# Trafficking in the Sahel: 60 Years to Conquer Power

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## Abstract

In a two-part interview with Mondafrique, Guillaume Soto-Mayor explained how traffickers have conquered power in the Sahel throughout sixty years of professionalization and territorial anchoring. In addition, in issue 117 of the journal *Recherches Internationales*, he published an article entitled "Trafficking and traffickers: structuring elements of Sahelian societies" based on work conducted since 2014. The following article, derived from these two pieces, explains how the Sahel region has developed expertise and activities in trade to trafficking that now carry a central weight in the regional balance of power.

*Keywords:* Sahel, Trafficking flows, Criminal networks, Criminalization, Conflicts

# Trata en el Sahel: 60 años para conquistar el poder

## Resumen

En una entrevista en dos partes con Mondafrique, Guillaume Soto-Mayor explicó cómo los traficantes han conquistado el poder en el Sahel a lo largo de sesenta años de profesionalización y anclaje territorial. Además, en el número 117 de la revista Recherches Internationales, publicó un artículo titulado "Trata y tratantes: elementos estructurantes de las sociedades sahelianas" basado en el trabajo realizado desde 2014. El siguiente artículo, derivado de estos dos trabajos, explica cómo la región del Sahel ha desarrollado experiencia y actividades en el comercio al tráfico que ahora tienen un peso central en el equilibrio de poder regional.

*Palabras clave:* Sahel, Flujos de trata, Redes criminales, Criminalización, Conflictos

# 萨赫勒的非法贩运：用60年掌权

## 摘要

在与Mondafrique（一家法国调查评论网）进行的由两部分组成的访谈中，Guillaume Soto-Mayor解释了贩运者如何通过60年的专业化和地域占领，进而在萨赫勒掌权。此外，他基于自2014年开展的研究，发表了一篇名为《贩运和贩运者：萨赫勒社会的结构要素》（Trafficking and traffickers: structuring elements of Sahelian societies）的文章，后者收录于《国际研究》（Recherches Internationales）期刊第117期。本文取自这两部分，解释了萨赫勒地区如何在贩运贸易中发展出专业性和相关活动，这一系列活动如今在该区域的权力平衡中占据中心作用。

关键词：萨赫勒，非法贩运流，犯罪网络，犯罪化，冲突

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The word "traffic" refers to ancient flows, which cross the region from east to west and south to north. The dependence of the population on these flows has undoubtedly increased in recent decades, as the inhabitants rely on the continuity of these flows and the income derived from them. A few decades ago, the trade-in of salt, camels, car parts, and gasoline was still the core of the trade routes that crossed sub-Saharan Africa. This trend has changed with the development of nation-states, the tracing of borders, and the advent of socialist regimes in Algeria and Libya. These factors led to the introduction of customs duties, which the dominant ethnic groups did not readily accept, and the gradual structuring of non-lawful trade flows.

## The beginning of traffic structuring in the 1960s

For many specialists, the beginning of the structuring of trafficking networks goes back to the early 1960s, with the "Lada Trade", i.e, the trade-in Lada vehicles sold from Algeria to Kidal. Then, products subsidized at meager prices in Algeria or Libya, such as pasta, rice, milk, and baby products, were resold with a few cents margin by traditional merchants in Kidal, Gao, Agadez, Timbuktu, until these products flooded the Sahelian capitals. Up to now, the merchandise is delivered on the markets of northern Mali and Niger. Throughout this period, the central challenge was already to secure the passage of salespeople, transporters,

trader/transit agents, and intermediaries for a client. Thus, these trades mark the beginning of the structuring of a cross-border commercial flow.

The acceleration of these flows and their rise in power was facilitated in the 1970s and 1980s by technological advances. First and foremost, the all-terrain 4X4s replaced the camels and Peugeots, making it possible to go further, faster, safer, and make these trades less visible. The arrival of GPS and satellite phones completed these advances.

In the 1980s, some of those involved in trafficking, began trafficking cigarettes thanks to their know-how and contacts, particularly within the police force. Cigarettes supplied from Guinea Conakry, Mauritania, Benin, and Nigeria were transported through Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to Libya—a significant consumer and transit country—Egypt and Algeria. A real turning point occurred in the 1980s, as we witnessed a change in the scale of trafficking. It began to involve criminal structures as logisticians (to take care of the cars, the caches), various modes of transportation (mostly land but also air), very experienced drivers, and well-organized relay points were needed. Furthermore, since cargoes are worth much more money, and the loss of one is much more severe than in the past, it becomes necessary to secure them through the armament of the convoys or their escort.

