

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS  
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2022 SERIES



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# MALI

HUMAN-SMUGGLING REVIVAL  
AFTER PANDEMIC-LINKED SLUMP

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# INTRODUCTION

In 2021, a revival of migration through northern Mali occurred, following the stark decline that took place in 2020, during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

The bulk of this increase was channelled through Timbuktu, which, despite a slowdown resulting from the restrictions implemented regionally and locally to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus, quickly rebounded as soon as restrictions were eased and enforcement relaxed. As many as 500–1 000 migrants arrived each week in the final quarter of 2021, and up to 100 a day as of early December.

During the second half of 2021, Gao also slowly re-emerged as the secondary migrant-transportation hub in the region. Prior to 2019, Gao had historically been the most important migrant-smuggling hub in the region; however, migrants heading to Algeria and Niger were then diverted along other routes due to escalating instability in central Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as banditry along the road linking the city to the Nigerien border. Yet despite ongoing insecurity in the region, transport links in Gao have gradually recovered, with migrants arriving in the city to access Algeria as well as in search of economic opportunities in northern Mali's booming artisanal gold-mining sector in Gao, Ménaka and Kidal regions.

As a result of unprecedented migrant arrivals in Timbuktu and the reactivation of Gao as a hub of smuggling activity, the routes used by transporters have proliferated and the actors involved in migrant transportation have become more diverse. Smuggling routes and itineraries have increasingly become intertwined with the artisanal gold mining, with fields in the central Sahara both stop-off points for migrants heading north and destinations in their own right. The ongoing proliferation of routes and diversification of actors involved in migrant transportation has coincided with increased reports of migrant exploitation and abuse, with accounts of migrants being abandoned in the desert and extorted during their journeys.

During the second half of 2021, the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe autodéfense Touareg Imghad et allies, GATIA), the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA), and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad–Daoussak (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad–Daoussak, MSA-D), in Northern Mali reportedly became involved in territory- and border-control efforts as part of a project supported by the Italian government. The involvement of armed groups in 'managing migration' in northern Mali raises several legal issues, and is likely to have a profound impact on the political economies and security dynamics in northern Mali.

This brief is part of the latest round of publications emerging from GI-TOC research on human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Niger, Chad and Mali.



A view of Timbuktu, 16 January 2020. Photo: Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images

Since 2018, the GI-TOC has undertaken monthly monitoring of human smuggling and trafficking in North Africa and the Sahel. The first report of the project, 'The human conveyor belt broken', published in early 2019, described the fall of the protection racket by Libyan militias that underpinned the surge in irregular migration between 2014 and 2017. The second report of the project, 'Conflict, Coping and COVID,' published in early 2021, detailed the evolution of human smuggling and trafficking in the face of Libyan conflict and the region-wide COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring both the disruption of the system and its broader continuity.

Rather than a single report covering trends and dynamics in 2021, the GI-TOC is publishing a series of briefs, each covering a single country as well as a regional overview brief. These build on the previous reports, mapping smuggling and trafficking, as well as the political and security dynamics that impacted and influenced the irregular transport of migrants in 2021. The series of briefs underscores the rebounding importance of smuggling from and through Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali, and the ways in which dynamics are intensifying as the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs and a rough peace is maintained in Libya.

## Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2021 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, security-force officials, politicians, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this brief are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the brief should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Mali and the broader region.





Photo: Amaury Hauchard/AFP via Getty Images



## ACTIVITY IN TIMBUKTU RETURNS TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

**T**here was steady increase in migrant-smuggling activity in the city of Timbuktu in 2021, with the number of migrants arriving each week returning to pre-pandemic levels during the first half of the year, and continuing to increase throughout the second half of the year. Based on estimates provided by contacts in the humanitarian community, as well as by local contacts, between 500 and 1 000 migrants arrived in Timbuktu weekly towards the end of 2021. As of early December, a contact within the humanitarian community and a representative for a local NGO indicated that as many as 100 migrants were arriving daily.

