Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali

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Table of Contents

Principal Findings

What's new? Drug trafficking in northern Mali is generating a level of violence that is unparalleled in the sub-region; many of the armed groups in the north rely on the drug trade to finance operations, meet logistical needs and acquire weapons and vehicles.

Why does it matter? Drug traffickers' rivalries obstruct the implementation of the 2015 inter-Malian peace agreement, and contribute to disputes among the groups who signed that deal. Violent interceptions are fuelling the militarised protection of drug convoys that is in turn delaying disarmament.

What should be done? Stamping out drug trafficking is unrealistic in the short term. Instead, Mali and its partners should strengthen control mechanisms ranging from local dialogue to coercive measures, so that stakeholders can agree on how to demilitarise drug trafficking in northern Mali.

Executive Summary

Drug trafficking in northern Mali is generating a level of violence that is unparalleled in the sub-region. The Malian state's inability to bring the area under control has spawned particularly fierce conflicts among traffickers. Weapons circulating after the rebellions of the past two decades have exacerbated the progressive militarisation of trafficking networks, whose rivalries fuel political and inter-communal tensions. Smuggling narcotics is not only a means by which armed groups gain funds but also a source of conflict in itself. Thus far, policies against drug trafficking have proven ineffectual; indeed, it is unrealistic to expect the problem to be eradicated any time soon. But Malian authorities and their international partners could take steps to at least demilitarise trafficking and reduce violence. These include backing regional stability pacts that informally regulate smuggling, redoubling efforts to rid all armed groups who signed the 2015 peace agreement of heavy weaponry, including those working with traffickers, and using coercive measures (notably targeted sanctions) against those who refuse to disarm.

The influx into northern Mali of drugs (hashish in the 1990s, cocaine in the 2000s) has shaken up the local economy. Initially monopolised by Arab tribes, the enormous profits generated by the drug trade have, since the mid-2000s, led to the involvement of other groups. The resulting competition – and the in-flow of arms across the Sahel – has militarised smuggling, with traffickers using heavy arms and militias to protect or intercept convoys. Drug money has caused disputes among communities and upended traditional hierarchies. Conflicts degenerate into protracted feuds because criminal groups increasingly fall back on their communities for support. Unable to prevent or regulate trafficking, the Malian state has for years backed some armed groups against others, with officials seeking to acquire resources and prevent them from falling into rebels' hands – although the government has denied doing this.

The 2012 Malian crisis worsened a situation that had already been deteriorating for a decade. After the rout of state forces from the north, traffickers adapted, forging closer ties to the region's various armed groups, including in some cases jihadists (though the link between jihadism and drug trafficking in the Sahel tends to be overstated). Major traffickers maintain relations with both Malian authorities (who deny any such ties) and political and military groups in the north; indeed, trafficking networks are often embedded in or overlap with those groups, who themselves depend on trafficking to finance their operations and to buy weapons. That said, ties between armed groups and traffickers are not trouble-free: they do not always share the same interests. Rivalries among trafficking networks sometimes provoke confrontations between armed groups that those groups would prefer to avoid.

Drug trafficking remained a side issue during the inter-Malian talks that sought to end the crisis, and which took place first in Ouagadougou in 2013, and then in Algiers in 2014 and 2015. Though discussed behind the scenes, the subject was virtually absent from the June 2015 peace agreement. Subsequent local deals known as Anéfis 1 (October 2015) and Anéfis 2 (October 2017), however, have sought to regulate trafficking. In particular, they have included influential figures involved in trafficking and, by keeping routes open to all transit, have attempted to diminish armed

competition and theft around those routes. The end goal has been to prevent rivalry among traffickers from escalating into fighting among the armed groups that signed the peace agreement. International actors, understandably reluctant to enter into open discussions about regulating trafficking, thus far view these efforts warily.

Actions to combat drug trafficking in northern Mali remain limited and ineffectual. National and international policymakers acknowledge the need to combat the drug trade. But many avoid shouldering responsibility, citing the (often valid) reason that the problem falls outside their remit. On the ground, the fight against trafficking appears to be a lesser priority for international actors than implementing the peace agreement, conducting counter-terrorism operations and combating people smuggling. Their reticence to act against traffickers can also be explained by the complexity of the networks involved and the fear of upsetting business interests, which sometimes reach into the uppermost levels of regional governments. Moreover, for UN peacekeepers who are already under attack from jihadists, picking another fight would bring further danger, particularly given the high number of armed groups involved in trafficking.

The global struggle against the drug trade has known few successes. To be effective, measures should be global and coordinated between countries of production, transit and consumption, whose interests often conflict. Meanwhile, Mali, which like other transit countries is exposed to violent competition over trafficking, needs a strategy based on its own needs and developed with the regional context in mind. Its efforts should focus on curtailing drug trafficking's most destabilising consequences. The Malian government and its foreign partners should seek to demilitarise trafficking in northern Mali as best possible in order to reduce associated bloodshed and facilitate the peace agreement's implementation. They should prioritise three interlinked strategies:

- Encourage local security agreements such as the Anéfis deals, which complement the inter-Malian peace process; replicate such deals elsewhere in the north; and, without condoning trafficking, allow those involved in the agreements to establish non-aggression pacts around transit routes and ensure that any fighting over trafficking does not escalate into clashes between the major armed groups in the north that signed the 2015 peace deal.
- Use security mechanisms put in place by the peace agreement, notably the Technical Commission for Security (Commission technique de sécurité, CTS) set up to help enforce the deal and which now comprises UN and French forces. The aim of the CTS is to reduce the circulation of heavy weapons and regulate the movement of vehicles used to transport such weaponry by all signatory armed groups – including those connected to traffickers – in the north. Already the CTS provides a mechanism that allows UN peacekeepers and French forces to monitor such convoys; stepping up these efforts could accelerate disarmament and thus the demilitarisation of trafficking.
- Adopt coercive measures, including targeted sanctions and the confiscation of heavy weaponry, in order to curb the activities of the most violent drug traffickers, who continue to employ the military resources of signatory groups. The UN Security Council, based on the findings of its panel of experts, can already sanc-

tion those who violate the 2015 peace deal while the security committee established in Mali by the peace agreement can also confiscate heavy weapons from signatory groups' unauthorised military convoys; these mandates could provide sufficient grounds for action against those refusing to demilitarise.

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I. Introduction

On 23 February 2013, French aircraft involved in Operation Serval, launched the previous month, bombarded an armed convoy that was preparing to take the small town of In-Khalil, on Mali's border with Algeria. The bombing mission's motive was the supposed presence of jihadist fighters in the convoy; unofficially, it also aimed to protect elements of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad, MNLA), a separatist group that had occasionally fought alongside the French troops and had just deployed in this border city.[1] Another version of the facts quickly circulated: the targeted elements were in the service of Arab traders who wanted to recover goods looted by Tuareg traffickers and bandits, especially those from the Idnan tribe, with whom they fight for control of the crossing point between Algeria and Mali in the In-Khalil and Bordj Badji Mokhtar (Algeria) region.[2] These traders believed their losses to be several billion CFA francs (several million euros), mainly vehicles, but also, according to sources close to these groups, drug shipments.[3]

During several years, the non-settlement of the In-Khalil episode poisoned relations between armed groups. In particular, it heightened the tensions between the MNLA and the Azawad Arab Movement (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, MAA) – at least its wing close to the Malian state –, provoking localised clashes.[4] This issue came into discussions between the Malian state and armed groups during several international meetings in Nouakchott, Mauritania and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in 2013, at the Algiers peace talks in 2014 and 2015, and at the local mediation initiative of Anéfis (northern Mali) in October 2015. The latter led to a reconciliation agreement between the Idnan and Arab tribes – relating in part to the open conflict

[1] Crisis Group interview, French army officer who participated in Operation Serval, 2016. Formed on 16 October 2011, the MNLA launched the fourth rebellion in Mali's history on 17 January 2012. The MNLA benefited from the return in 2011 of several hundred former Tuareg soldiers who had operated in the ranks of former Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, including Mohamed Najim, who became the movement's chief of staff. Some elements of the MNLA fought alongside French troops in Operation Serval in 2013 for anti-terrorist purposes.

[2] Crisis Group interviews, Arab trader, member of Operation Serval and member of MINUSMA, Bamako, May and October 2013. See also "Mali : des Arabes maliens comptent les dégâts et indexent les Idnanes", maliactu.net, 31 March 2013.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Created in late 2012, the MAA brings together most of the Arab tribes of Timbuktu and Gao and initially called for more autonomy for northern Mali. In 2014, the movement experienced a split between a wing mainly composed of Lamhar Arabs of the Tilemsi, which decided to support the Malian state, and another mainly composed of Berabiche Arabs of Timbuktu but which also includes some Arabs of Gao such as the Mechdouf, who joined forces with the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA), an alliance of rebel groups. Rivalries between traffickers within the original MAA played a role in this split.

between them since the In-Khalil episode. This affair illustrates the links established among politico-military groups, communities and drug traffickers. It also shows that they sometimes play a decisive role in episodes of armed violence.

Northern Mali is not a drug-producing area, nor even the only transit zone in West Africa. The consequences of drug trafficking in the country are unparalleled in the region, however. Since the 2000s, drug trafficking has played a role in the development of unprecedented forms and levels of violence. As the central state weakens and armed insurrections – including jihadists – rise, drug trafficking has become both a central stake and an essential resource for the struggles that are redefining political power relations in the country's north.

Armed violence in this area is often simplified schematically to competition between traffickers, or even the equivocal concept of narco-jihadism, confusing the figures of the jihadist and the drug trafficker, who actually have complex interrelationships. This report analyses how drug trafficking causes armed violence in northern Mali. It studies the specific role of drug trafficking in northern Mali's political economy, including in the development of armed groups, both on the side of the Platform coalition of pro-government groups and of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) alliance of rebel groups.[5] The report's recommendations are not intended to put an end to trafficking – an unrealistic objective in the short term – but, by calling for a review of the hierarchy of priorities, to suggest concrete avenues for curbing violence related to drug trafficking and therefore to mitigate its most harmful effects.

This report is based on several dozen interviews in Mali and Niger with members of all the armed groups who were signatories of the Inter-Malian peace agreement of June 2015, as well as diplomats, economic actors in northern Mali, Malian and international security officials, and community leaders. Most interviews were conducted in Bamako or Niamey in March, April or May 2018. Some were conducted in northern Mali and in the Gao region at the time of the peace agreement's signing and the Anéfis agreement in 2015. A few interviews took place in Mauritania.

Extreme caution is required in the collection and processing of data on criminal networks and their links with politico-military groups. This report does not study all forms of trafficking and trading in northern Mali. It focuses on drug trafficking because of the large number of actors involved in it (unlike arms trafficking), the very specific links between drug trafficking and armed violence in this region (much more, for example, than smuggling of migrants, which involves other actors) and, lastly, its influence on political power relations in Mali (especially in peace negotiations and then in implementation of the 2015 agreement).