Therefore, the different trading actors started allying with armed groups, giving them a piece of the pie to guarantee trade security. Following the same logic of securing a passage, critical State members, who could potentially compromise these flows, have been implicated. It was essential for the actors to ensure the arrival of their cargo to the buyers in time and with all due merchandise. Therefore, all stages of the delivery network had to work in perfect harmony. This implies that alliances are forged with all the crucial groups, tribes or clans along the route, from shipment to arrival.

The organization of the trade-in cigarettes thus made this structuration happen. Within a decade, prominent criminal leaders emerged. Some of them were simple, daring transporters with a fine knowledge of the desert and its hideouts —"castles in the desert", farms where migrants worked, gold-mining sites. Some were drivers who shifted to logisticians, thus becoming responsible for a part of the route and sometimes even developing their own traffic. Cherif Ould Abidine in Niger and Mohamed Rouggy in Mali are good examples of these.

## Criminal networks' professionalization in the 1990s

The 1990s saw a professionalization of the networks, characterized by a double movement. The first one originated in Morocco, where the production of cannabis resin became more sophisticated, thanks to research and development innovations by Dutch and French chemists. The increase in the tonnages

produced in the Rif region led to the flooding of Western Europe with Moroccan hashish. As a result, the trade route to Europe, both by sea and land, soon became saturated.

Drug barons then identified an alternative, secondary route, which bypassed Western Sahara by the south, then crossed Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Libya, to reach the Libyan ports that were the bases of the traffic: Misrata and Tripoli. Since the beginning of the 1990s, about 15% of total hashish production has circulated through this road, in the Sahel, amounting to several dozen to hundreds of tons per year. As for the trafficking of cigarettes, this trade made it necessary for trade actors to deal with a mosaic of ethnic groups, clans, and armed groups to secure the flow. This trade relies on the networks already in place - those that ensure the trafficking of cigarettes - as they are the only ones capable of transporting the hashish.

## The gradual criminalization of the Sahel region

The second observed phenomenon is the criminalization of the area, linked to the important income generated by the trafficking of cigarettes and hashish. Initially, the border between Morocco and Western Sahara was completely mined. In order to cross it, traffickers would send suicide dromedaries, which opened a window of four to six hours to process. Then, when the mines became electronic, local actors, colliding with the traffickers, disabled them for half a day. Over time, the convoys became faster and faster, exchanging drugs at agreed-upon GPS points.

Each segment of the traffic is managed by a different network, under the command of a few top barons who have the authority to mediate conflicts and control the whole zone. The repartition of the territorial control of the trafficking routes is based on ethnicity. Thus, each ethnic group manages each segment in the area. Certain places, such as Abala in Niger over the border with Mali, become interfaces between different network segments.

At the same time, the Tuareg and Toubou rebellions and the Arab or Peul militias used by local governments to counter these rebellions were resurfacing. These rebellions, on the one hand, and the paramilitary groups/militias/States, on the other, wanted to capture part of the potential revenues from hashish or cigarettes.

## The crystallization of conflicts around trafficking resources

Trafficking, therefore, gradually became a conflict issue, adding to identity and community claims. Indeed, the income generated from transporting or securing trafficking in the territories controlled by ethnicized armed groups

became essential to the survival of the different regional actors. Some communities became very dependent on trafficking as revenues serve to pay for weapons, food, soldiers' salaries, or fuel.

As these conflicts are very strongly ethnicized, certain clans or tribes become specialists, acquire a reputation around the trafficks, and eventually reverse the social scale. Furthermore, if they want to ensure the continuity of their criminal flows from Morocco to Libya, the major hashish barons in the area are obliged to rely on local intermediaries and influential figures. The latter enjoy a territorial base that enables them to guarantee the convoys' passage on a route segment. These influential figures are thus integrated into armed rebel or paramilitary groups. They include Dina Ould Daya, Sidi Ould Ahmed, Mohamed Rouggy, Sultan Ould Badi, Cherif Ould Abidine, and the Alamo brothers.

In the noble and very religious and conservative tribes, trafficking was long considered an unworthy activity. However, several events shifted these lines. Conflicts, which made the resources derived from these activities essential, and above all the droughts, which destroyed pastoral structures, killed livestock, aggravated famine and poverty, forced certain ethnic groups to turn to other palliative economies, and threw people onto the roads, contributed to this change.

