



Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush

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Principal Findings

What's new? In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a gold boom is attracting the attention of diverse armed groups. Security forces are struggling to control gold mining zones in regions that the state has neglected or abandoned.

Why does it matter? Artisanal gold mining provides armed groups, in some cases including jihadists, with a new source of funding and potentially even recruits. If left unregulated, it risks fuelling violence in the region.

What should be done? Sahelian states should reassert their presence in mining areas, either directly or through allied private actors, and take steps to formalise artisanal gold mining. Sub-regional and international mechanisms could limit clandestine gold exports and reduce risks that the gold trade will finance militancy and terrorism.

Executive Summary

In the central Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, armed groups have seized gold mining sites since 2016 in areas where the state is weak or absent. Artisanal gold mining has boomed since the 2012 discovery of a Saharan vein stretching from Sudan to Mauritania. Gold mines provide armed groups, in some cases including jihadists, with a new source of funding and even terrain on which to recruit. Informal networks in the region are increasingly involved in smuggling the precious metal. Artisanal mining thus risks fuelling violence and reinforcing transnational crime. Sahelian states should take steps toward formalising artisanal gold mining, while avoiding alienating miners. They should redouble efforts to secure mining areas, while ensuring that the forces doing so, whether security forces or allied militias, avoid predatory behaviour. Governments in the Sahel and those countries that buy its gold should strengthen their regulation of trade in the metal.

States in the region are struggling to effectively secure gold mines. Security forces are reluctant to deploy in rural areas where their presence is contested and lack resources to deal with non-state armed actors' violent appropriation of gold resources. States thus tolerate, or even encourage, the formation of local, non-state armed groups to whom they delegate – for now informally – responsibility for securing mines. But such measures have major limitations: the authorities' ability to regulate mining sites, even indirectly, crumbles as security deteriorates and armed groups challenge state authority in parts of the region. In this context, armed groups of all stripes can gain greater autonomy by exploiting gold resources, increasingly bypassing the state. Two recent attacks that killed more than sixty civilians working in the gold mining sector in Burkina Faso – the first against an artisanal site in the north west in October and the other near an industrial site in the east in November – showed that violence is becoming more acute.

The growth of artisanal gold mining threatens the state in other ways. The financial stakes involved have become considerable in recent years. This has encouraged the creation of informal local, regional and international smuggling networks. Such networks can help finance armed groups, including those engaging in terrorism, and encourage money laundering in the region as traffickers interfere in the artisanal gold economy.

While local dynamics vary across the Sahel, the authorities in each country can take steps to return to mining areas and prevent armed groups, including jihadists, from seizing resources:

- In high-risk mining areas, states should either deploy their security forces near the sites (but not necessarily in the mines themselves), or give local non-state actors a more official role and better supervision as they secure mining zones. In either case, site security arrangements should be accompanied by governance mechanisms to prevent predation by those forces securing mines, which would push gold miners toward armed groups hostile to the state.

- ❑ In areas where states can exercise authority without extensive security measures, they should adopt measures to formalise some artisanal mining, for instance issuing individual gold mining permits and setting up gold trading posts. By offering tax benefits or basic services, states can show their value to miners. Regional governments should also find a balance between allowing larger companies to industrialise sites, thereby generating revenue for the state, while preserving areas for artisanal gold mining and thus ensuring that miners do not lose their livelihoods.
- ❑ Regional states should exert greater control over gold trading networks to reduce the risk of money laundering and funding of armed groups. They should harmonise their regulatory frameworks and develop specific financial mechanisms to promote the transport of gold through formal – rather than informal – private or public networks. The United Arab Emirates (specifically Dubai), Switzerland and China, the main importers of Sahelian gold, should strengthen their legal frameworks for gold imports.

Dakar/Brussels, 13 November 2019

Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush

I. Introduction

In central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), gold mining has intensified since 2012 due to the discovery of a particularly rich vein that crosses the Sahara from east to west.¹ The first finds were made in Sudan (Jebel Amir) in 2012, followed by others between 2013 and 2016 in Chad (Batha in the centre and Tibesti in the north of the country), in 2014 in Niger (Djado in the north east of the country, Tchibarakaten to the north east of Arlit, and the Aïr region in the centre north), then finally in 2016 in Mali (the northern part of the Kidal region) and Mauritania (Tasiast, in the west). The cross-border movement of experienced miners from the sub-region, notably from Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso, has fuelled the exploitation of these sites.²

