants' origins and destinations

Origins		Destination			
Guinea	49%	(North) Africa:	65%	Europe:	35%
Mali	27%	Algeria	39%	Italy	17%
The Gambia	13%	Libya	14%	Spain	15%
Senegal	5%	Niger	9%	France	3%
Ivory Coast	4%				
Other	2%				

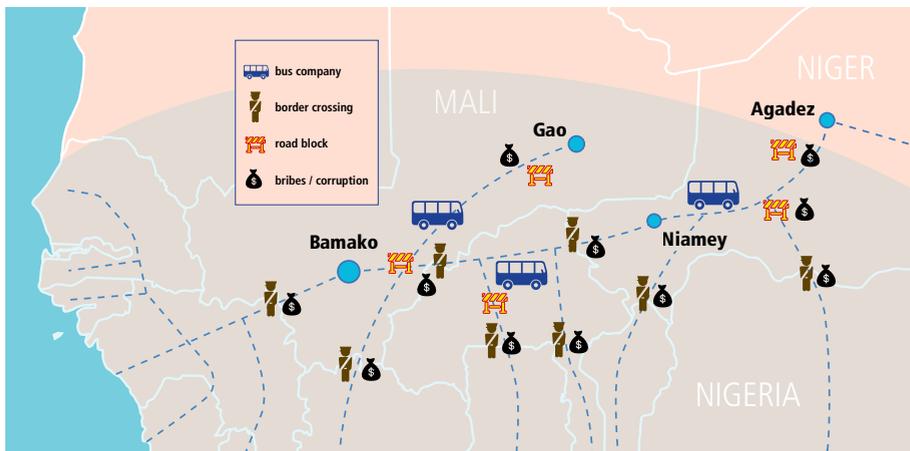
IOM, 2016, presentation titled 'Irregular Migration Flows in Mali and the Sub Region,' obtained through personal communication.

45 A limited sample of migrant survey data published by the Mixed Migration Hub shows that 67% of respondents also identified a lack of job opportunities in their country of origin as a root cause for migration. *Mali Survey Snapshot – April 2016*, Mixed Migration Hub, Cairo, 2016, <http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Mali-Survey-Snapshot-April.pdf> (accessed October 2016).

46 Helgoualch, E. 2010. 'Immigration: le Libyen Kadhafi fait chanter l'Europe', *Nouvel Observateur*, 11 June.

Migrant travel that takes place within Mali is generally of a licit nature, as the majority of migrants come from origin countries that belong to ECOWAS (see Box 1).<sup>47</sup> ECOWAS maintains a free-movement protocol, which means that migrants from these countries can enter Mali in a legal fashion. Migration becomes irregular when migrants travel within Mali without proper documentation and/or when they cross the border into Algeria without a valid Malian passport.<sup>48</sup> In practice, the transnational transport companies that travel from the West African capitals to Bamako and/or directly on to Gao navigate the rather grey territory between regular and irregular migration in a clever fashion.<sup>49</sup> Under the guise of the legality of free movement in the ECOWAS zone, they simultaneously cater to those who can and those who cannot present the right documentation. Onboard passport controls are nonexistent, and bribes to security forces are legion as ‘the only thing that interests transporters is money.’<sup>50</sup> In some instances, bus companies even designate totally separate services for migrants—allowing nonmigrant passengers to travel without any hassle.<sup>51</sup>

**Figure 1 The legal route**



47 The ECOWAS member countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo.

48 Due to Mali’s bilateral agreement with Algeria, Malian passports constitute a much sought-after commodity on the trans-Saharan irregular migration route.

49 Alternatively, migrants departing from Nouakchott, Mauritania, travel to Bassikounou, a town close to the Malian border and are then smuggled to Ber before heading north to Gao and the border. Confidential documents obtained from an intelligence officer, personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July.

50 La Boussole. 2016. ‘Affaire des 25 cartons de munitions: la MINUSMA se défend sans convaincre’, *Malijet*, 6 September.