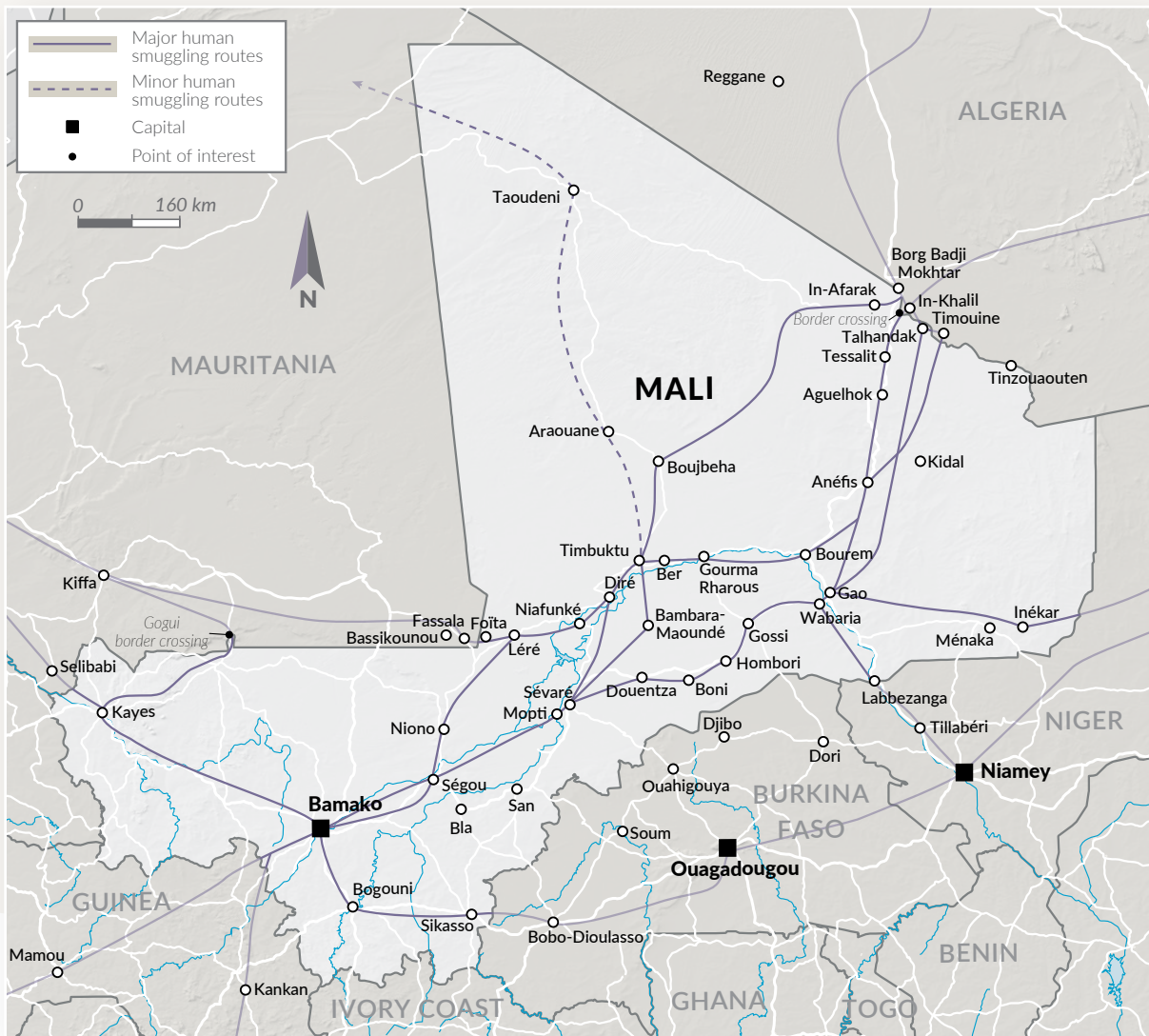
In recent years, and particularly since 2019, individuals affiliated with armed groups that are official signatories to Mali's stalled peace process have become directly involved in the transportation of migrants to Algeria; however, this should not be interpreted as the direct interest and involvement of armed groups in migrant smuggling.

Most migrant movement through the country dropped sharply in 2020 as a result of mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions and a brief closure of neighbouring countries' borders with Mali as part of an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sanctions regime implemented in response to an August 2020 military coup.<sup>2</sup> However, since September 2020, human smuggling via Timbuktu has re-emerged, with the city serving as Mali's most important hub for the activity, in large part because it is both easier to access overland from southern Mali and offers a direct route to the Algerian border.