These recent discoveries come in addition to the gold already mined in Tillabéri (western Niger), Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro (southern Mali), and various regions of Burkina Faso, making artisanal gold a hugely important issue in the Sahel. Artisanal production now reportedly amounts to almost half the volume of industrially produced gold:³ 20 to 50 tonnes per year in Mali, 10 to 30 tonnes in Burkina Faso, and 10 to 15 tonnes in Niger. This represents a total monetary value of between \$1.9 and \$4.5 billion per year.⁴ The bulk is exported to Dubai, which reports \$1.9 billion in annual gold imports from these countries (plus Togo).⁵ According to Crisis Group estimates, more than two million individuals in these three countries are directly involved in artisanal gold mining: one million in Burkina Faso, 700,000 in Mali and 300,000 in Niger.⁶ The number of people employed indirectly could be three times higher.⁷

Aside from the major social, environmental and political governance problems covered in the literature on artisanal gold mining, new security concerns have arisen in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger due to the practice.⁸ These three countries are the epi-

¹ Artisanal gold mining has existed for decades at sites in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In Mali, gold mines were already being exploited in the thirteenth century.

² Raphaëlle Chevillon-Guibert, Laurent Gagnol and Géraud Magrin, “Les ruées vers l’or au Sahara et au nord du Sahel. Ferment de crise ou stabilisateur ?”, *Hérodote*, no. 172 (2019).

³ “Gold at the Crossroads”, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018.

⁴ The low-end estimates are based on statements by national authorities, while the highest are based on interviews with artisanal gold mining actors. Crisis Group interviews, Ouagadougou, Niamey, Agadez and Bamako, 2018-2019. The ranges also partly reflect OECD estimates. “Gold at the Crossroads”, op. cit.

⁵ Some of the gold produced in Burkina Faso and Niger is exported through Togo. “Gold worth billions smuggled out of Africa”, Reuters, 24 April 2019.

⁶ These estimates are based on interviews with artisanal gold mining actors. Crisis Group interviews, Ouagadougou, Niamey, Agadez and Bamako, 2018-2019.

⁷ “Gold at the Crossroads”, op. cit.

⁸ Many researchers and NGOs have looked into these issues in the three countries in question. See, for example, Amadou Koita, “Orpaillage et accès aux ressources naturelles et foncières au Mali”, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2017; Emmanuel Grégoire and Laurent Gagnol, “Ruées vers l’or au Sahara : l’orpaillage dans le désert du Ténéré et le massif de l’Aïr”, *EchoGéo*, 2017; Joseph Bohbot, “L’orpaillage au Burkina Faso : une aubaine économique pour les populations, aux consé-

centre of insecurity in the Sahel, and gold has been discovered in areas where the state is historically weak or where it has recently withdrawn. The state has too few human and technical resources to oversee a rapidly expanding sector. This benefits various armed actors (self-defence groups, bandits, traffickers, rebel groups and jihadists) who sometimes challenge the state and sometimes cooperate with it.

These security issues have taken on a new dimension since 2016. More than ever before, the latest gold discoveries in the Sahel (such as in Kidal), coupled with the arrival of armed groups in areas where gold was already mined (such as northern Burkina Faso and Torodi in Niger), expose these resources to the predatory behaviour of rebel and jihadist armed groups, for whom mining sites have become a source of financing and recruits. Gold also contributes to the growth of international money laundering networks. In the north of Niger and Mali, several important artisanal gold mining entrepreneurs were – for those who quit – or still are major players in narco-trafficking. Traffickers frequently purchase gold above the market price to export it via smuggling networks.⁹ Such schemes to launder money through gold also exist in other parts of the world.¹⁰

Two recent incidents testify to the growing violence surrounding gold mining in Burkina Faso and more widely in the central Sahel, in a context where states are weakening and various armed groups are on the rise. On 6 November 2019, unidentified gunmen attacked a convoy from Semafo, a Canadian company operating the Boungou gold mine in eastern Burkina Faso. At least 40 employees were reportedly killed, some at close range, according to the first testimonies.¹¹ While attacks against gendarmes or police officers escorting such convoys have previously been recorded in the region, the large number of civilian casualties makes this one stand out. A few weeks earlier, on 4 October 2019, an armed group killed around twenty gold miners in an artisanal mine in Dolmané, near the town of Arbinda in the north west of the country.¹² In neither case have the attackers been identified.¹³

This report analyses the security concerns related to artisanal gold mining in central Sahel, a major challenge for states whose means are limited and already highly mobilised in counter-insurgency efforts. It is based on interviews conducted in the three countries with government and international actors, gold sector officials, artisanal gold miners, members of armed groups, and experts in the extractive resources economy, specifically the gold sector. This report proposes ways to identify public and private methods of securing sites, so that steps can be taken to formalise gold mining activities and better control gold trade networks.

quences sociales et environnementales mal maîtrisées”, *EchoGéo*, no. 42 (2017). On governance challenges in Burkina Faso, see “A Golden Racket”, *Public Eye*, September 2015.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, expert on natural resources based in Bamako, September 2019.