[5] The Algiers Platform of Movements of June 14, 2014 (Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger) is an alliance of Malian pro-governmental armed groups, the main ones being the Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (Groupe autodéfense Imghad et alliés, GATIA), a branch of the MAA, and a branch of the Coordination of Resistance Movements and Patriotic Forces (Coordination des mouvements et Forces patriotiques de résistance, CM-FPR). The Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) is an alliance of rebel groups formed in October 2014, consisting mainly of the High Council for the Unity of Azawad, (Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad, HCUA), the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad, MNLA), a branch of the MAA and a branch of the CM-FPR.

II. Increasingly Competitive and Militarised Trafficking in Northern Mali

Thousands of years old, trans-Saharan trade is not a static economy. Trafficking, which has developed since the 1960s with the emergence of nation-states and borders, has undergone several phases. The illicit circulation of subsidised products from Algeria has long been central to the survival of northern Malian society. From the 1990s and especially the 2000s, circulation of new products that are both illegal and have high added value, including arms and drugs, has opened a new phase, characterised by progressive militarisation. The image of the cunning small-time smuggler playing games with customs officers, in vogue in the 1970s and 1980s, has been replaced by that of the drug trafficker at the head of criminal networks or even private armies who protect the convoys and their cargoes. This relatively recent militarisation of a portion of the economy has very significant consequences for political relations in northern Mali.

A. *The Development of Drug Trafficking: Between Disruption and Continuity*

Trans-Saharan trade has long depended on an economy of protection essential for crossing the Sahara. The caravan trade aroused the lust of armed actors who regularly engaged in razzias (or *rezzous*), forcing traders to hire guards for their merchandise (slaves, cattle, grains, salt).[6] These razzias, which occurred everywhere in the Sahel-Sahara belt were especially widespread in the mid-nineteenth century, in part because of the arrival in the Sahara of weapons from Europe. The French colonial administration steadily reduced these predations but never completely put an end to them.[7] The ancient practice of *rezzous* in Aïr (Niger) and Adagh (current region of Kidal, Mali) as well as the development of the goumiers, a sort of police force charged by the colonial forces to counter the *rezzous,* has left indelible marks on the collective imagination.[8] The rapid and violent interceptions of shipments that are now common constitute in some respects a new form of *rezzous*.

But the criminal economy that prevails in northern Mali today only partly reflects these ancient forms of predation. Since the end of the 1990s, cannabis (hashish) resin, then cocaine, have given a new dimension to this economy: in equal quantities, cocaine is 25 times more profitable than hashish, which itself is twelve times more profitable than cigarettes.[9] The circulation of hashish in the Sahel is explained by the rise in Moroccan production in the early 1990s and by the fact that direct routes to

[6] The term razzia comes from the Arabic word *ghazi* which refers to a warrior expedition, and more precisely the Algerian Arabic variant of the word, *ghaziya*.
[7] Julien Brachet, "Le négoce caravanier au Sahara central : histoire, évolution des pratiques et enjeux chez les Touaregs Kel Aïr (Niger)", *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, vol. 57, April-September 2004.
[8] Gerd Spittler, *Les Touaregs face aux sécheresses et aux famines : les Kel Ewey de l'Aïr (Niger)* (Paris, 1993); Pierre Boiley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes : du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris, 1999).
[9] Profits have been calculated in equivalent quantities on the basis of the sale price prevalent in the Algeria-Mauritania-Mali border area and Kidal. Crisis Group email correspondence, economic actor in Kidal, July 2018.

Europe, more closely monitored, have become riskier.[10] In the early 2000s, some traffickers specialised in the cocaine industry, which enjoyed a golden age between 2006 and 2009. In November 2009, a Boeing from Latin America filled with cocaine landed in Tarkint (Gao region), bringing this traffic to light.[11] Since the end of the 2000s, other products have appeared, mainly intended for local consumption, such as methamphetamines and pharmaceuticals (tramadol, rivotril) being sold as narcotics.[12]

Estimates of the volume of drugs passing through northern Mali are poor, as they are based mainly on seizures, which are very rare in the Sahel-Sahara belt. Worldwide, the trend is toward increased production of cocaine and hashish, driven by continuously growing demand, notably in Europea.[13] In 2018, only 5 per cent of the cocaine produced in Latin America passed through West Africa, according to UN estimates.[14] But the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) finds that nearly one third of Moroccan production of hashish, about 300 tonnes, passed through the Sahel in 2010, most likely a very large portion via northern Mali.[15] Since then, the proportion of Moroccan hashish passing through the Sahel has likely increased, due to heightened policing of the maritime route between Morocco and Spain.

Drugs passing through northern Mali follow relatively stable regional axes, although the routes may be adjusted. All the hashish comes from Morocco and reaches Libya and Chad, and then Egypt, via Niger or the south of Algeria; cocaine leaves West African ports to reach those of the Maghreb.[16] The locality of In-Khalil, located a few kilometres from the Algerian locality of Bordj Badji Mokhtar, was the main hub in the 2000s for drug and arms trafficking in northern Mali.[17] The state's disengagement in 2012 contributed to the diversification of the routes in the north and created or stimulated the emergence of new hubs such as Tabankort (Tilemsi Valley in the north of the Gao region), Ber or Lerneb (to the east and west of Timbuktu, respectively). Routes taken between these hubs vary depending on the security situa-

[10] Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Production de cannabis et de haschich au Maroc : contexte et enjeux", *L'Espace politique,* vol. 4, 2008.

[11] "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa", UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), February 2013. Despite political pressure aiming to stifle this matter, media and diplomatic pressure led to the arrest and incarceration in 2010 of Mohamed Ould Aweinat, a trader of the Mechdouf tribe stemming from Tilemsi. He was released in early 2012 in exchange for the mobilisation of part of the Arab community against the rebellion led by the MNLA.

[12] "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa", op. cit.

[13] After falling 70 per cent between 2000 and 2013, global production of cocaine has tripled since 2013. Morocco remains the world's largest producer of hashish. "World Drug Report 2018", UNODC, 2018.

[14] "World Drug Report 2018", op. cit.

[15] Jean-Luc Peduzzi, "Physionomie et enjeux des trafics dans la bande sahélo-saharienne", Note from IFRI, January 2010.

[16] Flows of Indian hemp produced in Ghana and Nigeria pass through southern Mali to reach Senegal, but these flows do not yet pass through northern Mali.

[17] In-Khalil came out of the sand in the early 2000s as a result of a surge in smuggling of subsidised Algerian products. The prices of basic necessities in northern Mali are often lower than in the south, where goods generally come from West African ports. See Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara* (Cambridge, 2012); Sami Bensassi, Anne Brockmeyer, Mathieu Pellerin and Gaël Raballand, "Algeria-Mali Trade: The Normality of Informality", *Middle East Development Journal*, vol. 9, 2017.

tion and the pressure exerted by the states of the sub-region and international actors.[18] A senior Malian army officer said: "In the desert, everywhere is a route … but some are safer than others".[19]

The sociology of actors has also become more complex since the mid-2000s. Traditionally, Arab tribes, notably the Lamhar of Tilemsi (Gao region) and the Berabiche (mainly in Timbuktu and Taoudénit) have held a quasi-monopoly on drug trafficking. They employed men from other groups as guards and couriers but retained control of the flow of goods. The revenue generated by drugs has encouraged an increasing number of individuals to specialise either in the capture or the protection of convoys. Drug trafficking, especially that of hashish, was relatively "democratised" by the end of the 2000s, involving new actors from the main communities of northern Mali. Although they are still among the only ones who own drug shipments, Lamhar and Berabiche traffickers now share the market with many other actors.[20]

B. *Drug Trafficking and Armed Violence*

In order to develop, drug trafficking needs a state that is indifferent, complicit or incapable. It can nonetheless suffer in the total absence of the state and the disorder that generates. The inability of Malian security forces to control vast desert territories, unlike in Mauritania and especially in Algeria, has fostered the development of more independent and competing trafficking networks. In northern Mali, traffickers have to protect their cargoes from intercepts. With significant financial resources, they rely on private security firms that generally use pickup trucks equipped with heavy machine guns (often 12.7mm or 14.5mm in calibre).

Securing routes between the different drug trafficking hubs generates significant economic activity. Rebel fighters bring to the trafficking networks the military know-how they need. Although the channels are often run by traders, those who provide transport and convoy security have the profile of fighters. In the absence of a successful disarmament process, the weapons used in the last two rebellions in Mali (1990-1996; 2006-2009) continue to circulate. The 2011 Libyan crisis amplified this dynamic with the return to northern Mali of several hundred Tuareg fighters formerly under the orders of the late Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. For these men, whose main capital is handling weapons, joining the drug trafficking economy (conveying or intercepting) is attractive.[21]

[18] It is common for supplies to be interrupted for several months, especially of Moroccan hashish. Thus, between November 2017 and April 2018, very few shipments of hashish from Morocco passed through Mali. This may be due to strengthened security measures in border countries or the arrest of a key player. Crisis Group interview, member of an armed group that was a signatory to the peace agreement of June 2015, Bamako, April 2018. After the arrest in 2010 of Bubo Na Tchuto, vice-admiral of the Guinea Bissau navy, by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the supply of cocaine to Malian partners was reportedly interrupted for several months. Crisis Group interview, economic player from Gao, Niamey, June 2015.

[19] Crisis Group interview, Bamako, May 2016.

[20] On the eve of the crisis in 2012, Idnan Tuaregs, to this point responsible for transporting convoys of the Lamhar Arabs, attempted and partially succeeded in taking control of the drug flows in the In-Khalil region. Crisis Group interview, Lamhar trader, Bamako, May 2015.

[21] Some of them were already involved in various trafficking activities while living in Libya.

In the Sahel as elsewhere, the level of violence generated by drug trafficking fluctuates according to the products, places and times. In northern Mali a variety of factors – the Malian state's weakness in the north, the circulation of weapons in the wake of the 1990s Arab-Tuareg rebellions, the competitive nature of the market accentuated by the interplay of rivalries between tribes – have combined to feed an unprecedented militarisation of this trafficking. The case of In-Khalil is symptomatic: beyond the state's control, this drug trafficking hub has gradually aroused a rivalry between several community-based networks, which affiliated with armed groups during the 2012 rebellion and confronted one another. To impose themselves on the drug market or to protect the convoys, traffickers began a process of steady militarisation that the Malian state could not contain. Indeed, though the authorities deny it, they stimulated this process by supporting some traffickers against others.[22]

C. *Trafficking and Communities*

Although the settling of scores between traffickers does not directly affect civilians, drug trafficking has a significant effect on the local balance of power, particularly on relations between communities. Major traffickers and bandits have acquired local and even national influence, and have invested in their communities to build a "clientèle". They have thus become "local notables", while remaining controversial figures.[23]

Many traffickers have acquired the status of "social bandits", taking on rival tribes but redistributing part of their earnings to their relatives, reproducing practices similar to the old razzias.[24] In Kidal, for example, a leading trafficker has invested heavily in his village of origin (building a dam, digging a well and buying generators) and takes charge of his community's health care. Some may even finance religious festivals or mosque construction.[25] They are symbols of economic and social success in northern Mali, despite the moral disapproval that sometimes surrounds their criminal activity.[26]

Most traditional and religious authorities have condemned the circulation of drugs as *haram* (forbidden by the precepts of Islam). This may have held back some pious tribes, such as the Kel Ansar or Kel Essouk Tuareg, from participating in traf-

[22] Crisis Group interview, senior official of the Ministry of Internal Security and Civil Protection, Bamako, October 2015.

