Peacekeeping Responses to Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking: A Case Study of MINUSMA

By Erica Gaston, Catharina Nickel, Imane Karimou, and Marc Werner

UNU
CPR

About the Authors

Erica Gaston is Senior Policy Advisor and Head of the Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace Programme at UNU-CPR.

Catharina Nickel is a Research Officer at UNU-CPR where she is leading a project on the future of peace operations.

Imane Karimou is a Research Associate covering conflict resolution and humanitarian action.

Marc Werner was previously a Carlo Schmidt Fellow with UNU-CPR.

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I. Introduction

On 30 June 2023, the United Nations (UN) Security Council decided to end the ten-year UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), ordering the rapid withdrawal of personnel and a liquidation phase to begin in January 2024.[1] Escalating security challenges and an increasingly tense relationship with the Government of Mali had long complicated MINUSMA's ability to carry out its mandate.[2] Among the many security and governance challenges confronting the mission were transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking networks. They functioned as both a symptom and a cause of dysfunctional governance and of a political economy that reinforced cycles of violence.

Trafficking and criminal networks were always recognized as a strong contributor to instability in Mali, and a boon to transnational terrorist groups in the region. As a result there was some attention given to responding to transnational organized crime both in MINUSMA's mandate, and in other Security Council-authorized mechanisms (such as the sanctions regime). These were often linked to other counter-crime and counter-terrorism iniatives supported by other regional or multilateral actors or international organizations. Yet although there was scope to respond to organized crime and trafficking, it was never a resounding mandate. Often linked to or subsumed under broader counter-terrorism efforts, the mandate to help tackle transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking functioned as an "add-on" – one task among many in an already overloaded mission. As a result, efforts in this vein tended to be confined to more technical policing and rule of law activites divorced from the larger political strategy.

This paper explores some of the challenges to countering transnational organized crime in Mali, focusing primarily on MINUSMA, but also considering the challenges faced by other multilateral actors and initiatives. The objective is to feed into a larger research initiative exploring multilateral efforts to counter organized crime in conflict-affected and fragile areas. Examining MINUSMA as well as other UN Country Team efforts in relation to transnational organized crime offers a critical point of reflection. MINUSMA's hasty closure and dissolution comes at a time when the UN and Member States are re-considering the future models and mandates of peace operations and exploring other multilateral approaches that might offer a better response to transnational and cross-border threats. Though transnational organized crime was never strategically prioritized and sufficiently resourced, it is notable that the sort of tools and initiatives that tend to be recommended for better addressing transnational organized crime and trafficking were present in Mali. MINUSMA thus represents an interesting test case, illustrating some of the challenges facing future multilateral efforts to tackle transnational organized crime.

This paper will first offer a brief background on how transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking dynamics contributed to the 2012 crisis in Mali, as well as the origin and deployment of MINUSMA and other parallel international intervention mechanisms. It will then assess how the mission approached transnational organized crime, as well as the role played by other UN entities and other multilateral initiatives. It will conclude with some reflections on what these limitations suggest for future peacekeeping operations or other approaches to responding to transnational organized crime in conflict-affected regions.

Methodology and Key Terms

This study was supported by a grant from the United States Institute of Peace, as part of an initiative exploring Reinvigorating Multilateral Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding. It is one in a series of papers that includes a separate case study on similar dynamics in the Central African Republic, and a policy paper exploring past and future multilateral responses to transnational organized crime at a global level.

The research for this case study was conducted between August 2023 and April 2024 and included an extensive survey of the background literature and interviews with 72 individuals, comprising current and former members of the MINUSMA mission, experts on transnational organized crime or on security and governance dynamics in Mali, members of UN entities or other international agencies working on related themes in Mali, local authorities and police officers in Mali, and those who worked within regional bodies or multilateral initiatives, including the G5 Sahel and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) also commissioned a Malian researcher to undertake field research in one of the areas where gold mining and trafficking, as well as human trafficking, are prominent, to capture the views of community members and local stakeholders.

There are multiple definitions and ways of measuring "transnational organized crime." This paper will use criteria drawn from the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which considers transnational organized crime to be a set of activities that: a) are primarily aimed at obtaining profit illegally; b) have been carried out over time in an organized manner; c) have been conducted by a definable network of connected individuals and/or groups; d) either use or threaten to use violence or corruption; and e) either occur in, involve actors in, or span the border of two or more countries.[3]

A challenge in a country like Mali is disentangling who or what constitutes "transnational" organized crime, as distinguished from purely local criminal networks or enterprises. Certainly, some actors discussed in this paper may be operating solely within the territory of Mali, or may deal only with local markets. Nonetheless, these 'local activities' are almost invariably linked with larger transnational trade flows, networks, and extortion rings.

Artisanal gold mining, for example, tends to be deeply embedded within the local economies where such mining occurs. However, it is also connected to broader illicit export markets, often through the engagement of transnational criminal networks and armed groups.[4]

Although the analysis in this paper is informed by understanding of the nuances of transnational versus local networks and illicit activities, analysing and disaggregating the different actors within illicit markets and networks in Mali is not the central objective of this research. The focus is on multilateral efforts to respond to transnational organized crime, in particular the response of MINUSMA and other UN entities. As a result, the analysis will consider efforts and activities that might broadly relate to countering different aspects of organized crime and illicit trafficking writ large. The main time period of focus is from 2013, when the mission was mandated, until the decision to end the mission in the summer of 2023.

II. Background: Organized Crime and Trafficking-Related Antecedents to the 2012 Crisis

Throughout its history, Mali's territory has served as a key transit point, connecting trade routes in sub-Saharan Africa with northern Africa and beyond. In more recent years, its geographic location has positioned it to be a key node in a more pernicious form of transnational trade – the smuggling of drugs, arms, and people, which have been viewed as significant drivers of conflict and instability across the Sahel.[5] The linkage between organized crime and conflict in Mali and the broader Sahel is not simply that illicit activities make the means of warfare more available – including arms and heavy weapons, fuel, as well as money derived from illicit trade in gold, cattle, drugs and other high-value commodities. Instead, the more important linkage is the way that the larger political-economy drives and reinforces instability and volatile governance strategies. Organized crime and trafficking, and their interplay with communal divisions and State-

society relations in Mali, were critical contributors to the 2012 crisis and subsequent cycles of conflict in Mali.

In Mali's sparsely populated north, where much of the trade in licit and illicit goods passes, there has never been strong State presence and control. Lacking the capacity to meaningfully regulate cross-border trade or to provide much in the way of goods and services, State actors have historically accepted or tacitly encouraged informal, local governance, including on issues like border control.[6] Basic commodities – food, fuel, and medicine – largely come into the country through informal or illicit trade networks, alongside the smuggling of drugs, arms, and people (although each is often traded via their own distinct routes and markets).[7] Communities across Mali depend on the informal or illicit economy for their livelihoods and for access to basic goods, and often do not view these networks or illicit activities as a threat.

Box A: Prominent Illicit Trafficking Sectors in Mali
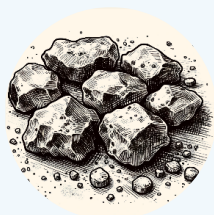
Artisanal Gold Mining

The gold sector is a major economic driver in the Sahel region, worth over $12.6 billion in 2021 alone.[8] Most of the sector operates informally and beyond State control, leading to substantial underreporting of gold exports and lost tax revenues. An example of this is the gap in export/import data in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key transit hub for the illicit trafficking of gold from the Sahel. While Mali's reported gold exports to the UAE in 2019 amounted to 567 kg, the UAE's declared gold imports from Mali weighed 81 tons in the same year.[9]

Drug Smuggling

The Sahel region serves as a key drug smuggling route for South American cocaine to Europe, as well as Moroccan cannabis to the Middle East, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In 2008, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that 14 per cent of Europe's cocaine (worth $1 billion) flowed through West Africa,[10] and confirmed that Mali is an important transit site for regional drug trafficking. Armed groups in Mali profit from smuggling by setting up toll roadblocks and offering protection against other militias, with control over drug trafficking routes offering a particularly lucrative protection racket.[11]

Weapons and Arms Smuggling

Most firearms in the Sahel are sourced within Africa. Since 2019, Libya has supplied newly manufactured AK-pattern rifles to the black market in the Gao, Timbuktu and Ménaka regions. However, most are diverted from national armed forces through battlefield capture, theft or corruption and illicit sales.[12] Since 2013, there has also been a steady rise in the trafficking of materials used to make IEDs, one of the deadliest threats for both civilians and peacekeepers.[13]

Human Trafficking

Mali remains a key transit hub for refugees and migrants from across the Sahel, with many migrant and trafficking routes facilitated by payments to armed groups.[14] In 2021, 500 to 1,000 migrants arrived weekly in Timbuktu.[15] Migrants working at gold sites controlled by armed groups is common in Gao, Kidal and Ménaka. The Mali Government has reportedly increased efforts to identify trafficking victims, but these efforts have been criticized for significant underreporting and little follow-through.[16]
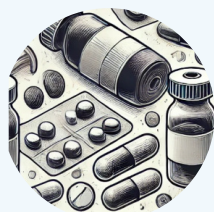
Pharmaceutical Goods

The Sahel countries rely heavily on imports of medical products and pharmaceutical drugs, and the trafficking of these products poses a barrier to achieving universal health coverage in a region affected by malaria and limited health infrastructure. Falsified and substandard medical products from the illicit market lead to indirect treatment costs ranging from $12 to 44.7 million per year across sub-Saharan Africa.[17] They cause between 72,000 and 267,000 deaths annually in the region; in addition to over 169,000 child deaths resulting from severe pneumonia treatments.[18]

Cattle Rustling

Cattle rustling is a significant part of the criminal economy in Mali and a prominent source of income for extremist groups. In the Mopti region alone, cattle theft surged from 78,000 in 2019 to 130,000 in 2021. In Gao, due to the increasing activities of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), cattle rustling during the first nine months of 2022 exceeded total figures for 2019.[19] In addition to affecting the livelihoods of local communities, cattle theft is often associated with intensifying local violence.[20]

The State has not only lacked the capacity to fully uproot these networks; there have also been strong political disincentives to attempt to do so. Among these has been the risk of triggering insecurity and armed resistance, in particular from Tuareg communities in northern Mali. The Tuareg people are a historically nomadic ethnic group that have spanned trade and transit routes (licit and illicit) across the Sahel and North Africa for centuries. Tuareg armed groups have staged rebellions or armed resistance against the Malian State in cycles stretching back to the 1960s.[21] Given that these armed groups, and their constituent communities, have historically had a share in cross-border trading networks, State efforts to assert control or disrupt trafficking networks could trigger these underlying political sensitivities and affect State stability.

As a result, historically where State institutions or leaders have intervened in illicit trafficking networks, it has been part of more complex strategies of accommodation and repression, allowing some illicit economies or trading relationships to thrive while suppressing others.[22] In addition, both because of past accommodation strategies (for example, prior disarmament efforts resulting in the integration of former armed groups within State security services) as well as the patrimonial nature of this larger political-economy structure, linkages with informal trafficking networks are to be found across Malian State institutions.

While many of these dynamics have been longstanding, **a significant departure point came in the 1990s and early 2000s with the rise of trade in high-value goods like cigarettes, hashish, and cocaine.**[23] The high profits to be earned attracted the interest of both State and non-State actors to control part of the trade. But capturing these lucrative markets (especially cocaine) also required a "greater degree of protection – brought about by either violence or corruption," experts Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw note.[24] Protecting the trafficking routes required control of armed groups and some degree of complicity of the State, bringing State actors into the illicit economy in a much more significant way.[25] This in turn would have knock-on effects for governance, public perceptions, and ultimately, the stability of the State. It became a self-reinforcing cycle of trafficking supporting armed groups and armed groups supporting trafficking, with both dependent on the corruption and corrosion of State authority, which continues to the present.

In addition, whereas trafficking in Mali had historically been dominated by local – often tribally aligned – actors with deep community linkages and equities, the promise of higher profits from these more lucrative commodities attracted more mercenary and criminal elements.[26]

Global trends toward the rise of transnational terrorist and extremist networks had also begun to take hold in the Sahel from the late 1990s, capstoned with the rebranding of an Algerian Salafist group as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007 (see Box B on key armed groups).[27] While studies suggest that AQIM and other extremist groups garnered more of their funding from kidnapping for ransom, and (later) illegal taxation of trafficking routes and local communities,[28] there nonetheless were strong patterns of collusion and cooperation between criminal networks and terrorist groups, giving rise to the label of a "narco-terrorist" nexus.[29] This idea of a 'narco-terrorist' nexus in Mali would have an important effect in shaping the way that subsequent international intervention strategies approached transnational organized crime dynamics in Mali.

The rise in trade of more lucrative commodities, and the way that this attracted new actors and protection rackets, intersected in a particularly volatile way with some of the pre-existing State-society conflicts and inter-group competition in the north. Competition to control drug profits had contributed to increasing militarization in northern Mali, with competing groups mobilizing militias to protect their share of the trade. This included increased militarization among Tuareg communities, who bore not only long-standing grievances against the Government but were increasingly seeing these lucrative new trade routes of high-value commodities being taken over by competing groups. Wolfram Lacher observes that while Tuareg uprisings, including one of significance that erupted in 2006 in the border areas with Libya and Niger, were "due to wider political grievances, rivalries over the control of smuggling gradually became more prominent in the dynamics of the conflict."[30]

Following the 2006 Tuareg rebellion (as in many past periods), Malian State leaders attempted to keep hold of the north by playing certain groups off against each other – backing the main competitors of some of those involved in the 2006 rebellion as a way to tip the power balance against them.[31] Instead of helping maintain State authority, however, the strategy arguably backfired – contributing to competition and militarization in the north and increasing Tuareg grievances against the State further.

The Arab Spring in Libya and the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 became the proximate cause that ignited this volatile situation.[32] With the collapse of border controls on the Libyan side, Mali was flooded with an array of arms and advanced weaponry. In addition, armed Tuareg fighters who had been fighting on the Qaddafi side in Libya (some even enlisted within

the Libyan national army) returned to northern Mali equipped with greater training, combat experience, and weaponry.[33] These Tuareg returnees consolidated major Tuareg groups from the north into an umbrella group known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). By late 2011, two other northern armed group movements had coalesced: Ansar Eddine, an AQIM-linked force with strong local Tuareg elements, and a jihadist group based out of Gao, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).

Beginning in January 2012, the MNLA kicked off an offensive that resulted in it, or other jihadist groups, gradually taking control of parts of northern Mali. This was facilitated by internal divisions in the Malian Government: in March 2012, parts of the Malian army who were dissatisfied with the country's leadership (including its mishandling of the security situation in the north) staged a mutiny that blossomed into a coup.[34] With the army's attention divided, the MNLA quickly seized the regional capitals of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu.[35]

Figure 1: Mali as a Transit Point for Hashish and Cocaine Trafficking

This map depicts common trafficking routes (overland and by sea) in the Sahel, illustrating Mali's position as a transit point for hashish and cocaine. This map is a composite depiction of trafficking routes, as they existed between 2012 and 2024, based on publicly available data.[36] However this map should not be considered exhaustive or comprehensive. The boundaries and names shown and the designations on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map illustration by Anastas Petkov.[37]

The MNLA was subsequently overtaken by MUJAO and Ansar Eddine who took control of the three cities (and imposed Sharia law). Northern armed groups then began to advance on Mopti, which sits at the intersection of northern and southern Mali, on the pathway to the capital, Bamako. As a result of both the internal disorder within State institutions and the dramatic loss of territorial control, by mid-summer 2012, the Malian State appeared to be in freefall.

Although trafficking in arms and drugs tends to garner more attention, and was certainly a more prominent driver of the 2012 crisis, other forms of criminality, banditry, and trafficking in goods have also contributed to inter-communal conflicts in Mali, including cattle rustling, human trafficking, natural resource exploitation (such as illegal logging), and wildlife trafficking.[38] Artisanal gold mining, with the gold mined then exported both through licit and illicit channels, has also been a growing phenomenon in Mali (see Box D on gold mining dynamics in the Kayes region).[39] The desire to control this trade has been associated with increased reports of local violence, corruption, human trafficking, and child labour. Overall, these other sectors of illicit trafficking and the associated criminal networks are perceived as both reflecting and driving the weak governance and government dysfunctionality that feed larger conflict dynamics. Greater attention to some of these other forms of crime and trafficking, in particular as relates to agropastoral conflicts and human trafficking, increased over the course of the MINUSMA mission.

Box B: Armed Groups Involved in the Mali Conflict

Below are some of the key armed groups that have taken part in the conflict in Mali. Several are also party to the 2015 Algiers Agreement. This list is not intended to be comprehensive but to highlight some of the key groups discussed.

Jihadist Groups

Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)
AQIM emerged from an Algerian Salafist extremist group that was formed in 1998 (the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat). The group officially pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2006 and renamed itself AQIM in January 2007. Initially based in Algeria, AQIM's activities have shifted to the Sahel region over time, particularly Mali. It capitalized on political instability in 2012 to control key cities in northern Mali, alongside other allied armed groups.

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)/Al-Mourabitoun
MUJAO splintered off from AQIM in October 2011, orienting itself more around Sahelian jihadist ideologies and recruitment. In 2013, it merged with another group, Katibat al-Mulathimeen, to form Al-Mourabitoun, and expanded its area of activities to North Africa and Spain. Following a 2015 split within the group, part of MUJAO became the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), while the remainder joined Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
Led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, ISGS emerged in 2015 as a local ISIS branch and a subgroup of the Islamic State West Africa Province, with operations primarily in the Liptako-Gourma sub-region of the Sahel.

Ansar Eddine
Founded in 2011 by a central figure in Mali's 1990 Tuareg rebellion against the central Government, Ansar Eddine was one of the leading groups (alongside MUJAO, MNLA, and AQIM) to take part in the March 2012 Tuareg offensive that resulted in loss of government control of northern Mali. It remains affiliated with AQIM and is listed under several sanctions regimes.[40] One of its leaders was convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Court in 2016.[41]

Katibat Macina
Also known as the Front de Libération du Macina, Katiba Macina emerged in January 2015. Initially affiliated with Ansar Eddine, it split with the group in 2017 to become an independent and key member of the JNIM coalition. The group is one of Mali's most active jihadist armed groups, operating in various parts of Mopti and conducting attacks in regions further south and west, including Segou and Koulikoro near the Mauritanian border.

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
JNIM was established in 2017 as an umbrella coalition of several al-Qaeda-aligned factions, including Ansar Eddine, AQIM, MUJAO, and Katiba Macina. These groups continue to operate autonomously but collaborate under the JNIM banner, and have collectively claimed responsibility for attacks across Mali.

Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)

Established in 2011, MNLA is a predominantly Tuareg political and military organization that aspires to autonomous rule. A key player in the Tuareg offensive in northern Mali in January 2012, the MNLA occupied part of northern Mali, briefly declaring a new, independent Azawad state in Gao in April 2012. Although initially allied with Ansar Eddine in 2012, the MNLA was later marginalized by the more jihadist groups.

Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA)

Formed in June 2015, the CMA is an umbrella organization including some of the most prominent pro-independence armed groups in Mali, including the MNLA, Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), and a faction of the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad. It is a signatory of the 2015 Algiers Peace Accords.

Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger ("Plateforme")

Also a signatory group of the 2015 Algiers Accords, the Plateforme is an alliance of pro-Government armed groups. Plateforme's main members are GATIA (Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés), MAA-Plateforme, and Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance.

Coordination des Mouvements de l'Entente (CME)

The CME is a loose coalition of mostly localized armed groups (such as MSA-C and Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad)[42] that are not party to the Algiers Agreement, but argue that they should be part of it. Although not a party, they have participated in some aspects of the peace process, such as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives.

International Support and Intervention: Introducing a Range of Actors and Stabilization Efforts

The risk of State collapse, together with increasing concern that Mali had become a "base" for regional terrorist and jihadist groups, galvanized a strong international response.[43] In October 2012, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2071 calling on Member States (specifically those in the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU)) to assist the Government of Mali to reassert control over Malian territory and respond to AQIM.[44] Following on from this, in December 2012, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2085 authorizing an **African-led International Support Mission (AFISMA)** to "support the Malian authorities in recovering the areas in the north of its territory under the control of terrorist, extremist, and armed groups."[45]

AFISMA was to be led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but before AFISMA could deploy, rebel groups waged a substantial offensive in January 2013. The Government of Mali requested immediate support from France, which (also acting under the authority of Security Council resolution 2071) deployed forces in early 2013 under the **counter-terrorism-focused mission Opération Serval**.[46] Opération Serval, which was also supported by Chadian forces, successfully ousted AQIM and other affiliated groups from major cities in the north.[47] It was replaced in August 2014 by a more regionally focused French-led counter-terrorism mission, Opération Barkhane, with forces not only in Mali, but also in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.[48]

With AFISMA at a standstill, there was a need to identify a mission structure that could support peacekeeping efforts to complement these stabilization operations. **In April 2013, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2100 establishing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA)** and authorizing it to absorb forces and responsibilities from AFISMA on 1 July 2013.[49] MINUSMA was designed to be a multidimensional peacekeeping mission, supported with a full range of mission components and additional expertise within the UN Country Team. It was initially allocated up to 11,200 military personnel.[50]

Part II will go into greater detail on the MINUSMA mandate, as well as the mission components, UN Country Team contributions, and other Security Council-authorized elements (such as the sanctions regime) that contributed to efforts against transnational organized crime. However, because these UN efforts worked alongside other international and regional actors who also had a role in countering transnational organized crime, it is important to briefly introduce some of these other actors and initiatives.

Bilateral and Multilateral Initiatives by Western States

In addition to supporting counter-terrorism operations, Western States responded to the crisis by dramatically increasing their bilateral or multilateral foreign assistance to the Malian Government and forces, with a heavy focus on counter-terrorism, stabilization, and (to a lessor extent) rule of law and border control initiatives.

European Member States played a leading role. Following the initial French deployment under Opération Serval, the EU authorized an **EU Training Mission (EUTM)** on 17 January 2013, with the goal of training and supporting the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) to restore Malian control over territory and respond to terrorist groups.[51] Although primarily focused on counter-terrorism activities, it included some efforts to respond to those parts of organized crime associated with the so-called 'crime-terror' nexus. In April 2014 the EU also authorized a civilian training mission known as the **EUCAP Sahel Mali**, focused on strengthening civilian security forces, including the police, gendarmerie, and the national guard.[52] A substantial part of the EUCAP activities involved training, capacity-building, and technical support to justice and law enforcement officials, including as relates to countering trafficking and organized criminal networks (although this was not an explicit focus). Individual Member States (notably Germany and the United Kingdom (UK)) also bilaterally supported a range of other military support, stabilization, and justice and governance activities that might be considered part of the multilateral response to organized crime and illicit trafficking issues.[53]

The United States (US) also provided substantial support in Mali and the region, leading a number of counter-terrorism initiatives, as well as other stabilization, border control, and governance initiatives.[54] US State Department assistance to Mali, for example, spiked from just over $1 million in 2011 to $20.4 million in 2012, and remained at high levels until US internal regulations forced a cut in funding following a 2020 military coup in Mali.[55] This included high levels of funding for the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and the Department of Defense International Military Education & Training Fund, two funds that supported various forms of training and capacity-building to both the military and civilian components of Mali's security services. In addition to an overall emphasis throughout this period on stabilization and counter-terrorism support, US State Department support from 2012 to 2016 gave substantial funding for the UN mission and other forms of humanitarian aid, more than for the above counter-terrorism and military

training funds.[56] While not the primary focus, some of the State Department assistance and programming had a nexus with addressing regional trafficking, counter-narcotics, and counter-crime.

Regional Member State Cooperation and Support

Beyond the short-lived AFISMA effort, regional and pan-African engagement in Mali continued through contributions to the MINUSMA mission, other diplomatic engagement and coordination via ECOWAS and the AU, and bilateral efforts by Mali's neighbours. In 2013, the AU introduced the **Nouakchott Process**, a regional framework for encouraging cooperation and coordination on counter-terrorism and transnational organized crime.[57] It regularly brought together intelligence services, military chiefs of staff, and other security officials from North Africa (Algeria and Libya), the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Mali), the Lake Chad Basin (Niger and Nigeria), and littoral West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Senegal).

ECOWAS, the AU, and Algeria (alongside the UN, EU, France, and the US) were also crucial in helping to facilitate the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, also known as the "Algiers Agreement" in recognition of Algeria's mediating role. The **Algiers Agreement** brokered a peace between the Government of Mali, the CMA, and the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger (the "Platform") (see further in Box B).[58] However, implementation of key provisions lagged from the start, in particular government concessions on decentralization and regionalization, which were key demands of northern armed groups.[59]

In addition, in 2014, largely in response to the Mali crisis, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel Joint Force as a regional framework for cooperation on security and development in the Sahel. In 2017, Mali became the site of the G5 Sahel's first regional operation. G5 Sahel States jointly deployed several thousand military and police personnel as part of a **G5 Sahel Task Force**, to work in partnership with MINUSMA and other bilateral forces.[60] The G5 Sahel Task Force's mandate included "combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking," and "eradicating the actions of terrorist armed groups and other organized criminal groups," among its key priorities.[61] Some reflections on the experience of the G5 Sahel Task Force, and insights for proposals for regional enforcement models are discussed further in the analysis and conclusion sections, and in Box E.

III. MINUSMA's Role in Countering Transnational Organized Crime: From Mandates to Operational Capacities (and Limitations)

Although the multilateral initiatives and actors introduced above all had some scope to address transnational organized crime, or associated trafficking networks, this was never the priority. In addition to lacking a clear mandate to fully address transnational organized crime, a range of operational and political challenges ultimately constrained the ability of MINUSMA and its partners to achieve much on this issue. Nonetheless, because many of the tools and mechanisms that tend to be recommended as means of better addressing transnational organized crime and trafficking were present in Mali, examining how this devolved offers lessons learned for future multilateral efforts to counter organized crime in conflict-affected areas.

This section will first introduce the ways that transnational organized crime and related trafficking was approached within MINUSMA's mandate and operationalized, at least on paper. It will then assess some of the challenges and deficits associated with these different mechanisms, tools, and responses across two key phases, followed by some overall reflections and lessons learned. Throughout, the focus will be on MINUSMA and related UN efforts, but efforts by other multilateral actors will also be referenced, as relevant.

Mandates and Capacities to Address Transnational Organized Crime

MINUSMA's mandate and remit evolved substantially over its decade-long operation. While combating organized crime and related illicit activities was never the central focus of MINUSMA's mandate, these conflict drivers were recognized in Security Council resolutions related to Mali to a greater degree than in many other peacekeeping missions.[62] Concern about the "serious threats posed by transnational organized crime in the Sahel region" was acknowledged from the first Security Council resolution authorizing MINUSMA in 2013.[63] Similar language and attention to the issue of transnational organized crime and related trafficking continued throughout all the resolutions renewing the MINUSMA mandate, but with varying degrees of emphasis in terms of which entities should bear primary responsibility. In 2013, in one of

the UN Secretary-General's first reports influencing the focus and strategy of MINUSMA, emphasis was placed on "the fight against corruption and organized crime" as a key governance challenge, although the evidence suggests that this was not in fact taken up as a priority.[64] Instead, from 2013 to 2017, where transnational organized crime was referenced in Security Council mandates, the emphasis was on regional actors and cooperation (such as the G5 Sahel) and other Member States' efforts to combat "the proliferation of all arms and transnational organized crime."[65] MINUSMA's role in this 2013 to 2017 period was to support regional efforts, by strengthening the ability of Mali's authorities to counter arms trafficking.[66] However, at this point, it was not set as a priority task within the mandate.

From 2017 on, there was greater mention of transnational organized crime in the mandate, and some additional tools brought to bear, although still not to the level that made it a clear operational priority for the mission. In 2017, the Security Council created a **sanctions regime for Mali**, with designation criteria that included those who engaged in hostilities, obstructed implementation of the Algiers Agreement, or supported such activities through "the proceeds from organized crime, including the production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and their precursors originating in or transiting through Mali, the trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, the smuggling and trafficking of arms as well as the trafficking in cultural property."[67] Once the sanctions regime was established in 2017, MINUSMA was also mandated to assist the Sanctions Committee and Panel of Experts, implicitly including support for collecting information based on the listing criteria of financing through organized crime (See also Box C on other sanctions regimes in Mali).[68]

From 2018, countering transnational organized crime was positioned within the MINUSMA mandate as one of the priority tasks, under the umbrella of activities in support of the peace process and the mission's criminal justice support.[69] MINUSMA was tasked with supporting Malian judicial and corrections authorities in detaining, investigating, and prosecuting individuals responsible for "terrorism-related crimes, mass atrocities and transnational organized crime activities."[70] The 2018

resolution renewing MINUSMA called particular attention to other multilateral resources and efforts, requesting MINUSMA to work in coordination with the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to "enhance its awareness of the financial sources of conflicts in Mali, including trafficking in persons, arms, drugs and natural resources, and the smuggling of migrants, and of its implication on the regional security environment."[71] These direct references to countering transnational organized crime in MINUSMA's 2018 mandate must be noted, but their significance should not be overstated. Particularly given the way that this priority task was cabined by its association with counter-terrorism, and folded within broader justice and peace process support activities, this certainly was not viewed within the mission as a clear mandate to tackle organized crime writ large.

Box C: A Range of Multilateral Sanctions for Mali

The UN sanctions regime in Mali is often held up as an example of how sanctions practices are evolving to deal with sources of transnational threats, such as transnational organized crime. However, it certainly was not the sole sanctions regime at play. A number of other regional organizations and individual Member States, including ECOWAS, the US, the EU, and the UK, all established various forms of sanctions with regard to Mali. Following the 2020 and 2021 coups and the military junta's December 2021 decision to postpone the electoral timeline, ECOWAS imposed substantial sanctions – including the closure of land and air borders, the suspension of financial transactions and economic flows between Mali and other Member States, and targeted sanctions such as travel bans and asset freezes for Malian leaders designated as impeding the transition process.[72] Although less all-encompassing, the EU adopted a sanctions regime on similar grounds following the coups, and in February 2022, it listed five key leaders following the December 2021 postponement of elections and democratic transition.[73] Most of the ECOWAS sanctions were lifted in June 2022, following the junta's commitment to a new electoral timeline and transition plan, and the remainder in February 2024.[74]

The US and the UK also created sanctions regimes applicable to Mali, but so far the designated individuals have been listed primarily based on violations of human rights or humanitarian law, on links with terrorist groups, or financing or links with the Wagner Group. Malian leaders have been included in some of these listings, primarily in relation to their support for the Wagner Group (rather than in relation to undemocratic transfers of power and practices). For example, in July 2023 the US Department of the Treasury announced travel bans and financial sanctions against senior Malian military and defence officials (including the Minister of Defense) on the grounds of "facilitating the deployment and expansion of the Wagner Group's activities in Mali."[75]

Both the US and UK sanctions regimes for Mali include specific listing criteria related to transnational organized crime and trafficking. The US sanctions regime includes the following listing criteria: "(H) The illicit production or trafficking of narcotics or their precursors originating or transiting through Mali; (I) Trafficking in persons, smuggling migrants, or trafficking or smuggling arms illicitly."[76] The UK sanctions regime criteria includes as a basis "the production in Mali of narcotic drugs and their precursors; the smuggling or trafficking into, through or from Mali of persons, cultural property, arms or material related to arms, or narcotic drugs and their precursors."[77]

Within sanctions practice more broadly, it is typical for the sanctions regimes of Member States or regional oganizations to be designed to extend the effect of UN sanctions, effectively translating UN Security Council-authorized sanctions into domestic law. In some cases, they will also introduce supplementary sanctions, sometimes referred to as "gold plating," which offers additional bases or listing criteria beyond what was approved by the Security Council.[78] The UK and EU sanctions regimes offer examples of both, with the introduction of these regimes and certain listing decisions referencing UN sanctions, but not with identical results.[79] The linkage with the UN sanctions created an interesting dilemma when the Security Council authority for the Mali sanctions regime lapsed at the end of 2023.[80] Following this the Council of the EU extended its sanctions regime and many of the listings for a further year.[81] The UK continued its sanctions regime, but following the ending of the UN sanctions regime, it removed five individuals who appeared to have been listed in association with it.[82] The lapse of the UN sanction regime does not appear to have influenced subsequent changes in US Treasury Department rules or listing criteria.[83]

A final point of interest on the mandates is that from 2019 to 2022, Security Council resolutions placed the onus on armed groups with regard to transnational organized crime, demanding "that all armed groups reject violence [and] cut off all ties with terrorist organizations and transnational organized crime."[84]

These Security Council mandates and authorities were operationalized primarily through a range of training, support, and capacity-building initiatives with Malian institutions.[85] From the earliest period of the mission, United Nations Police (UNPOL) officers, alongside members of MINUSMA's Justice and Corrections and Security Sector Reform divisions, were engaged in initiatives to strengthen policing, law enforcement, and judicial capacities.[86] These training and institutional support efforts were not only taken on by MINUSMA personnel, but also by members of the UN Country Team, such as UNODC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).[87] There was a similar emphasis on capacity-building and technical support, as well as interdiction strategies or criminal justice approaches within other bilateral or multilateral support efforts, for example, within the EUCAP Sahel mission supported by the EU, and in activities spearheaded by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement within the US State Department.[88]

Across both UN and other bilateral efforts, much of the focus was on general support to policing, security sector reform, and judicial institutions, but over time some attention was given to more specialized policing and judicial support related to counter organized crime and trafficking. For example, by 2021, combating organized crime and preventing corruption was identified as one of the priority areas for EUCAP, operationalized largely through support to government ministries and institutions as well as engagement with other stakeholders.[89] Secretary-General reporting on the mission from 2015 on increasingly references UNPOL and MINUSMA efforts on countering organized crime and terrorism.[90] After the Security Council mandate was expanded in 2018 to emphasize UNODC's role, and UNODC opened an office in Bamako in 2020, it provided more focused expertise to help Malian institutions strengthen their "criminal justice response to trafficking."[91] This included greater monitoring and reporting, more specialized training for law enforcement and members of the judiciary (including in conjunction with regional partners and initiatives), support for anti-trafficking legislation and other means of encouraging enforcement of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, regional dialogue and information exchange initiatives, as well as other governmental support and civil society initiatives on themes related to countering organized crime, corruption, and terrorism.[92]

In addition to these regular operational activities, there were a number of special units or initiatives within the MINUSMA mission related to specialized policing and judicial support, and intelligence collection and analysis. These are important to note because they reflect the sort of mechanisms or tools that scholars and practitioners have recommended as ways to strengthen multilateral responses to transnational organized crime. Examples of these special mechanisms or initiatives include:

- **Specialized policing and judicial capacities**: One response to transnational organized crime – already tested and enacted in a growing number of mission contexts – has been to deploy specialized police units, which come not only with more tailored knowledge but also bring additional resources and training capacities that may be more attuned to responding to transnational organized crime.[93] Another common recommendation is to buttress – even in some cases on a "rapid support" or "surge" basis – the specialized judicial capacities within missions.[94] There were examples of both of these tools within the MINUSMA mission. In 2016, UNPOL within MINUSMA, along with justice and corrections components, UNODC, and other partners collaborated to support a "specialized judicial unit on terrorism and transnational organized crime."[95] From 2018, several iterations of specialized police teams were mobilized within MINUSMA, supporting specialized functions related to evidence collection, forensics, and criminal intelligence that would arguably contribute to the mission's mandated "priority task" of supporting the investigation and prosecution of those involved in organized crime.[96]

- **Intelligence and analytical capacities**: Another long-standing recommendation to strengthen responses to organized crime has been to improve joint data collection and analytical capabilities on political-economy dynamics.[97] This includes an ability to conduct robust mapping of criminal networks and illicit markets, as well as ways to analyse how these trends affect armed conflict dynamics, protection risks, and other mission priorities in real-time. On this front, scholar Arthur Boutellis notes that MINUSMA "benefited from unprecedented information collection and analysis capabilities for a UN peacekeeping operation," notably on organized crime.[98] From its inception, MINUSMA included a joint mission analysis center (JMAC), a joint civilian-military unit that is designed to provide the mission with integrated analysis to support mission planning and decision-making.[99] MINUSMA's force commander also benefited from an All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), an

intelligence unit modelled after NATO intelligence fusion cells and designed to support tactical and operational decision-making.[100] The latter even briefly included a dedicated analyst on organized crime.[101]

- **Sanctions and sanctions monitoring regimes:** Sanctions regimes are seen as a potentially powerful political-economic tool, both for the way that sanctions can constrain economic drivers of conflict (including illicit trafficking in arms and other conflict contributors), and because the associated panels of experts effectively provide a sort of political-economy intelligence that can better inform responses.[102] The sanctions regime in Mali, and the accompanying work of the Panel of Experts, are particularly notable because of their specific designation criteria related to trafficking and smuggling activities.[103] One study comparing this and other listing criteria across nine sanctions regimes noted that of the three individuals listed for organized crime and illicit trafficking across the nine sanctions regimes active in 2023, two were in Mali.[104]

In sum, on paper at least, the mission was set up to have a robust response to transnational organized crime – appropriate to the recognition that these issues were central to conflict drivers in Mali. Yet in practice this did not prove to be the case. Despite its categorization from 2018 onward as a "priority task," countering transnational organized crime was never more than a third or fourth tier priority, in a mission that was increasingly consumed by other political and operational crises. This led to a lack of sufficient resourcing and political imperative behind any efforts to counter transnational organized crime. Meanwhile, the persistent association with terrorist financing (as opposed to treating organized crime as an issue in its own right) led to an overly narrow approach.