¹⁰ “Money Laundering/Terrorist Financing Risks and Vulnerabilities Associated with Gold”, *Financial Action Task Force*, July 2015.

¹¹ “At least 37 killed in attack on Canadian miner Semafo convoy in Burkina Faso”, *Reuters*, 6 November 2019. Crisis Group interview, expert working for a security company hired by a mining firm in Burkina Faso, Dakar, 6 November 2019.

¹² “Burkina : une vingtaine d’orpailleurs tués lors d’une attaque dans le Soum”, *RFI*, 5 October 2019.

¹³ Both attacks took place in areas where jihadist groups operate, but no group has claimed responsibility.

II. Private Security at Gold Sites: The State between Resignation and Calculation

The Sahelian states' defence and security forces are already committed on several fronts, particularly in the fight against jihadist insurgency, and they struggle to secure the most isolated territories under their nominal control. Their presence around artisanal mining sites is often inadequate or non-existent, despite the riches extracted there. Armed groups of all stripes benefit from this scant state presence, forcing Sahelian states to tolerate, or even encourage, arrangements whereby local actors secure these sites themselves. These local actors appear as a necessary and inexpensive expedient as long as they do not challenge the authority of the state. This fuels a private security economy, further stimulated by sub-regional arms trafficking.

In southern Mali, security at artisanal gold mines largely depends on the Dozo, hunting confraternities that are usually equipped with homemade rifles. For several decades, they have been called upon by the Tomboloma, an unofficial mining police that site owners employ and pay through taxes collected from miners. The Tomboloma represent village chiefs at mining sites, and their mission of securing mines in the Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro regions has not been challenged at either the local or national level. In recent years, securing these sites has become more difficult due to the increasing number of artisanal gold miners, prompting the government to deploy security forces at certain locations.¹⁴

In Burkina Faso, security arrangements are comparable to those observed in Mali, but less structured and with more local variation. The securing of artisanal gold sites was formalised under President Blaise Compaoré: it was the responsibility of the *concessionnaires*, via private security companies with the support of security forces.¹⁵ Since Compaoré's departure, local actors have largely taken back control of artisanal mining sites, sometimes with the support of policemen (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité in French) or gendarmes.¹⁶ In the west, artisanal miners seek the assistance of former bandits, who take on a new role for the occasion, or of the Dozo, who have traditionally been responsible for securing rural areas in the Boucle du Mouhoun, Hauts-Bassins and Cascades regions.¹⁷ On the Mossi Plateau, in the province of Yagha (Sahel region), and in the Centre-North and East regions, the Koglweogo – a self-defence group formed in 2015 – are employed as security forces at certain artisanal mining sites.¹⁸

Niger, for its part, appears to be hesitating between several approaches. In the Agadez region, home to recent rebellions, the state is keen to assert its authority.¹⁹

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, artisanal gold miner based in Sikasso, October 2019.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, artisanal gold miners and members of civil society from the Yagha and Soum provinces, July 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, members of civil society from the Soum province, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, notables from western Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

¹⁸ "Self-Defence Movements in Burkina Faso: Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups", Network of Researchers in International Affairs, 15 November 2018.

¹⁹ The Agadez region has experienced two episodes of rebellion (1990-1995 and 2007-2009). It is a hub of trafficking in the Sahara and remains under threat from jihadist groups. The state is therefore mobilising specific means in the vicinity of gold sites that are of interest to these three categories of actors.

Since 2015, the army has been deployed near the main site of Tchibarakaten and provided weekly escorts for miners going to Arlit and Agadez.²⁰ In other places, security increasingly depends on private actors. In the Torodi department (Tillabéri), vigilante committees have been expanding since 2016 in the face of worsening banditry targeting miners. The state, however, is seeking to develop a legal framework and structure these groups' activity.²¹

Whether a deliberate strategy or not, delegating security to private actors has limitations. As states in the central Sahel become progressively weaker, there is a real risk that these actors will become autonomous of the authorities and even end up challenging them. In the Kangaba gold mining zone (Koulikoro region) in Mali, for example, Dozo take on policing and judicial duties outside of any legal framework; in early 2019, they killed individuals suspected of banditry near a mining site.²² In Sikasso, some Tomboloma have reportedly been arrested following disputes with defence and security forces.²³ In Burkina Faso, the Koglweogo largely operate outside of any state control. They carry out security operations in the mines and make arrests without the authorities' approval.²⁴

In addition, states are apprehensive about the growth of jihadist insurgencies in the central Sahel, and have begun mobilising local armed actors, including those securing mines, for what they call "counter-terrorism" operations. They carry out intelligence-gathering missions and patrol various areas to identify and, in some cases, arrest suspects.²⁵ In the Sikasso region of Mali, the Dozo are solicited by authorities to give early warnings of terrorist threats.²⁶ In the Centre-North region of Burkina Faso, which has the largest concentration of artisanal mines in the country, the Koglweogo are already involved in "the fight against terrorism" alongside authorities.²⁷

In taking part in counter-terrorism efforts, these actors take on a role for which they are not prepared and become the target of jihadist attacks. They risk behaving less like a private police force responsible for securing gold mines, and more like a militarised group acting outside state control, likely to develop its own agenda and seize mineral resources.