51 Personal communication, Sahel migration expert, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 11 December.

The bus companies' involvement in irregular practices is not limited to their facilitation of the transportation of undocumented migrants.<sup>52</sup> In addition, indications exist of connections between transport companies and organised criminal groups. In a recent incident involving NOUR transport, for example, one of the company's buses was stopped by Malian customs and was found to be transporting 25 ammunition boxes from Senegal into Mali.<sup>53</sup> This is not to say that criminal groups own the bus companies. Rather, bus company owners form part of a group of privileged elites with strong ties to the political centre, whose position in power relies on economic activities that supersede the lines between licit and illicit endeavours.<sup>54</sup> So far, the strong focus on human smuggling networks and border control overlooks the strong complicity of these business elites. In addition, their political connections beg the question of to what extent national politicians can be pushed to address this side of irregular migration.

## Irregular migration as an issue of good governance

The example of the bus companies' role in the facilitation of irregular migration—and the corruption of state officials that has been alluded to above—is indicative of larger governance issues that face the Malian state. Corruption and nepotism have hollowed out the state from within, with weak state institutions lacking (human) capacity and the substandard delivery of core services to the people, such as education, security and rule of law, as a result.<sup>55</sup> These failings are particularly visible in the police and security forces, where jobs are distributed as political favours and sold at a price. A job in customs, for example, can allegedly be bought for 2 million CFA (3,023 EUR). According to a European expert with extensive knowledge of the Malian security and justice sector, some 80 percent of recruits join the security forces in this manner.<sup>56</sup> Needless to say, this does not contribute to the quality of the security forces' work.

It should therefore come as little surprise that security personnel contribute to the manifestation of irregular migration, such as through their involvement in extracting tolls on roadblocks, their inability to effectively secure border posts and their alleged

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52 The road to GAO is serviced by SONEF, NOUR, Maïga, Binkè and Bani Transports. Capitalising on the volume of travellers, three of these national companies adopted a 42 percent price raise on the Bamako-Gao track in late October 2015, which pit them against the local community. See L'oeil du Mali. 2015.

'Transport: Bras de fer entre Binké transport, SONEF, Nour transport et la population de Gao', *Malijet*, 16 October.

53 La Boussole, *op. cit.*

54 Personal communication with two intelligence officers, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 7 November.

55 *Ibid.*; Lecoq, B. et al. 2013. 'One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: a Multivocal Analysis of the 2012 Political Crisis in the Divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40(137), 47.

56 Cited in Briscoe, I. *Op. cit.*

involvement in the issuing of false passports. Indeed, the taxing of migrants at police and army roadblocks, where security forces make use of migrants' unawareness of their rights as ECOWAS citizens, is a commonly acknowledged practice.<sup>57</sup> At the dozens of roadblocks along the way to Bamako and Gao, migrants pay a toll of between 1,000 and 5,000 CFA (1.50–7.50 EUR) to the security forces that control them.<sup>58</sup> According to key respondents from the region, the Gao gendarmeries also take migrants off the bus at the city entrance. Migrants reportedly have to pay a tax between 2,000 and 5,000 CFA (3–7.50 EUR) and are then handed over to the smugglers who take them under their wing. In other cases, migrants are arrested after entering Gao, and smugglers pick them up from the police station in exchange for a bribe.<sup>59</sup>

Corrupt police officials are also involved in the fake passport industry. Many West African migrants seek to obtain false Malian passports, which allow them to travel through Mali freely and to enter Algeria and Morocco without a visa for a period of three months. To receive this passport, migrants need to obtain a Malian identity card, delivered at a police station at the presentation of a Malian birth certificate with the mention 'Malian nationality'.<sup>60</sup> Corruption and bribes occur along the various stages of this procedure and involve officials at different levels.<sup>61</sup> An estimated 10 to 15 percent of Malian passports are issued to migrants in this manner, with prices ranging between 50 and 200 EUR.<sup>62</sup> According to a high-ranked member of the international community, rooting out the false passport manufacturing industry is complicated, as 'there is always somebody to take the spot of those who have been arrested'.<sup>63</sup>

From the above, it becomes clear that corruption and complicity with irregular migration are not incidental phenomena. These practices are rooted in dominant state dynamics where power is obtained through personal connections and financial resources and where public officials use their appointments for personal enrichment. The 2012 Malian crisis has shown how, in the long run, the accompanying delegitimisation of the state resulted in destabilizing consequences.<sup>64</sup> In addition, direct and indirect state

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57 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July.