## The evolution of inter and intra-ethnic group relations alongside the evolution of trafficking

These external circumstances lead to the overturning of the table within ethnic groups and between ethnic groups. This double movement is challenging to understand and analyze. Nonetheless, it has been crucial in societies that functioned with a powerful social hierarchy, making certain religious, political, and economic positions inaccessible to captive or castrated ancestry people. As a result of the illegal trade, many traffickers became important regional figures, providing jobs, protection, and survival for entire clans. Moreover, access to this income has enabled ethnic groups involved in petty trade, agriculture, or livestock to rise to higher levels in society and power circles.

From the 1990s and early 2000s, this trend continued. As a result, traffickers become key actors in the conflict in the Sahel. They gather forces within their respective ethnic/tribal groups and thus accentuate ethnic and tribal fragmentation. A common way to increase a group's influence over certain territories is to split trade segments and redistribute control over it to different members of the ethnic group. This process secures incomes, as corruption at the highest level of the sub-region is now established.

As a consequence of these phenomena, the maps of inter-ethnic relations have been reshuffled. The relations within the Tuareg ethnic groups, or between Adnan and Ifoghas illustrate these changes. The governments of the sub-region in-

strumentalize these competitive if not conflictual relations, considering it is profitable to rule by division to get money. For example, the Malian government regularly freed traffickers or supported them against the Ifoghas to prevent a future rebellion and dry up their revenues. The same thing happens with the Arab tribes. The Lehman and Berabiche became key relays for the Malian government in the north of the country against the noble Kounta tribe.

In the mid-2000s, the rebellion breaks out again. The dividing line moved slightly away from the single ethnic criterion to oppose the newly rich forces, close to the government, and the old dominant forces in the area fighting not to be downgraded. In the Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), the Ifoghas and the Kounta opposed the Lehmar and the Imghad. Thus, the dividing line evolved along both ethnic and criminal lines.

## Current trends in organized crime in the Sahel

Moroccan hashish is by far the most critical issue in Sahelian networks, in terms of revenue generated, place, dependence, and structuring. However, cigarette trafficking continues, amongst other traffics such as gasoline, oil, counterfeit drugs. Cocaine trafficking is very occasional in the Sahel, as there is a boulevard available in the ports and airports of Western Africa for cocaine transport. Consequently, cocaine traffickers do not take expensive and dangerous routes.

Gold is the new source of income that has emerged in recent years, mainly because of the increase in its prices. This material has become an important source of income, both in northern Chad at Kouri Bougoudi, and in Django, in northern Aïr or Kidal region. This resource is essential in financing armed groups and personalities in the area. Furthermore, gold trade is considered nobler than other traffics, as it is integrated into legal structures with wholesalers, buyers and intermediaries. Gold traffics has several strongholds such as Accra, Cotonou, Lomé, and even Ouagadougou.

Shifts in trafficking trends are essential factors in the balance of power between armed groups in the area, particularly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The more important the barons of these criminal networks become within ethnic groups, the more they become critical political forces to deal with regarding the territorial control of entire regions. Their power is also visible in the release of hostages, as well as in peace negotiations.

Governments have played different games with these networks in the sub-region states to have their say and share of revenue. Because they needed these criminal players' support for elections and sometimes had personal interests in particular trafficking, States adopted various strategies.

Since the 1990s, Niger's strategy has been to gradually integrate criminal networks into the state apparatus to regulate opposition and possible conflicts, which has made it possible to maintain a form of stability to the surprise of many. The problem is that the more space is given to criminal networks, the more they gradually increase their hold on the state apparatus and political parties. In this regard, one shall recall the incestuous relationship between the ruling Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism and Cherif Ould Abidine, nicknamed Cherif Cocaine in Agadez. In Mali, the strategy has been to divide and conquer, to use traffickers to weaken rebel leaders.

## The necessary distinction between jihadist groups and criminal actors

It would be wrong to confuse criminal actors with jihadist actors. There is no such thing as narco-jihadists. The idea that armed jihadist groups are highwaymen draped in a veil of religion, whose main objective is financial, is absurd and unrealistic. First of all, the survival of local armed groups, tribes, clans and entire ethnic groups depends on the income generated by illicit activities in their territories. How can we think that thousands of armed men, zone by zone, who know the topography inside out, who are respected and legitimate by the local population, would let a few hundred men, often foreigners (Algerians in particular), though well trained, take away the source of income on which they depend?

For the jihadists, adopting such strategy would be suicidal as it would lead to conflict with local populations, armed groups, and even the authorities, which would threaten their survival since they would no longer be able to move, refuel, and continue their operations freely.