Migrants travel to Timbuktu using a variety of routes and methods. Those from Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Gambia, for example, are likely to travel by public transport directly to Bamako, from where there are multiple ways they can reach Timbuktu by transport accessible to the public. Two particular companies, Sonef and Nour, provide services along a route that links Bamako to Timbuktu through Segou region.

Mini-buses and private 4x4s for rent also travel from Bamako to Sévaré, in Mopti region, from where migrants continue to Timbuktu via Douentza using various forms of overland transport. Since 2016, this route has become increasingly less popular for migrants (as well as Malians beginning their journeys in Bamako or other parts of southern Mali), due to concerns of insecurity and banditry. A more popular option from Sévaré, especially since late 2019, are boats that travel along the Niger River via the town of Mopti in order to reach Timbuktu.





**FIGURE 1** Human-smuggling routes through Mali, 2021.

Itineraries that do not start in Bamako are more varied and less defined. Those who enter Mali via Niger, for example, are unlikely to travel to Timbuktu in order to reach Algeria, opting instead to travel directly to the Algerian border after linking with transporters in Gao. Those entering via Burkina Faso have a number of options for reaching Timbuktu – for example, taking boats via Sévaré or travelling overland via Bamako or Douentza.

Furthermore, not all migrants travelling to northern Mali are necessarily aiming to reach Algeria; instead, they may be searching for employment opportunities in northern Mali’s artisanal-mining sector, concentrated in the Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu regions.

As a result, migrants’ itineraries through northern Mali towards Algeria, including via Timbuktu, may be circuitous and counter-intuitive, as individuals’ ambitions and priorities may change during their journey.

Migrants communicate with smugglers and receive information on how to reach Timbuktu by social-media apps, principally WhatsApp and Facebook. Certain individuals act as information brokers, and there are non-Malian nationals based in Timbuktu who act as liaisons between co-nationals and



smugglers based in Timbuktu. These actors, often referred to as coxeurs, are usually the first point of contact migrants have with smugglers; while coxeurs may help migrants reach Timbuktu through exchange of information and by making contact with transporters in southern and central Mali, migrants are generally responsible for finding their own way to the city.

Migrants often travel in groups, thus pooling information and resources in order to arrive in Timbuktu safely. In Timbuktu, Nigerian nationals reportedly cater to migrants from anglophone countries, specifically those from Nigeria, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia.

The intertwining of irregular-migration patterns with the gold economy in northern Mali has made itineraries and departures less uniform and more varied. As a result, interviewees reported that the extent to which a given migrant convoy exiting Timbuktu is travelling directly to the Algerian border or to gold sites is less easily discernible.

The itinerary linking Timbuktu to the Algerian border via In-Afarak and In-Khalil remains the most popular used by smugglers. Interviewees report that migrants pay between FCFA100 000 and FCFA200 000 (€152–€305) to go from Timbuktu to Algeria. The most common price range reported in the final quarter of 2021 was between FCFA130 000 and FCFA150 000 (€198–€229), with convoys of several cars leaving multiple times per week.

Various contacts in northern Mali indicated that the wide availability of subsidized Algerian fuel on the black market in northern Mali, which had briefly been in short supply due to border closures, in part explains a reduction in prices over the course of the year. Other factors include the reduced risk for smugglers now that difficulty in crossing the Algerian border has ebbed, as Algerian authorities have slowly relaxed stringent security and monitoring implemented during the initial phase of the pandemic. Finally, dropping prices reflect an improvement in security in northern Mali, after various armed groups, including signatory groups and jihadists, made arrangements to reduce banditry and conflict along key routes linking Timbuktu to Algeria. This has allowed smugglers to operate with a greater degree of predictability.



Drivers pack passengers' luggage on a bus before starting the journey from Bamako to Kakolo Mountain in the region of Kayes, 9 July 2020. Photo: Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images

In the late summer and autumn of 2021, information emerged confirming that migrants were also being transported to Algeria from Timbuktu via Taoudenni, from where they crossed the desert to eventually reach Reggane and Aoulef in Algeria. The extent to which migrants take this route – or why certain smugglers prefer it – is not well understood and, as previously mentioned, the ongoing discovery and expansion of gold sites in the Kidal and Gao regions means that migrant transportation is taking place within a broader context of migrant mobility within Mali that makes itineraries, prices and actors less uniform.