58 Duval Smith, A. 2015. 'Inside Mali's Human-Trafficking Underworld in Gao', *BBC Africa*, 21 April.

59 Telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July; Telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

60 Daniel, S. 2006. 'Bamako: le passport malien, un sésame recherché', *Radio France International*, 27 April.

61 Personal interview, migration expert, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 28 July.

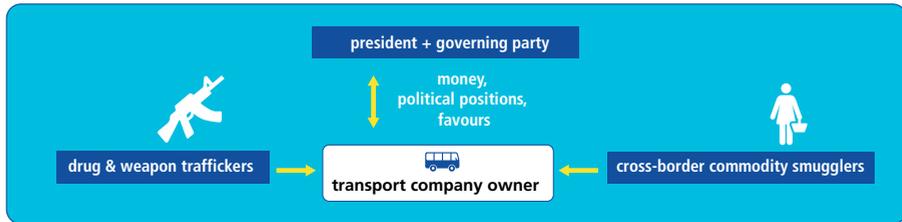
62 Raineri, L. and Galletti, C. 2016. *Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition*, policy brief, London, International Alert. Also see: personal communication, Sahel migration expert Luca Raineri, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 1 November.

63 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July.

64 Briscoe, I. *Op. cit.*

involvement in, and complicity with, irregular migration stands in the way of effective policy formation targeting trafficking activities more generally and can only be rooted out through a more general focus on issues of good governance and the funding of politics and elections.

**Figure 2** The legal route's political dynamics



### 3 Gao: a migrant smuggling hub

When arriving in Gao, the organisation of migration starts to change. Bus services do not run further than Gao, meaning that migrants rely on local transport companies for the remainder of their journey through Mali. For this, they turn to the local smuggling networks run by ‘*passseurs*,’ who connect migrants to transport companies, drivers, recruiters and state officials that need to be bribed to provide the migrants with transportation, fake passports and shelter in the main transit zones such as Gao. The *passseurs* are well-established business (and trade) entrepreneurs that operate on a transnational basis, meaning that they usually offer services to citizens of a particular country of origin.<sup>65</sup> According to several respondents, they are also connected to the transport companies and the security forces.<sup>66</sup>

*Passseurs* in Gao have their accomplices at the bus station in Bamako. Acting as the first point of contact for the migrants, these *cokseurs* spot newcomers or are directly approached by candidates for illegal immigration that put migrants on the buses to Gao after linking them up with their contact in the north. Migrants arriving in Gao generally know who will pick them up once they get off the bus at the police checkpoint.<sup>67</sup> After negotiating with officials when there is need, *passseurs* then organise shelter in the city before putting the migrants on trucks leaving for Algeria. Often being former migrants themselves, the *cokseurs* have been through the different steps of the journey to reach the shores of Africa and know the ins and outs of the trip.<sup>68</sup> At times, they are also responsible for advertising their smugglers’ services in their home communities.<sup>69</sup>

*Passseurs* also work together with local ghetto operators, or chairmen, who run the locales where migrants await their passage northwards.<sup>70</sup> These ‘ghettos’ have been established in Kidal and Gao, along the main routes to Algeria. The chairmen are mainly

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65 Guineans in Conakry will give the phone number of Guineans in Bamako, for example, who will in turn link them up with Guinean smugglers in Gao.

66 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July; telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Personal interview, migration expert, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 28 July.

69 Telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

70 Oftentimes, the figure of *passseur* and ghetto owner also overlaps.

former migrants that have settled in Gao and have lived there long enough to establish connections with the *passeurs* and local authorities.<sup>71</sup> Migrants stay in these ghettos and work in the city until they gather enough money to continue their journey. In exchange for the services they provide (shelter, water and food), the ghetto operators charge an illegal tax, often referred to as *droit de ghetto*.<sup>72</sup> They have to share this tax with local authorities, security forces and the local population to 'secure their neighbourhoods and to ensure social peace.'<sup>73</sup> As a consequence of this wealth distribution, chairmen also have an important social function in the community.<sup>74</sup>