[23] Not all drug traffickers adopt the same strategy. Some prefer to stay in the shadows while others have sought to obtain positions as mayors, deputies or chiefs of tribal factions. Judith Scheele has noted the complex relationship that traffickers have with their communities, emphasising that some tended to emancipate themselves by building their personal networks on a personal rather than tribal basis. Judith Scheele, "Tribes, States and Smuggling: The Border between Algeria and Mali", *Etudes rurales*, vol. 184, 2009. This analysis is fair but the stiffer opposition between communities since the beginning of the 2012 crisis has led drug traffickers, like other political actors, to withdraw to their communities of origin.

[24] Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959). See also Spittler, *Les Touaregs face aux sécheresses et aux famines*, op. cit.

[25] Crisis Group interviews, community actors from northern Mali, Bamako, 2012-2018.

[26] "It is said that any marriage concluded with drug money will remain necessarily sterile and is hardly better than prostitution". Scheele, "Tribes, States and Smuggling: The Border between Algeria and Mali", op. cit.

ficking.[27] But others have overlooked these prescriptions taken part in this lucrative activity. Drug trafficking has gradually become a major source of jobs and redistribution of wealth within families and tribal factions.[28]

While drug trafficking is giving rise to new economic elites, some former notables are also tempted by the promise of drug money. Certain traditional leaders have encouraged their young relatives to engage in trafficking, or at least tolerated their involvement, as a way of consolidating their position. For example, in the Kidal region, young people of the Kounta or Ifogha tribes, who enjoy much political and religious prestige, have engaged in trafficking or predation for the more or less direct benefit of their elders.

The emergence of major traffickers has altered the sociology of northern Mali elites. It has intensified a process of tribal splitting that started with the 1993 policy of decentralisation and has proved corrosive for "traditional" forms of authority.[29] Those who succeed in drugs use their financial resources to consolidate their territorial base and some create their own tribal faction.[30] This dynamic is particularly common in the Timbuktu region. The Oulad Ehich and Oulad Oumrane, two factions of the Berabiche Arab tribe, each composed of two sub-factions in 1994, today count eighteen and fifteen, respectively.[31] While drug trafficking does not on its own explain the trend toward tribal "splitting" (and sometimes the creation of new administrative districts, called "circles"), it is one driver, since the enrichment of new actors pushes them to empower themselves and demand control of the circles. Tribal leaders' authority erodes, thus weakening the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Rivalries between traffickers, who organise their networks partly along lines of family and tribal solidarity, sometimes descend into open conflict. For instance, the conflict between the two Arab tribes of the Tilemsi valley, the Mechdouf and the Lamhar, is directly linked to rivalries between a few major traffickers. Allies until 2005, especially against the Arabs of the Kounta tribe, the Mechdouf and the Lamhar parted ways over a dispute between networks of traffickers, aggravated by the political influence acquired by the Mechdouf under President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2007.[32] This rivalry turned into armed conflict during the 2012 rebellion, helping the split of the Azawad Arab Movement (MAA) into two branches in 2014, one of which joined the Platform coalition and the other the CMA.

Competition between drug traffickers from different communities exacerbates pre-existing tensions, particularly between "noble" and "vassal" tribes.[33] The ten-

[27] Ibid.

[28] A faction, in a nomadic area, is a grouping of families, usually from one or more villages in a commune and belonging to a tribe. A tribe is therefore composed of several factions.

[29] Law 93-008/PM-RM of 11 February 1993 determines the conditions for free administration of territorial authorities.

[30] The creation of a tribal faction is subject to deliberation by the municipal council before being approved by the prefecture.

[31] Crisis Group interviews, members of the Azawad Arab Movement (MAA), Bamako, April 2018.

[32] Crisis Group interviews, Arabs from Tilemsi, Bamako, April 2018.

[33] These rivalries have as their common substratum social relations built historically on supposed statutory domination of the latter by the former. The Kel Adagh Tuareg, from the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century, paid a tax to the Ouillimiden Kel Ataram, who then

sions between the Kounta and "vassal" Arab tribes degenerated into open conflict in 1999 and again after 2002.[34] Similarly, recurrent conflicts between the Ifogha and Imrad were accentuated from the mid-1990s, in parallel with the decentralisation process and the organisation of the first local elections.[35] Due to the development of smuggling, then of drug trafficking, the "vassal" tribes have strengthened themselves commercially, militarily and politically to emancipate themselves from their former overlords.[36]

These struggles between tribes – or those who claim to represent them – are both political and economic: the revenue generated by trafficking has become important because it allows each tribe to finance its own fighting apparatus while weakening that of its enemy tribe.[37] The tensions between the Tuareg of the Idnan tribe and Arabs of the Lamhar tribe, accentuated by the 2007 legislative elections, are also due to rivalries for territory between trafficking networks from these two tribes in the Kidal region.

D. *Traffickers between the State and the Rebels*

Drug trafficking disrupts local community dynamics and also interferes with local and national political dynamics. Indeed, the resources generated by trafficking are now a valuable, if not essential, asset to go into politics in northern Mali. Control of trafficking has therefore become important for those who wish to assert privileged links with the state or, conversely, to rebel against it. The trafficking economy, community affiliations and state interests are thus intertwined.

The major traffickers become political entrepreneurs whose influence is palpable in electoral campaigns in northern Mali. Some are embarking on political careers, running in local or legislative elections. Others prefer to remain in the shadows and finance the electoral campaigns of their protégés or relatives. Access to political power is a source of both direct enrichment (access to public procurement) and political benefits: notably parliamentary immunity, diplomatic passports, access to the highest state institutions and access to public contracts.[38] These national political

dominated the Adagh. See Georg Klute, "Hostilités et alliances. Archéologie de la dissidence des Touaregs au Mali", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 137, 1995.

[34] Scheele, "Tribes, States, and Smuggling: The Border between Algeria and Mali", op. cit. The Kounta are an Arab tribe with great social and religious prestige. Most of the other Arab tribes of the Gao and Kidal regions were historically their tributaries.

[35] The rebellion of 1990 led to the splitting of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement populaire de libération de l'Azawad, MPLA), dominated by the Ifogha, and creation of the Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of the Azawad (Armée révolutionnaire de libération de l'Azawad, ARLA), mainly Imrad. See Boiley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*, op. cit., pp. 513-517.

[36] This reversal of social orders is not unique to Mali. It is found in other contexts marked by the development of drug trafficking, such as in Colombia. Diana Villegas, "Le pouvoir de la mafia colombienne des années 1980 et 1990", *Pouvoirs*, vol. 132, 2010.

[37] For example, in January 2010, the interception by the Ifogha and the Kounta of cocaine being transported by the Lamhar and Imrad prompted the Lamhar to kidnap the Kounta chief in the Gao region. See Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 September 2012.

[38] Crisis Group interviews, actors involved in drug trafficking, Bamako, Nouakchott, Niamey, 2013-2018.

networks are essential guarantees of influence as well as protection of trafficking activities. They are coupled with political support at the highest level in the sub-region.

Traffickers are also connected to the state administrations through their investments in the legal economy (transport, construction and real estate sectors), aiming to diversify their activities and launder their money. This economic penetration occurs in Mali, but also and especially across the wider region (mainly in Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Algeria).[39]

This politico-economic influence lets traffickers progressively impose themselves as indispensable political actors at different levels of a state open to such relations. Anxious to control the north, the Malian state has since the 1990s forged alliances with tribes considered to be "loyalist".[40] The new element from the 2000s is the presence of major drug traffickers among the Tuareg and Arab tribes on which the state relies. By allowing these actors to form armed militias in 2008, the state intended to find local supporters to fight the rebellion of Ibrahim ag Bahanga.[41] For their part, the militia leaders were primarily interested in regaining control of the trafficking routes.[42]

At the same time, drug traffickers also made connections to rebel groups. In 2006, as a new Tuareg rebellion was emerging, the main rebel movement, the Democratic Alliance for Change (ADC), solicited the few active trafficking networks in the Kidal region to participate in the war effort.[43] The latter were pressed to choose a camp, which helped militarise the networks, in particular to deal with the increasingly frequent interception of convoys.[44]

[39] A prominent Lamhar trafficker from Mali has the reputation of having direct access to the presidents of neighbouring countries and of travelling regularly to regional capitals aboard his private plane. Crisis Group interview, security officer, Niamey, December 2017.

[40] This policy of community preference had already sharpened tensions between the Ifogha and Imrad in 1994. The MPLA of Iyad ag Ghali (dominated by the Ifogha) had then reportedly served as a paramilitary force of the Malian army to counter the movements that had not signed the Tamanrasset agreements in 1991, including the Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of the Azawad (ARLA) led by Elhadji Gamou (dominated by the Imrad).

[41] After the signing of the Algiers agreement in 2007, Ibrahim ag Bahanga continued the rebellion launched by the Democratic Alliance for Change (Alliance démocratique pour le changement, ADC) in 2006. He was at the head of the National Alliance of the Tuareg of Mali (Alliance nationale des Touareg du Mali, ANTM) until his death in August 2011.

[42] Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region", op. cit. See "Prominent Tuareg's View of Arab Militias, Rebellion and AQIM", U.S. embassy Bamako cable, 18 March 2009, as made public by WikiLeaks.

[43] Crisis Group interviews, leaders and members of armed groups of the Kidal region, Bamako, 2013-2018. See also Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region", op. cit.

[44] The traffickers of the Ifogha and Kounta tribes intercepted each other's convoys, as did the Berabiche Arabs and traffickers from Kidal (the Idnan, Ifergoumessen and Taghat Malet factions, among others). Crisis Group interviews, Berabiche and Tuareg leaders, Nouakchott, July 2012. See "Tuaregs and Arabs clash over drugs and cash in northern Mali", U.S. embassy Bamako cable, 31 August 2007, as made public by WikiLeaks.

III. Trafficking at the Heart of the Malian Crisis

In northern Mali, trafficking, community conflicts and state interests intertwined in the mid-2000s. But with the 2012 crisis, these links took on a new dimension. Trafficking networks, organised partly on a community basis, infiltrated the 2012 rebellion more thoroughly than previous insurrections. The traffickers used their links with armed groups to continue or even develop their activities. The 2012 rebellion does not come down to the involvement of drug traffickers, however.

A. *In 2012, a Weakened Link between Drug Traffickers and the State*

In early 2012, the central state and its representatives precipitously evacuated the north of the country while a flexible coalition of armed groups seized the area. The separatist MNLA was gradually supplanted by jihadist groups. By June, three of these groups had taken control of the three main northern cities: the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) of Gao, Ansar Dine of Kidal and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) of Timbuktu. The state's debacle was such that the trafficking networks not only had to deal with the region's new "strongmen", as in 2006, but also to get closer to them.