To understand these different factors, the subsequent sections will discuss the overall trajectory of mission priorities and political dynamics in two periods, and how some of the above mandated tasks or initiatives related to transnational organized crime fit into those. This will be followed by a summary discussion of what this meant for efforts to tackle organized crime and trafficking, or to consider them within overall mission approaches.

Early Years: Not the Political Priority, and Possibly a Challenge to It

In the early years of MINUSMA's operations, although countering transnational organized crime was recognized

as a conflict driver, the greater focus of the mission was on restoring constitutional order following the March 2012 coup (e.g., support to the 2013 elections) and then the peace process that led to the 2015 Algiers Agreement.[105] From 2015 on, the focus shifted to supporting implementation of the Algiers Agreement and strengthening the extension of State authority, including through a more robust peacekeeping mandate.

While there was recognition that transnational organized crime and trafficking dynamics were deeply embedded in the political networks and contestation that would determine whether the peace process endured, the very centrality of these issues to the political-economy of the conflict made them almost too sensitive to touch. Organized crime was an "unspoken factor" during the negotiation of the Algiers Agreement, but was studiously avoided because of the link with armed group financing, and thus any effort to address it would have threatened the interests of many involved.[106] Many of the trafficking routes and sectors were dominated not by terrorist groups but by criminal networks more closely linked to the three main parties to the Algiers Agreement, the CMA, the Platform, and indirectly or clandestinely, parts of Mali's Government and the FAMA.[107]

In later years, asking hard questions about organized crime and trafficking that implicated parties to the Algiers Agreement could have disrupted efforts to bring armed groups along in the disarmament or demobilization process, or could simply have scuppered larger trust-building and cooperation efforts with the Government and non-governmental parties involved. Many Malian leaders did not see many sectors of organized crime and illicit trafficking as a significant threat – indeed many senior leaders and lower-level officials were benefiting from it.[108] "Everybody was involved – government officials, signatory armed groups, maybe even our own staff members. The mission already had so many problems, that it wasn't willing to risk it," one former MINUSMA officer summarized.[109]

This is not to suggest that MINUSMA officials were unaware of these dynamics, nor that they completely neglected attention to organized crime in the political activities of the mission. For example, between 2015 and 2017, MINUSMA's political section helped facilitate a series of local peace deals designed to reduce competition and conflict surrounding drug trafficking, part of its activities to support "bottom-up" peace efforts and demobilization and disarmament.[110] These stand out as a positive example of a mission integrating political-economy considerations into its mediation and political strategy. Nonetheless, the Anéfis 1 and 2 Agreements (as they were known) were relatively limited

local compacts, within a larger strategy that was more focused on keeping the peace process afloat, even if it meant looking the other way on government or signatory groups' complicity.[111] As one expert observed: "The focus was more on keeping everyone on board in the peace process and these issues [organized crime and trafficking] were seen as a factor that would derail the peace process."[112]

Another frequently cited factor limiting efforts on transnational organized crime in these early years was the overall counter-terrorism lens that infused

the international intervention in Mali. Given the UN mandate, MINUSMA was not a counter-terrorism mission. Nonetheless, to some degree MINUSMA – as well as the other civilian agencies and multilateral initiatives that would be essential to any counter-crime strategy – were affected by the overall security-centric approach and counter-terrorism lens. Countering sources of terrorism was given a much more central voice in the Security Council mandates for MINUSMA than, for example, countering crime or strengthening governance.

Figure 2: Armed Group Control and Key Arms and Migrant Trafficking Sites.
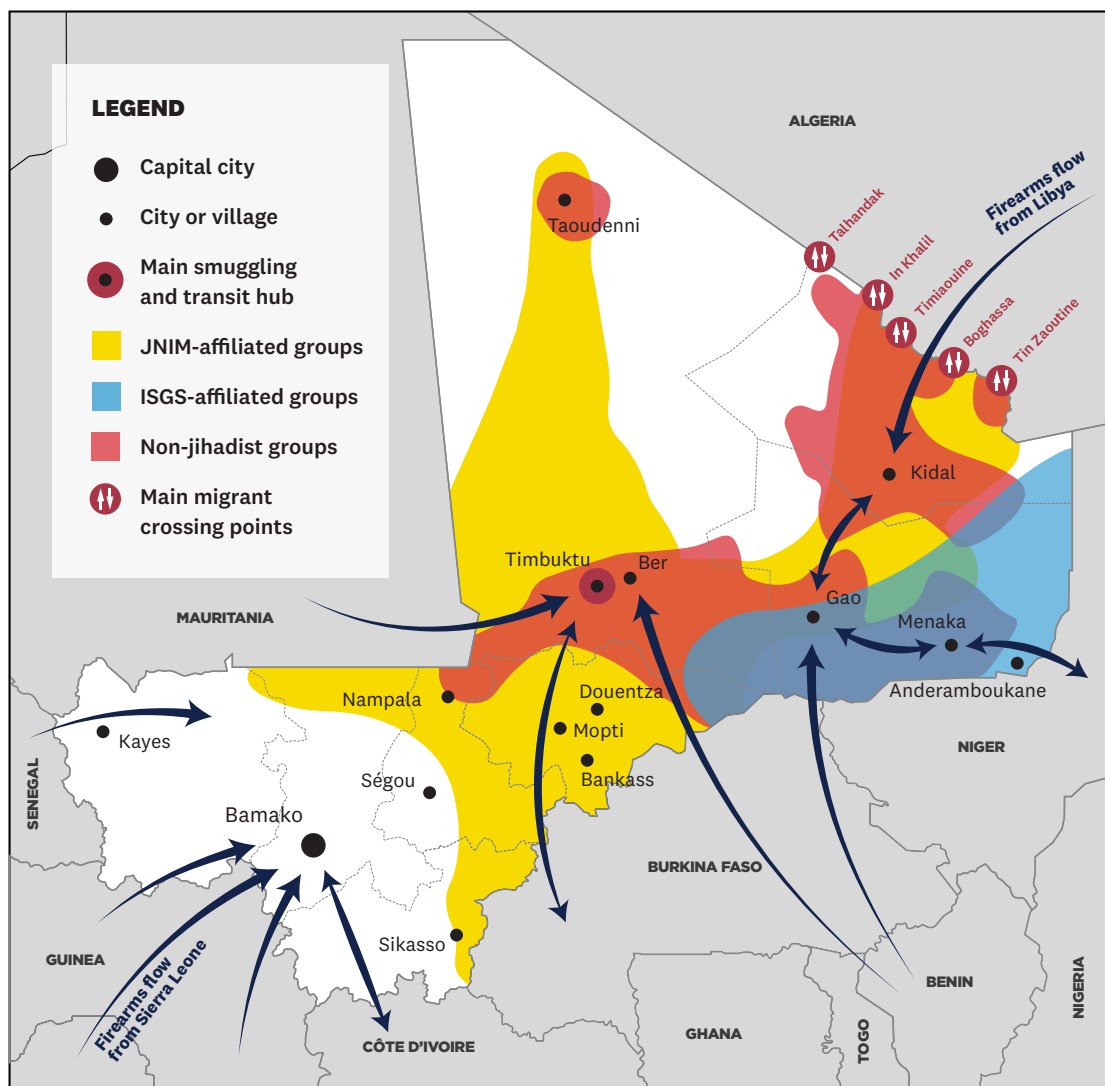
This map depicts the areas controlled by armed groups and key cities mentioned in the text. It also highlights some of the key firearm trafficking routes and human smuggling points and transit hubs. While areas of control frequently fluctuate, the map illustrates general control patterns in 2022–2023, based on data from a number of monitoring sources.[113] This map should not be considered exhaustive or comprehensive. The boundaries and names shown and the designations on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map illustration by Anastas Petkov.[114]

Creating enemies among well-connected trafficking networks might also have compromised the mission's ability to respond to other operational threats. One expert observed that when it came to negotiating the release of kidnapping victims – a significant phenomenon in Mali – prominent drug trafficking figures with links to armed groups often served as intermediaries: "So the fight against organized crime was compromised in that way – they were needed for other purposes."[115]

As a result of this overall focus, those working in the mission noted that where the issue of organized crime arose it tended to be within discussions of terrorist financing, or limited to organized crime that could be linked to terrorist groups (as opposed to other actors), rather than treated as a key issue or priority in itself.[116] Many of the operational capacities identified above – for example, the more robust intelligence and analytical units like the NATO-style intelligence fusion cell AFISU – were there by virtue of counter-terrorism concerns, or at least were linked to them. In both the mandate language and in their operationalization transnational organized crime tended to only be brought to the fore in conjunction with or adjacent to counter-terrorism efforts. The specialized judicial unit noted above is an example of this, mandated to address "terrorism and transnational organized crime" as a joint issue. The same could be observed in other multilateral stabilization, military, and rule of law efforts. For example, although the G5 Sahel Task Force did have a notable emphasis on organized crime within its mandate, the language, and subsequent operationalization, always linked the issue to counter-terrorism.[117]

Focusing only on one set of actors involved – those with terrorist affiliations – did little to shift the overall entrenched system of organized crime and trafficking, and may even have made efforts less effective by creating a false narrative of success. Scholar Peter Tinti provided an example of this from this early period, focusing on the effects of French military intervention via Opération Serval in stemming the flow of illicit trafficking in northern Mali. French operations were largely focused on those they identified as Islamist terrorist groups, and largely succeeded in ousting AQIM and MUJAO (two of their main targets) from holding territory. However, narco-traffickers who did not have affiliations with these groups "largely remained in place." Meanwhile, some of those previously affiliated with Islamist groups were able to avoid being targeted by reforming and denouncing the groups they were previously involved in. Rather than "turning the page" on organized crime and trafficking with the ouster of these terrorist groups, Tinti concludes, it was business as usual.[118]

Later Years: Declining Political and Security Space

Beginning in 2017, there was a greater emphasis on countering transnational organized crime in Security Council mandates, for example, with the creation of the sanctions regime in 2017, the elevation of countering transnational organized crime as one of MINUSMA's priority tasks in 2018, and with Security Council references to some of MINUSMA's other partners in this area of work (UNODC and the G5 Sahel Task Force, among others).[119] Yet it would be a mistake to assume that these changes substantially elevated countering transnational organized crime to a chief mission priority. Those who served in the mission observed that this addition to the mandate should not be viewed as a "game-changer" in terms of positioning the mission to more concertedly address transnational organized crime; it was simply adding further tasks onto an already complex mandate.[120] Transnational organized crime continued to be treated primarily as a contextual factor within the broader mission focus and direction, and as a lower priority "add-on" in terms of the mission's operations. Rapidly deteriorating security and political dynamics increasingly made it an "add-on" that fell by the wayside.

As a first matter, despite its seeming elevation, efforts to counter transnational organized crime were still cabined by the linkage with counter-terrorism. For example, although the mandates from 2018 onward elevated countering organized crime as a priority task, it was only as part of law enforcement and judicial support efforts to counter "terrorism-related crimes, mass atrocities and transnational organized crime activities."[121] In mandate language from 2019 to 2022, the Security Council demanded that armed groups "cut off all ties with terrorist organizations and transnational organized crime".[122] The linkage with terrorism was always there, and in practice, was usually given priority.

In addition, while there was greater capacity (nominally) to counter transnational crime from 2018 on there were also greater constraints on the misson's political and security space to do so. By 2018, the conflict had shifted from being primarily focused on the north to central Mali, where there were significant armed group attacks and terrorist strongholds. Levels of violence and conflict also escalated dramatically in this period. Between November 2018 and March 2019, Mali experienced a 300 per cent increase in "reported fatalities linked to direct attacks targeting civilians."[123] The main perpetrators were jihadist groups, particularly JNIM in northern and central Mali and ISGS in the Mali-Burkina Faso border region.[124] However, the FAMA, and a number of local self-defence

organizations were also involved in the fighting, including attacks that resulted in substantial civilian casualties.[125]

Amid this escalation in the violence, "robust peacekeeping" and ways to address these protection challenges became the greater priority, in addition to force self-protection. Peacekeepers were themselves coming under attack – from armed groups, but also from improvised explosive devices and other threats.[126] By 2021, MINUSMA had become the deadliest modern peacekeeping mission, with 268 peacekeepers killed.[127] By 2023, some 80 per cent of the MINUSMA force's operational capacity was devoted to protecting convoys, personnel, and equipment, leaving little capacity to deal with other mission priorities.[128] This limited the degree to which key elements of the mandate could be carried out. The threats to peacekeepers also increased the number of "undisclosed caveats" or restrictions that troop contributing countries placed on their deployment of peacekeepers.[129] Amidst these fast deteriorating security dynamics, there was limited bandwidth – and physical operating space – to take forward the many "priority tasks" loaded on to MINUSMA's mandate, including but certainly not limited to countering transnational organized crime.

In addition to these security pressures, MINUSMA's political operating space began to shrink rapidly after two military coups in 2020 and 2021, which brought into power Colonel Assimi Goita as the new transitional President. At the end of 2021, Goita's regime suspended planned 2022 elections, and announced they would postpone them for five years. Goita's position vis-à-vis elections, as well as his increasing disregard (and ultimate abrogation in January 2024) of the Algiers Agreement, undercut what were arguably the two key political pillars of the MINUSMA mission.

The introduction of the Wagner Group (since renamed Africa Corps) in Mali from late 2021 – and the shift in government strategy that it signalled – widened the distance between the Malian Government and its international partners, including MINUSMA. This would have repercussions for MINUSMA's ability to carry out a range of mission tasks and functions, including but not limited to those related to countering transnational organized crime. Goita had critiqued MINUSMA as well as other international partners for failing to take aggressive enough action to address Mali's security challenges. Beginning in late 2021, the Goita Government signalled its intent to take a different direction, signing a contract with the Russian private military company formerly known as the Wagner Group for security services. From late 2021 onward, the Wagner Group reportedly began deploying some 800 to 1000 personnel to Mali.[130]

Although on paper simply a private contract between the Malian Government and a Russian security provider, the record of the Wagner Group in other countries (for example, in the Central African Republic), as well as the accompanying flood of anti-French and anti-MINUSMA propaganda and disinformation that accompanied the Wagner Group's arrival in Mali, lent a much greater significance to the new security partnership. In February 2022, French President Emanuel Macron announced that French troops would withdraw from Mali, citing differences with the Mali Government, including over its partnership with the Wagner Group.[131]

The interjection of the Wagner Group forces into the dynamics in Mali had considerable knock-on effects for MINUSMA's ability to carry out its mandate. Throughout 2022, Wagner Group personnel established a presence across different parts of the country, and were increasingly engaged in training and joint security operations with the FAMA.[132] Reports of abuses of civilians trailed many of these joint operations, but when MINUSMA's human rights unit attempted to investigate these reports, they were obstructed from doing so.[133] The most notable case concerned a massacre of several hundred men in Moura, in central Mali, by a contingent of FAMA and Wagner Group forces in March 2022.[134] MINUSMA efforts to investigate the Moura massacre and other human rights incidents further contributed to tensions with the Government of Mali, leading the Government to officially state that it would no longer cooperate with MINUSMA on that part of its mandate, and to declare the head of MINUSMA's human rights unit *persona non grata* in February 2023.[135] In addition, the sensitivity surrounding the Wagner Group forces operating jointly with FAMA appeared to be contributing to other limitations in the mission's operating space and access. After the introduction of Wagner Group forces in Mali, MINUSMA and Country Team members experienced a number of restrictions on their operations, from halts in air clearances to joint Wagner Group-FAMA forces limiting the access and movement of convoys and humanitarian actors.[136]

While not the sole factor feeding differences with the Malian Government, the introduction of the Wagner Group certainly limited the mission's operating space and the degree to which it could count on government consent and cooperation in its final years of operation. The geopolitical tensions surrounding the Wagner Group are also cited as one of the reasons for the abrupt ending of MINUSMA and also for the lapse of the Mali sanctions regime in August 2023, after the Russian Federation vetoed a resolution to renew its mandate.[137]

One last important note given the subject of this paper is the direct involvement of the Wagner Group and its affiliates in sectors related to illicit trafficking and organized crime. While the contract terms for the Wagner Group's operations in Mali are not publicly disclosed, some of Mali's gold mines have come under the control of the Wagner Group, leading to the suggestion that they may have been partially remunerated in the form of mining licenses (as has happened in other countries).[138] As discussed below in Box D, foreign actors' control of many gold mining sites further complicates efforts at regulation and enforcement.

Box D: The Promise and Pitfalls of Gold: Local Perspectives on Gold Mining and Trafficking

One of the challenges of effectively countering the effects of organized crime and trafficking is that the issues surrounding each sector, even in each locality, are so varied. In addition, while much of the focus has been on the negative effects of such criminal activity – the way that illicit trade in drugs and arms have supported armed groups and driven militarization in northern Mali – many sectors of the illicit economy are a vital lifeline to communities, and even have the potential to attenuate conflict drivers.

Mali's gold mining sector illustrates this tension. Mali is one of the top gold producers in West Africa. Gold production is also a vital lifeline for communities and for State coffers, constituting more than 80 per cent of total exports in 2021, and conservatively supporting the income of more than 2 million people.[139] But much of Mali's gold is extracted through artisanal mining, and then exported through illicit networks, often to the greater enrichment of criminal networks and armed groups than local communities.[140]

These illicit economy dynamics and overall weak regulation of the industry have contributed to instability, local conflict, and other human security consequences in gold-producing communities – including spikes in local criminality and robbery, human trafficking and child labour (in the artisanal mines), as well as exacerbating issues of government corruption.[141] Mali's defence and security forces tend to be focused on the more conflict- and terrorism-prone areas and have limited presence around artisanal mining sites. This limited law enforcement capacity, together with the vested interests of some government officials and international firms and actors (including the Africa Corps – formerly known as the Wagner Group) in mining sites have led to few curbs on criminality or violence.[142] Communities have sometimes stepped in to fill the void, creating child protection committees at a village and commune level, but argued these were no substitute for effective State protection and enforcement.[143]

However, there is also promise that the gold sector could be a stabilizing rather than destabilizing force. Analysts hypothesized that from one perspective, a well-regulated gold production and export market could be a boon to the peace process.[144] A productive local sector that offered alternative livelihoods for former combatants (among others) could help facilitate and sustain DDR processes.[145] For example, some reporting suggests that some local CMA-linked armed groups around Kidal have abandoned armed conflict since 2017 to focus on artisanal gold mining.[146] Stronger regulation could also help address other drivers of local conflict and exploitation, including poverty and underdevelopment, and create means of monitoring and enforcement related to human trafficking and child labour.