## Transnational organisation of migration

From the above, it follows that the facilitation of irregular migration forms part of the socioeconomic fabric of Gao. It is a commonly recognised and accepted practice that conveys status and financial resources. The discussion of the local organization of migration also pinpoints to the fact, however, that irregular migration is organised in line with transnational dynamics. In part, this is the case because current smuggling networks build on a legacy of intraregional migration, as shown by the important role that former migrants play in connecting and facilitating the different legs between origin, transit and destination countries. Nationality comes to the fore as the most important organising principle of these networks, and conflicts over migratory resources are most likely to occur when actors violate this principle. As one respondent put it: 'Conflicts between chairmen happen often. For instance, going to a Guinean ghetto as a Senegalese person can cause important issues.'<sup>75</sup>

As discussed in more detail above, these transnational connections are reflective of the 'connectivity' principle of illicit trans-Saharan trade more generally, meaning that smuggling networks are organised in a horizontal, interconnected manner across borders. This makes it very hard to target them, as the networks are fluid and not controlled by one single kingpin. With time, the transnational character of the human smuggling networks has also introduced a degree of efficiency that less transnationally organised networks are hard to match. The inner workings of the passport fraud industry illustrate this. Migrants often rent—rather than buy—a fake passport to get to their destination of preference. Once they arrive, the smuggling networks send the

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71 The ghetto owners are usually wealthy Malian businessmen. Confidential documents obtained from an intelligence officer; personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

passports back to Mali for reuse.<sup>76</sup> As to consequences for policy makers, this suggests that it makes little sense mainly focusing on taking out human smugglers in transit countries. These independently operating linkages are easily replaced, and the focus on transit smuggling does nothing to mitigate the continuous supply of migrants being gathered in origin countries.

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76 Frontex Risk Analysis Unit. 2015. *Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community Joint Report*, Warsaw, Frontex. A bust of a false passport-manufacturing network in Bamako last year showed the network to involve four Malians and one Cameroonian, with the complicity of 'men in uniforms.' Tyenou, C. 2015. 'Démentalement d'un réseau de fabrication de faux passeports et cartes d'identité: un Camerounais et quatre Maliens écroués', *L'Indépendant*, 27 April.

# 4 The road from Gao to Algeria

## Human smugglers' links to politics and armed groups

While the trip to Gao can be made using legal bus companies, crossing the Algerian border from Gao requires the help of smugglers and informal transport companies. Migrants are put on trucks and smuggled through Anéfis, Kidal and Aguelhok up to the border with Algeria. The drivers of the trucks transporting migrants are generally Tuaregs, who know the terrain and the conditions along the routes.<sup>77</sup> These transporters are also involved in other types of transborder trade. Up to 2014, for example, migrants were transported on the back of 4x4 pickup trucks that had unloaded goods from Algeria in Gao and that took 25–30 migrants to Algeria on their way back. Since 2014, Algerian trucks carrying dates, which can take between 60 and 100 migrants, have typically replaced the pickups. These trucks can stay immobilised up to a week to ensure that enough migrants are collected to make the journey back a profitable one. At the moment, these trucks leave quickly though, due to the substantial flow of migrants passing through Gao.<sup>78</sup>

The road from Gao to Algeria traverses a complex, fragmented terrain (see Box 2 below). 'It is a region not characterised by social uniformity and ethnic homogeneity but rather by a series of historical as well as recent fissures, fragmentations, and cleavages, all of which are part and parcel of the current navigation between criminality, coping, and resistance.'<sup>79</sup> In practice, this means that different armed groups are engaged in violent clashes in the area.<sup>80</sup> Smuggling itineraries and the popularity of the different border crossings therefore fluctuate, depending on the security situation on the ground and the strictness of Algerian border controls.

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77 Indeed, having historically used them as part of their crossborder trading with southern Algeria before turning to the criminal economy after the complete withdrawal of the state and the desecuritisation of northern regions, the Tuaregs have become prominent actors in human smuggling. Reitano, T., Adal, L. and Shaw, M. 2014. *Smuggled Futures: The Dangerous Path of the Migrant from Africa to Europe*, Geneva, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

78 Telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

79 Bøås, M. *Op. cit.*, 303.

80 *Ibid.*, 314.