The allegiances varied. At Kidal, from late 2011, many traffickers supported or even joined the MNLA, as they had supported the rebel movement of Ibrahim ag Bahanga in 2006. In addition, several tribes in the region changed sides to join the separatist movement, and the traffickers from these communities were required to support it. Imrad Tuareg and Berabiche Arab paramilitary groups, some of whom had integrated into the Malian armed forces, remained generally loyal to the state. Threatened by the emergence of the separatist groups, they fought the rebellion at early 2012 but ended up withdrawing, like the state.[45] For their part, the Lamhar Arab traffickers, who had seen their influence with the Malian presidency decrease after the 2007 legislative elections, opportunely drew closer to the MNLA at the end of 2011, then allied with the MUJWA in Gao in the first months of 2012.[46]

Alliance choices sometimes caused division among drug traffickers and communities. Confronted with the state's sudden withdrawal, Berabiche traffickers hesitated: should they maintain an alliance with a central authority that had made significant concessions to them (including the creation by then-President Amadou Toumani Touré of the strong Arab majority region of Taoudénit)? Or should they lean toward the rebels, who may sustainably control the northern routes? To cope with the uncertainties associated with the crisis, families or groups sometimes assigned different members to retain ties with both of the opposing camps.

[45] Largely isolated, the Imrad component, led by Colonel Elhadji Gamou, took refuge in Niger in April 2012 in order to reorganise, while waiting for the Malian state to be able to support them again. The Nigerien authorities welcomed these elements, considered as loyalists and that included Malian military personnel, after having officially disarmed them at the Niger-Mali border, then confined them in the outskirts of Niamey. Crisis Group Whatsapp interview, Niger army officer, 28 July 2018.

[46] Crisis Group interviews, members of the Arab community of Tilemsi, Bamako, March and April 2018.

During the 2012 crisis, the traffickers' links with the state were no longer essential to protect their affairs as the latter had lost control of the northern part of the country. But drug traffickers and the state did not completely split up. Some traffickers still have real estate in Bamako, where parts of their families and businesses are located, although most of their profits are invested in Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania or Algeria.[47] They have maintained relations with the Malian authorities, while their minimal use of banks has protected them somewhat from political or fiscal pressure.[48] Only the drug traffickers from Kidal may have broken all connection with the authorities.[49]

With the gradual return of the state to the north, the drug trafficking networks resumed playing power games around appointments to key positions in the customs service, national police and army, confirming that they wish to maintain links with the state.[50] The Malian authorities readily acknowledge the closeness between certain politicians and drug traffickers at the time of former President Touré but emphasise that these links were broken under the current president.[51]

B. *Traffickers and Jihadists: Complex Relationships*

The supposed alliance between drug traffickers and jihadists, summed up in the term "narco-terrorism", gives rise to many fantasies.[52] Up until 2012, the links were limited, and jihadists such as the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who has held high positions in AQIM in northern Mali, was probably never involved in drug trafficking, contrary to the received wisdom.[53] If links exist, they have to be the subject of a more detailed analysis.

In 2012, traffickers and jihadists learned to put up with each other, understanding that conflict would not serve their immediate interests, and even that cooperation could be beneficial. This rapprochement of circumstance is a priori unnatural from the point of view of religious dogma. Several elements suggest that jihadists are disapproving of or even hostile toward drug traffickers.[54] While they occupied the main

[47] Crisis Group interviews, actors close to the drug trafficking circles, March-April 2018.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Some army officers stationed in Gao and Timbuktu serve as relays with the south of the country, where certain goods come from. One of them was recently killed in Timbuktu in a settling of scores. Crisis Group interviews, MAA and MNLA members, Bamako, March-April 2018.
[51] Crisis Group interview, senior official of the Ministry of Internal Security and Civilian Protection, Bamako, October 2015.
[52] Wolfram Lacher, "Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel", West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD), July 2013; Mathieu Pellerin, "Narcoterrorism: Beyond the Myth", in "Re-mapping the Sahel: Transnational Security Challenges and International Responses", European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), June 2014.
[53] Mokhtar Belmokhtar has often been presented as a cigarette smuggler, earning him the nickname of "Mister Marlboro". But according to journalist Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, who has investigated Belmokhtar's activities in depth, he was never involved in cigarette and even less in narcotics smuggling. Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara : Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris, 2014).
[54] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) reportedly issues *fatwas* against drug trafficking in the mid-2000s and Ansar Dine in 2012, but Crisis Group has not been able to confirm this.

northern cities in 2012, the jihadists reportedly burned cargoes of cigarettes and hashish in Gao and In-Khalil.[55] But beyond one-off condemnations, none of the three jihadist movements present in the area – AQIM, Ansar Dine and the MUJWA – displayed opposition to drug trafficking, and none seem to have waged an active and sustained fight against it, either before or after 2012.

In Gao, the MUJWA and the Arabs of Tilemsi, who are key actors in drug trafficking, have maintained close links. Although certain Arabs have committed themselves to the MUJWA for ideological reasons, the majority of Lamhar operators have supported the movement (with donations of vehicles and fuel, especially) in order to pursue their commercial activities and protect themselves from the MNLA – in particular its Idnan component, rivals of the Lamhars in trafficking – with whom they were in open conflict until Gao's capture in June 2012.[56]

Paradoxically, the launch of Operation Serval in early 2013 may have favoured a rapprochement between some jihadist groups and certain traffickers. The military pressure exerted against the jihadists pushed them to seek the support of the traffickers. Solidarity seemingly arose as soon as Operation Serval was triggered: some traffickers who shared a tribal affiliation with AQIM and Ansar Dine fighters reportedly offered logistical support to help them escape the French strikes.[57] In Kidal, the hostility that Ansar Dine showed toward certain traffickers in 2012 declined in 2013, when the movement went into hiding.[58] In addition, the drying-up of ransom money encouraged jihadist groups to show greater tolerance of trafficking. Letting some of the fighters pursue their trafficking activities made it possible not to pay them.

Finally, the local roots of jihadist groups and the growing influence within them of Arab-Tuareg leaders from northern Mali – particularly in the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), a coalition of jihadist groups based in northern Mali formed in March 2017 – seem to influence the way in which these groups position themselves with respect to drug trafficking. Indeed, the Malian fighters who make up the majority of the GSIM's contingents and are not committed on a solely religious basis sometimes retain their past relations and interest in drug trafficking.[59]

There is no evidence that the main GSIM leaders, including Emir Iyad ag Ghali, are directly involved in drug trafficking. Some sources, however, refer to the partici-

[55] Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian actors working in the north, MAA and MNLA members, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[56] Crisis Group interviews, Arabs of Tilemsi, Bamako, March and April 2018. After the MNLA refused to ally with Ansar Dine in the spring of 2012, the MUJWA and AQIM attacked the MNLA, headquartered in the Gao governorate. On 26 June 2012, a coalition of the MUJWA supported by the Lamhar and the Songhaï dislodged the MNLA from the governorate, injuring its secretary-general, Bilal ag Cherif.

[57] Crisis Group interviews, members of armed groups originally from Kidal, Bamako and Niamey, 2016-2018.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Crisis Group interviews, armed groups from Kidal, Niamey and Bamako, March and April 2018. For more information on the religious foundations, see Mathieu Pellerin, "Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel", IFRI, February 2017; see also "Si les victimes deviennent bourreaux", International Alert, June 2018.

pation of members of secondary circles and close relatives of the group's leaders.[60] Trafficking networks within or around the GSIM and/or jihadist groups who participated in its creation have probably become more important in recent years. This is hardly surprising in a region where the fluidity of allegiances leads individuals to switch from the separatist cause to jihad and then to the drug trade (or in the opposite direction). There are no clearly defined boundaries between these different activities.

C. *Traffickers: Resources and Constraints for the Armed Group Signatories of the Peace Agreement*

Drug trafficking is probably one of the main sources of income for the armed groups who are members of the CMA and the Platform coalition.[61] It is an activity that is not only sought after but also dangerous to leave to the adversary. Several politico-military groups have therefore developed links with drug traffickers both to benefit from the dividends of drugs and to deprive their rivals of them.[62] A Platform coalition senior official acknowledged that "if they are not allowed to carry on with their traffic, they may create their own group or join the CMA".[63] The less well-armed groups are also those who appear to be less involved in drug trafficking, such as the Coordination of Resistance Movements and Patriotic Forces (CM-FPR).

In addition to their financial contributions, traffickers provide material support to the military operations, supplying or lending fuel, ammunition and, especially, vehicles.[64] They provide it all the more willingly that they have a personal interest, whose nature varies. When tensions between the two wings of the Arab Azawad Movement were at their climax between 2013 and 2015, an important Arab trader from Tilemsi reportedly supported the CMA's war effort against the Lamhar drug traffickers of the MAA with whom he was in conflict.[65] Several sources indicate that another major drug trafficker, initially without affiliation, joined the Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA), a member of the Platform coalition, after his brother died fighting the CMA in Ménaka, in the east, in 2015.[66]

[60] Crisis Group interviews, members of armed groups that were signatories to the peace agreement of June 2015 and international officials, Bamako and Niamey, April and May 2018. Crisis Group email correspondence, members of armed groups in Gao and Kidal, May and June 2018.

[61] The financing of armed groups is a complex question that is difficult to analyse with precision. Many seek financial and/or material support from communities of the areas they occupy or from communities they are close to. The tribal contribution reportedly is common within the various branches of the MAA, and occasional for the HCUA, the Congress for Justice in Azawad (Congrès pour la justice dans l'Azawad, CJA), the GATIA or the MNLA. Those who have significant financial resources, particularly traffickers, are expected to make important contributions. Crisis Group interviews, members of armed groups from Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, Niamey and Bamako, March and April 2018.

[62] In 2015, Crisis Group quoted the secretary-general of an armed group: "If you don't take hold of the drug, it will end up killing you". Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°115, *Mali: Peace from Below?*, 14 December 2015, p. 6.

[63] Crisis Group interview, Bamako, March 2018.

[64] The traffickers can then be reimbursed for the logistical support. Crisis Group interviews, MNLA, MAA, HCUA and GATIA members, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[65] Crisis Group interview, MAA member, Bamako, March 2018.

[66] Crisis Group interviews, MNLA, MAA, HCUA and GATIA members, Bamako, March-April 2018.

But traffickers are also a constraint for the armed groups, because their interests do not always coincide. They may be reluctant to contribute to or provide assistance for a specific operation.[67] A CMA leader explains: "Sometimes you need to mobilise vehicles to make war, but they belong to a trafficker who uses them to secure a convoy; it is a problem".[68] Fighters of groups such as the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad, HCUA), the GATIA and the MNLA, who generally are unpaid, sometimes seek to intercept drug traffickers' convoys or to move drugs themselves. When they succeed, they can provide more resources to their movement but they are also tempted to put their own commercial interests first.[69] Some even desert the battlefield to take refuge in Algeria or Mauritania.[70] Just before fighting the Platform coalition in 2017, the CMA had to remobilise traffickers who had disengaged from the movement by pointing out that in the event of defeat they would all lose access to the city of Kidal – where some of their families live.[71]

Finally, rivalry between traffickers can undermine the internal cohesion of armed movements. Indeed, the "democratisation" of access to trafficking can sometimes lead to tensions and settling of scores within a single movement. When Ménaka fell in May 2015, a shipment of drugs escorted by actors close to the MNLA (member of the CMA) was intercepted by members of another tribal group also affiliated with the MNLA.[72] In March 2018, the convoy of a major trafficker affiliated with the MNLA was intercepted by another actor affiliated with the same group.[73] Tensions may also arise within a tribe. In late 2016, two networks of traffickers from an Ifoghat faction of Tamesna (east of the Kidal region), affiliated with the same movement, came into conflict over a drug shipment.[74]

In northern Mali, armed groups have not been built around the interests of drug traffickers, but trafficking is one of the main resources that enables them to achieve their political goals or to defend themselves against armed rivals. In conflict situations, relations with the drug traffickers are therefore essential for the armed groups. On the other hand, as the political situation stabilises in northern Mali, these links could wither away.