Interviews with local officials in Kidal, one of the centres of gold production in Mali,[147] suggested that formalization of the sector is easier said than done. Nationally, Mali's Government has introduced policies to regulate the mining sector and address abuses such as human trafficking, notably the National Policy Document for the Development of the Mining and Petroleum Sector (2019–2023) and the National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons (2023–2027).[148] However, local enforcement is hindered by budget constraints and in some cases local complicity.[149] Local officials offered one example in which local security officials seized the equipment from an illegal Chinese mining site; some time later the seized machines went up for public auction and were bought back by the same Chinese company which then simply resumed operations "as if nothing happened."[150]

Complex bureaucratic processes are also a hurdle to formalization of the sector.[151] To obtain legal permission to extract and then export gold involves an almost labyrinthine process of filing administrative documents – beyond the capacity of many in the local artisanal mining sector. This regulatory environment favours industrial mining companies, which have the capacity to go through such administrative processes or pay bribes to get around them. In key mining areas in Mali, many of these are linked to Chinese operators or other foreign companies, creating local resentment at this perceived favouritism toward foreign actors.[152]

The dilemmas surrounding regulation of the gold sector in Mali help illustrate the challenge of improving multilateral efforts to counter the negative effects of organized crime and trafficking, with each sector invoking different regulatory or enforcement challenges, which must be synched with larger governance and development approaches to succeed.

Figure 3: Mali's Gold Deposits and Mines
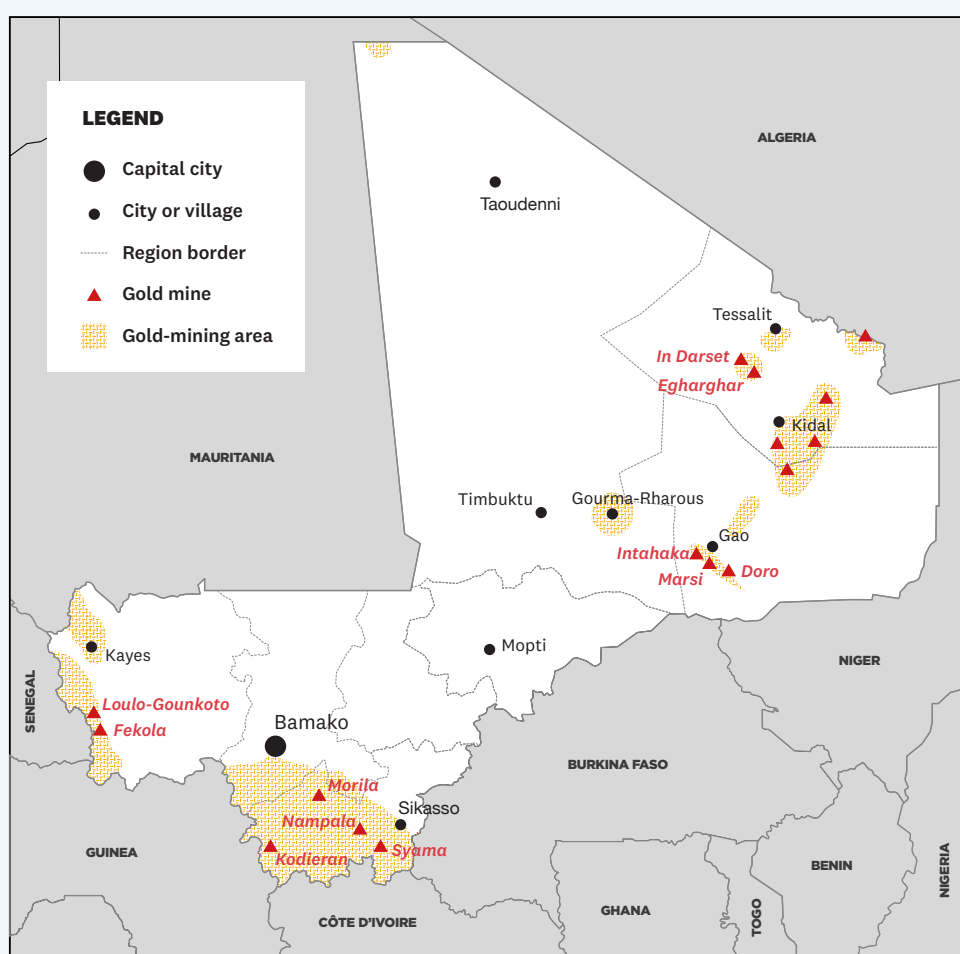
The Kayes and Sikassao regions are Mali's most productive gold-mining areas. Since the 1990s, there has also been a "gold boom" in the North following the discovery of new deposits near Gao and Kidal. This map is a composite depiction of gold deposits and mines based on reliable data.[153] The triangle icon in the map indicates industrial mines, while the gold-shaded areas indicates areas where artisanal mines are prevalent. The boundaries and names shown and the designations on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map illustration by Anastas Petkov.[154]

Cumulative Effects on Countering Organized Crime and Trafficking

With all of these political and later security issues, it is perhaps not surprising to note that an issue that was viewed as a lower priority mission task was not adequately resourced or politicaly empowered to achieve its objectives. Although there were many efforts to strengthen the Government of Mali's ability to counter organized crime and trafficking on paper, these were substantially limited by the political constraints and focus, as well as by limitations in resourcing and capacity for this very specialized issue. Some of the key limitations of multilateral efforts to counter organized crime included:

A tendency to segregate organized crime sectors to technical and counter-terrorism-linked capacities: As observed above, from the earliest years of the mission, there was a tension between recognition that organized crime and trafficking were key drivers to the conflict, and that doing anything about it – beyond those elements related to terrorist financing – was incredibly sensitive politically. This led to a de facto division of labour, in which the more delicate questions surrounding transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking were desegregated from the larger political focus and left to more technical capacity-building functions (rule of law and policing support) or to other parts of the UN system with some distance from the mission. One expert noted that because of the clear linkages between the State, armed groups, and traffickers "there was almost a preference to hand that tricky issue to the Panel [of experts]."[155] Even this division of labour could trigger sensitivities, for example, when the Panel of Experts documented collusion of parties to the Algiers Agreement in trafficking, and even listed some prominent CMA officials. Compliance with the travel ban and asset freeze "became a headache for the mission because it singled out people involved who were sitting around the table," one former MINUSMA officer observed.[156]

In addition to segregating these efforts to more technical elements of the mission, political sensitives (together with the overall counter-terrorism focus) meant that efforts to counter transnational organized crime largely focused on those sectors or illicit activities linked to terrorist financing. This was problematic because, given how prominent illicit networks were within the political-economy in Mali, it proved impossible to address their linkage with conflict drivers (including poor governance and corruption) by focusing only on one sector, one set of actors, or one particular aspect of organized crime.

Countering organized crime was "one issue among many" in the policing sector: An additional challenge

from the view of those working in those technical rule of law and policing sectors was the limited resourcing in proportion to the scale of the challenge. Although there were units, initiatives, and special mechanisms created to support criminal justice (policing and judiciary) responses to transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking, this was only one subset or issue within a much broader array of challenges within Mali's security and justice sector. Although MINUSMA enjoyed a large UNPOL contribution, and also benefited from other bilateral and multilateral police and security sector support, for example through EUCAP, the main focus of multilateral efforts was strengthening regular police, the national guard, and gendarmerie.[157] Improving regular policing, and ensuring sufficient police presence and accountability across the country, was already a significant challenge. Several former MINUSMA officers and other observers interviewed suggested that by 2023, ten years into such efforts, the Malian State still struggled to carry out national policing at a basic level of functionality and accountability across the country.[158]

Amidst such large deficits in regular policing capacities, work on countering transnational organized crime or related trafficking networks represented a "very niche and particular topic," and one that therefore received very little designated attention (or possibly none at all for certain periods).[159] One former MINUSMA staff member based outside of Bamako observed that the range of competing priorities and tasks meant that in practice nothing was prioritized. He observed that if a mission wanted to tackle something as serious as organized crime, then to operationalize it a law enforcement mandate "has to be clearly written in the mandate, and it has to be one of two or three main tasks not one of 40 to 60."[160]

Similar limitations existed in terms of justice sector support, with support on this 'niche' area largely overshadowed by larger governance and justice challenges. One observer who looked into the effects of the "specialized judicial unit" described it as a minimal upgrade to existing capacities by "including some additional prosecutors and justice-related actors."[161] It was the right impulse in terms of recognizing that policing efforts on organized crime would reach a dead-end without the larger criminal justice system able to "keep up."[162] But ultimately the amount of specialized resources provided was very limited and nothing in proportion to the scale of the judicial and law enforcement challenges of investigating and prosecuting organized crime.

Limits in physical and political operating space hamstrung meaningful and consistent efforts: The limitations in terms of resources and capacities to

support counter-organized crime efforts became even more acute as security conditions deteriorated and the overall relationship with the Government of Mali became more fraught. As the mission became more "bunkerized" due to increasing security threats, even regular, well-resourced policing and justice initiatives became less effective. Without MINUSMA staff present, the sort of deployments and institutional measures that would have been necessary for law and order and accountability functions to be improved were more difficult to encourage.[163] This was particularly true for an area like organized crime and illicit trafficking, where the Malian police, the gendarmerie, and other parts of the security sector were seen to be complicit to varying degrees in its continuation.[164]

In a political context in which the mission's relationship with the Malian Government was already wearing thin, it would have been difficult to develop the level of cooperation that would have been necessary for a more holistic and concerted approach. As one individual involved in some of the anti-corruption and police assistance activities offered: "There was some work with corruption but not looking at it from a systemic point of view. [With anti-corruption] you're basically asking the State, your main partner, to acknowledge that they are part of the problem."[165]

Progress on transnational organized crime and trafficking depended on local political will and buy-in: The complicity of State actors in illicit trafficking networks, and fundamental differences between Malian leaders and multilateral actors on how much these networks posed a threat proved a fundamental challenge that both limited the effects of any lower-level technical capacity-building, and any larger strategic approach to the issue. As Boutellis describes it, illicit networks had "co-opted the state and key state institutions all the way to the capital Bamako … which makes the topic extremely sensitive politically."[166] Various parts of the Government and security services were involved in illicit trafficking across Mali and to transnational markets – from high-level government officials linked to large-scale drug trafficking to local officials or security officers looking the other way or actively aiding in the movement of illicit commodities.[167]

That the Government of Mali and its institutions were themselves to some degree involved in these networks and practices placed a fundamental limit on how far reforms via capacity-building and institutional strengthening approaches could get. One expert who had briefly served in an advisory position in MINUSMA remembered conversations about the challenges of trying to improve government institutions and police

capacities with regard to transnational organized crime: the security officers involved observed that where issues of organized crime arose, and they tried to identify who was controlling or benefiting from those networks, the evidence "led straight to the top."[168] Addressing or limiting organized crime would have required the Government to police and reform itself, undermining a key source of either personal or State revenue, and thus it quickly became a political and operational dead-end.

Nor was this challenge limited to MINUSMA's operations. Another expert observed similar issues with EU policing and rule of law efforts: "There were training courses [and other capacity-building measures] but they never really reformed the overall system. It wasn't tackling serious crime in any significant way – certainly not the transnational networks and illicit flows."[169] One former EUCAP Sahel officer observed a disconnect between the overall approach (focused on institutional strengthening, training, and support) and the underlying lack of political will and failure to forge a true partnership approach toward Malian authorities that would have enabled such technical approaches to meaningfully respond to the evolving challenges of transnational crime.[170] The overall conclusion of those familiar with these sort of capacity-building and institutional support programmes (whether within MINUSMA or those of other Member States or multilateral initiatives) was that while they provided some skill-building and technical support, they never had the capacity (or possibly even intent) to make the sort of systemic changes that would have been necessary to significantly address organized crime dynamics and transnational flows.[171]

Information and analysis assets were ill-positioned to support counter-organized crime efforts: As noted above MINUSMA benefited from "unprecedented information collection and analysis capabilities," of the sort that tend to be recommended as part of a coordinated strategy for countering organized crime.[172] There were not only specialized integrated analysis and intelligence cells (JMAC and AFISU), but also a host of reporting and analysis by UNODC, the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC), and other civil society and academic actors, which mapped a range of organized crime and trafficking dynamics in Mali, as well as their connection to the broader region. Yet those working within or observing JMAC and AFISU noted significant limitations in these units' ability to analyse transnational organized crime.

First, similar to the issues of overall focus and prioritization within the mission, collection and analysis of information connected to transnational organized crime was not a priority.[173] Those who had served in JMAC (whether in

Bamako or field offices) noted that they would regularly pick up information about transnational organized crime, but it was alongside that of general security, political, and operational dynamics. It never received the sort of dedicated focus – much less higher level mission awareness – that would have enabled more concerted action. Most often, such information and analysis came to the fore in connection with terrorist groups and their activities or provinces where it contributed to inter-communal violence or other threats.[174]

Second, and closely related, perhaps because it was not politically prioritized, these intelligence units were not really positioned to enable a more meaningful analysis of these issues. International staff members assigned to the JMAC or ASIFU generally did not have the languages, background, information sources, or connections that would have enabled investigation and analysis into this very sensitive and non-transparent sector.[175] One former JMAC staff member observed that "specialized training would have been required" to produce any rigorous analysis of organized crime, much less to have identified ways to operationalize that knowledge.[176] In keeping with larger critiques that UN information systems (including both JMACs and political affairs analysis) are not staffed with those with political-economy expertise,[177] staff with specialized skills on transnational organized crime were not recruited into those billets. Local staff were well informed on many issues but given the sensitivities, many were reluctant to dig too deeply: "Even if they're aware of it, they don't want to be anywhere near this stuff. They don't expect the UN to protect them," one international staff member observed.[178] Given the overall sensitive nature of the subject matter, and the high level of risk involved, it is difficult to investigate illicit trafficking and criminal elements, and to get any level of corroboration or verification beyond the anecdotal.

ASIFU was in many ways even more limited. It was mainly staffed by military analysts and officers who hailed from NATO Member States, many with past experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan that did not necessarily prepare them for operating in a UN peacekeeping mission in a very different country and conflict context.[179] They also lacked the languages, background, and relevant local sources to allow them to gather the sort of information that would be necessary for nuanced organized crime analysis. Nor were they able to overcome those limitations in the course of their missions, given that many were on six-month rotations. Due to these staffing issues, both ASIFU and JMAC were largely limited to internal mission incident reporting, and lacked the sort of robust human intelligence sources that likely would have been required to gather more concrete information on organized crime and trafficking patterns.

Another issue cited by those working in a range of different units or positions across the mission was that of information silos.[180] Beyond these specialized intelligence and information units, a range of actors within the mission (and other partners) were regularly collecting information that would have been relevant to analysing organized crime, including through incident reports, regular political affairs engagement and analysis, information collected through Malian partners working in security sector reform and policing, as well as community reporting collected by Protection of Civilians (PoC) officers. While some positive examples of information sharing and exchange were offered by interviewees, others argued that all the different pieces were not really pulled together into any coherent, mission-informative analysis, at least as far as organized crime was concerned.[181] For example, one former PoC officer described efforts to develop a separate POC-owned database designed to improve data collection and analysis, which included reporting on various forms of organized crime and armed banditry.[182] While PoC trend reporting certainly would have been shared with mission leadership, the improved event and incident database remained within the PoC pillar. Similarly, UNODC's country offices have regularly engaged in data collection related to counter-trafficking and counter-smuggling commitments and priorities, but these are often used as internal products or in confidential engagement with Member State governments rather than shared broadly across the mission.[183] Other MINUSMA staff noted that some of the most useful insights on trafficking networks or on who or what was driving organized criminal activities likely emerged through the regular engagements of political affairs teams or those involved in army or police mentoring, but that these pieces of information and insights are likely never even written down or channeled into formal reporting.

Limited demand or uptake for political-economy-centred analysis and information, given the political focus: An even greater challenge for these information and analysis units was that there was little demand for information and analysis on transnational organized crime. Panel of Experts reporting regularly highlighted ways that armed group engagement in organized crime has impeded implementation of the Algiers Agreement and contributed to other conflict drivers and protection implications (i.e., as regards human trafficking).[184] Engagement in illicit trafficking was noted both by those linked to terrorist armed groups and by signatory armed groups. While the mission leadership offered support to the Panel of Experts, this type of reporting on political-economy dynamics was not really absorbed in ways that shifted the mission direction or activities. Those working

within JMAC or other analytical units observed the same in terms of the information they gathered related to organized crime or trafficking. One analyst who offered the counter-view that there was information collection and sharing among the analytical parts of MINUSMA on organized crime dynamics said the real issue was that there was no appetite or interest from the mission leadership in using that information.[185] Another former JMAC staff member offered a similar observation, noting that they would very regularly gather information on a range of illicit economic activities – including drugs trafficking, human trafficking, and reporting on gold and extractives mining and export – but that it was hard to see the mission ever doing anything with it: "The mission was mostly focused on the peace agreement in Mali so illicit trafficking … these other things weren't really the focus."[186] Countering transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking was not a priority issue, and so there was little uptake of the information and analysis that was brought to bear in ways that might have informed the political focus or orientation of the mission.

Lack of attention to these underlying causes was illustrative of larger limitations in the UN approach: As a result of all these factors, the overall view of most of those interviewed was that UN efforts to counter transnational organized crime never amounted to much in Mali. It was the "elephant in the room" one former

MINUSMA staff member offered. "Everyone knew it was a big issue and something that would be a source of future issues, but no one was really figuring out how to tackle it and had the willingness to touch on the matter."[187]

While perhaps understandable given the range of competing priorities and limiting factors, several of the MINUSMA staff interviewed saw this oversight as illustrative of the underlying strategic issues with the mission. The size of the illicit economy, and the way that competition for trafficking drove militarization and protection rackets and winnowed out the legitimacy of the State, meant that these issues were fundamental to what was driving instability and conflict in Mali. One former MINUSMA staff member offered that it is impossible to make progress on state-building and peacebuilding – to effectively try to support and extend government authority as a means of extending peace – without uncovering and dealing with this underbelly of corruption contributing to cyclical violence. In talking to communities about peace, he offered: "you can't ignore what's happening beneath the surface. How can you talk about the need to restore State authority but ignore their own criminal behavior?"[188] In that sense, failure to give more weight to these underlying governance and political-economy issues reflected a more fundamental issue in the way the mission was positioned to impact conflict transformation.