## Box 2 Northern Malian spheres of influence

*Central Mali:* According to several observers, the centre of the country – consisting of the triangle Segou, Nampala and Mopti – forms an “epicentre of jihadism”.<sup>81</sup> The terrorist group Ansar Dine Macina, the southern *katiba* of Ansar Dine, one of the main actors of the armed Islamist offensive in 2012, has conducted numerous attacks in the region of Segou and Mopti and has established itself as one of the main armed groups of the centre of the country. Local Fulani and Tamasheq communities, feeling left out of the peace agreements and threatened by the armed Islamist wave, have also taken up arms in the region.<sup>82</sup> Their composition, objectives and the extent of their military power are, at the moment, the subject of much speculations.<sup>83</sup> North of Mopti, the localities of Douentza and Boni are the zones of influence of the *Plateforme* members GATIA, the Ganda Izo and the Ganda Koy, all pro-government militias.<sup>84</sup> However, this region has recently been the theatre of attacks by an unidentified armed Islamist group, highlighting the fragile nature of territorial control in Mali.<sup>85</sup>

*Gao:* The region of Gao mainly falls under the control of the MAA (*Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad*) divided into two sub-groups, one part of the *Plateforme* and the other of the CMA.<sup>86</sup> The MAA is heavily involved in drug trafficking and operates mainly in the area between Timbuktu and Gao, despite having some presence in Kidal. Due to the high number of former MUJAO members in the ranks of the MAA, analysts have speculated on the ties between the movement and other armed Islamist groups such as Al-Mourabitoune (the result of a fusion between MUJAO and The Signed in Blood Battalion of Belmokhtar), also present in the region.

*Kidal:* The region of Kidal near the Algerian border has been the scene of many battles since the signature of the intra-Malian peace agreement. The CMA and the *Plateforme* have engaged in violent conflicts over the control of trafficking routes, endangering the implementation of the peace agreement in the process.

81 See for instance Sangare, B. 2016. *Le Centre du Mali: epicentre du djihadisme*, Note d’analyse, Brussels, Groupe de recherche et d’information sur la paix et la sécurité.

82 Carayol, R. 2016. ‘Carte: au centre du Mali, une constellation de groupes armés’, *Jeune Afrique*, 17 June.

83 For a better overview of the latest thoughts on such groups see International Crisis Group. 2016. *Mali Central: la fabrique d’une insurrection?* Africa report n.238, Brussels, International Crisis Group.

84 Carayol, R. 2016. ‘Carte: au centre du Mali, une constellation de groupes armés’, *Jeune Afrique*, 17 June.

85 RFI. 2016. ‘Des jihadistes s’emparent de la localité de Boni, au centre-est de Mali’, *Radio France International*, 3 September.

86 Personal interview with a Malian journalist with a track record in migration stories, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 27 July.

Within the CMA, the MNLA and the *Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) appear as the two main active groups while the GATIA has mainly represented the *Plateforme* in the latest fights. Analysts tie the MNLA and HCUA to armed Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine – one of the militant organizations that played an active role in supporting the early stages of the 2012 rebellion before hijacking it.<sup>87</sup> The CMA controls the city of Kidal itself.

The border town of Tal Handak has replaced the trafficking hub of In Khalil, for example, due to the 'extremely challenging security situation that has prevailed in In Khalil since the beginning of 2013.'<sup>88</sup> The benefit of this route is that it bypasses the violently contested region around the city of Kidal. Routes that do pass Kidal cross the border at Timeiawine and Tin Zaouatene.<sup>89</sup>

The armed groups that operate in the north do not necessarily control the human smuggling industry. The reason for this is that the amount of profits to be made here are not high enough.<sup>90</sup> Human smuggling is a labour-intensive business that does not generate revenues as lucrative as other illicit businesses. Instead, the armed groups have focused their attention on the trafficking of weapons, cigarettes or drugs, the trade of which continue to thrive despite the French intervention in early 2013.<sup>91</sup> Armed groups do profit from human smuggling in more indirect ways, however, such as by exploiting their territorial control by extracting a *droit de passage* from migrant convoys transiting through their area of influence. On the route between Kidal and Algeria, for example, militias reportedly manage several informal checkpoints, demanding 5,000 CFA (7.50 EUR) per migrant per checkpoint.<sup>92</sup> In addition, insecurity has resulted in the rise of armed bandits that attack the migrant convoys. Instances abound of migrants being robbed or killed.<sup>93</sup> Or, as one member of the international community put it succinctly,