²⁰ "Rapport d'Etude sur la typologie des conflits dans le secteur minier au Niger", Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix, April 2019.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien interior ministry officials, Niamey, May 2019.

²² "Village de Dabali : deux hommes tués par de présumés chasseurs", *Nord-Sud Journal*, 8 January 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interview, artisanal gold miner based in Sikasso, October 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society members from the Soum province, Ouagadougou, September 2019.

²⁵ In contrast, Sahelian states do not use these private security groups against politico-military groups.

²⁶ Crisis Group email correspondence, researcher in the Sikasso region, June 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Koglweogo from the Centre-North region, Ouagadougou, September 2019.

III. A Resource Coveted by Politico-military Groups in the Sahel

Some politico-military groups that have opposed or still oppose the state are seeking to seize gold resources. By taking control of gold mines or securing ore transfer sites and routes, these groups (or affiliated members) can access a source of financing. This is already the case in the Kidal region (Mali), the stronghold of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), an alliance of rebel groups with several thousand members formed in October 2014, and to a lesser degree in the Djado area (Niger), home to rebel groups and traffickers moving between Niger, Chad and Libya.²⁸ While no such groups exist at this stage in Burkina Faso, the proliferation of jihadist attacks and growing insecurity could push local self-defence groups in this direction.

In the Kidal region of Mali, most artisanal gold mines are controlled by members of the CMA or, to a lesser degree, the Algiers Platform of 14 June 2014, an alliance of several dozen pro-government armed groups.²⁹ Gold is used both to enrich individual combatants and to fund armed movements.³⁰ The CMA often taxes miners in exchange for site security.³¹ In contrast to other mining areas, the gold boom in Kidal has not been accompanied by a resurgence in banditry, suggesting that the mechanism is effective.

In northern Niger, artisanal gold mining, which began in the spring of 2014 in the Djado area, was quickly seized by networks of several hundreds of armed men, mostly Chadians suspected of links to Zaghawa or Toubou rebel groups from southern Libya.³² These actors reportedly controlled certain gold sites and illicitly traded gold on Libyan territory until at least 2016.³³ To drive them out of the area, but perhaps also to prepare for the arrival of international mining companies, the Nigerien authorities closed the site in 2017.³⁴ Despite the commitments made, the site has yet to reopen, which has had the effect of both redirecting miners toward other gold sites (especially in the Air region) or the criminal economy, and bringing discontent to local communities.³⁵ Nevertheless, a few groups of foreign gold miners continue to exploit the site illegally, sometimes in collusion with local defence and security forces.³⁶

Artisanal gold mining also has a positive impact in these regions, offering lucrative employment opportunities, which can encourage fighters to lay down their arms. In Côte d'Ivoire, the willingness of some former rebels to work in the gold sector appears to have facilitated the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration pro-

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, security sources, Bamako and Niamey, November 2018 and January 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, gold miners and CMA members in Kidal, July 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group Africa Report N°267, *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali*, 13 December 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, CMA member, Niamey, May 2019.

³² "The Gold Rush in Northern Niger", Small Arms Survey, 19 June 2017.

³³ Crisis Group interview, gold miner in Djado, Niamey, January 2017.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior Nigerien officials, Niamey, September 2018 and January 2019.

³⁵ "The Niger-Libya Border: Securing It without Stabilising It?", Institut Français des Relations Internationales, December 2018.

³⁶ Crisis Group email correspondence, expert in the artisanal gold sector in Niger, September 2019.

cess.³⁷ In the Agadez region of Niger, many mine owners are former rebels or traffickers; Saleh Ibrahim, formerly a rebel of the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ) and criminal economy baron, has now taken up artisanal gold mining at the Tchibarakaten site and become a highly respected local figure.³⁸ In Kidal, certain members of the CMA and even the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies, a group created in 2014 and part of the Platform, have given up armed struggle since 2017 to devote themselves to artisanal gold mining.³⁹

It nevertheless remains possible that armed groups may summon these combatants-turned-miners back into service when necessary. An individual's trajectory is extremely unpredictable in the Sahara region; it is conceivable to partake in both gold mining and politico-military activities.