Multiple contacts in Timbuktu, including those with visibility on migrant-smuggling activity, confirmed that the demand for smuggler services continued to outstrip supply at the end of 2021.

Migrants waiting to depart for Timbuktu generally stay in houses, or 'foyers', located in the neighbourhoods of Abaradjou, Hamabangou, Koiratao and Bellah Ferrandi, with influential local actors from the Arab community ensuring protection and cooperation from local law-enforcement authorities, who have a minimal presence in the city.

Although transporters are often armed with automatic weapons and may pay actors affiliated with the Signatory groups or the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, JNIM) in order to travel along certain routes, the migrant-smuggling market in Timbuktu is not controlled by any particular group. Furthermore, contacts in Timbuktu indicated that there is no competition over control of the market, although this could change if any of the different armed groups in the region begins to see migrant smuggling as a source of revenue worth trying to capture. For now, key figures within signatory groups have reached an ostensible détente with the JNIM and its allies, enabling goods and people to move throughout Timbuktu and Kidal, and smugglers based in Timbuktu are actively looking for drivers from Arab and Tuareg communities to transport migrants.





## GAO RE-EMERGES AS A HUB AFTER GOING DORMANT IN 2019

In 2021, Gao, northern Mali's largest city, slowly re-emerged as the secondary migrant-transportation hub in northern Mali. This represented a slight rebound of what had been the largest hub of migrant-smuggling activity in Mali prior to 2019. Migrant transit via the city fell sharply, as the worsening security situation in central Mali and in northern Burkina Faso, and a spike in banditry along the road linking Gao to the Nigerien border, severely disrupted transport routes, making travel along this itinerary more dangerous and less frequent. By the late spring of 2020, when COVID-19 measures led to a closure of international borders and restrictions on internal mobility, migrant-smuggling networks based in Gao effectively went dormant.<sup>3</sup>

During the second half of 2021, there was a noticeable, though not particularly large, increase in migrants transiting through Gao in order to reach Algeria, with interviewees noting that networks of smugglers are now active amid arrivals from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon and Nigeria. This has coincided with the arrival of migrants from Niger and Burkina Faso, who interviewees say are more likely to be travelling to Gao in order to find work in the rapidly expanding artisanal and small-scale mining sectors in Gao and Kidal.

It is not possible to accurately estimate the number of migrants arriving in Gao for onward travel to Algeria due to the fact that these are mixed-migration flows, which also include Malian nationals, and, unlike with Timbuktu, convoys leaving Gao rarely go directly to the Algerian border. Throughout the second half of 2021, however, interviewees did confirm that migrants are paying approximately FCFA20 000 (€30.49) for places on pick-up trucks heading to the Algerian border, with migrants reportedly responsible for paying between FCFA10 000 and FCFA20 000 (€15.24–€30.49) at these checkpoints controlled by various armed groups.

Routes from Gao to Algeria vary, and a given migrant convoy leaving the city may make several stops throughout the Kidal region at various gold sites before continuing to the border. The locality of Talhandak, which has long served as a hub for smuggling contraband, is reportedly a popular consolidation point for smugglers moving migrants into Algeria. From here, the smugglers then facilitate crossings into Timouine, Algeria, or continue to crossings near In-Khalil.



An aerial view taken on 10 March 2020 shows the river Niger near the town of Gao in northern Mali.

*Photo: Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images*

In the second half of 2021, interviewees reported an increase in migrant women arriving in Gao, particularly Nigerian nationals, who work as servers in local bars or engage in sex work. The extent to which these women are technically trafficked is not always clear, but it is believed that many arrive in Gao under highly exploitative debt-based arrangements in which they are forced to work for a certain period of time before being allowed to leave the city. In August 2021, the UN Panel of Experts reported that a network involving Nigerian nationals had ‘taken root’ in Gao, operating in the Aljanabanja neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> The network is reportedly run by a group of Nigerian women who oversee brothels in which women from Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone are forced into sex work.