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87 For a timeline of event, see Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T. *Op. cit.*

88 Bensassi. S. et al. *Op. cit.*; telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

89 Telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July; telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

90 Personal interview, Malian journalist with a track record in migration stories, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 27 July; personal interview, member of the international community working in the field of peacekeeping, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 27 July; personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July.

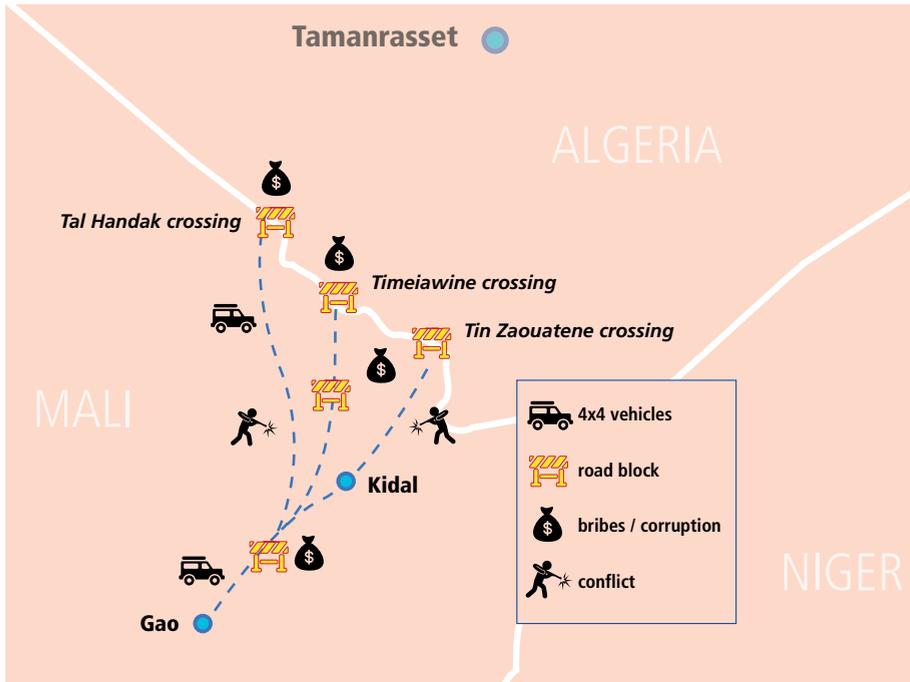
91 These trafficking routes may have been disturbed by the conflict, but the intensity of the business has remained constant. Confidential documents obtained from an intelligence officer, personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July.

92 *Mali Survey Snapshot – April 2016*, Mixed Migration Hub, Cairo, 2016, <http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Mali-Survey-Snapshot-April.pdf> (accessed October 2016).

93 Personal interview, member of the international community working in the field of peacekeeping, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 27 July.

‘when you encounter the bad ones, they steal everything from you—the good ones, you just have to pay them off to continue your drive.’<sup>94</sup> In response to these security concerns, and building on the ties between *passeurs* and armed groups as outlined below, armed groups have started providing protection to convoys in exchange for a share in the profits.<sup>95</sup>

**Figure 3 The contested route**



Despite this protection, the lawlessness of the area above Gao is such that human rights abuses are frequent, such as rapes or migrants being left in the desert when their families back home refuse to pay an extortion fee.<sup>96</sup> Instances of human trafficking, such as prostitution and forced labour, have been documented in the ghettos along the way as well.<sup>97</sup> Recent reports also indicate that migrants are being kept hostage

94 Telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July.

95 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July; telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Mben, P. 2006. ‘Sur les traces des migrants clandestins: Gao, ville Ghetto et point de ralliement des passeurs,’ *L’indépendant*, 14 April.

and brutalised when they reach border posts. Smugglers call the migrants' families and request 300,000 CFA (450 EUR) to secure their release. This money is sent to a Bamako contact of the smugglers, who collects the money and sends a message to the smugglers that the migrant may be released.<sup>98</sup> This development is reminiscent of the situation in Libya, where state absence has given rise to similar exploitative practices.