³⁷ "The West African El Dorado: Mapping the Illicit Trade of Gold in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso", Partenariat Afrique Canada, January 2017.

³⁸ Nearly all former MNJ leaders and fighters have been or are still involved in the gold economy in Tchibarakaten or Amzigar. Crisis Group interviews, former members of the MNJ, Niamey and Agadez, 2017. On Saleh Ibrahim, see "Lost in Trans-Nation: Tubu and Other Armed Groups and Smugglers along Libya's Southern Border", Small Arms Survey, December 2018, p. 66.

³⁹ In Kidal, the proportion of converted fighters remains low. Crisis Group phone interviews, inhabitants of Kidal, August 2019.

IV. Artisanal Gold, a New Stake for Jihadists in the Sahel

Sahelian states and international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), are worried about the risk of jihadists seizing gold resources in areas where state institutions are weak or absent.⁴⁰ As hostage taking for ransom – a major source of income for jihadist groups in the Sahel – becomes increasingly scarce, gold can become a new asset for both financing and recruitment. This risk is increased by the fact that gold miners sometimes do not consider the presence of jihadists a threat but rather see it in a positive light.

The main jihadist groups in the Sahel benefit financially from gold extraction – an activity that they consider *halal* (lawful) – in their areas of influence. They do so in ways that vary from region to region. In Burkina Faso's Soum province, gold miners pay jihadist groups to secure sites. In the areas of Tinzawaten, Intabzaz and Tala-handak, in the north of Mali's Kidal region, the jihadist group Ansar Dine (a member of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, or GSIM) does not have an armed presence to secure the site, but levies the *zakat* (religious tax) upon miners and the rest of the population.⁴¹

In Burkina Faso's East region, some jihadist groups affiliated with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) as well as GSIM also appear to benefit from gold mining by levying the *zakat*.⁴² Despite the recent Otapuanu military operation, they still reportedly control several mining sites, especially in the least accessible forests and reserves, where they likely collaborate with other groups such as some former Koglweogo.⁴³

Some miners cooperate with jihadist groups for reasons of pragmatism more than conviction: they side with those who hold power at the local level and determine gold mining conditions, or ally themselves with jihadist groups to regain control of disputed mining sites. In the Soum province of Burkina Faso, gold miners reportedly supported jihadists against the Koglweogo who had seized the Kereboulé site in 2016.⁴⁴ Artisanal gold miners might also turn to jihadist groups in an endeavour to obtain justice. In the Soum province, communities appear to have been brought closer to jihadists following counter-terrorism operations in early 2019, during which gold

⁴⁰ "Gold at the Crossroads", op. cit.

⁴¹ Ansar Dine is a jihadist group founded by Iyad ag Ghaly in January 2012 in the Kidal region. Iyad ag Ghaly's GSIM was created in March 2017 from the merger of al-Qaeda-linked jihadist groups operating in the Sahel: Ansar Dine, al-Murabitun and certain Saharan al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) units. The third pillar of Islam, *zakat* is the alms that must be paid regularly by Muslims in an amount that varies according to their means. In areas under jihadist influence, their groups levy the *zakat*.

⁴² The ISGS, led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, was created in May 2015 from a split in the jihadist group al-Murabitun. The Islamic State accepted its allegiance in October 2016.

⁴³ The arrival of jihadist groups resulted in verbal non-aggression agreements with many Koglweogo. Crisis Group interview, actor in the governance of the gold sector, Ouagadougou, May 2019.

⁴⁴ These Koglweogo were originally from Boulsa (a province in the Centre-North region), and their leader, Elhadji Djiby, worked for an individual with close ties to the former gold mine operator Adama Kindo, CEO of the Somika mining company, strongly opposed by local communities during the term of President Compaoré. Crisis Group interview, high-standing local figure from Soum, Ouagadougou, September 2019.

mining equipment, and even gold, was seized.⁴⁵ In the East region of Burkina Faso, the governor ordered the closure of artisanal mining sites in 2018, officially to cut off sources of funding for terrorist groups. Consequently, disgruntled miners turned toward jihadists, who reopened certain mines, like the one at Kabonga.⁴⁶

For the time being, gold sites largely remain a secondary source of funding for jihadist groups in the Sahel. Their reliance on gold could, however, increase as they expand into other mineral-rich areas, and as they appear to face financing difficulties.⁴⁷

The gold sites also seem to be a recruiting ground for jihadist groups. In the East region of Burkina Faso and in the Torodi department of Niger, jihadists have reportedly preached about the need to respect Islamic law at extraction sites.⁴⁸ Some nearby communities support the “morality” supposedly spread by jihadists in places where theft, alcohol consumption and prostitution are persistent problems.⁴⁹