[67] During a meeting of Arab tribes as part of the organisation of the MAA in 2013, it was decided that the seven wealthiest economic operators present at the meeting would contribute FCFA3 million per month (4,585 euros). From the third month, these operators decided not to honour their commitment any longer after observing that the checkpoint established at Ber allowed the group to collect enough revenue. Crisis Group interviews, MAA members, Bamako, April 2018.

[68] Crisis Group interview, Bamako, March 2018.

[69] This hardly happens in the different MAA branches, partly because they pay their fighters. Crisis Group interviews, leaders of the CMA and the Platform coalition, Bamako, March 2018.

[70] Crisis Group interviews, members of the CMA and Platform coalition, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[71] Crisis Group interview, CMA member, Bamako, March 2018.

[72] Crisis Group interviews, MNLA, MAA, HCUA and GATIA members, Bamako, March and April 2018.

[73] Crisis Group interview, MNLA member, Bamako, March 2018.

[74] Crisis Group interview, member of an armed group based in Kidal, Niamey, May 2018.

D. *Trafficking: The Cause of Clashes between Armed Groups?*

Most of the international actors involved in Mali know that trafficking finances most of the armed groups. Some also believe that rivalries between traffickers lie behind many of the military clashes in the north of the country. The reality is more nuanced.[75] The competition for control of trafficking explains certain episodes of violence but is not the only reason for clashes between armed groups. It comes on top of other factors relating to diverging political (and often community) interests.

Some of the clashes that occurred between 2013 and 2015 were aimed at control of trading hubs such as In-Khalil, Tabankort, Ber and Lerneb, which reportedly have also served as temporary warehouses for the drug trade.[76] These battles reinforced the idea that armed conflict was mainly motivated by drug trafficking interests. In addition, rumour has attributed to the military leaders of some of the main armed movements (or their relatives) a leading role in drug trafficking.[77]

In May 2015, the Platform coalition, supported by the Malian army, took over the city of Ménaka, in violation of a ceasefire signed in February. Taking Ménaka, a historical bastion of rebellions, like Kidal, represented a political victory for the state and the Platform coalition. A few weeks later, in June 2015, the inter-Malian peace agreement was signed, containing a provision to make this city the capital of a new region.

At the same time, the capture of Ménaka was also of interest to traffickers related to the Platform coalition, who saw it as a useful support point to avoid the Kidal region, under the control of the CMA Ifogha. The offensive in Ménaka also coincided with the presence in the city of a truck carrying a large shipment of hashish escorted by actors affiliated with the CMA and coveted by members of the Platform coalition.[78] The traffickers' interests were closely intertwined with political considerations, and the presence of a truckload of drugs probably facilitated mobilisation of the Platform coalition's fighters, motivated by potential gains. The leading traffickers may be influential in the armed groups who signed the peace agreement, but they rarely hold high-ranking positions. The interests of these traffickers and these groups' leaders may sometimes converge but not systematically.

Indeed, a situation that is too chaotic may harm traffickers' interests, with insecurity hindering the passage of convoys. During phases of conflict between armed

[75] Crisis Group interviews, members of the MINUSMA, Bamako, March 2017 and April 2018.
[76] The battle of In-Khalil in February 2013 crystallised the tensions between the Idnan component of the MNLA and the Lamhar Arabs within the MAA. As part of the Anéfis process of October 2015, an agreement was signed for the open access to In-Khalil. In Tabankort, armed groups clashed several times in May and July 2014, and the CMA and the Platform clashed in January 2015. This basin located south east of Anéfis constitutes both a major commercial crossing point and a strategic barrier between the Kidal, Gao and Ménaka regions. It is therefore a natural demarcation between the CMA and the Platform coalition (and the tribes that compose them). In the Timbuktu region, although Ber was the bastion of the Azawad Arab Movement as early as April 2013, the division of the MAA into two branches pushed the so-called "pro-Bamako" branch to fall back to Lerneb. This split was mainly due to community and commercial rivalries within the Berabiche community.
[77] The rumour is often well founded. The son-in-law of the leader of a major politico-military movement in northern Mali was recently arrested in Niger for hashish trafficking. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali", UNSC S/2018/581, 9 August 2018.
[78] Crisis Group interviews, leaders of the Platform coalition and the CMA, Bamako, March-April 2018.

groups, many traffickers arrange to maintain contacts in each camp. Thus, between 2013 and 2015, when tensions were high between the CMA and the Platform coalition – and especially between Ifogha and Imrad – traffickers linked to each camp agreed to jointly ensure the security of drug convoys.[79] In the Kidal region, traffickers refused to let themselves be drawn into the conflicts between the CMA and the Platform coalition and proclaimed themselves "non-aligned" to protect their commercial interests.[80] Several traffickers officially affiliated with the MNLA (member of the CMA) have worked with Arab and Imrad partners affiliated with the Platform coalition.[81]

The vast majority of clashes between traffickers are not publicised and have no impact on the balance of power between armed groups. "Local mediators" who may or may not be linked to armed groups help settle them.[82] They only lead to conflict between armed groups when certain factors come together, such as the presence among the traffickers of a senior leader of an armed group, extreme tension between the armed groups or issues related to their control of strategic axes. Since insecurity is harmful to the movement of convoys, and therefore to the traffickers' interests, they may favour a form of stabilisation of northern Mali.

E. *Traffickers and the Inter-Malian Peace Process: Actors and/or Obstacles?*

Although many Malian and international actors acknowledge that drug trafficking is a major contributor to Mali's instability, the question has surfaced only marginally and unofficially in the peace process, which took place mainly in Algiers in 2014 and 2015.[83] But local mediation processes, initiated by the actors of the conflict, have sought ways to regulate the tensions between traffickers.

Trafficking was the subject of discussions behind the scenes of the negotiations in Ouagadougou in June 2013 and Algiers in 2014-2015. Shortly after the meeting in Ouagadougou, the Malian state lifted the arrest warrants issued against several figures of the rebellion, some of whom were designated as drug traffickers, as part of

[79] This was particularly the case during the fighting in Tabankort in 2015. Crisis Group interview, leader of the Platform coalition, Bamako, March 2018.
[80] Crisis Group email correspondence, trader based in Kidal, November 2017.
[81] When the GATIA attempted to seize Kidal in 2015, a trafficker close to the MNLA reportedly had sheep delivered to the movement's fighters to ensure their future cooperation. Crisis Group interview, GATIA member, Bamako, March 2018.
[82] For instance, Sheikh ag Aoussa, chief of staff of the HCUA (member of the CMA), was known to intervene in conflicts between rival traffickers in the Kidal region, and sometimes even beyond, thanks to his longstanding relations with the Arabs of the Tilemsi. Crisis Group interview, economic operator of the Kidal region, Niamey, May 2018. Another case indicates that mediators who are close to the state can also play this role. In August 2007, after Berabiche traffickers intercepted a convoy escorted by members of the Ifogha community in Mauritanian territory, a Berabiche officer of Malian state security negotiated with both parties for restitution. This officer was then a central figure in the creation of the Berabiche paramilitary group supported by President Touré. "Tuaregs and Arabs clash over drugs and cash in northern Mali", op. cit.
[83] For an analysis of the peace process since 2012, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°226, *Mali: An Imposed Peace?*, 22 May 2015, and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°104, *Mali: Last Chance in Algiers*, 18 November 2014.

confidence-building measures intended to make negotiations easier.[84] Diplomats in Algiers have been reluctant to openly address a subject taboo because of its high-level political implications. But the subject came up in "corridor discussions" that punctuated the negotiations.[85] It was up to the main traffickers or their relatives, members of official delegations, to ensure that their interests were not threatened and that those of their rivals were not favoured.[86] In the end, the fight against trafficking is only very briefly mentioned in the Inter-Malian peace agreement of June 2015, in Articles 1, 29 and 30, the latter providing for "the establishment … of special units for the purpose of combating terrorism and transnational organised crime".[87]

The subject of trafficking, however, has been central to several local initiatives of inter-community mediation, in particular two peace processes "from the bottom up" that took place in October 2015 and October 2017, respectively, in Anéfis in northern Mali.[88] Anéfis 1 sought to reduce the violence between community leaders from the Kidal region, which included traffickers.[89] The gentlemen's agreements concluded among the Arabs of Tilemsi (around In-Khalil) and between Idnan and the Arabs of Tilemsi have restored the freedom of movement and goods in the region.[90] While this process brought together the armed groups, economic actors and community leaders, the Malian state sent a mission of three ministers on the first day of the meeting, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) facilitated it. This has made a connection possible, albeit discreet and limited, between the inter-Malian political process supervised from Bamako and local initiatives that can be complementary.

The Anéfis 2 pact, concluded in October 2017, also aimed to strengthen security in the Kidal region, in particular by reducing the destabilising impact of drug trafficking. Representatives of armed groups who signed the peace agreement have sought to isolate the clashes between traffickers so that they no longer involve either the CMA or the Platform coalition. As such, the Qadis Commission, a panel of Islamic judges created by Anéfis 2 and responsible for helping reconcile the signatory groups in case of conflict, has declared itself incompetent to deal with incidents related to trafficking.[91] In fact, several conflicts that occurred after Anéfis 2 between

[84] Eight of the 30 rebel actors whose arrest warrants were lifted in October 2013 were also drug traffickers. "Levée de mandats d'arrêts contre des chefs rebelles : le prix de la paix ?", maliactu.net, 22 October 2013.

[85] Crisis Group interviews, participants in the Algiers process, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[86] Crisis Group interview, diplomat present during Algiers negotiations, Bamako, April 2015.

[87] Article 1, paragraph (h) provides that the parties reiterate their commitment to the "fight against terrorism, drug trafficking and other forms of transnational organised crime". Article 29 specifies that this fight can be done "including through existing regional strategies and mechanisms". "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process", Bamako, June 2015, available at: https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mali/328671/peace-accord-translations/1-accord-paix-et-reconciliation-francais.pdf.

[88] Crisis Group Briefing, *Mali: Peace from Below?,* op. cit.

[89] Ibid.

[90] The Anéfis pacts secured the return of Arab traders who were close to the Platform coalition in the In-Khalil locality from which they had been driven away in 2013. For in-depth analysis, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Mali: Peace from Below?,* op. cit.

[91] Four commissions were set up to address security, justice, political and reconciliation issues. Much of the discussions bore on issues of justice and reparation after the CMA strongly condemned

traffickers affiliated with the CMA and with the Platform coalition did not lead to escalation or reprisals between groups. For its part, the Qadis Commission did not respond to complaints filed by traffickers whose cargo had been intercepted.[92] In attempting to reduce the risk that rivalries between traffickers would escalate into clashes between the CMA and the Platform coalition, Anéfis 2 is a continuation of Anéfis 1.