In addition, armed groups are linked to human smuggling in a more indirect way. In light of the new balance of power in the north, the *passeurs* tend to overlap with the leading elites of armed groups. Rather than saying that armed groups control the migrant smuggling trade and/or irregular migration economy, however, this should be read to mean that the human smuggling economy functions as a single node in a much more complex relationship between smuggling, authority and the empowerment of nonstate armed forces in north Mali.<sup>99</sup> The *passeurs* are influential members of their local communities, and as such they are tied to larger local and national personalised governance networks.<sup>100</sup> An example that illustrates this is that of one prominent businessman and transport company owner active in the human smuggling trade, who shall remain unnamed here, who confidential intelligence sources tie directly to the GATIA leadership.<sup>101</sup>

Since the beginning of the Algiers peace talks, the government in Bamako has decided to support the GATIA.<sup>102</sup> Considering the strong involvement of GATIA in drug trafficking and its proven links with the Malian army, it would not be surprising that some government officials benefit from this relationship—and from human smuggling proceeds as well. Allegations have similarly been made of local government officials directly benefiting from the dividends of traffics and of known traffickers investing their profits to buy off local political elites.<sup>103</sup> This goes to show once again that efforts to stop human smuggling should form part and parcel of larger efforts to promote good governance and the funding of politics and elections. In addition, irregular migration and human smuggling should not be addressed in isolation, but should form part of a larger process of peace negotiations targeting overarching issues of criminality, coping and resistance.

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98 Telephone interview, member of a local migrant NGO in Gao, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 10 November.

99 See Briscoe, I. *Op. cit.*

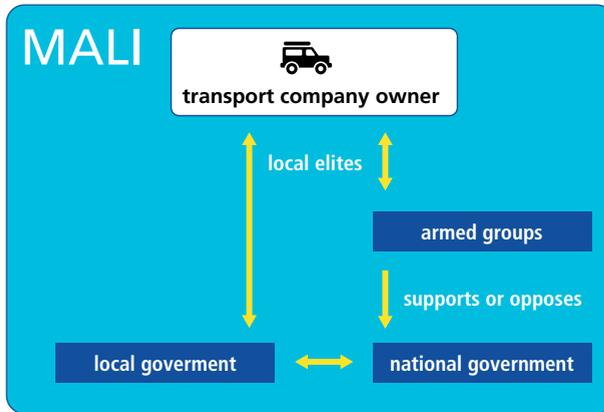
100 *Ibid.*, 314.

101 Personal interview, intelligence officer, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 25 July.

102 McGregor, A. 2015. 'GATIA: A Profile of Northern Mali's Pro-Government Tuareg and Arab Militia', *Terrorism Monitor* 13(7).

103 Personal interview with three members of the international community working in the field of migration, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 29 July; telephone interview, migration expert in Gao, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 30 July.

**Figure 4 The contested route's political dynamics**



### State absence and lack of capacity

The continuation of internal insecurity in north and central Mali thus forms one of the main obstacles to addressing irregular migration. Added to this it should be noted that effectively addressing human smuggling remains beyond the state's purview, as it has little capacity to act in the north.<sup>104</sup> The Malian Customs Directorate, for instance, relies on a mere 2,000 men to watch more than 7,000 km of borders. Before the 2012 crisis – a clear consequence of porous borders – only two border posts were operational in the region of Kidal, only one in Gao and none in Timbuktu. Today, none of the existent customs posts along the Malian borders are permanently operated, including the three border posts in the northern regions.<sup>105</sup>

Controlling borders falls under the responsibility of no less than seven distinct security forces reporting to four different ministries. These forces are the Army, the National Guard, the Gendarmerie, the National Police, the Central Office Against Drugs (CNO), Customs, and the Forest Guards. In practice, these forces suffer from gaps in personnel, equipment, and infrastructure, as well as from a lack of inter-organizational coordination and training.<sup>106</sup> While there is pressure from donors to engage in a structural reform of security forces and to develop a comprehensive border strategy to tackle human