Mining sites can also become training grounds, notably with regard to the manipulation of explosives, since these are also used in gold mining. Several members of the Khalid Ben Walid *katibat* (brigade), the southern branch of Ansar Dine, have reportedly admitted to being trained in explosives at one of the many artisanal gold mines in northern Côte d’Ivoire, near the Malian border.⁵⁰ The gold sector may also provide a supply route for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), particularly in central Mali and parts of Burkina Faso where ammonium nitrate, sold by some companies in the Sahel, is the main component of IEDs.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Crisis Group email correspondence, humanitarian actor in Soum, 28 May, 2019.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian actor in the East region, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local sources in Soum and central Mali, September 2019.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group analyst’s interview in a former capacity, humanitarian actor, Niamey, April 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group analyst’s interview in a former capacity, gold mining actors, Agadez, January 2019.

⁵⁰ “Vastes opérations de la sécurité d’Etat : Ces terroristes pris dans les mailles de la SE”, *L’Aube*, 26 April 2016.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, expert on IEDs in the Sahel, 9 August 2019.

V. Restoring State Presence and Regulation

Given the security risks associated with gold mining, Sahelian states should take steps to regulate and secure artisanal sites. Faced with many other challenges, they would be wise to set their priorities: as a first step, expand their presence, and where possible, better supervise local security actors. Strengthening sub-regional and international regulations and improving due diligence mechanisms could also limit the influence of violent armed groups and help Sahelian states to better regulate gold production.

A. Resuming Security Missions in Gold Mining Zones

Before redeploying public services in gold mining areas, Sahelian states need to secure artisanal gold mines. In the short term, at least, they will be unable to do so in areas controlled by rebel and/or jihadist armed groups, such as Kidal (Mali) or Soum (Burkina Faso). Elsewhere, however, the state can and should secure mines either by sending its own forces or by collaborating with local private actors who are already present but should be better supervised.

Defence and security forces are needed around gold sites that hostile armed groups may attempt to seize. Thus, in the East region of Burkina Faso, the state should deploy its forces to certain mining sites deserted by jihadists during Operation Otapuanu last May. This increased state presence should go hand in hand with an effort to promote good governance. The state should commit itself to end injustices perpetrated by its own forces, such as extortion, which have exacerbated citizens' distrust in the authorities. This goal is not unrealistic: at various sensitive sites in the Agadez region of Niger, the state has shown miners that its presence rendered their activity safer. By securing artisanal sites in the same manner, Burkina Faso would help rebuild trust between its armed forces and civilians. Once security is assured, governments should strive to withdraw their armed forces from the mines, while keeping mobile police forces nearby.

Under certain conditions, the state will have to rely on non-state actors already conducting security operations at gold sites. The large number of sites to be secured poses a major challenge for defence and security forces that lack resources and are committed on several other fronts. It is not a question of delegating mine security to militarised groups that could escape state control and commit crimes against civilians. Rather, it is about recognising the role of local security actors, who already de facto police the mines and their surroundings, and supervising them better. For example, the authorities could establish inclusive local committees under mayors or traditional leaders, such as the Community Security Coordinations (Coordinations Communales de Sécurité, CCS) in Burkina Faso, in charge of supervising certain self-defence groups.⁵²

⁵² According to Decree 2016-1052, the CCS are in charge of the technical supervision, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the activities of self-defence groups as soon as they are recognised by the Ministry of Security as Local Community Security Structures. But the CCS are not yet operational, and there are worries regarding the excessive powers that mayors may be granted within them. There are plans to revise Decree 2016-1052. Crisis Group interview, actor involved in the implementation of this reform, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

Associating with these actors instead of replacing them with defence and security forces offers a twofold advantage: it would induce them to collaborate with authorities and avoid alienating them by depriving them of a profitable activity; and it would relieve defence and security forces, who are increasingly busy with the fight against jihadist groups. In the longer term, Sahelian states should consider integrating these local private actors into territorial police forces (or local police) – which they have been trying to establish for several years – provided that they display discipline, efficiency and integrity.

Whatever actors are involved in security (defence and security forces or private actors), the authorities must ensure that they refrain from predatory behaviour at mining sites. Here again, there is a need for monitoring mechanisms involving local actors – miners but also nearby communities – including local political and traditional elites, but also local civil society organisations. The creation of inclusive local committees to supervise activities in and around gold mining sites could help limit abuses by public officials.