Jihadist groups currently represent a few thousand people, 2,500 to 3,000, in the central spindle zone (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania). The financial needs of these groups are not so extensive. These actors need food, water, motorcycles, cars, gasoline, means of communication, weapons, and ammunition. They seek resources to get the ability to pay the occasional local source, an informant, to cover the funeral expenses of one fighter's mother, the delivery of another's wife. Generally, jihadist groups occasionally hand out a little money rather than fixed salaries. Soldiers do not have bank accounts, nor do they carry large sums of cash around. Local relays and merchants serve as their bank. Thus, the daily needs of these groups are minimal.

## Jihadist groups' sources of income

Furthermore, receiving money from impure sources is, in principle, forbidden (*haram*). Thus, the primary resource of these groups is *zakat*, the third pillar of Islam, which corresponds to donations to support *jihad* (the just

cause). Local donors, merchants, religious entrepreneurs, and even members of armed groups, in a spirit of goodwill, finance religious organizations, local associations, and intermediaries—usually merchants—through *zakat*. Then, all or part of this money can then be redistributed to armed jihadist groups. If the precise figures are difficult to estimate, the estimated amounts they generate corresponds to millions of euros annually, gathered in cash or merchandise such as livestock.

Jihadist groups also gather income from hostages' custody. For the last fifteen years, money collected through ransoms amounts to at least 150 million euros. The collected money is then redistributed amongst different groups and the often-criminal intermediaries. The latter takes substantial shares of the ransoms, sometimes up to half, as was the case for Yiad Ag Ghaly, Cherif Ould Tahar, and Baba Ould Cheikh. Finally, armed jihadist groups meet some of their needs for weapons and vehicles by attacking military bases and convoys. The addition of these different sources of income provides them enough resources to cover their needs.

According to rules enacted by the al Qaeda hierarchy in Afghanistan, *haram* revenues can be turned legitimate in particular cases to regulate the group's relations with the Taliban around opium trafficking. These principles were then imported into Algeria by Algerian-Afghans, such as Djafar Al-Afghani or Abdelrazak El Para, who had frequented Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the figures of the traffic in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, some *katiba* leaders occasionally profit from criminal revenues by charging a tax to a convoy, attacking a convoy and burning part of the cargo, or selling the cars or cargo to an opposing network. But these funds must be used exclusively for *jihad*. It is essential to note that at no point does the nature of the groups change: they do not become criminal or *haram* by earning extremely occasional income.

## Pragmatic cooperation between armed groups and local leaders

Jihadist groups' '*raison d'être*' is above all ideological. These groups' project remains a defensive *jihad*, aimed at establishing a regime against the *kufars* (infidels), the *tawaghits* (unbelievers), the *munafiqun* (hypocrites), the representatives of the state and their foreign allies who are believed to oppress the good Muslims by imposing on them a foreign and anti-Muslim way of life. They fight to apply the only regulation of private and public life that can protect their living conditions: the *sharia* and the *sunna*. They, therefore, carry an alternative project of society, a political project. These groups offer social and family regulation, the fight against petty crime and insecurity, and above all, justice. In particular, the qadis, religious judges who are very successful throughout the Sahel, replace a state that is at best absent and at worst nepotistic, corrupt, and predatory.

The label of narco-jihadist is thus dangerous because it tends to present armed jihadist groups as mere illiterate bandits and to ignore the political alternative they propose and the reasons for their success. This designation often serves political objectives.

Just because a tiny fraction of jihadist income comes from trafficking, or because some traffickers give them money, or because armed jihadist groups and some armed groups cooperate in a shared territory does not mean that jihadists become traffickers. Armed jihadist groups are at war with states and their proxies. That is particularly the case with al-Qaeda, whereas the Islamic State is less pragmatic in its relationship to local populations, as it considers any "bad" Muslim, including civilians, to be a legitimate target. Conversely, AQMI knows that the key to the sustainability of its action lies in its sound understanding of the different key players in the Sahel, including armed and criminal groups.

In a pragmatic logic of good understanding, sometimes thanks to ethnic or family proximity, a *katiba* in a territory will therefore collaborate with an armed group, for example, to carry out targeted assassinations against an enemy. On the criminal side, this agreement is advantageous because it can divert the attention of the armed forces and provide a useful complement of forces. This non-aggression pact is materialized by certain deals, for example not to recruit from certain tribes or by sealing marriages between senior mujahideen leaders and local tribal leaders.

Eventually, a situation of tolerance, non-aggression, and sometimes even active cooperation is established over time.