<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with two members of the international community working in the field of border control, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 26 July.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Herbert, M. and Henlon, Q. 2016. *An Assessment of Mali's Border Security Capacity and Capabilities*, Assessment Report, Washington, DC, Strategic Capacity Group.

smuggling, the Malian government so far has not made this its priority.<sup>107</sup> Units of the National Guard, which are tasked with providing border security, maintaining law and order, and intelligence collection in rural areas, for example, have mainly been allotted the task of protection of state institutions by the president. Expert sources reveal that 80% of these forces are posted in Bamako, providing a good indication of the government's security priorities.<sup>108</sup>

These deficiencies are replicated within the central state institutions themselves as well. Several respondents note that the government lacks the capacity to design and implement effective policies in the field of countering irregular migration and human smuggling, even if it wanted to.<sup>109</sup> Efforts to stop human smuggling in Mali should recognise this institutional lack of capacity and invest in capacity building first and foremost.

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107 *Ibid.* The border police are only present in Bamako, 'delivering passports,' items subject to a high level of fraud and corruption as discussed below.

108 Raineri, L. and Galletti, C. 2016. *Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition*, policy brief, London, International Alert. Also see: personal communication, Sahel migration expert Luca Raineri, 2016. The Hague, The Netherlands, 1 November.

109 Personal interview with two members of the international community working in the field of border control, 2016. Bamako, Mali, 26 July. These members note that addressing human smuggling also has a low priority to the Malian state, other than as a way to obtain additional development funding.

# Conclusion and recommendations

A major dilemma confronting policy makers that attempt to control irregular migration in and through Mali is that state authorities are either complicit in migration, such as by providing migrants free passage in exchange for a toll at roadblocks and by issuing false passports, or that they lack the effective presence and/or capacity to counter human smuggling. This problem is particularly salient in the north, where armed groups have taken territorial control and offer protection to, and feed off, the human smuggling industry. At the time of writing, a solution to the internal conflict appears to lie in the distant future, meaning that addressing the issue of irregular migration remains one of the lowest priorities on the government's agenda.

Based on the analysis presented above, current domestic and international migration policies seem insufficient to tackle human smuggling and irregular migration dynamics. They do not explicitly take into account the substantial numbers of West African migrants that transit through Mali, the state official's own active involvement in irregular migration by levying roadblock tolls and issuing false passports or the fact that the absence of state control in the north plays into the hands of human smuggling networks that have established connections to armed groups. Even the focus on development (aid) as a means to address the root causes of migration should sound alarm bells. Past experiences with corrupt officials skimming aid funds have resulted in the suspension of development aid to Mali.<sup>110</sup>

A second major dilemma that has been outlined in this report is that the group of actors behind irregular migration in Mali—the human smuggling networks—are not necessarily organised in a hierarchical manner. Instead, they build on a history of transnational (illicit) trade relations spanning across the region. Given human smuggling networks' horizontal, interconnected nature, solving the issue of human smuggling should start in the origin countries themselves. In addition, it should be recognised that these networks involve local elites that have an important stake in (local) political life and/or that are linked to armed groups. As such, human smuggling networks function as a singular node in larger relationships between smuggling, authority and the empowerment of nonstate armed forces in north Mali.

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110 Bergamaschi, I. 2014. 'The Fall of a Donor Darling: The Role of Aid in Mali's Crisis', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 52(3) 347–378.

In terms of policy advice, this means that the investment in a robust and inclusive political settlement for the north remains critical to address the issue of human smuggling. Given that the conflict's proliferation depends to a substantial degree on the control of, and competition over, illicit trafficking routes, policy makers should continue to invest in mapping out local power dynamics to identify potential partners for action. They should be mindful not to address human smuggling and irregular migration in isolation. Instead, these issues should form part of a larger process of peace negotiations targeting the complex dynamics of criminality, coping and resistance that has taken a hold over the north. Policy makers should also be realistic about the extent to which the Malian state's institutions are capable, and/or legitimate (in the eyes of society) willing partners in the fight against irregular migration. In a situation as complex as Mali, short-term or one-sided technical solutions are doomed to fail.

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