IV. Conclusion

How to better address transnational drivers of conflict and instability, and to prevent and address all forms of violence have been raised as priority issues for future UN peacekeeping operations, and for the UN system more broadly.[189] Among these future challenges, the threat posed by transnational organized crime looms large. As recognized by the UN Secretary-General in July 2023, the death toll linked to organized crime has exceeded that linked to armed conflict in recent years.[190]

This case study in Mali has helped illustrate why this issue should be front and centre of future discussions on maintaining peace and security and preventing violence. As seen in the discussion of factors leading to the 2012 crisis and the conflict dynamics that devolved, organized crime and illicit economies have not only provided the means and resources for armed groups to engage in armed conflict, terrorism, and predation, but have also skewed the incentives of various governmental and non-

governmental stakeholders in ways that contribute to militarization, corruption, and a self-reinforcing cycle of violence. More fundamentally, illicit activities like drug trafficking, smuggling, and extortion divert resources away from legitimate economic endeavours and foster corruption, which erodes trust in institutions among citizens, hindering economic and social development.

Yet despite the significant impact of organized crime in Mali, the multilateral response, as seen in the ten-year time period of the MINUSMA mission, remained limited. Rather than treating organized crime as a distinct issue warranting a significant response, transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking tended to be subsumed under the larger framework of countering terrorism threats, both within MINUSMA and in other stabilization and assistance efforts.[191] Where it was dealt with, it tended to be approached through technical assistance and capacity-building – one issue among

many within efforts to strengthen the Malian police and judiciary. The results suggest this is far from enough. Because transnational organized crime is interlinked with and generates a wide range of economic, governance, and social consequences, a siloed or technical response is insufficient.

This case study has illustrated that there are limits to generating a more coherent and stronger response using the tools that the multilateral system currently has to offer. The results from various initiatives and approaches tried in Mali suggest the following about some of the most commonly proposed responses for addressing organized crime and illicit trafficking:

Limits of UN peace operations: The idea that peace operations need to factor in the effects of transnational organized crime, trafficking rings, and other elements of the illicit economy has been a running theme in academic and policy literature for more than the last decade.[192] However, as this case study has illustrated, there are several challenges to operationalizing an effective response.

Although transnational organized crime and associated trafficking was given attention in the MINUSMA mandate, it was still a somewhat limited focus; referred to only in the preambular language setting the overall tone and focus of the mission in the first few years, and then from 2018 onwards incorporated as one of many "priority tasks" in the law enforcement and justice space. It was one task among many in a very overloaded mandate. In addition, because of other political goals and constraints – the need to keep all parties (including those linked to traffickers) engaged in the peace process, the increasingly difficult relationship with the Government of Mali, and its narrow interests when it came to organized crime – any efforts targeting transnational organized crime tended to be siloed to technical specialists or the Panel of Experts.

The additional intelligence and analytical capacities within MINUSMA – many of which had been proposed as a result of prior reflections on peacekeeping limitations and necessary reforms – offered a useful tool that increased the availability of information on political-economy dynamics like transnational organized crime. But they were not sufficient in themselves to reorient the mission, and so these additional information capacities were simply not made use of. The larger take-away is that while these intelligence, analytical, and monitoring capacities can be an important way to improve the political-economy awareness and focus of a mission, they are only useful if the mission is positioned and primed to act upon them.

Should this issue have been given greater emphasis in the mandate, and in overall mission priorities? If this had been the case, would it have made a difference? In answer to the first question, even MINUSMA staff who thought that transnational organized crime merited more attention did not necessarily think so given how stretched the mission already was. Reflecting relatively common sentiments among many interviewees, one international expert observed: "The flaw of MINUSMA was that it was already too broad."[193]

A more fundamental question, the same expert continued, was whether "suppression of criminal markets is useful to combine with peacekeeping missions."[194] Many of the experts consulted suggested that in a situation like Mali, dealing with the different strands and networks of organized crime would have required sector-specific strategies, with each requiring a different balance of tools and approaches (see Box D on gold trafficking for an example of this). In many sectors, suppression and prosecution would likely have to be combined with other attempts to structure legal and economic incentives, potentially including legalization or formalization of certain markets, but with careful consideration of any implications for local communities, as well as ripple effects, both nationally and regionally. Many judged that the core toolkit and comparative advantage of a peacekeeping mission are not well suited to striking that delicate balance. As observed in the discussion on mission intelligence and analysis components, UN missions have generally not hired for political-economy expertise and generally lack the sector-specific nuance that would be required for such an approach to be effective.

Technical approaches only go so far: The observation that peace operations are not well positioned, in terms of the core capacities and tools they bring to bear, to address an issue like transnational organized crime, frequently leads to these issues being dealt with by more technical or specialty organizations and components within the multilateral system, for example the policing or specialized judicial components of a mission, or partner organizations like UNODC, or even UNDP. This approach was also seen with MINUSMA.

There are certainly advantages in having these issues taken on by those with expertise, and by organizations that often have a longer timeframe of engagement. UNDP, for example, had been operating in Mali since the 1990s and would continue to do so after MINUSMA's liquidation, as would UNODC. However, the experience in Mali also illustrated some of the limitations of this more technical

approach to countering organized crime. Because these illicit networks – their drivers, controlling actors, and effects – are so integrated with broader governance, security, and development challenges, comprehensively tackling them requires a holistic approach that may not be possible through targeted justice and security interventions alone. In Mali, the downshifting or de-prioritization of these issues to more of a technical tasking limited the degree to which any efforts at either countering illicit networks or broader anti-corruption efforts could shift underlying systemic issues. Although specialized capacities such as Specialized Police Teams or linked justice "surge" capacities that are oriented around responding to trafficking and organized crime could be an important ingredient in future multilateral efforts, if these are not synched with the larger political strategy and mandate then they would be unlikely to touch on the fundamental political capture and political-economy factors driving this practice. Referring to some of the specialized mechanisms and tools available to the mission, one former MINUSMA staff member observed: "You can have all of the tools and toys you want but if you don't have the political will, it's a waste."[195]

An additional challenge to leaving these issues to the more technical justice and policing components of a mission, or even to specialized agencies like UNODC, is that these approaches tend to be tightly focused on improving national capacities and institutions. While a necessary consideration, these nationally-focused capacity-building approaches are often not well positioned or resourced to address the transnational drivers and effects of transnational organized crime.

Regional approaches may offer a middle ground, but only with significant re-tooling and support: Given both the experience of missions like MINUSMA and declining levels of cooperation and consensus within the Security Council, there is a marked decrease in the international community's appetite for sponsoring large, multidimensional UN peace operations. As an alternative, many have looked to whether regional organizations, rather than the UN, could take the lead in future peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations. Weighing into the debate, in December 2023, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2719, which recognized the "changing nature of conflicts in Africa," including the "expanding influence of transnational organized crime," and gave its support to more AU-led peace operations.[196] The experience of regionally-led interventions in Mali – both AFISMA and the G5 Sahel Task Force (see further in Box E) – helps illustrate some of the limitations of these proposals.

As noted in the background section, the original vision for a multilateral response to the crisis in Mali (including its transnational organized crime dimensions) was via a regionally-led mission, the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), authorized by the Security Council in 2012. This approach was initially selected not only as part of an élan toward African solutions to African problems, but because it was perceived to be better positioned to engage in the sort of tough peace enforcement and counter-terrorism operations that are beyond a UN peacekeeping mandate and model.[197]

However, it proved difficult to establish a sustainable funding and logistics framework for this new, relatively ad hoc structure. This contributed to a deployment timeline that was too slow for the rapidly deteriorating situation in Mali. It was because of these delays that a French intervention force had to be dispatched more immediately. Given these delays and framework issues, the AU agreed to roll its forces and authorities into a UN peacekeeping force, MINUSMA. MINUSMA offered a more coherent and well-established legal and operational framework for amassing troop contributions and resources, and for synching them with Council-mandated political priorities. But this reversion to the UN peacekeeping model undercut the fundamental impulse to have a more African-led operation, which had the potential to bring a different orientation and capacities with it. It also is an important reminder that subsidiarity issues related to legal frameworks and reliable funding and logistics streams can be a substantial bar to rapid deployment, which may make regionally-led missions a less nimble and available alternative in many situations.

The experience with the G5 Sahel Task Force offers additional lessons about funding and subsidiarity issues, as well as the challenges of adjusting models and approaches within regionally-led missions. Though substantially driven by cooperation of its five constituent Member States (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), the Task Force still relied substantially on financial, operational, and leadership support from external actors. This not only slowed the deployment and operational pace, because it was dependent on an irregular pipeline of support from external actors, but also compromised the degree to which the G5 Sahel Task Force truly reflected national and regional ownership. A critique by those involved was that it was inevitably limited to the priorities set by external donors.

Box E: The G5 Sahel Task Force: An Experiment with Regional Enforcement

The G5 Sahel Task Force was a regionally led operation, supported by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Beginning in 2017, the G5 Sahel States jointly deployed some 5,000 military and police personnel, working in partnership with MINUSMA and other bilateral forces.[198] The primary focus was on on counter-terrorism operations, but the G5 Sahel Task Force's mandate included "combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking," and "eradicating the actions of terrorist armed groups and other organized criminal groups," among its key priorities.[199] The soldiers and military personnel deployed primarily operated within each respective country but with a limited cross-border right of pursuit to detain and arrest individuals.[200] To deal with those arrested, the force also included a police and gendarmerie component (some 105 police personnel),[201] which were linked with criminal justice systems in the respective countries, as well as some transnational mechanisms (i.e. INTERPOL).[202]

Despite high hopes, the G5 Sahel Task Force had a limited effect, in part due to operational and funding challenges, which affected its training, equipment, and readiness.[203] The Task Force still relied substantially on financial, operational, and leadership support from external actors, notably from EU Member States. This split ownership created issues in terms of both functional capacity and orientation. There were critiques that external support was often too slow, and insufficient to meet the objectives the Task Force was set up for. Additionally, there were concerns that the heavy reliance on external funds meant that donor States' vision for the force supplanted those of the African Member States.[204]

Several interlocuters also critiqued the G5 Sahel Task Force for being too oriented around securitized responses. Although it was linked to law enforcement and judicial capacities, the primary thrust of the G5 Sahel Task Force was military operations within the border areas of Task Force members' territories and limited cross-border raids.[205] Notwithstanding reports of hundreds of arrests, none interviewed thought the force had done much to stem the flow of illicit trafficking and criminal activity, even those interviewed who were directly involved in the force. Some of this may have been due to the operational and resourcing limits noted above. However, the larger drawback appeared to be that this was not necessarily the right tool for countering transnational criminal flows. As Boutellis observed, it "remains unclear to this date how this military force with relatively limited means is supposed to implement the crime fighting component of its mandate," and to successfully deal with "powerful and nimble transnational criminal networks with solid local anchors" across different countries.[206]

It is worth noting that while the G5 Sahel Task Force was critiqued for being overly security-centric, senior African diplomats and commanders interviewed argued that it need not have been so. They remembered that in the initial regional diplomatic conversations that led to the G5 Sahel, the focus was on development approaches, health and education, and socioeconomic cooperation, and attributed the shift to a greater security focus on Western countries' (especially France) need for local security partners.[207] "The security point of view ultimately took precedence over the rest, but that was not the initial intention," one senior African diplomat observed.[208]

Those in favour of this subsidiarity trend argue that regional organizations have more vested interests in durably resolving crises that emerge in their own backyards. This is seen as a way around some of the political will challenges that have held back UN peacekeeping in recent years. On this theory, without having to work through Security Council divisions, or wrest troop contributions from reluctant States, such missions might be freer to mobilize a rapid response, one more tailored to regional needs and prerogatives.

However, the stillbirth of AFISMA stands as a cautionary tale for this narrative of more proactive and rapid regionally-led peace operations being able to take over. With AFISMA, it proved no easier for African Member States to corral a regional force in response to the exploding crisis in Mali – even though it had clear and immediate spillover implications for their countries. So much so that ultimately external support (from France) had to be deployed to deal with the immediate crises. The funding, organizational, and framework issues that

led to an overly slow response and deployment from the AU and ECOWAS in support of AFISMA still exist, and would have to be surmounted for rapid AU deployment to be a meaningful alternative in future crises.

Some of the same funding, donor dependency, and slow start-up issues also arose with the G5 Sahel force.[209] However, the even more interesting take-aways from the experiences of the G5 Sahel force are the limitations – at least in the current default modes of operating – on transnational or regionally-focused interventions. The G5 Sahel Task was framed to be a regional and transnationally-operative mission on counter-terrorism and countering organized crime, including both cooperation among its participating Member States and some cross-border operating capacity. It's a provocative example given some discussion among policymakers about whether, given the range of transnational threats generating peace and security issues, the 'future of peace operations' lies more in models that are transnational in their scope, mandate, and operations, rather than the default mode of being confined to the territory of one Member State. Certainly, one could argue that the G5 Sahel force never really tested that model. Although cross-border, hot-pursuit missions were authorized, this was only within a limited territorial range, and did not constitute the main focus of operations. But more fundamentally, experts questioned whether a military force, with some cross-border operating capacity, was really the right tool or response to an issue like transnational organized crime. The transnational element that really needed to be operationalized and supported was not that of military operations but of governance and law enforcement strategies (reflecting concerns noted above about a too security-oriented force).[210]

This does not mean abandoning the idea of moving toward more transnational peace operations models; it simply was not tested enough with the G5 Sahel to draw this conclusion. Nonetheless, it does suggest that the underlying model of peace operations would have to be shifted much more significantly to truly represent a different approach to transnational and cross-border threats.

A final lesson to be learned from the AFISMA and G5 Sahel experiences comes down to political will. As noted, those strongly in support of regionally-led peace operations often view them as a way to get around political divisions and lack of political will among the broader international community. Yet the issues in mobilizing AFISMA initially, the ultimate collapse of the G5 Sahel, and ongoing political divisions in West Africa highlight that political divisions and lack of political will

are not issues that are unique to the Security Council. The G5 Sahel force was dissolved after first Mali and then Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew from it. The military leadership of all three countries (which came to power following coups) have since formed a mutual defence pact known as the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). The AES seems set to chart its own political course and objectives, not in alignment with those of its other Sahelian and West African neighbours.

One Sahelian analyst who worked on regional diplomatic initiatives observed that given recent political dynamics and broader issues of mistrust, it was hard to see who would be left to take up the sort of regionally-led peace operations that have figured in discussions in New York: "ECOWAS is totally weakened. The G5 Sahel force is down. If you want to look at regional [operations], I'm not sure we have an option," he argued.[211] This casts some doubt on whether regional organizations are as poised to fill the gaps in global political will as many in New York have hoped.

Political-economy approaches and analytic tools are important, but in need of reinforcement: Since at least the early 2000s, one of the main themes of recommendations for improving responses to transnational organized crime, particularly in peace operations settings, has been improving analysis and intelligence surrounding illicit activities.[212] Such recommendations were in step with broader recommendations for peacekeeping reform from the 2000 Brahimi Report (*Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*) onward, suggesting that peace operations required integrated field intelligence capacity in order to understand and respond to complex threats.[213] More recently, a major theme of the New Agenda for Peace has been to emphasize political-economy considerations in conflict prevention and responses, and also a greater emphasis on exploring, but also utilizing, new technologies. Some of the proposed suggestions for stronger "political-economy" tools include greater resources in terms of information and analysis units like the JMAC and AFISU, as well as modifying tools like sanctions regimes, or mediation strategies to be more cognizant of political-economy dynamics driving conflict.

The experiences in Mali still suggest that these political-economy tools could indeed be important, but also shows how far the system has to go to fully integrate such political-economy perspectives into its work. Staff with sufficient background experiences and knowledge in sectors related to countering organized crime and illicit trafficking, among other political-economy issues, were

not recruited into MINUSMA, nor were they given the time, resources, and political support necessary to collect the sort of information that would lend toward a more politically informed approach. These deficits in staffing, and in operationalizing political-economy analysis, are not unique to MINUSMA, but have been observed as a global deficit in the UN system.[214] However, what was missing in Mali was not purely a lack of qualified staff or specialized political-economy resources, but lack of demand for or uptake of this information within mission planning and strategy. This might require both more comprehensive whole-of-mission collection strategies (that help unlock information siloes and ensure clear information flow) and the political will to take these issues seriously as part of the political mandate.

The Mali Panel of Experts was an additional powerful source of political-economy information and analysis. But as noted in the analysis, its work tended to be siloed from the larger political focus of the mission. While this is understandable given the sensitivity of the information – with panel of expert reporting often implicating key partners and parties to the peace process – it created a certain disconnect between this key political-economy tool and the larger mission strategy. Ideally the potential carrots and sticks that might emerge from a sanctions regime would be synched in with the larger political strategy and mediation efforts. If nothing else, panel reporting on how economic activities were enabling or sustaining conflict should inform mission strategies and approaches.

The dissolution of the Mali sanctions panel in late 2023 is worth highlighting as part of a broader trend of the disruption or dismantlement of what are otherwise potentially powerful political-economy and accountability tools. In anticipation of the renewal of the sanctions mandate and panel, the Government of Mali objected that the Panel of Experts had become a "political mechanism" designed to interfere with the State's "sovereign choice of partners" (implicitly the Wagner Group) and also objected to the Panel's conclusions regarding human rights violations by Malian forces.[215] These objections were then highlighted by the Russian Federation representatives in explaining their veto of the Panel.[216]

Notwithstanding these explanations, it is difficult not to view the dissolution of the Panel as part of a larger pattern of undercutting this monitoring and accountability tool, with broader Security Council tensions and divisions as a root cause. In the last few years, the Russian Federation and/or China have suppressed panel of experts reports and blocked the re-appointment of panel members in a number of countries, including the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Somalia.[217] A common thread across many of these contexts was that panel of expert reports documented the involvement of Member States in potential sanctions violations; in some cases in connection with the activities and deployment of the Wagner Group. Although not prominent in its reporting, the Mali Panel of Experts did take note of Malian operations supported by the Wagner Group, and the resulting civilian death toll and potential implications of these operations for the sustainability of the peace process.[218]

Conclusions and next steps: While these findings do not offer any hard and fast conclusions for the way forward, they do offer a strong body of evidence about how well past mechanisms and approaches have fared. The challenges that the MINUSMA mission faced in Mali were significant, but they were not unique. Future peace operations, whether led by the UN, by regional organizations, or organized through other new and emerging approaches and frameworks for multilateral cooperation, are likely to face similar challenges both in terms of political complexity and in terms of the sheer practical difficulty of confronting nimble and adaptive transnational criminal networks. The experience in Mali underlined these challenges but also the imperative to develop stronger responses to transnational organized crime and trafficking. Absent a more dedicated focus and reckoning with these issues, future missions will likely face the same uphill battle in achieving sustainable conflict transformation that MINUSMA did.

Endnotes

1   Security Council Resolution 2690, S/RES/2690 (2023).

2   During the official MINUSMA closure ceremony in Bamako on 11 December 2023, the outgoing Special Representative, El-Ghassim Wane, acknowledged a mismatch between the mission's mandate and operational realities, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive evaluation of the mission's accomplishments and shortcomings. See: United Nations Security Council, "Discours du Chef de la MINUSMA El Ghassim Wane, Cérémonie officielle de clôture de la MINUSMA," *United Nations*, 11 December 2023, https://minusma.unmissions.org/discours-du-chef-de-la-minusma-el-ghassim-wane-c%C3%A9r%C3%A9monie-officielle-de-cl%C3%B4ture-de-la-minusma-11.