## RISING NUMBERS OF MIGRANTS DRIVE INCREASED REPORTS OF ABUSE

In mid to late 2021, multiple interviewees as well as contacts within humanitarian and development organizations indicated that the proliferation of routes from Timbuktu and Gao, the entry of new and potentially less experienced actors into the market, and the intertwining of migration routes with transport to gold sites, have all led to increased migrant vulnerability. Multiple contacts cited examples of migrants being robbed or abandoned in the desert, or even held for ransom.

In August, the UN Panel of Experts on Mali reported a case in which a migrant smuggler in Timbuktu named Mamadou Niakate, who goes by the alias 'Tyson', was accused of extorting three migrants from Sierra Leone and two from Senegal.<sup>5</sup> The migrants ultimately managed to escape and report the case to the local police. The same report said that Niakate was allegedly among a group of nine smugglers arrested in Gao in February 2018, and was reportedly arrested a second time in Gao at the end of June 2021.<sup>6</sup>

The same UN report also found that a smuggler based in Gao named Siaka Diarra oversees a network of human traffickers, working with two Guinean nationals – one based in Sévaré, named Amadou Diallo, and one based in the Algerian border town of Timouine, nicknamed 'Rougeot'.<sup>7</sup> According to the report, this network targets migrants from francophone West Africa, mostly Guinean and Ivoirian nationals, who are held prisoner at a house in Timouine where migrants are extorted for extra payments and where female migrants are sexually abused.

In the final quarter of 2021, interviewees in Timbuktu as well as an official working for a local development NGO noted that migrants returning to Timbuktu from unsuccessful journeys to the Algerian border were reporting cases of extortion and deception at the hands of their smugglers.



## ARMED GROUPS TO BE INVOLVED IN ‘MANAGING’ MIGRATION?

In August, the UN Panel of Experts on Mali reported on the launch of a new project, conceived by Alhamadou Ag Ilyene, Mali’s Minister of Malians Abroad and African Integration, and Italy’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.<sup>8</sup> The project is aimed at strengthening the capacity of local actors, including armed signatory groups, to carry out territory and border control in northern Mali.

According to the UN report, the armed groups that would be participating in the project include the CMA, elements within the Plateforme loyal to El-Hadj Ag Gamou, and factions within GATIA and the MSA-D. The report also noted that Malian authorities, GATIA and the MSA-D ‘recovered 251 migrants from traffickers or migrants smuggling networks operating in the Ménaka and Gao regions’ in March 2021, as part of this initiative. The majority of migrants detained, however, were migrant labourers working in the gold-mining sector who did not want to be repatriated and had ‘no intention of travelling to Algeria or beyond’. Among the 65 who did express interest in being repatriated, 12 were unaccompanied minors.

Discussions on the involvement of Malian armed groups in migration management have been ongoing for some time. In 2019, the interviewees indicated that some segments within leadership of the CMA, particularly those based in Kidal, had been in discussions with certain European governments concerning how they might help ‘manage’ irregular-migration flows from Mali into Algeria.

There is reportedly reticence within the Kidal-based factions for the CMA to get involved in intercepting migrants, in part due to the fact that migrant labour is critical to the functioning of the gold sites under CMA control.

Multiple contacts in Gao, as well as diplomatic contacts in Bamako, indicated that the Italian-funded project, which is to be implemented in partnership with humanitarian organizations and armed groups in Gao and Ménaka regions, is moving forward with plans to set up a more permanent reception centre from where migrants who have been ‘recovered’ by armed groups and Malian authorities would be processed and repatriated.

Given that the vast majority of migrants transiting northern Mali are ECOWAS citizens who have a right to be in Malian territory, it is unclear under what legal framework armed groups will be ‘recovering’ migrants. Indeed, several contacts in Gao voiced concern over the fact that there is no real mechanism for holding armed groups accountable for their actions.





Photo: © Souleymane AG Anara/AFP via Getty Images





## MALIAN–MAURITANIAN NETWORKS ARRANGE BOAT DEPARTURES TO THE CANARY ISLANDS

In 2021, interviewees in the Malian city of Kayes and in Mauritania indicated that Malian–Mauritanian networks that were moving Malians to the Spanish Canary Islands through Mauritania. Contacts in Mauritania indicated that there was a brief dip in activity along this itinerary during the second quarter of 2021 due to reports of scammers posing as smugglers as well as a spate of boat accidents at sea.