B. Demonstrating the State's Utility at the Most Accessible Sites

At sites where states can still exert their authority without extensive security measures, they should take steps to formalise artisanal gold mining.⁵³ For Sahelian states, it is essential to know who is operating at artisanal gold sites and to control extraction channels as much as possible in order to reduce the risk of financing armed groups, including jihadists. Establishing a legal framework for artisanal mining at these gold sites would also generate tax revenues. This would imply registering and issuing gold mining permits, and setting up gold trading posts and a technical mechanism for controlling mining methods. To demonstrate its utility to artisanal gold miners and convince them to cooperate, the state should provide them with security guarantees, tax benefits (potentially also on equipment imports) and/or access to public services.

Sahelian states have recently taken steps in this direction, but a lack of political will or institutional capacity has meant that the process has not yet been completed. Burkina Faso has provided tax benefits for those selling their product to the new state agency created in November 2015, the National Agency for the Supervision of Artisanal and Semi-Mechanised Mining (ANEEMAS, by its French acronym).⁵⁴ It is still too early to evaluate the impact of this policy. For its part, Niger is planning to set up gold mining corridors (specific zones reserved for formalised artisanal mining) that would be secured and supplied with basic services available to miners (such as water, electricity, education and health facilities).⁵⁵ This could make them more attractive than the corridors set up in Mali, which are criticised for their poor mineral resources and complete lack of services.⁵⁶ These artisanal gold mining corridors aim to struc-

⁵³ Formalising does not necessarily imply industrialising. The aim is to provide a legal framework for artisanal gold mining in order to increase the sector's transparency and make it less vulnerable to criminal networks. See "Best Practices: Formalization and Due Diligence in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining", Impact, May 2018.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group analyst's interview in a former capacity, gold mining actor, Ouagadougou, April 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, expert in the artisanal gold sector in Niger, August 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, artisanal gold mining actor in Mali, June 2019.

ture gold miners into cooperatives and to encourage the creation of small-scale (semi-mechanised) mining companies.

Sahelian states must also find a balance between preserving artisanal gold mining and industrialising the sector. The latter generates tax revenues but risks stirring resentment among locals. Industrialisation can destroy some of the jobs generated by artisanal mining and cause land conflicts when the areas concerned are inhabited by populations expelled without systematic or adequate compensation.⁵⁷

Moreover, the presence of a mining company in an area does not always improve security conditions there. While these companies can afford private security forces, they can also become a target, as demonstrated by the recent kidnappings of expatriate personnel from mining companies in Niger and Burkina Faso.⁵⁸ Finally, the social and environmental consequences of industrial mining can also lead to violence, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. On 8 August 2019 in Youga, in the Centre-East region of Burkina Faso, local residents ransacked the equipment of a Turkish mining company and injured several employees.⁵⁹

C. *Strengthening Regional and International Control Mechanisms for the Artisanal Gold Sector*

Armed groups exploiting gold sites depend on export channels. In the areas they control, gold is often sold through informal networks with links to bordering countries: eastern Burkina Faso and the Tillabéri region (south-western Niger) are connected to resale channels in Ghana and Togo; southern Mali is linked to Guinea; the Kidal region (northern Mali) to Algeria; and the northern part of Agadez (central Niger) to Libya. At the end of the chain, exports are destined largely for Switzerland, China and especially Dubai.⁶⁰

Limiting informal cross-border trade in gold, which is associated with an increased risk of money laundering and terrorist funding, above all means reducing the attractiveness of certain tax regimes and developing public policy incentives for gold production to go through formal, rather than informal, trade networks. If the countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) harmonised their taxation systems, this would prevent countries like Togo, Mali and Guinea, whose tax regimes are particularly attractive, from becoming a destination for smuggled gold.⁶¹

To promote formal trade networks, two solutions are possible. First, through the Central Bank of West African States, Sahelian states could purchase the artisanal gold

⁵⁷ An example of this occurred in Tillabéri, Niger in the summer of 2017: the state closed down certain mines and expelled miners to allow a foreign mining company to set up. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in a former capacity, state officials and gold miners, Tillabéri, January 2019.

⁵⁸ "Trois employés de la mine d'or d'Inata enlevés dans le nord du pays", *Jeune Afrique*, 24 September 2018; "Un cadre canadien d'une compagnie minière enlevé au Burkina", AFP, 17 January 2019.

⁵⁹ "Attaquée et critiquée, une mine d'or turque dans la tourmente au Burkina Faso", France 24, 13 August 2019.

⁶⁰ "Gold worth billions smuggled out of Africa", op. cit.; and "A Golden Racket", op. cit.