3   Definition drawn from the United Nations General Assembly, "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted by the General Assembly at the 55th session," United Nations, 15 November 2000, A/RES/55/25.

4   UNODC and TOCTA Sahel, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2022). Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Gold_v5.pdf. See also Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (Routledge, 2023), p. 261; Interview with MINUSMA national staff member formerly in Gao, by Zoom, 7 February 2024, interview #14.

5   For more in-depth reporting and discussion of these sectors, see, e.g., UNODC, "Transnational Organized Crime in the Sahel," *UNODC*, last visited 14 June 2024, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html; Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC), "Human smuggling and trafficking ecosystems in North Africa and the Sahel," *GITOC*, 14 September 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/human-smuggling-trafficking-ecosystems-north-africa-sahel-2023/; UNODC and TOCTA Sahel, *Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022), p. 9. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

6   Matt Herbert et al., "Mali's Border Security and Capacities: Assessment Report," *Border Security in the Sahel: Building a Regional Platform for Dialogue and Action in Mali* (Washington, DC: Strategy Capacity Group, 2016); See: Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel* (Geneva: The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2015), p. 7.

7   In one study of community perceptions of what was crossing the border illegally, the leading response was "fresh food" (70 per cent) followed by "processed food," clothing, animals or cattle. Drugs was only noted by 17 per cent and arms did not appear on the list. Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, pp. 8, 13.

8   UNODC, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2022). Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Gold_v5.pdf.

9   UNODC, *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2024), p. 27. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Transversal_2024.pdf.

10 Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 2012), p. 6.

11 Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen, "The contested route – northern Mali and Libya," *CRU Report* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2017)

12 UNODC, *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2022), pp. 6, 13. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf.

13 David Lochhead et al, *Out of Control: The Trafficking of Improvised Explosive Device Components and Commercial Explosives in West Africa* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, November 2023). Accessible at: https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Report-24-IEDs-WEB.pdf.

14 Peter Tinti, *Human-Trafficking Revival After Pandemic-Linked Slump* (Geneva: GITOC, July 2022), p. 5. Accessible at: https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-MALI.pdf.

15 Besides Timbuktu, Gao is also a major migrant hub. See: UNODC, *Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2022), p. 9. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf. Gao is also a key migrant hub.

16 For example, between 2022 and 2023, 245 cases were reported. The subsequent year, only 48. See: US Department of State, *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mali* (Washington, DC: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023). Accessible at: https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/mali/. U.S. Department of State, *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mali* (Washington DC: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2024). Accessible at: https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/mali/.

17 UNODC, *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2024), p. 30. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Transversal_2024.pdf.

18 UNODC, I*mpact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel.* p. 17; "Fake medicines kill almost 500,000 sub-Saharan Africans a year: UNODC report," *United Nations*, 1 February 2023, https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/february-2023/fake-medicines-kill-almost-500000-sub-saharan-africans-year-unodc-report-0.

19 UNODC, *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel.* p. 17

20 Flore Berger, "Locked Horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy," *Research Report* (Geneva, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

21 Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, *The Roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2015), pp. 8, 21–22. Accessible at: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/The_roots_of_Malis_conflict.pdf; Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, p. 10. The Tuareg population is estimated to make up 10 per cent of Mali's population, but are concentrated in the drier areas of northern Mali that have been most affected by drought and economic deprivation, both contributing to periodic rebellions against the State. Ibid.

22 Scholars Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw characterize the State strategy as a classic "divide and conquer" strategy, rewarding some groups with access to criminal markets and a permissive approach toward their militias, while clamping down on others. Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, pp. 12, 24-25. See also Peter Tinti et al., "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future," *GITOC Research Paper* (Geneva: GITOC, 2014). Accessible at: https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf.

23 Peter Tinti et al., "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future"; Peter Tinti, *Drug trafficking in northern Mali* (Brussels: ENACT, September 2020). Accessible at: https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2020-09-17-mali-drugs-research-paper.pdf. Cocaine began to be trafficked via Mali in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with Mali as a transit country for cocaine going from South America to Europe. To illustrate the increase in profitability, cocaine has been estimated to be 25 times more profitable than hashish, which itself is 12 times more profitable than cigarettes. See: "Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Politics in Northern Mali," *Crisis Group*, 13 December 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali.

24 Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, p. vi. Reitano and Shaw also offer that cigarette smuggling, was a sort of vanguard commodity, helping establish the patterns of corruption in the 1990s that would later be replicated with more lucrative commodities like cocaine. They also attribute the shift in part to the fact that there was substantially more pressure on the State to control commodities like cigarettes, cocaine, and latterly, trafficking in persons (as compared to illegal trade in household goods and medicines), requiring a higher level of buy-in and pay-off to enable the State to protect these trades. Ibid. p. 14–15. See also: Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2012), pp. 9–12. Accessible at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf.

25 Arthur Boutellis observed in 2018 not just some degree of complicity but that illicit trafficking was deeply bound within the elite compact underlying State construction and had effectively "co-opted the state and key state institutions all the way to the capital Bamako." See Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 259. One incident that underlined the extent of cocaine trafficking and its deep incorporation of State actors was the discovery of a crashed Boeing 727 that had departed from Venezuela and carried between 7 and 11 tons of cocaine. The amount of cocaine, and its means of transport, gave rise to suspicions of links between traffickers, local politicians, and a high-level presidential advisor. See: Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*; Mark Micaleff, Raouf Farrah, Alexandre Bish and Victor Tanner, *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali* (Geneva: GITOC, 2019), p. 9. Accessible at: https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/After_the_storm_GI-TOC.pdf.

26 Judith Scheele, *Tribus, États et Fraude: la Région Frontalière Algéro-Malienne* (2009), p. 82.

27 Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) emerged from an Algerian Salafist extremist group, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), which was founded in 1998. Throughout its inception in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, the GSPC supported itself in part through criminal activities, including kidnapping and ransom and other criminal rackets.

28 Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, pp. vi, 18–22, 50–51. Reitano and Shaw note that kidnapping as a source of income emerged "almost accidentally" in 2003 with the kidnapping and ransom of 32 European citizens, but that it steadily became a central source of income, not only for AQIM but also for other affiliated or splinter groups; AQIM was estimated to have made $90–125 million in kidnapping and ransom between 2003 and 2013. Ibid., p. 19. See also: Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, p. 13.

29 Peter Tinti, *Drug Trafficking in Northern Mali* (Brussels: ENACT, 2020), p. 3; Wolfram Lacher, "Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel," *WACD Background Paper No. 4* (WACD, 2017). Accessible at: http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Challenging-the-Myth-of-the-Drug-Terror-Nexus-in-the-Sahel-2013-09-12.pdf. While also pushing back against this narco-terrorism label, Reitano and Shaw provide illustrations of figures central to terrorist networks also engaged in smuggling activities and other criminal rackets dating back to the 1990s. See: Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, p. 28.

30 Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, p. 11.

31 Ibid.; See also Peter Tinti et al., "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future," pp. 10–12.

32 Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "Drug Smuggling and the Stability of Fragile States. The Diverging Trajectories of Mali and Niger," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* Vol. 16 No. 2 (2022), p. 229.

33 Ibid.; Crisis Group, "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," *Africa Report No. 267* (Crisis Group, 2018).

34 Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel*, pp. 4–5, 29.

35 Ibid., p. 29. Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," *Africa Report No. 189* (Crisis Group, 2012) pp. 13–14. Accessible at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/mali-avoiding-escalation.

36 Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*; Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen, "The contested route – northern Mali and Libya"; UNODC, *Drug Trafficking in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2024), pp. 6, 13. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_drugs.pdf.

37 This map was created using a base map from d-maps (d-maps, "Mali: République du Mali", 2007-2024. Available at: https://d-maps.com/pays.php?num_pay=37&lang=en).

38 For a larger discussion of farmer-herder conflicts and its link with other armed group and conflict dynamics, see, e.g., Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," pp. 261–262; "Illicit economies: fueling armed groups' expansion in the Sahel," *ENACT*, 29 November 2023, https://enactafrica.org/events/illicit-economies-fueling-armed-groups-expansion-in-the-sahel#:~:text=This%20seminar%20explores%20the%20nexus,operational%20resources%2C%20financing%20and%20legitimacy; Leif Brottem, "The growing complexity of farmer-herder conflict in West and Central Africa," *Africa Security Brief*.

No. 39 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). For an overview of other illicit sectors and trafficking issues, see GITOC, Global Organized Crime Index: Mali (2023). Accessible at: www.ocindex.net/country/mali.

39 Gold mining had been an important sector in southern Mali since at least 1950, but since 2018, there has been a "gold rush" in the north centred around the area of Kayes (also an area of significant armed group activity). UNODC and TOCTA Sahel, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel*, p. 13.

40 United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities: QE.A.135.13. Ansar Eddine," 20 March 2013; US Department of the Treasury, "Press release: Terrorist Designations of Ansar al-Dine", 21 March 2013, https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/206493.htm; European Union Commission, "Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/2670 of 22 November 2023 amending for the 339th time Council Regulation (EC) No 881/2002 imposing certain specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities associated with the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida organisations," 21 November 2013.

41 Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, a senior member and religious expert of Ansar Eddine, was involved in the group's activities during the 2012 occupation of Timbuktu. He was prosecuted and convicted by the ICC in September 2016 for destroying nine mausoleums and a mosque, part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, becoming the first individual prosecuted by the ICC for attacking cultural heritage. See: International Criminal Court, "Press Release: ICC Trial Chamber VIII declares Mr Al Mahdi guilty of the war crime of attacking historic and religious buildings in Timbuktu and sentences him to nine years' imprisonment," 27 September 2016, https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/icc-trial-chamber-viii-declares-mr-al-mahdi-guilty-war-crime-attacking-historic-and-religious.

42 The Movement for the Salvation of Azawad - Coalition (MSA-C) emerged in September 2016 from splits within the broader Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), which itself had formed earlier that year. The group advocates for greater autonomy for the Azawad region. The Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA) was created in March 2014 as a political and military movement with a broader coalition-based approach, also seeking self-determination and political representation for the Azawad people.

43 Illustrating the degree of focus on the presumed terrorist linkage, a 2012 NATO report characteirzed northern Mali as the "largest Al Qaeda stronghold since the fall of Afghanistan in 2001," and the base for increasing jihadist activity across the region. Angela Sanders and Samuel Lau, *Al Qaeda and the African Arc of Instability* (Brussels: NATO Civil-Military Fusion Center, 2012), p.10.

44 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2071 (2012), adopted by the Security Council at the 6846th meeting," *United Nations*, 12 October 2012, S/RES/2071.

45 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2085 (2012), adopted by the Security Council at the 6898th meeting," *United Nations*, 20 December 2012, S/RES/2085. It is notable that, if only in its preamble, the resolution recognized the role played not just by terrorist groups but also by "criminal networks" and of armed trafficking in the region. Ibid.

46 Isaline Bergamaschi, "French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual yet Insufficient," *Stability International Journal of Security and Development* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2013).

47 Mathieu Bere, "Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges of International Intervention in Mali," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* Vol. 7 No. 2 (2017): 60–84, pp. 64–65.

48 Andrew Lebovich, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, last accessed 25 April 2024, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane#menuarea.

49 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2100 (2013), adopted by the Security Council at the 6952nd meeting," United Nations, 25 April 2013, S/RES/2100.

50 By the mission's closure, the UN Country Team comprised 21 UN entities, many of which had been operating in the country since the late 1990s. See: "Organismes de l'ONU au Mali," *Nations Unies Mali*, last accessed 22 April 2024, https://mali.un.org/fr/about/un-entities-in-country.

51 European Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP of 17 January 2013 on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali).

52 Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a fractured state? Breaking the cycles of crime, conflict and corruption in Mali and Sahel.*

53 Germany, for example, supported EU operations and MINUSMA but also directly provided equipment to the FAMA, and supported a range of long-term development projects (including those in related rule of law and governance areas). "Ausstattungshilfe zur Förderung der Friedenssicherung in Afrika," *Bundesministerium der Verteidigung,* last accessed on 26 June 2024, https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/dossiers/engagement-in-afrika/das-engagement/bilaterale-kooperation-afrika/ausstattungshilfe-zur-foerderung-der-friedenssicherung-in-afrika-12960. The UK also supported a range of initiatives, from stabilization efforts to humanitarian aid. Among these was the Gao Stabilisation Fund (GSF), which funded local infrstructure and governance projects, and also supported on trafficking related areas (i.e. the effects of artisanal gold mining in Gao). UK aid, "Artisanal goldmining in the western Gao region: (In)stability, risks, and opportunities," *Gao Stabilisation Fund (GSF)* (London: UK aid, 2022).

54 US support to counter-terrorism and military stabilization efforts included deployment of forces and military or intelligence assets in the region, operational support to French forces leading Operation Barkhane, and support to governments in the region on counter-terrorism, including through a longstanding State Department-led regional counter-terrorism programme, known as the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). TSCTP encompassed both Department of Defense training and equipment as well as development aid. Alexis Arieff, "Statement on U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Challenges in Africa," Hearing before the Committee on Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 16 December 2019. Accessible at: https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/TE/TE10044; Lesley Anne Warner, "Nine questions about the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership you were too embarrassed to ask," *War on the Rocks blog*, 8 April 2014.

55 This information was obtained by comparing US assistance provided by the State Department from 2001 to 2024, which is available through the US Department of State's online assistance tracking website. See "U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country," last accessed 17 June 2024, https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/mali/2017/obligations/0. It was notable that while there was an increase in overall US assistance (including that by other development and assistance agencies) the most dramatic jump was in State Department assistance. State Department assistance then levelled off, remaining between $36 and $20 million per year from 2013 until the coup in 2020, which forced mandatory assistance cuts. Ibid. On mandatory funding cuts, see Congressional Research Service, "Coup-Related Restrictions

in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations," *Congressional Research Service In Focus*, 12 December 2023. Accessible at: https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11267.pdf.

56 Whereas support to UN operations and forms of humanitarian aid topped the activities funded by the State Department from 2012 to 2016, from 2017 to 2020, the top activities tended to be the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, and Department of Defense (DoD) International Military Education & Training Fund. Ibid.

57 "Mapping African Regional Cooperation," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, last accessed on 25 April 2024, https://ecfr.eu/special/african-cooperation/nouakchott-process/#:~:text=The%20Nouakchott%20Process%20is%20not,in%20the%20Sahelo%2DSaharan%20region; PSC Report, "ISS AU Summit 31: What is the African Union's role in the Sahel?" *Institute for Security Studies*, 25 June 2018, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-summit-31-what-is-the-african-unions-role-in-the-sahel.

58 The Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger (the "Algiers Platform of Movements of June 14, 2014" or simply "Platform") is a coalition of pro-Government armed groups that includes the Groupe autodéfense Imghad et alliés, GATIA ("Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies"), and a branch of the Coordination des mouvements et Forces patriotiques de resistance ("CM-FPR Coordination of Resistance Movements and Patriotic Forces"). In October 2014, a number of rebel groups formed an alliance known as the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), which became one of the main parties to the Algiers Agreement. The CMA includes the Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA, or "High Council for the Unity of Azawad), and the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA or "National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad). Some of the factions of the Platform later split and joined the CMA. For more on these groups and their role in the Algiers negotiations and broader peace process, see Crisis Group, *Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm* (New York: Crisis Group, June 2020). Accessible at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/laccord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire.

59 "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On," *Crisis Group*, 24 June 2020.

60 The G5 Sahel force was authorized by the African Union, and also supported by the Security Council in resolution 2359 (2017). See, African Union, "Communique of the 679th PSC Meeting on the draft Strategic Concept of Operations (CONOPs) of the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel," PSC/PR/COMM(DCLXXIX), 13 April 2017; S/RES/2359 (2017).

61 Ibid.

62 For comparisons of organized crime within the MINUSMA mandate as compared to other missions, see: Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw, and Arthur Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2013).

63 S/RES/2100 (2013), preamble. Similar language continued in the preamble in the resolutions renewing MINSUMA's mandate from 2013 to 2017. See, e.g., United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2164, adopted by the Security Council at the 7210th meeting," *United Nations*, 25 June 2014, S/RES/2164 (2014); S/RES/2227 (2015); S/RES/2295 (2016); S/RES/2364 (2017). This phrase then dropped out of the preamble of subsequent renewal resolutions but was emphasized in other aspects.

64 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, S/2013/582 (2013), para. 82.

65 See, e.g., S/RES/2100 (2013), para. 28; S/RES/2164 (2014), para. 30; S/RES/2227 (2015) paras. 28–29; S/RES/2295 (2016), para. 42; S/RES/2364 (2017), para. 43. The 2015 and 2016 Security Council resolutions highlighted the efforts of the G5 Sahel with regard to transnational organized crime and counter-terrorism. S/RES/2227 (2015), paras. 28–29; S/RES/2295 (2016), para. 42.

66 See, e.g., S/RES/2100 (2013), para. 27; S/RES/2164 (2014), para. 32; S/RES/2227 (2015), para. 34; S/RES/2295 (2016), para. 45; S/RES/2364 (2017), para. 46.

67 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2374, adopted by the Security Council at the 8040th meeting, on 5 September 2017, S/RES/2374, para 8(c).

68 For background on the common duties and activities of the Panel of Experts, including their relationship with UN peace operations and other entities (in Mali and elsewhere), see: Charles Cater, "UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict," *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 86–106.

69 These activities were justified as part of efforts to support the Algiers Agreement, on the rationale that organized crime and trafficking, "including trafficking in persons, arms, drugs and natural resources, and the smuggling of migrants … risk destabilizing the peace process." See: S/RES/2432 (2018), para. 38 (iii). This language and the priority focus continued in subsequent mandates, up until the last authorizing resolution in 2022. See, e.g., S/RES/2432 (2018), para. 38(iii); S/RES/2480 (2019), para. 28(a)(iii); S/RES/2531 (2020), para. 29 (iv); S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 30(iv); S/RES/2640 (2022), para 26(iv).

70 Ibid.

71 S/RES/2432 (2018), para. 31.

72 ECOWAS, "Press Release: communiqué final du Sommet extraordinaire d'urgence sur le Mali," 20 August 2020. Accessible at: https://www.ecowas.int/communique-sur-la-situation-au-mali-18-aout-2020/?lang=fr; ECOWAS, "Press Release: communiqué final de la Session extraordinaire de la conférence des chefs d'état et du gouvernement de la CEDEAO," 16 September 2021. Accessible at: https://reliefweb.int/report/guinea/communiqu-de-la-session-extraordinaire-de-la-conf-rence-des-chefs-d-etat-et-de; ECOWAS, "Press Release: communiqué final du 4e Sommet extraordinaire de la conférence des chefs d'état et du gouvernement de la CEDEAO sur la situation politique au Mali," 9 January 2022. Accessible at: https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/communique-final-4eme-sommet-extraordinaire-de-la-conference-des-chefs-d-etat-et-de.