Unlike Anéfis 1, which was unable to prevent the resumption of the conflict ten months after it was signed, Anéfis 2 seems more sustainable and better observed. There is no guarantee, however, that this local conflict management mechanism would survive renewed tensions between the CMA and the Platform coalition, or intense clashes between traffickers, especially since many trafficking networks are beyond the control of CMA and Platform coalition representatives. In addition, though it limits the destabilising effect of conflicts between traffickers, the Anéfis 2 agreement does not set up a mechanism for preventing them. Nevertheless, at this stage it is the only means accepted by the signatory groups for reducing the violence associated with drug trafficking.

attacks on civilians in Kidal by a GATIA military leader in the spring of 2017. Crisis Group interviews, CMA and Platform coalition members, March-April 2018.

[92] These traffickers probably sought to obtain reparations from the group with which the interceptors were affiliated. Crisis Group interviews, members of the CMA and the Platform coalition, March-April 2018.

IV. The Fight against Drug Trafficking: Limited Results

Measures to fight drug trafficking in Mali remain limited in scope and effect. Most national and international public actors recognise the need to combat organised crime, but many of them abdicate responsibility for doing so, on the grounds that it is not within their competence.

A. *Seizures in Limited Quantities*

The Malian authorities are active in the fight against drug trafficking, largely encouraged in this effort by the European Union, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the French police. The Central Narcotics Office (Office central des stupéfiants, OCS) was established in 2010, with the aim of covering the entire territory, while the activities of the police narcotics brigade are limited to Bamako. At its inception, the OCS had representatives in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, but suffered from a lack of resources that prevented it from carrying out large-scale operations. It recently reappointed several agents to the north, but the bulk of its staff and operations are now concentrated in the south.

The OCS has made most of its seizures in the south and particularly in Bamako. A certain number of seizures can also be credited to the Malian customs (particularly in the Kayes region, in the south west of the country), mainly of Indian hemp produced in Ghana or Nigeria and destined for Senegal, as well as cocaine.[93] The last major cocaine seizure in the south took place in 2010 at Nara (Koulikoro region), close to the border with Mauritania; the confiscated drugs then went missing.[94] Since then, only small quantities of cocaine, transported from Latin America by "mules" (individual smugglers) in aircraft, have been seized in Bamako and Mopti (in the centre of the country).[95] The limited seizures are probably the result of both the lack of resources and police officers' fear of interfering with networks rumoured to be connected to the authorities. These rumours persist though the authorities deny any such connections.[96]

[93] There was an exceptional seizure, in December 2015 in Kayes, of 500kg of hashish from Morocco. "Kayes : 500kg de cannabis saisis à Nioro du Sahel", Studio Tamani, 29 December 2015.

[94] Crisis Group interview, senior official of the Malian security services, Bamako, May 2014.

[95] Neighbouring countries such as Mauritania or Niger have made larger seizures, including of hashish. For example, a Nigerien police operation last June led to the incineration of 2.5 tonnes of hashish that had passed through Mali, and to the incarceration of several Malian traffickers who were close to the Platform coalition. "Lutte contre la drogue au Niger : Incinération de 2,5 tonnes de résine de cannabis à la périphérie de Niamey", Tamtaminfo.com, 25 June 2018. This operation, however, may be simply the result of a settling of scores between Nigerien trafficking networks. If the fight against drugs became an instrument of rivalries between trafficking networks, it could increase the violence associated with trafficking. Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, Nigerien army officer, official of an international agency combating organised crime, Bamako, April and June 2018.

[96] Regarding the ineffectiveness or even counter-productive effects of international support for the fight against organised crime in the Sahel, see Adam Sandor, *Assemblages of Intervention: Politics, Security and Drug Trafficking in West Africa* (Ottawa, 2016). Crisis Group interview, senior official of the Ministry of Interior Security and Civilian Protection, Bamako, October 2015.

In the north of the country, seizures are rare and the fight against drugs is often the subject of local political manipulation. In 2008, Colonel Gamou, then commander of army operations and strongman of the Imrad community, on which the Malian presidency relied, carried out a major cocaine seizure in Kidal. It led to the arrest of several traffickers from Ifogha and Kounta communities, who were then rivals of the Imrad community and of the Tilemsi Arabs, who were supported by the state.[97] Since 2012, no major drug seizure has taken place in the north, other than a few seizures of tramadol, a potent analgesic, partly intended for local consumption.[98] No major seizure of hashish has reportedly been carried out in northern Mali since the end of the 2000s, or possibly even before.

State defence and security services officials will be ineffective as long as they are not fully redeployed to the north, the balance of power remains with trafficking groups that have enough political influence to hinder investigations. Lacking sufficient resources, they seldom venture into rural areas to intercept traffickers' heavily armed convoys, which allegedly are frequently protected by either armed signatory groups or high-level public actors (though the authorities deny it).[99] Several cases of pressure on state agents in Gao and Timbuktu, particularly between 2010 and 2012, have been reported.[100]

The Ménaka region in the east of the country, one of the drug transit areas between Mali and Niger since 2015, is a case in point. No seizures have taken place there recently despite the gradual deployment of close to 500 security and defence personnel since 2015.[101] The region remains largely under the control of armed groups, whether signatories of the peace agreement (MSA, GATIA) or jihadist (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM)).

B. *International Actors in the Fight against Drug Trafficking: The "Hot Potato" Policy*

Most international actors in the Sahel make fighting organised crime a priority.[102] For its part, the G5-Sahel, a joint initiative of five countries in the region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), has in its mandate fighting cross-border organised crime, of which drug trafficking is an essential component.[103] Mali's main partners also point out that drug trafficking has a strong influence on the levels of violence in the north of the country and that it is a source of funding for terrorist groups.[104]

[97] The seized drugs allegedly disappeared. Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, Kidal elected representative, member of an armed group, Bamako, March 2016 and July 2018.
[98] Crisis Group interview, OCS representative, Bamako, March 2018.
[99] Crisis Group interview, senior official of the Ministry of Internal Security, Bamako, October 2015.
[100] Crisis Group interview, former OCS agent based in northern Mali, Nouakchott, June 2015.
[101] Crisis Group interview, governor of Ménaka, Bamako, March 2018.
[102] This is the case, for example, for the Sahel strategy adopted by the European Union in 2011, or more recently the roadmap for intervention established by the French special envoy for the Sahel, Jean-Marc Châtaigner, on behalf of Alliance Sahel.
[103] For more information on the G5 Sahel and its mandate, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.
[104] Crisis Group interviews, MINUSMA and European Union representatives, Bamako, May 2018. The French foreign affairs minister in office at the outset of Operation Serval, Laurent Fabius,

Yet there is a significant gap between strategic ambitions and operational reality.[105] On the whole, and with rare exceptions such as the European Union's Capacity Building Mission for Malian security forces (EUCAP Sahel Mali), the fight against drug trafficking is seen in the field as a secondary issue; it would require too much resources to lock down the relevant area and combat drug trafficking efficiently.[106] In Mali, it ranks well below implementation of the peace agreement, anti-terrorist operations and trying to stop clandestine migration.

Deployed since January 2015, EUCAP Sahel Mali includes battling organised crime in its mandate.[107] Its activities mainly concern strategic advice, training and coordination between security actors. As such, it can play a useful role in general reorganisation of internal security services driven by the Ministry of Security. But in the field, its action, mainly concentrated in Bamako, has up to now done little to curb drug trafficking in the north of the country, where Malian forces are redeployed very weakly.

The reluctance of international partners can be explained by the complexity of drug trafficking networks and the fear of interfering with business interests that reach the top of certain countries' governments.[108] These links, often suggested but hard to bring to light, make police interventions particularly delicate. Thus, several major traffickers in northern Mali have continued to travel freely, including through the sub-region's airports, even though the Malian state issued international arrest warrants against them in January 2013.[109] Most international actors say they do not know who to depend on within the Malian state apparatus to act against drug trafficking.[110] Without more willingness on the part of governments to fight drug trafficking, it will remain unsuccessful.

Neither Operation Barkhane, conducted since 2014 by the French army, nor MINUSMA has a mandate to combat drug trafficking. But the renewed mandate of MINUSMA in 2018 gives greater attention "to the financial sources for conflicts in Mali", among which drug trafficking is named in particular, "in order to help define integrated and effective strategies" in cooperation with the UNODC and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).[111] In Mali, Barkhane operations targeting the logistics flows of jihadist groups sometimes enable incidental interception of drug shipments.[112] In northern Niger, Barkhane has already intercepted ship-

referred to the "narco-terrorist" threat. "Fabius pointe la 'menace narcoterroriste'", *Le Figaro*, 9 December 2012.

[105] Crisis Group interviews, Malian officials, representatives of international actors, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[106] The UK, through its Serious Crime Unit, stands out from other partners by a strong interest in problems related to organised crime, although these efforts focus mainly on migratory networks, and human and arms trafficking.

[107] See the web page of the European External Action Service dedicated to the EUCAP Sahel Mali mission: https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eucap-sahel-mali/40878/%C3%A0-propos_fr.

[108] Crisis Group interviews, international actors, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[109] Crisis Group interview, Nigerien security officer, Niamey, December 2017.

[110] Crisis Group interviews, international actors, Bamako, March-April 2018.

[111] "United Nations Security Council resolution 2423 (2018) adopted on 28 June 2018", UNSC S/RES/2423, 28 June 2018.

[112] "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali", op. cit.

ments of hashish during operations that did not have fighting trafficking as a goal.[113] But the French military operation is not intended, at least for the moment, to replicate such seizures.

International forces are, however, in ambiguous situations when they collaborate for the purposes of counter-terrorism with armed groups that they know are also linked to trafficking networks. French soldiers admit to closing their eyes to their allies' drug trafficking,[114] while others, including diplomats, even believe that if these flows can not be interrupted it is better to help direct them to allies rather than to groups linked to jihadists or to other countries in the sub-region.[115] It is difficult to know if these positions are only personal predilections or if they reflect an unofficial political strategy. But in practice, if not in intent, certain French military interventions are influencing the drug trafficking economy.[116]

[113] During an operation conducted around Salvador Pass (Niger-Libya border) on 9-10 May 2015, the Barkhane force seized 1.5 tonnes of hashish. "La force Barkhane a saisi 1,5 tonne de drogue dans le Nord du Niger", Opex360.com, 19 May 2015.

[114] Crisis Group interviews, French army officers, February and June 2018.

[115] Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, July 2017.

[116] The French strikes on In-Khalil on 23 February 2013 forced the MAA to withdraw from this hub for the benefit of the MNLA, suspected of being an ally of France. "Mali: bombardements français sur une base d'un groupe armé, quatre blessés", Agence France-Presse, 25 February 2013. Similarly, Barkhane's support of the Azawad Salvation Movement (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad, MSA) and the GATIA in Ménaka since 2017 allows the traffickers linked to these two groups to strengthen their control of the strategic routes of this region, to the detriment of competing networks, particularly those linked to the CMA.