⁶¹ "Gold at the Crossroads", op. cit.; "Curbing Illicit Mercury and Gold Flows in West Africa", UN Industrial Development Organization, November 2018.

mined on their territory, an example already set by Guinea.⁶² The Central Bank, however, cannot print CFA francs – the currency of states in the West African Economic and Monetary Union – to buy gold without weakening the value of its currency, which is not possible in the context of the fixed parity between the CFA franc and the euro. To purchase gold without printing money, the Central Bank would have to tap into its own foreign currency reserves, which are limited.

Alternatively or in addition, Sahelian states could encourage the formal private sector to become involved in artisanal mining. These private actors could seek to insert themselves into the gold supply chain by offering artisanal miners prices higher than market prices. The short-term costs would be offset by later gains from economies of scale and the development of more efficient means of production. The artisanal sector would thus be protected from traffickers who sometimes use gold to launder money. In the longer term, institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank should support this process with programs that help artisanal miners form cooperatives to extract gold sustainably and transparently, in line with international standards.⁶³

As long as effective national traceability mechanisms are established, this would reduce the risk of money laundering and terrorist financing since control would be regained over some of the informal channels. It would also provide significant financial benefits for the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the CFA franc zone. Authorities in various countries must therefore strengthen controls at airports, as most gold smuggled to Dubai takes this route.⁶⁴ Sahelian states should prohibit individuals from transporting gold in their luggage, which allows them to bypass air freight controls.⁶⁵

Governments should strive to identify trade and export networks that could directly or indirectly finance non-state armed groups, including those accused of terrorism. At the sub-regional level, the states concerned should take steps to develop a certification mechanism reflecting the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals. The sub-region could draw inspiration from the Regional Certification Mechanism established by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region to curb financial assistance to armed groups.⁶⁶ In Mali, the UN Expert Group could, within its current mandate, address the issue of militancy and terrorism funding through gold, particularly in the Kidal region.

At the international level, Dubai is the first importer of gold from Sahelian and West African countries. This gold is largely exported through smuggling networks.⁶⁷ As

⁶² Crisis Group email correspondence, Roberto Sollazzo, expert in the economy of natural resources, 19 September 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, private-sector gold mining actors, expert in natural resources, October 2019.

⁶⁴ “Curbing Illicit Mercury and Gold Flows in West Africa”, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ As notably recommended by the report, “The West African El Dorado: Mapping the Illicit Trade of Gold in Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso”, Africa Portal, 1 January 2017.

⁶⁶ “Regional Certification Mechanism”, Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.

⁶⁷ Between 2006 and 2016, the share of African gold in the United Arab Emirate’s total gold imports increased from 18 to 50 per cent. “Gold worth billions smuggled out of Africa”, *op. cit.* Dubai has declared annual gold imports from Mali ranging between 40 and 60 tonnes since 2013, the bulk of

such, it is the United Arab Emirate's responsibility to strengthen the legal framework of its gold imports – beyond its recent efforts – especially to prevent risks of money laundering and terrorist financing.⁶⁸ Importers of artisanal gold should be required to collect additional information on sellers, and to verify the authenticity of certificates of origin, export authorisations and national customs certificates.⁶⁹ Switzerland and China, the other major importers, should also strengthen their controls over supply chains and impose reasonable due diligence mechanisms on their companies.⁷⁰

which comes from illegally exported artisanal gold. “Curbing Illicit Mercury and Gold Flows in West Africa”, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ The Dubai Good Delivery mechanism establishes responsible sourcing standards for refineries. Authorities also affirm that only a small number of refineries accept gold imported in hand luggage. “Gold worth billions smuggled out of Africa”, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ “The West African El Dorado: Mapping the Illicit Trade of Gold in Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso”, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ For details on shortfalls in Switzerland’s application of its money laundering law, see “A Golden Racket”, *op. cit.*

VI. Conclusion

The gold boom in the Sahel opens up new opportunities, particularly in terms of jobs, but also raises many environmental, health-related, social and security challenges. The security risk is particularly high: the weakness of the Sahelian states paves the way for the proliferation of armed groups, including jihadists, who carry out security operations at extraction sites and/or tax the operators in place of the authorities.

Sahelian states should not lose interest in artisanal gold mining or simply outsource site security to poorly supervised armed groups. In a context where state authority is contested in many rural areas, it is perilous to leave gold sites in the hands of armed groups of any sort. The use of force alone, however, will not allow states to restore their authority over disputed territories.

The state will only regain a foothold at these sites if it can demonstrate its usefulness, and above all its ability to regulate the exploitation and trade of artisanal gold. Since the artisanal gold sector transcends national borders, states in the sub-region should harmonise their regulatory frameworks and methods to better control trade networks. Finally, controls of export and import channels should be strengthened at the international level.

Dakar/Brussels, 13 November 2019

Appendix A: Map of the Sahel Region



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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

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

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

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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