73 The broad basis for listing is those "responsible for threatening the peace, security or stability of Mali, or for obstructing the implementation of its political transition targeting those responsible for actions threatening Mali's peace and security." Council of the EU, "Press release: Mali: EU sets up autonomous framework for sanctions against those obstructing the political transition," 13 December 2021. Accessible at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/13/mali-eu-sets-up-autonomous-framework-for-sanctions-against-those-obstructing-the-political-transition/.

74 The remaining ECOWAS sanctions were lifted in 2024, in ancitipation of the March 2024 elections, which ultimately did not occur. See ECOWAS, "Press Release: communiqué final du Sommet extraordinaire de la conférence des chefs d'état et du gouvernement de la CEDEAO sur la situation politique, la paix et la sécurité dans la région," 24 February 2024. Accessible at: https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Fr-Extraordinary-Summit_Final-Communique2_fin_240225_192411.pdf. The EU

sanctions related to the delayed elections were not lifted at that time.

75 US Department of Treasury, "Press Release: Treasury Targets Malian Officials Facilitating Wagner Group," 24 July 2023. Accessible at: https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1645. The US has also sanctioned individuals and companies connected to the Wagner Group and its former leaders globally, without specific reference to their activities in Mali. See, e.g., U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Press Release: Treasury Sanctions the Head of the Wagner Group in Mali," 25 May 2023. Accessible at: https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1502; US Department of the Treasury, "Press Release: Treasury Sanctions Illicit Gold Companies Funding Wagner Forces and Wagner Group Facilitator," 27 June 2023. Accessible at: https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1581.

76 The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), US Department of the Treasury, "Mali Sanctions Regulations," 31 CFR Part 5. Accessible at: https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/932051/download?inline.

77 Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, Her Majesty's Treasury, "Financial Sanctions Notice: Mali," 1 September 2023. Accessible at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64f1f73efdc5d1000d2849f0/Notice_Mali_010923.pdf.

78 Matt Herbert and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, "Convergence Zone: The Evolution of Targeted Sanctions Usage against Organized Crime," *Sanctions and Organized Crime Initiative: 2023 Series* (Geneva: GITOC, 2023), pp. 37–38

79 The EU sanctions followed the Security Council's adoption of resolution 2584 in 2021 (which condemned the coup d'etat) and are viewed as "transposing into EU legislation the sanctions decided by the United Nations." Council of the EU, "Press release: Mali: EU sets up autonomous framework for sanctions against those obstructing the political transition," 13 December 2021. Nonetheless, the UN sanctions have generally not been applied in response to undemocratic practices, while the EU's have. The UK sanctions regime also makes reference to the UN Security Council designations, in particular in individual listing criteria. See: US Department of the Treasury, "Press Release: Treasury Sanctions the Head of the Wagner Group in Mali," 25 May 2023. However, its designation of certain individuals (for example, those linked to the Wagner Group) have gone beyond UN sanctions listings.

80 UN Security Council, Meeting records of the Security Council 9408th meeting on the situation in Mali, S/PV.9408 (August 30, 2023); UN Security Council, "What's in Blue: Mali: Vote to Renew the Sanctions Regime," *Security Council Report*, 30 August 2023. Accessible at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/08/mali-vote-to-renew-the-sanctions-regime.php.

81 Council of the EU, "Press Release: Mali: Council renews restrictive measures for a further year," 11 December 2023. Accessible at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/11/mali-council-renews-restrictive-measures-for-a-further-year/.

82 Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, Her Majesty's Treasury, "Financial Sanctions Notice: Mali."

83 The current US sanctions regime for Mali, for example, was last amended on 3 July 2024, nearly a year after the UN sanctions regime lapsed, and also following the end of the MINUSMA mission. Nonetheless, it continues to include as a basis any individuals involved in planning, sponsoring or conducting attacks against "the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilizations Mission in Mali peacekeepers … or any other peacekeeping operations." United States, Mali Sanctions Regulations, 7 August 2023, Chapter V, Part 555, Subpart B. Accessible at: https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-31/subtitle-B/chapter-V/part-555/subpart-B.

84 See: S/RES/2480 (2019) para. 7; S/RES/2531 (2020), para. 6; S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 7; S/RES/2640 (2022), para. 5.

85 Interview with former senior officer within MINUSMA, by Microsoft Teams, 25 October 2023, interview #3.

86 The number of police personnel authorized for MINUSMA hovered between 1,105 (in 2016) and 1,748 (in 2020). See: "History," *MINUSMA*, last accessed 25 April 2024, https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/history. This is relatively comparable to the number of police (vis-à-vis military personnel) in other large multi-dimensional peace operations, such as those in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. See: "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, last accessed 25 April 2024, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors.

87 For reporting highlighting the joint engagement of these other Country Team entities alongside MINUSMA efforts on organized crime, see, e.g., S/2016/1137, 30 December 2016, para. 32; S/2018/541, 6 June 2018, para. 22; S/2020/476, 2 June 2020, paras. 9, 34. Other Country Team members would also be involved in particular initiatives, for example, with greater engagement from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), on issues related to trafficking in persons. See, e.g., IOM, "Press release: Mali Launches a National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons 2023-2027 with the Support of IOM and UNODC," *IOM*, 25 October 2023, https://rodakar.iom.int/news/mali-launches-national-action-plan-combat-trafficking-persons-2023-2027-support-iom-and-unodc.

88 See: "Common Security and Defense Policy: Civilian mission Mali EUCAP Sahel Mali," *EEAS Factsheet* (European Union External Action, 2021). Accessible at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet._english_2021.pdf. In reviewing State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) funding in Mali from fiscal years 2012 through 2019, only two projects surface related to the designated areas of "counter-narcotics" or "transnational crime" – a 2019 USAID-funded justice sector support project, and a 2016 INL-funded project related to "Strengthening institutional capacity to coordinate national anti-trafficking response including the identification, protection of victims, investigation and prosecution of trafficking offenders in Mali." This data was derived by using the US Government dashboard of funding, available at: https://www.foreignassistance.gov/.

89 See: "Common Security and Defense Policy: Civilian mission Mali EUCAP Sahel Mali," *EEAS Factsheet* (European Union External Action, 2021). Accessible at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet._english_2021.pdf.

90 One example highlighted in 2015 reporting by the Secretary-General was MINUSMA support for a "specialized judicial unit on terrorism and transnational organized crime" (created in October 2015), including through training Malian defence and security personnel on intelligence gathering, and investigation skills. Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, 24 December 2015, S/2015/1030, para 30. See also, e.g., S/2107/478, 6 June 2017, paras. 28, 44; S/2018/541, 6 June 2018, para. 22. It is notable that "anti-gang operations" and "anti-trafficking operations" nor other advanced training related to organized crime were part of the core operational support

91 provided by UNPOL, at least as recorded in 2013. William Durch, "Police in UN Peace Operations: Evolving Roles and Requirements," *International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, Occasional Paper No. 4* (2014), p. 6–7.

91 Interview with members of the UNODC Regional Office for the Sahel, by Microsoft Teams, 15 November 2023, interview #7.

92 Ibid. For more on UNODC initiatives in Mali, see their website: https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/westandcentralafrica/countries/Mali.html.

93 Charlie Hunt, *Specialized Police Teams in UN Peace Operations: A Survey of Progress and Challenges* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2024), p. 7. See also Arthur Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?*, p. 62.

94 Arthur Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?*, pp. 61–62.

95 The "specialized judicial unit" included additional magistrates, prosecutorial resources as well as a "specialized investigation brigade" of 50 investigators. United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations Policing, S/2016/952 (November 10, 2016), para. 29; Interview with expert on UN policing deployments, by Microsoft Teams, 11 April 2024, interview #38.

96 Charlie Hunt, *Specialized Police Teams in UN Peace Operations: A Survey of Progress and Challenges,* p. 3.

97 See, e.g., James Cockayne, Louise Bosetti, John de Boer, *Crime-Proofing Conflict Prevention, Management, and Peacebuilding: A Review of Emerging Good Practice* (New York: United Nations University Center for Policy Research, 2016), pp. 7–8; Arthur Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime*, pp. 59-61; William Durch, "Police in UN Peace Operations: Evolving Roles and Requirements," *Occasional Papers No. 4* (International Forum for the Challenges of Peace Operations, August 2014), pp. 6–7.

98 Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 264.

99 JMACs are units comprised of both civilian and military officers designed to produce integrated analysis that can support "mission planning and decision-making" for UN missions. See: United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Policy Joint Mission Analysis Centres (JMAC), Ref. 2020.06 (May 1, 2020). The idea of providing UN missions with stronger capacities for situational awareness, knowledge, and conflict analysis was a key recommendation of the 2000 Brahimi Report, with the first guidance on JMAC emerging in 2006. For more see also United Nations, Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, A/55/305 – S/2000/809, paras. 51–68 (August 21, 2000); Philip Shetler, "Intelligence in Integrated UN Peacekeeping Missions: The Joint Mission Analysis Centre," *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 15 No. 4 (2008): 517–527.

100 Lawrence J. Richardson, "A Comparative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Operations in Mali and Somalia," *InterAgency Journal* Vol. 10 No. 4 (2019), p.110–111. Accessible at: https://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/IAJ-10-4-2019-pg102-142.pdf.

101 However, Boutellis notes that this unit suffered from lack of contextual background and language skills. Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 264.

102 Charles Cater, "UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict," pp. 86–106. Additional examples of sanctions with listing criteria related to organized crime or trafficking would include the Democratic Republic of Congo sanctions regime (1533), Libya (1970), Afghanistan (1988),

Central African Republic (2127) and South Sudan (2206). For more on these and the broader role of sanctions see Charles Cater, "UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict," pp. 86–106.

103 S/RES/2374 (2017), para 8(c). There was also a notable focus on "transnational organized crime" in the region and intensifying trafficking in drugs, arms and persons and other criminal activities in the authorizing resolution as a whole. See: S/RES/2374 (2017), preamble.

104 Ibid. pp. 96, 105. See also United Nations Security Council, "Press release: Security Council 2374 Committee Adds Three Entries to Its Sanctions List," *United Nations,* 20 December 2018, https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13639.doc.htm; United Nations Security Council, "Security Council 2374 Committee Approves Additional Measures to Five Entries on Its Sanctions List," *United Nations*, 19 December 2019, https://press.un.org/en/2019/sc14064.doc.htm.

105 Interview with former senior officer within MINUSMA, by Microsoft Teams, 25 October 2023, interview #3. For a helpful discussion of the different phases of evolution in MINUSMA's mandate, see Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," pp. 262–263.

106 "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," Crisis Group, p.17; Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 260.

107 "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," Crisis Group; Interview with former senior officer within MINUSMA, by Microsoft Teams, 25 October 2023, interview #3; Interview with former MINUSMA officers based in Gao and Mopti, in New York, 4 October 2023, interview #1; Interview with former MINUSMA security sector specialist, by Microsoft Teams, 17 January 2024, interview #12. See also United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2022/595 (2022); United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2018/581 (2018); United Nations, Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on Mali S/2020/158 (2020).

108 Peter Tinti, *Drug trafficking in northern Mali* (Brussels: ENACT, 2020), pp. 12–14.

109 Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15.

110 "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," Crisis Group, pp. 15–18, 23.

111 MINUSMA staff noted that those in the mission were certainly not taking proactive measures to interdict trafficking linked to the CMA or other parties to the Algiers Agreement, for example, searching CMA members who took MINUSMA transport. Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15. The Panel of Experts reported regularly on CMA linkages with artisanal gold mining in Kidal and other areas, and observed that CMA "had used MINUSMA flights to transport gold to Bamako." United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2020/785 (2020), para. 126. See also: Peter Tinti, *Drug trafficking in northern Mali* (Brussels: ENACT, 2020), p. 13.

112 Interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13.

113 UNODC, *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel*, pp. 6, 13. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf. Flore Berger, "Jihadist violence and communal divisions fuel worsening conflict in Mali and wider Sahel," *IISS*, 20 June 2019, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2019/06/conflicts-

in-mali/; IOM International Organization for Migration, *The Mali Migration Crisis at a Glance* (IOM, 2013), pp. 1, 4, 7. Available at https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/migrated_files/Country/docs/Mali_Migration_Crisis_2013.pdf. Andrew Lebovich, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel"; Pauline Le Roux, "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 10 June 2019, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/exploiting-borders-sahel-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs/. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara Expanding Its Threat and Reach in the Sahel," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 18 December 2020, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-expanding-its-threat-and-reach-in-the-sahel/.

114 This map was created using a base map from d-maps (d-maps, "Mali: République du Mali", 2007-2024. Available at https://d-maps.com/pays.php?num_pay=37&lang=en).

115 Ibid.

116 Interview with former MINUSMA officers based in Gao and Mopti, in New York, 4 October 2023, interview #1; Interview with former senior officer within MINUSMA, by MS Teams, 25 October 2023, interview #3. Tinti also observed that organized crime and illicit trafficking only appeared to arise in international policymakers' discussions as part of (in his view largely inaccurate) frameworks of "narco-terrorism" or "narco-jihadism." See: Peter Tinti et al., "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future," p.17.

117 For example, in the part of the mandate referencing organized crime, the focus is on "eradicating the actions of terrorist armed groups and other organized criminal groups." African Union, "Communique of the 679th PSC Meeting on the draft Strategic Concept of Operations (CONOPs) of the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel," PSC/PR/COMM(DCLXXIX), 13 April 2017, para. 11(iii).

118 Peter Tinti et al., "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future," p. 16.

119 S/RES/2432 (2018), para. 38 (iii). This language and the priority focus continued in subsequent mandates, up until the last authorizing resolution in 2022. See, e.g., S/RES/2432 (2018), para. 38(iii); S/RES/2480 (2019), para. 28(a)(iii); S/RES/2531 (2020), para. 29 (iv); S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 30(iv); S/RES/2640 (2022), para 26(iv).

120 Written comments received from a former MINUSMA staff member, by e-mail, 11 July 2024.

121 Ibid.

122 See: S/RES/2480 (2019) para. 7; S/RES/2531 (2020), para. 6; S/RES/2584 (2021), para. 7; S/RES/2640 (2022), para. 5.

123 Sam Jones, "Political Violence Skyrockets in the Sahel According to Latest ALCED Data," *ACLED*, 28 March 2019, https://acleddata.com/2019/03/28/press-release-political-violence-skyrockets-in-the-sahel-according-to-latest-acled-data/.

124 Malte Lierl, "Growing State Fragility in the Sahel: Rethinking International Involvement," *GIGA*, December 2020, https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/growing-state-fragility-in-the-sahel-rethinking-international-involvement; "Actor Profile: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)," *ACLED*, 13 November 2023, https://acleddata.com/2023/11/13/actor-profile-jamaat-nusrat-al-islam-wal-muslimin-jnim/.

125 Malte Lierl, "Growing State Fragility in the Sahel: Rethinking International Involvement"; Fatou Bensouda, "Statement of the ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, on reported upsurge of violence and mass killings in Mopti region, central Mali," Statement to the International Criminal Court, 25 March 2019. Available at https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-fatou-bensouda-reported-upsurge-violence-and-mass-killings-mopti.

126 "Fact Sheet: Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates Across the Sahel," *ACLED Factsheet*, 21 September 2023. Accessible at: https://acleddata.com/2023/09/21/fact-sheet-attacks-on-civilians-spike-in-mali-as-security-deteriorates-across-the-sahel/#:~:text=Violence%20Targeting%20Civilians%20Surges%20Amid,2022%20(see%20graph%20below); David Lochhead et al, *Out of Control: The Trafficking of Improvised Explosive Device Components and Commercial Explosives in West Africa* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, November 2023). Accessible at: https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Report-24-IEDs-WEB.pdf. One expert observed that improvised explosive devices had been a consistent source of MINUSMA casualties since 2013, but by 2022 had become an acute factor, responsible for an estimated 60 per cent of MINUSMA casualties. He also observed that a significant element in IED production was due to illegally trafficked parts. Interview with former MINUSMA security sector specialist, by Microsoft Teams, 17 January 2024, interview #12.

127 This figure is derived by comparing the fatalities data per year in the United Nations online database of peacekeeper fatalities, accessible at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities. The highest number of recorded peacekeeper deaths is still in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, but most of these deaths date back to the early years following its creation in 1978, rather than recent conflict dynamics.

128 Lisa Sharland, "MINUSMA and Protection of Civilians: Implications for Future Peacekeeping Missions," *IPI Global Observatory blog*, 14 July 2023, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2023/07/minusma-and-protection-of-civilians-implications-for-future-peacekeeping-missions/.

129 The issue of undisclosed caveats had been present since the beginning of the mission to some degree but accelerated with the increased threat. After some prominent attacks troop contributing countries even suspended troop movements and operations altogether. Seán Smith, *MINUSMA has a new mandate, so what has changed? Part 2: Reporting Requirements* (New York: Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2020). Accessible at: https://civiliansinconflict.org/blog/minusma-has-a-new-mandate-part-2/.

130 Danielle Paquette, Joyce Sohyun Lee, and Jon Swaine, "Civilian killings soar as Russian mercenaries join fight in West Africa," *Washington Post*, 23 May 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/23/mali-russia-west-africa-wagner/.

131 Jared Thompson et al., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 February 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali. Shortly after the Wagner Group's deployment, French President Emmanuel Macron announced French troop withdrawals after nine years of intensive engagement. See: "Why are French troops leaving Mali, and what will it mean for the region?," *BBC News*, 26 April 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60419799; "France and EU to Withdraw Troops from Mali, Remain in Region," *VOA News*, 17 February 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/france-and-eu-to-withdraw-troops-from-mali-remain-in-region-/6445606.html.

132 Ibid. Jared Thompson et al., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 February 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali. On reported abuses against civilians by joint units of the FAMA and the Wagner Group (often referred to as "foreign security personnel" in Secretary-General reports), see, e.g., S/2023/578; S/2022/446, paras. 47–52.

133 Jason Burke and Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Russian Mercenaries linked to Civilian Massacres in Mali," *The Guardian*, 4 May 2022,

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/russian-mercenaries-wagner-group-linked-to-civilian-massacres-in-mali. Already between February 14 and March 22, there were allegations of some 53 enforced disappearances, and additional large numbers of summary executions. Simon Marks, "UN Probes Allegations of Russian Mercenary Rights Abuses in Mali," *Bloomberg*, 11 March 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-11/un-probes-allegations-of-russian-mercenary-rights-abuses-in-mali. "U.N. says investigators prevented access to site of Mali killings," *Reuters*, 21 April 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-says-its-investigators-not-allowed-access-site-mali-killings-2022-04-20/.