V. Toward "Demilitarisation" of Drug Trafficking

The fight against drug trafficking has had few real successes and remains a challenge for all states engaged in it.[117] To be effective, it should be global and coordinated among the authorities in the countries of production, transit and destination. At the same time, strategies should be developed on a case-by-case basis according to regional and national contexts. In the Sahel, efforts must focus on the most destabilising consequences of drug trafficking for the region and Mali in particular. Other than the specific violence that drug trafficking produces in northern Mali, there is no reason to launch a stronger frontal attack than in the neighbouring countries that are also transit or even production areas. Most of the trafficking comes from a single product, cannabis resin, which a growing number of states are legalising for regulated use.[118]

In northern Mali, prohibition is unrealistic in the immediate future. Malian authorities and their international partners should first attempt to demilitarise drug trafficking and reduce the associated violence. To do this, they have to go beyond police repression and make use of a wide range of tools. To reduce the military capabilities of groups that supervise drug trafficking, they should focus on three interdependent axes: supporting the processes of local political negotiations, such as that of Anéfis, which can reduce the conflict associated with drug trafficking; strengthening, as part of the peace process, the mechanism for disarmament (with priority given to heavy weapons and control of armed convoys) by integrating all armed groups that have links with drug trafficking; and finally, using coercive measures, including the UN sanctions regime, against drug traffickers who perpetrate or sponsor the worst violence.

Demilitarisation must be understood to mean the reduction of drug traffickers' ability to mobilise a large number of heavily armed and mobile fighters. At the end of this process, criminal groups will remain in northern Mali but their ability to generate destabilising violence would be drastically weakened. The goal may seem modest and offend police institutions that are uncomfortable with leaving criminal groups in the region.[119] Yet in the short term, demilitarisation is perhaps the only realistic objective, especially since many major traffickers and leaders of politico-military groups have an interest in pacifying the circulation of goods, licit or not, in northern Mali.

A. *Including the Drug Trafficking Problem in Regional Security Pacts*

The peace agreement signed in Bamako in 2015 deliberately ignored the role of drug trafficking in armed violence. It was thereby deprived of the ability to put in place tools to limit its destabilising effects. But local pacts initiated by influential actors in northern Mali, as in Anéfis since 2015, could place drug trafficking and its role in the violence at the centre of discussions. This is all the more conceivable as most armed

[117] Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "L'échec de la guerre contre la drogue", *Après-demain*, vol. 44, 2017.
[118] In 2018, 35 countries have already partly or wholly decriminalised the use of cannabis. Pierre Breteau and Maxime Vaudano, "Légalisé, dépénalisé, prescrit… le cannabis dans le monde en neuf graphiques", *Le Monde*, 6 January 2018. The most recent is Canada, in October 2018.
[119] Crisis Group interview and email correspondence, UNODC official, Dakar, October-November 2018.

groups and traffickers are looking for local arbitration mechanisms. The relative failure of Anéfis 1 to curb violence, however, shows that local pacts are not a miracle solution.

The often informal rationale of these pacts is adapted to the practices of local actors but is more difficult to reconcile with the institutional logic of the Malian state and even more so that of international actors.[120] Yet all have a provisional interest in accommodating themselves to the local pacts: the deals must be conceived of as temporary tools, made necessary by the current extreme weakness of the Malian state in the north of the territory. They constitute instances of dialogue, consultation and arbitration among the most influential local actors. The commissions set up by these pacts are not intended to be entrusted with policing duties. But they should be allowed to have recourse to the security bodies created by the peace agreement of June 2015, starting with the Technical Security Commission (CTS) set up to supervise the implementation of the ceasefire and investigate violations. They could report to the CTS clashes between traffickers that they are powerless to stop.[121]

Mali's international partners do not have to go as far as to support consultation bodies that include – among others – criminal elements. But they should promote regional pacts, which are complementary to the inter-Malian peace process. Without supporting them officially or financially, they could encourage them to set up arbitration mechanisms in each of the five regions of northern Mali to reduce the violence caused by drug trafficking. For this, local actors will have to reaffirm the terms of Anéfis 1 in more depth, in particular the principles of non-aggression and free access to the trade hubs. Once these rules have been established, it will be a matter, this time by consolidating the achievements of Anéfis 2, of using arbitration mechanisms to encourage systematic condemnation of violent interception of convoys. This is indeed a form of predation that remains a main driver of the drug economy's militarisation.

B. *Reducing the Circulation of Heavy Weapons and Controlling the Movement of Armed Convoys*

Limiting access to arms, and in particular heavy weapons, which destabilise the north and feed militias that are able to compete with a weakened state, should be a priority for the Malian state and all international actors.[122] Efforts to stabilise Mali are in fact intrinsically linked to the reduction of drug traffickers' capacity to perpetrate violence. In other words, forces such as the MINUSMA, Barkhane and the G5 Sahel have no choice but to work actively toward demilitarisation of drug trafficking in order to fulfil their mandate, whether or not it mentions fighting organised crime.

[120] Crisis Group email correspondence and telephone interview, member of international forces present in Mali, November 2018.

[121] The CTS is one of the main interim security measures introduced by the June 2015 peace agreement. Chaired by the MINUSMA, it includes representatives of the Malian armed forces and signatory groups as well as two representatives of the MINUSMA and one representative of each member of the international mediation team et the Barkhane operation. "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali", op. cit., p. 20.

[122] In Mali, these include 12.7mm and 14.5mm machine guns and ZU 23mm cannons. These armaments are mounted on pickup trucks to protect or attack convoys.

Two complementary tools set up by the 2015 peace agreement can be used to demilitarise drug trafficking: the CTS and the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Program (DDR). With the impetus of Barkhane and MINUSMA, since 2017 the CTS has put an emphasis on the control of convoys with heavy weapons and the systematic registration of convoys of more than five vehicles. These measures targeting signatory armed groups also have a significant impact on the military resources that the drug traffickers can mobilise. But this CTS mission is not fully recognised by all the armed groups that are members of it.

The reduction of drug trafficking's deleterious effects also depends on the launch of the DDR program provided for in the peace agreements. Though not explicitly targeting the drug traffickers, the DDR program will still have an effect on them by depriving them of the military resources available to the signatory groups. The DDR program has fallen far behind schedule, however, due to disagreements among signatories, particularly on the number and rank of the fighters to be reintegrated. Resistance to the DDR program is also linked to the benefits that the owners of weapons derive from the work done for the drug traffickers. There again, the DDR program and drug trafficking issues cannot be separated. As Anéfis 1 shows, the drug traffickers may have an interest in pacification of the north but they will only accept disarmament, even partial, of the drug convoys if they are convinced that it will not expose them to predation by their rivals. For this reason, to have any chance of success the DDR program must target simultaneously as many armed groups with interests in drug trafficking as possible.

International forces, and Barkhane in particular, should resist the temptation to favour certain armed groups involved in trafficking because they are participating in the fight against jihadists.[123] If they are not careful, they risk repeating the mistake made by the Malian state in the 2000s of favouring one coalition of armed groups linked to drug trafficking over another. This would have the effect of further militarising the trafficking components of these groups while dissuading rival groups from disarming, or even encouraging them to arm themselves more. The solution will rather be demilitarisation of the largest number of trafficking networks. This will certainly not eradicate the problem of drugs circulating in the Sahel but it will limit its worst effects on the stability of northern Mali.

C. *Sanctioning the Most Violent Drug Traffickers*

The gradual demilitarisation of traffickers therefore relies, on one hand, on local arbitration mechanisms that associate drug traffickers and, on the other hand, on an effective DDR process. To this dual approach must be added to coercive means in order to sanction drug traffickers who refuse to commit to the path of demilitarisation.

The Technical Security Commission set up by the Inter-Malian peace agreement could impose sanctions to increase the pressure on these actors. It should condemn repeated violations of the rules for registration of convoys and confiscate the heavy weapons from unauthorised convoys that belong to signatory armed groups. This sanction, the only one provided for by the CTS, is hardly being implemented at the

[123] See Crisis Group Africa Report N°261, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018.

moment. In the past, signatory groups boycotted the CTS when it denounced their shortcomings or non-observance of the rules.[124] If this recurs, the CTS should call upon the Agreement Monitoring Committee (Comité de suivi de l'accord, CSA), which oversees the application of the agreement. Its involvement would be all the more useful that the international mediation that sits on it has gained a greater power of arbitration between the parties since the signing of the Peace Pact on 15 October 2018, an additional document which is supposed to revive the implementation of the 2015 agreement.[125]

Due to the weakness or absence of Malian security forces in the affected areas, the MINUSMA, chair of the CTS and an impartial actor, should take action against those who circulate unregistered armed convoys or engage in violent interception of convoys. These activities, since they often involve fighters affiliated with signatory groups, are in effect violations of the ceasefire that the MINUSMA is mandated to prevent. The MINUSMA's mandate should more explicitly provide for implementation of CTS decisions, as the force commander sits on that body. For example, MINUSMA contingents should adapt their rules of engagement to seize heavy weapons in cases provided for by the CTS. The most influential CTS members, in particular France and the MINUSMA, must strengthen their cooperation to effectively limit the circulation of heavily armed convoys.[126] They must not only issue useful rules, but also act against potential offenders.

The MINUSMA, busy with thwarting jihadist attacks and better protecting civilians in central Mali, is reluctant to assume this role, which few stabilisation missions take up.[127] Strengthening the MINUSMA's role in controlling armed convoys involves risks, especially an increase in attacks against its personnel that already force it to take a defensive attitude. UN officials also stress that any coercive measure against the signatory groups could compromise the UN assistance services and undermine the mission's credibility.[128] But since the peace process cannot move forward without reducing clashes between drug traffickers, the MINUSMA should tackle this problem by playing a concrete role in reducing the violence associated with drug trafficking.[129]

[124] Crisis Group telephone interview, member of an international organisation sitting on the CTS, November 2018.

[125] The Agreement Monitoring Committee, chaired by Algeria, brings together the members of the international mediation team (including Algeria, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, the European Union and MINUSMA) as well as the signatory parties. It oversees the proper application of the June 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. The October 2018 Peace Pact strengthens the powers of the international mediation team by entrusting it with the ability to arbitrate with binding decisions in the event of divergences between the government and the signatory parties. "Mali Peace Pact", 15 October 2018.

[126] Crisis Group telephone interviews, member of an organisation sitting on the CTS, November-December 2018.

[127] Crisis Group interview, UN representatives, New York, November 2018.

[128] Ibid. An internal UN report raises fears that the MINUSMA's inability to enforce CTS decisions – due to a lack of resources and the troop contributing countries' adversity to risk – undermines its credibility. "Internal UN report", January 2018.

[129] Arthur Boutellis and Stéphanie Tiélès, "Peace Operations and Organised Crime: Still Foggy?", in C. de Coning and M. Peter (eds.), *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order* (New York, 2018), pp. 169-190.