However, during the second half of 2021, the information emerged that Malian migrants continue to travel to Mauritania to take boats to the Canary Islands. The route mainly involves young men and minors from Kayes and Sikasso regions. Interviewees indicated that this growing migration is being driven by economic hardship in Kayes and Sikasso, combined with food insecurity amid rising food prices.

The dynamics of migrant smuggling along this route remained relatively constant throughout 2021. Smugglers based in Kayes region serve as a first point of contact for prospective migrants, and instruct Malians to take public transport to Nouakchott, providing phone numbers of smugglers operating there. The majority of migrants using this itinerary are ethnic Soninke or Bambara, who rely on contacts within their communities to share information, develop a system of trust between migrants and smugglers, and mitigate risk. Mauritians from the Guidimaka region, who are also ethnic Soninke, also tap into these networks in Nouakchott.

Migrants paid between €1 200 and €1 400 in 2021 for a place on boats departing from beaches between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, in the north of the country. In September 2021, smugglers were arranging one or two boat departures a month, mostly carrying Malians. However, the frequency of departures subsided during winter months due to changing conditions at sea.

While Malian nationals based in Nouakchott play a key role in organizing trips and liaising directly with prospective migrants, these networks also consist of Mauritanian and Senegalese nationals. Mauritanian nationals, for example, manage relationships with local authorities, ensuring that the



coastguard allows boats to go through, reportedly in exchange for €1 000–€1 200 per departure. While boats leaving from areas just north of Nouakchott may depart without complicity from Mauritanian security services, contacts in Mauritania indicated that boats cannot depart from Nouadhibou without making such arrangements. Boats are generally captained by Senegalese nationals living and working in Mauritania, often as fisherman or in the fishing industry, who navigate small boats out to sea from where migrants can be transferred onto larger vessels that continue to the Canary Islands.



A Malian migrant, who arrived in a boat in August 2020, is pictured in a 'boat cemetery' in Arinaga on 18 November 2021, on the Spanish Canary island of Gran Canaria. *Photo: Lluís Gene/AFP via Getty Images*



## CONCLUSION

**B**ased on the trends detailed in this brief, migrant arrivals to both Timbuktu and Gao are likely to continue to increase throughout 2022. There is little indication of any substantial shift in the structural drivers of migration to and through Mali, such as economic pressures resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and expanding zones of insecurity throughout the subregion. Furthermore, the expansion of artisanal gold mining in northern Mali is likely to lead to substantial migration to the north, and risks the sort of human-trafficking issues seen in Chadian goldfields.

All this will lead to an increased demand for smuggling services, compelling more actors to enter the transportation market. While there is currently little competition between various actors and armed groups in northern Mali, this dynamic could change, especially as routes proliferate and become more intertwined with the gold-mining sector.

The involvement of armed groups in 'migration management' could fundamentally alter migrant smuggling in the region. Given that some actors within these groups are also directly involved in migrant smuggling, a model may emerge in which they profit from both sides of the system. Similarly, irregular migration could become a 'bargaining chip' used by armed groups to seek support from external actors eager to stem irregular-migration flows in the Sahel, and vice versa, with certain external partners cooperating on issues of irregular migration and border security conditional on receiving other types of support.

As noted previously, with growing numbers of migrants working at gold sites controlled by armed groups, the issue of irregular migration and 'migration management' may soon become a key component shaping political economies and security dynamics in the regions of Gao, Kidal and Ménaka. Furthermore, the issue of control of and competition over migrant-smuggling routes could become a point of tension, and subsequent subject of negotiation and mediation, between armed groups, akin to arrangements that have been made surrounding other criminal economies (such as narcotics trafficking and contraband smuggling).

The Malian–Mauritanian networks facilitating boat departures from Mauritania to the Canary Islands are likely to continue in 2022. These networks, however, could see their activities hindered should more aggressive policing measures be pursued by Mauritanian authorities, in partnership with Spain and the EU.



## NOTES

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) and renewed by Resolution 2541 (2020) concerning Mali, 6 August 2021, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2021\\_714.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_714.pdf).
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