134 "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers," *Human Rights Watch*, 5 April 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers; "U.N. says investigators prevented access to site of Mali killings," *Reuters*. See: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "Press release: Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN human rights report," 12 May 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during.

135 "Mali expels U.N. mission's human rights chief," *Reuters*, 6 February 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-expels-un-missions-human-rights-chief-2023-02-05/. As another illustration of this, in Security Council deliberations over MINUSMA's mandate renewal in 2022, the Malian Government specifically objected to the part of the mandate related to investigating protection and human rights incidents and noted that it did not intend to comply with them, and would not respect the "freedom of movement of MINUSMA" in the execution of its human rights mandate. See: United Nations Security Council, Meeting records of the Security Council's 9082nd meeting on the situation in Mali, S/PV.9082, (June 29, 2022); United Nations, "Security Council Renews Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, Adopting Resolution 2640 (2022)," *United Nations*, 29 June 2022, https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14953.doc.htm.

136 See, e.g., by 1 March 2022, the Malian Government had denied authorization for 24 per cent of the mission's flight requests. Because many of these linked to intelligence and surveillance aircraft, some interviewees theorized that there was an attempt to restrict the mission from gathering information on joint FAMA-Wagner Group operations.

137 UN Security Council, Meeting records of the Security Council 9408th meeting on the situation in Mali, S/PV.9408 (August 30, 2023); UN Security Council, "What's in Blue: Mali: Vote to Renew the Sanctions Regime," *Security Council Report*, 30 August 2023. Accessible at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/08/mali-vote-to-renew-the-sanctions-regime.php.

138 See: Africa Defense Forum, "Russia Tightens Control of Mali Gold," *Africa Defense Forum Magazine*, 9 April 2024, https://adf-magazine.com/2024/04/russia-tightens-control-of-malian-gold/; Joe Inwood and Jake Tacchi, "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian mercenary group has rebranded," *BBC News*, 20 February 2024; Jared Thompson et al., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.

139 Baba Ahmed, "More than 70 are dead after an unregulated gold mine collapsed in Mali, an official says," *Associated Press*, 24 January 2024.

140 Most of the armed groups involved in illicit trafficking in gold tend to be either local criminal groups or armed groups associated with parties to the Algiers Agreement, rather than jihadist groups, which tend to be based in other parts of Mali and are supported by other illicit activities. A local commissioner from Kéniéba interviewed for this study confirmed that there have been no terrorist attacks in the past three years. Field interview with Kéniéba Police Commissioner, Kéniéba, 3 November 2023, interview #62; Field interview with Head of Child Promotion, National Directorate for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection Division, Bamako, 14 November 2023, interview #67. For more on human trafficking dynamics in Mali and the greater Sahel, including within gold sites see: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), "Mali. Human Smuggling Resilient amid major political and security upheaval," *Human Smuggling and Trafficking Ecosystems – North Africa and the Sahel 2024 Series* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024); Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment — Sahel (TOCTA), *Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel* (Vienna: UNDOC, 2022).

141 Field interview with Federation of Gold Miners and the Chamber of Mines, Kéniéba, 3 November 2023, interview #65; Field interview with Deputy Head of the Brigade of the Keniéba Gendarmerie, Kéniéba, 2 November 2023, interview #60.

142 The Blood Gold Report, *How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold* (Washington: The Blood Gold Report, 2023). Field interview with Federation of Gold Miners and the Chamber of Mines, Kéniéba, 3 November 2023, interview #65; Field interview with Senior Defense Official of the Ministry of Mines, Bamako, 15 November 2023, interview #68.

143 Focus Group discussion, Sanougou (Kéniéba circle), 4 November 2023, interview #81. The village chief of Sanougou, a village on the outskirts of Kéniéba that has witnessed repeated incidents of child abuse emphasized the importance of implementing this initiative in his village as committees identify cases of abuse and refer them to appropriate care structures. Ibid.

144 For more on how Mali's gold boom can absorb ex-combatants, see: United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2020/785 (2020).

145 Interview with former UN staff member based in Gao, in New York, 4 October 2023, interview #52; Interview with four UN staff members involved in DDR processes in the Sahel and globally, in New York, 11 October 2023, interview #53.

146 See: Crisis Group, "Getting a Grip on Central Sahel Gold Rush," *Africa Report No. 282* (New York: Crisis Group, 2019).

147 The Kayes region is rich in a number of minerals, including gold, iron ore, and bauxite. It produced 78 per cent of Mali's gold in 2018, according to public estimates, which tend to exclude artisanal gold production. République du Mali, "Rapport ITIE-Mali pour l'année 2018," *Initiative pour la transparence des industries extractives* (Bamako: Republic of Mali, 2020), pp. 13, 16. Accessible at: https://itie.ml/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Rapport-ITIE-Mali-2018-Final-Sign%c3%a9.pdf.

148 See: Ministère des Mines, de l'Eau et de l'Énergie du Mali, "Document de politique nationale de développement du secteur minier et pétrolier et son plan d'actions 2019-2023," 27 January 2020. Accessible at: https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/fr/c/LEX-FAOC206414/#:~:text=L'objectif%20principal%20assign%C3%A9%20au,tir%C3%A9s%20du%20secteur%20et%20de; UNODC, "Le Mali lance un Plan d'action national de lutte contre la traite des personnes 2023-2027 avec l'appui de l'OIM et de l'ONUDC," *UNODC West and Central Africa*, 19 October 2023, https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/westandcentralafrica/stories/2023/le-mali-lance-un-plan-daction-national-de-lutte-contre-la-traite-des-personnes-2023-2027-avec-lappui-de-loim-et-de-lonudc.html.

149 In Kayes, limited budgetary resources have prevented local authorities from effectively identifying mining title holders and

conducting field inspections. Field interview with Deputy Head of the Brigade of the Keniéba Gendarmerie, Kéniéba, 2 November 2023, interview #60.

150   Field interview with Deputy Head of the Brigade of the Keniéba Gendarmerie, Kéniéba, 2 November 2023, interview #60.

151   Field Interview with two senior officials of the Kéniéba Federation of Gold Miners and the Chamber of Mines, Kéniéba, 3 November 2024, interview #65.

152   Ibid.

153   Barrick, "Loulo-Gounkoto", 2024. Available at: https://www.barrick.com/English/operations/loulo-gounkoto/default.aspx. GlobalData, "Mali: Five Largest Mines in 2021", 2022. Available at: https://www.globaldata.com/data-insights/mining/mali--five-largest-mines-in-2090761/. UNODC, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2022), pp. 12; 21. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Gold_v5.pdf. UNODC, *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel* (New York: UNODC, 2024), p. 27. Accessible at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Transversal_2024.pdf.

154   This map was created using a base map from d-maps (d-maps, "Mali: République du Mali", 2007-2024). Available at: https://d-maps.com/pays.php?num_pay=37&lang=en.

155   Interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13.

156   Ibid.

157   Interview with former MINUSMA data analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 31 October 2023, interview #4; Interview with former EUCAP Sahel Mali planning officer, by Whatsapp, 18 March 2024, interview #17.

158   Interview with former MINUSMA officer, by Microsoft Teams, 31 October 2023, interview #4.

159   Interview with former MINUSMA staff member, by Microsoft Teams, 29 November 2023, interview #8. The same interviewee did not recall anyone working on this specialized topic during the period of his/her time in MINUSMA.

160   Interview with former MINUSMA officer, by Microsoft Teams, 10 November 2023, interview #6.

161   Interview with international expert on policing in peace operations, by Microsoft Teams, 11 April 2024, interview #38.

162   Ibid.

163   Ibid.

164   Interview with former MINUSMA security sector specialist, by Microsoft Teams, 17 January 2024, interview #12; Interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13; Interview with MINUSMA national staff member formerly in Gao, by Zoom, 7 February 2024, interview #14.

165   Interview with former EUCAP Sahel Mali Planning officer, by Whatsapp, 18 March 2024, interview #17. The same individual noted that while political sensitivities (and implicitly collusion on the part of some government actors) may have been part of the challenge, the lack of a coordinated approach on transnational organized crime also reflected broader failings among international actors to truly consult with Malian authorities and jointly determine priorities and how they would be pursued; Ibid.

166   Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," pp. 259–260.

167   See supra note 10. As one example of this lower-level engagement, experts observed that certain goods and commodities – such as cattle rustling – would have been impossible to move at the speeds observed without facilitation (direct or tacit) from the

army or gendarmerie. Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15; Interview with former MINUSMA officer based in Mopti, by Microsoft Teams, 10 November 2023, interview #6.

168   Interview with expert on transnational organized crime, by Whatsapp, 17 April 2024, interview #41.

169   Interview with international expert on policing in peace operations, by Microsoft Teams, 11 April 2024, interview #38.

170   By lack of partnership, the individual interviewed also intended this to reflect a critique of Western tendencies to not truly consult national partners and engage in a dialogue to identify common, mutually-agreed priorities and approaches. Interview with former EUCAP Sahel Mali Planning officer, by Whatsapp, 18 March 2024, interview #17.

171   Ibid.; Interview with international expert on policing in peace operations, by Microsoft Teams, 11 April 2024, interview #38; Interview with former MINUSMA officers based in Gao and Mopti, New York, 4 October 2023, interview #1.

172   Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 264.

173   Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15; Interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13.

174   Interview with former MINUSMA senior official, by Whatsapp, 20 February 2024, interview #16; Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15.

175   Ibid.; Interview with MINUSMA data analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 31 October 2023, interview #4. Boutellis noted that staff in the JMAC and AFISU lacked sufficient context and language skills, and many would rotate out after a few months, leading to little time to gain expertise and knowledge. Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 264.

176   Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15.

177   Indeed, after observing the specific political-economy capacity limitations in MINUSMA, Arthur Boutellis observes that "There is indeed no such thing as a political-economy analyst job profile in the staff rosters for UN peace operations." Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 264; Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman, "Adopting a Political Economy Lens: Policy Implications for UN Peace Operations," *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (London: Routledge, 2023).

178   Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15.

179   Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 8 May 2024, interview #26.

180   Interview with MINUSMA protection of civilians officer, by Microsoft Teams, 31 October 2023, interview #4; former MINUSMA staff dealing with DDR, New York, 11 October 2023, interview #2; Interview with former MINUSMA senior official, by Whatsapp, 20 February 2024, interview #16; Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Whatsapp, 9 February 2024, interview #15.

181   On a positive note, one interviewee recounted examples of cross-sharing of information and joint analysis across different analytical units within the mission. Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 23 April 2024, interview #23. However, more interviewees cited information siloing as an issue. See, e.g., interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13. Others noted similar issues of siloing and lack of information sharing with other multilateral

initiales and efforts. Interview with former EU security sector officer, 26 March 2024, interview #18.

182 Interview with former MINUSMA data analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 31 October 2023, interview #4.

183 For example, following the 2018 Niamey Declaration – an agreement by Ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs from West African and European countries to counter trafficking in persons – UNODC conducts a bi-annual data collection process to assess the state of trends related to smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, and any measures taken in response. However, in part because these are part of the monitoring of the Niamey Declaration commitments, information is only shared with the Member States in question. UNODC does also produce periodic public-facing reports, although these tend to be managed more by its research units than by the country office. Interview with members of the UNODC Regional Office for the Sahel, by Microsoft Teams, 15 November 2023, interview #7.

184 See, e.g., United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2022/595 (2022); United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2018/581 (2018); United Nations, Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2021/151 (2021). Although not widespread across the report, at least one report of the Panel of Experts noted ways that emergence of trafficking in certain sectors (artisanal mining) could unexpectedly advance the agreement by providing alternative livelihoods to ex-combatants. United Nations, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, S/2020/785 (2020).

185 Interview with expert on armed groups and criminal networks in Mali and the Central African Republic, by Microsoft Teams, 5 February 2024, interview #13.

186 Interview with former MINUSMA analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 23 April 2024, interview #23.

187 Interview with former MINUSMA officers based in Gao and Mopti, in New York, 4 October 2023, interview #1.

188 Interview with former MINUSMA officers based in Gao and Mopti, in New York, 4 October 2023, interview #1. Another former civil affairs officer offered similar thoughts: "International or transnational organized crime structurally undermines all efforts by the international community and even the national civil society to build up structures that would allow people to elevate their living standards, to live in accordance with human rights, to benefit from a functioning economic system, or even from social services provided by the State. I think one can go so far, I guess, to say that transnational organized crime supports armed groups in their efforts to take over control over the country and its people." Interview with MINSUMA civil affairs staff member, by Whatsapp, 11 December 2023, interview #10.

189 For example, within the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace, threats by "criminal groups" are highlighted as one of a series of converging or "interlocking" transnational threats that go beyond any one State's ability to manage, and thus implicitly require a multilateral response. The same brief (and the broader "Our Common Agenda" policy framework that it is part of) also highlights "Eradication of violence in all its forms" as one of the core commitments. See: "A New Agenda for Peace," *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9* (United Nations, 2023). Accessible at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf.

190 Ibid.

191 Interview with former MINUSMA, EU and French officers, March and April 2024. See also: Peter Tinti, *Drug trafficking in northern Mali* (Brussels: ENACT, 2020).

192 Kemp and Shaw, *Elephant in the Room*; James Cockayne et al., *Crime-Proofing Conflict Prevention, Management and Peacebuilding.*

193 Observations during expert stakeholder focus group discussion, by Zoom, 8 November 2023, Interview #24.

194 Ibid.

195 Contributions during expert workshop, New York, 30 April 2024. The same interlocuter clarified that by political will, he meant both by the mission leadership and by the government in question.

196 S/RES/2719 (2023); United Nations, "A New Agenda for Peace," *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9* (Unted Nations, 2023). Accessible at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf; Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter sets out the UN Security Council's powers to maintain peace. It allows the Council to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression," and to take military and nonmilitary action to "restore international peace and security." See: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-7.

197 Arthur Boutellis and Paul D. Williams, "Disagreements Over Mali Could Sour More Than the Upcoming African Union Celebration," *IPI Global Observatory*, 15 May 2013, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2013/05/disagreements-over-mali-could-sour-more-than-the-upcoming-african-union-celebration.

198 The G5 Sahel force was authorized by the African Union, and also supported by the Security Council in resolution 2359 (2017). See, African Union, "Communique of the 679th PSC Meeting on the draft Strategic Concept of Operations (CONOPs) of the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel," PSC/PR/COMM(DCLXXIX), 13 April 2017; S/RES/2359 (2017).

199 Ibid.

200 "Sahel (Mali, Niger)," *Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze*, last accessed on 25 April 2024, https://www.zif-berlin.org/en/sahel-mali-niger; Jennifer G. Cooke, Boris Toucas and Katrin Heger, *Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security* (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017). Accessible at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security; Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 270.

201 Karoline Gasinka and Elias Bohman, *Joint Force of the Group of Five. A review of multiple challenges* (Stockholm: Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2017), p. 19.

202 Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 270. Illustrating a linkage with another multilateral initiative in this realm, the G5 Sahel policing components were also supported by INTERPOL's "Integration for Impact" project, which aimed to enhance policing capabilities within the Sahel region to combat terrorism effectively. "G5 Sahel," *INTERPOL*, last accessed on 25 April 2024, https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Terrorism/Counter-terrorism-projects/G5-Sahel.

203 Lawrence E. Cline, "Trying to Coordinate Force in the Sahel: The G5 Sahel," *Small Wars Journal*, 26 October 2020. Accessible at: https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/trying-coordinate-force-sahel-g5-sahel. "Sahel (Mali, Niger)," *Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze*.

204 Marie Sandnes, "The Impact of External Support on Coalition Efficiency: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force," *Defence Studies* Vol. 23 No. 3 (2023): 477–496; Interview with senior African diplomat, by Whatsapp, 2 April 2024, interview #19; Interview with senior African military commander, New York, 12 April 2024, interview #20.

205 Boutellis describes it as "a coalition of five armies, each initially operating in their own national territories in a strip of 50 kilometres on their respective sides of the border, with a right of pursuit." He also observed that the linkage with policing only came to the fore as an outgrowth of cooperation with MINUSMA, and primarily came about as a way to make sure those detained were dealt with "in compliance with the rule of law." Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," p. 270.

206 Ibid.

207 Interview with senior African diplomat, by Whatsapp, 2 April 2024, interview #19; Interview with senior African military commander, New York, 12 April 2024, interview #20.

208 Interview with senior African diplomat, by Whatsapp, 2 April 2024, interview #19. See also: Interview with senior African military commander, New York, 12 April 2024, interview #20. There are competing views on how central this counter-terrorism or hard security approach was to the original vision of the G5 Sahel force. While some observed the commitment to economic and development cooperation among the G5 Sahel countries from its earliest formation, they have also observed that in practice the greater focus was on counter-terrorism. Lawrence E. Cline, "Trying to Coordinate Force in the Sahel: The G5 Sahel," *Small Wars Journal*, 26 October 2020. Accessible at: https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/trying-coordinate-force-sahel-g5-sahel. Other narratives highlight that it was primarily viewed as a means of mounting a more robust military response than UN peacekeeping missions were capable of. See: Crisis Group, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017). Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/258-force-du-g5-sahel-trouver-sa-place-dans-lembouteillage-securitaire.

209 Marie Sandnes, "The Impact of External Support on Coalition Efficiency: The Case of the G5 Sahel Joint Force," *Defence Studies* Vol. 23 No. 3 (2023): 477–496. Interview with senior African diplomat, by Whatsapp, 2 April 2024, interview #19; Interview with senior African military commander, New York, 12 April 2024, interview #20.

210 Arthur Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 270.

211 Interview with former regional security analyst, by Microsoft Teams, 23 April 2024, interview #23.

212 See, e.g., Walter Kemp et al. *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime*?, p. 68.

213 See, e.g. United Nations, Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, A/55/305 – S/2000/809 (2000), para. 51; United Nations, Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnerships and people, A/70/95-S/2015/446 (2015), para. 119. For more on this theme, see A. Walter Dorn, *Keeping Watch: Monitoring, Technology and Innovation in UN Peace Operations* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2011).

214 See Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman, *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* (London: Routledge, 2023).

215 "Meeting records after Russian Federation's Veto of Sanctions Text, General Assembly Speakers Consider Consequences for Stability in Mali," *United Nations Meetings Coverage*, 11 September 2023, GA/12528.

216 UN Security Council, Meeting records of the Security Council's 9408th meeting on the situation in Mali, S/PV.9408, 30 August 2023.

217 Charles Cater, "UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict," *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 86–106; Colum Lynch, "Russia's Sanctions Problem: Are its UN panel obstructions about shortterm leverage, or are they intended as an existential threat to the system?" *Foreign Policy*, 22 October 2021.

218 See, e.g., S/2023/138, at paras 44, 62; S/2022/595, paras 47(b); S/2023/578, para. 72. In some reporting they are referenced by the more generic term "foreign security partners."

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