In fact, the MINUSMA's revised mandate adopted in June 2018 pays more attention to drug trafficking as a source of funding for the conflicts in Mali.[130]

In the long term, the joint force of the G5 Sahel, whose mandate includes the fight against cross-border crime, could take over from the MINUSMA or supplement its action. For its part, Operation Barkhane might consider revising its mandate to support the MINUSMA in controlling the circulation of heavy weapons and rolling stock, since it also has an interest in the proper application of CTS decisions on the subject. It is not a question of explicitly including the fight against organised crime in Barkhane's mandate – an ambitious objective in the Sahel – but rather providing support to the MINUSMA or the G5 during ad hoc operations against armed groups engaged in drug trafficking who resist the CTS's decisions.

Soldiers of international forces present in Mali are reluctant to engage in the fight against drug trafficking. They point out that it requires excessive military oversight and intervention resources.[131] While preventing the circulation of illicit products on this immense territory seems unrealistic, targeted and localised military operations can have a dissuasive effect on trafficking groups.

The sanctions regime established by UN Resolution 2374 of 5 September 2017 against those impeding the implementation of the peace agreement is another tool for fighting the most violent drug traffickers. A member of the panel of experts created pursuant to this resolution is responsible for trafficking issues.[132] The sanctions, including the travel ban that will affect the businessmen involved, should as a priority target the traffickers or criminal groups who use heavy weapons to intercept or protect convoys, as well as those whose support for or funding of terrorist groups is proven. Sanctions should not be used to eliminate influential economic actors, which would risk reviving the conflict, but rather to encourage them to reconcile their commercial interests with the imperative of demilitarisation of northern Mali, a crucial step for stabilising the region.

The fight against drug trafficking, including through the sanctions regime, is not without risk. Given the importance of trafficking for armed groups, taking on the traffickers in northern Mali could disrupt the balance that has prevailed between the CMA and the Platform coalition since the Anéfis 2 pact was signed. This risk can be mitigated by simultaneously targeting the two rival groups. In view of the personalities incriminated by the first report from the panel of UN experts on Mali, this balance is for the time being only partially ensured.[133]

[130] "United Nations Security Council resolution 2423", S/RES/2423 (2018), Article 31, 28 June 2018.
[131] Crisis Group email correspondence and telephone interview, member of international forces present in Mali, November 2018.
[132] Crisis Group interview, UN official, Niamey, April 2018.
[133] The panel of UN experts on Mali has chosen to target only Ahmoudou ag Asriw, an officer of the GATIA, mentioning in particular a clash that took place at Amassin (Kidal region) in April 2018, where his vehicle was attacked and intercepted by another group. It would probably have been wise to target the latter as well. Indeed, interception is the driving force behind militarisation of trafficking in northern Mali. "Report of the United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali", 8 August 2018.

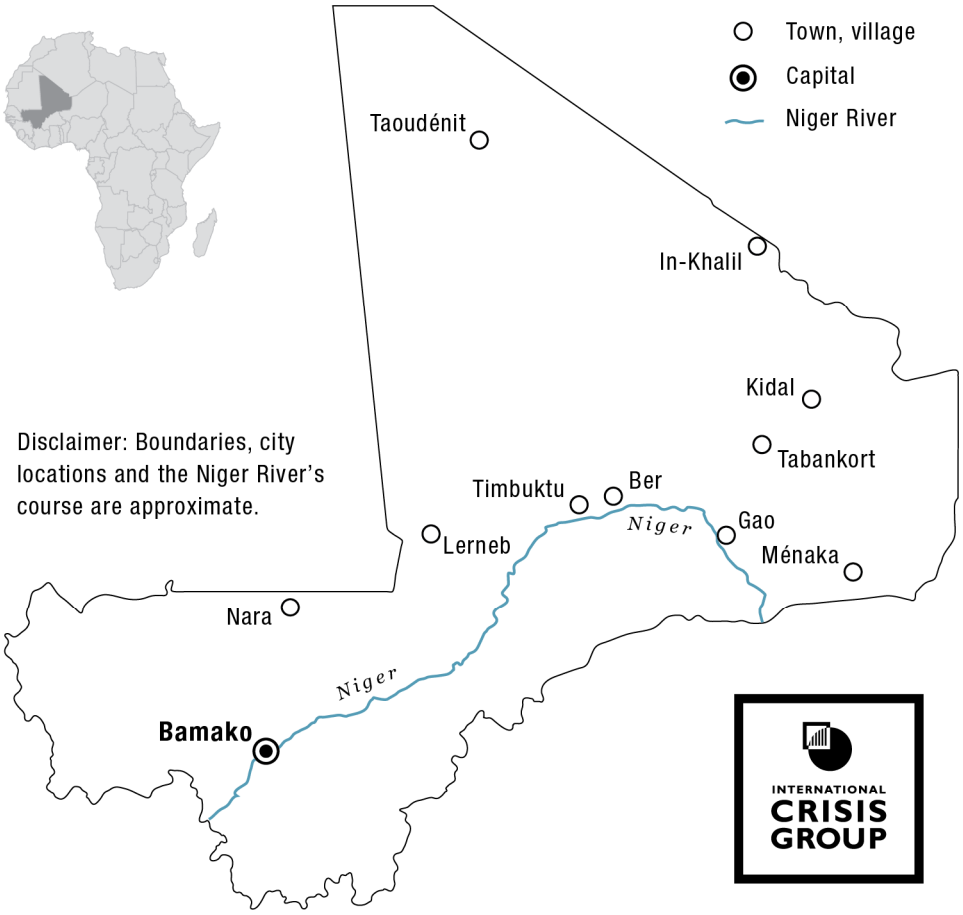
VI. Conclusion

In northern Mali, the link between drug traffickers' interests and armed violence has never been stronger than since 2012. Trafficking alone cannot explain the conflict that prevails in this region, but it aggravates the underlying intra- and inter-community cleavages, and sharpens the tensions between pro-government and pro-rebel networks. At the same time, increased competition between networks makes traffickers less and less controllable, including by the politico-military groups for which they are a resource but also a matter of concern.

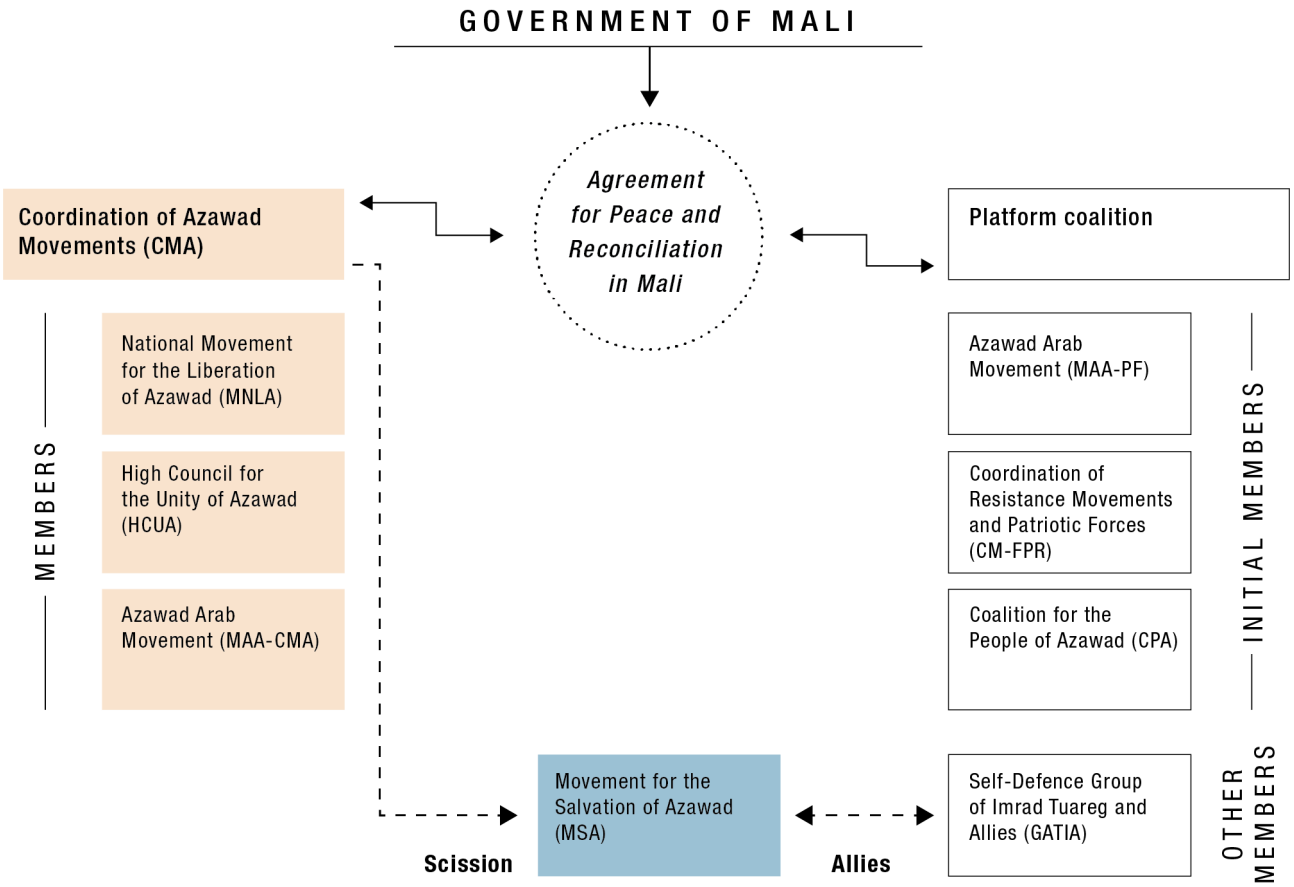
From this point of view, the willingness of armed groups expressed at Anéfis 2 to distance themselves from the conflicts between traffickers is an opportunity to reduce armed violence and the causes of clashes associated with drug trafficking. By working to demilitarise traffickers, international actors can limit their negative effects in the short term. The fight against drug trafficking, meanwhile, plays out less in northern Mali than in the countries of production and consumption.

Dakar/Brussels, 13 December 2018

Appendix A: Map of Main Malian Locations Mentioned in this Report



Appendix B: Politico-military Movements Signatory to the Inter-Malian Peace Accord and Their Allies



Appendix C: Acronyms

ADC	Democratic Alliance for Change (Alliance démocratique pour le changement)
ANTM	National Alliance of the Tuareg of Mali (Alliance nationale des Touareg du Mali)
AQIM	Al-qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ARLA	Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of the Azawad (Armée révolutionnaire de libération de l'Azawad)
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
CJA	Congress for Justice in Azawad (Congrès pour la justice dans l'Azawad)
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad)
CM-FPR	Coordination of Resistance Movements and Patriotic Forces (Coordination des mouvements et Forces patriotiques de résistance)
CSA	Agreement Monitoring Committee (Comité de suivi de l'accord)
CTS	Technical Commission for Security (Commission technique de sécurité) created by the June 2015 Peace Accord
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUISS	European Union Institute for Security Studies
GATIA	Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés)
GSIM	Group to Support Islam and Muslims
HCUA	High Council for the Unity of Azawad (Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad)
IFRI	French Institute of International Relations (Institut français des relations internationales)
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
MAA	Azawad Arab Movement (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad)
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad)
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement populaire de libération de l'Azawad)
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
OCS	Central Narcotics Office (Office central des stupéfiants)
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOWAS	UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel

Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2015

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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