

**GLOBAL
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ORGANIZED CRIME



AFTER THE STORM

Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara
following upheaval in Libya and Mali

MARK MICALLEF | RAOUF FARRAH | ALEXANDRE BISH | VICTOR TANNER



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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	LNA	Libyan National Army
CCMSR	Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Council of Military Command for the Salvation of the Republic)	MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements	MJRN	Mouvement pour la Justice et la Réhabilitation du Niger (Movement for Justice and the Rehabilitation of Niger)
CSDP	EU Common Security and Defense Policy	MLF	Macina Liberation Front
EU	European Union	MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
FACT	Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad)	MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa)
FCFA	Franc CFA (Communauté Financière d'Afrique)	RSF	Rapid Support Forces
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies)	SLA-AW	Sudan Liberation Army Abdul-Wahid
GNA	Government of National Accord	SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army Minni Minnawi
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)	TMC	Transitional Military Council
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement	UFR	Union des Forces de la Résistance (Chadian Union of Resistance Forces)
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin	UNDP	UN Development Programme
		UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Organized crime in the Sahel has entered a new phase of consolidation and diversification. During the past decade, criminal activity expanded exponentially, particularly in the wake of the conflicts in Libya (2011) and Mali (2012). Arms stockpiles from the Libyan regime spilled into neighbouring countries at an alarming rate following the revolution, fuelling conflict across the region and bolstering the operational capacity of criminals all the way from Mali to southern Sudan – and beyond.¹

Overall, the increase in activity since the Libyan revolution of 2011 plateaued after 2015/2016 and in some cases has seen reversals, partly due to law enforcement (in Algeria, Niger and Libya – the latter two driven by the US, France and EU), but also because of localized developments, most notably renewed fighting in Libya from 2014 onwards, which created internal demand for arms and ammunition.² The result is that the proliferation from Libyan arms stockpiles has contracted.

On the drug-trafficking front, instability in Mali, Niger and Libya, and the spread of banditry in these territories, as well as in northern Chad, have undermined high-value trafficking, particularly in narcotics. In northern Niger, Libya and western Sudan, the rapid growth of the human-smuggling industry was delivered a blow between 2016 and 2018, following a concerted effort by some EU member states to co-opt and recruit various state and non-state actors along the primary irregular migratory routes to Europe in the fight against human smuggling and the stemming of migratory flows.³

There has also been considerable geographic displacement, as well as operational shifts. For instance, some drugs and arms routes shifted as a result of Algeria's hardening of its borders, as well as increased surveillance operations in northern Niger and southern Libya (by the US and France). New trafficking spots in remote areas at the frontier of the Sahel have emerged, while others have seen steadily declining activity. Human-smuggling routes have scattered, particularly in Niger, and at least part of the industry has shifted focus westward, targeting Algeria,

Young Tuareg man working at a well on the routes to Tchin Tabaradei , Niger

© Giacomo Zandonini

Morocco, and to a lesser extent Tunisia, and coastal passages to Europe from these countries.

There has also been considerable displacement of actors across different criminal industries. The squeeze on drug trafficking is leading to a concentration of actors seeking to maximize resources and capability following an era of ever-increasing competition. In northern Mali, in particular, this competition led to violent clashes over the protection of drug convoys between armed groups affiliated to the peace agreement.⁴ At the same time, relatively new criminal markets have developed and some existing ones have expanded. A major development concerns the growth of protection rackets and the linked development of organized banditry targeting commodities ranging from gold to drugs and weapons. Armed groups have been increasingly seeking rents in Libya, Mali, Chad and Sudan, where the state's presence is weak or where militias perversely represent state security forces.⁵

Other developments concern the trafficking of prescription medicines for local markets and their export towards North Africa, the spread of sex trafficking and kidnap for ransom targeting local communities. The latter is a growing industry in Libya and Mali, one in which criminals target officials and military personnel in order to extract a financial rent or conduct on-command operations. In some cases, particularly with respect to the smuggling of prescription medication and the spread of banditry, these activities are driven by a displacement of smugglers who turned to this activity after their human-smuggling business collapsed in northern Niger and Libya. A similar shift took place among former artisanal gold miners evicted from gold mines in Niger and Chad – which were at once hubs for criminal activity and an economic boon for neighbouring communities.

While the Sahel was never merely a highway for transiting illicit goods, these developments are increasingly directing the impact of criminal activity towards local populations. Parts of the region have experienced an escalation in violence resulting from changes in organized criminal activity. Key examples are the competition over illicit goods between armed groups in Mali, the opportunities created by the Libyan conflict for Sudanese and Chadian mercenary groups, and the expansion of banditry in northern Niger and Chad.

Criminal financial flows in this fragile region complicate or in some cases undermine the transition from war to peace, heighten weak governance and fuel corruption. In the northern parts of the Sahel in particular, criminal spoilers have infiltrated themselves into different territories. High-level traffickers convert profits into political capital to obtain state protection or gain social legitimacy among local populations, or both. In northern Mali, for instance, the social status of high-level traffickers has risen, as their business provides a major source of economic opportunities for a heavily unemployed and impoverished population.⁶

Factors fuelling the consolidation and diversification of organized crime are woven into the local political, economic and social fabric of the region. The lack of economic opportunity, the pervasiveness of corruption, instability and insecurity, weak law-enforcement capacity, and the regional integration of West Africa and the Maghreb into the global economy combine to make the Sahel fertile ground for criminal economies.⁷ In this sense, this report is as much about new and emerging trends as it is about the established context that allows high-level criminal activity to thrive in this region.

Against this picture, with cross-border trafficking and its protection being the primary activities on which organized crime is centred in the Sahel, there is an obvious case to make for a transnational assessment. Nonetheless, the penetration of organized crime still varies greatly between the countries in the region, and across different territories within each country. The regional and global dynamics that drive trends in a specific country are invariably shaped by local contexts. For this reason, the core of this report is based on country assessments of the state of organized crime in the territories researched: Mali, Niger, Chad, Darfur (western Sudan), southern Libya and southern Algeria.

Each country assessment represents a broad-scan analysis of the most significant criminal activities, grounded with insights gained through ongoing monitoring in the region as well as privileged access to informants. Although this research is an overview, its value stems from the fact that it offers individual assessments of these countries, while painting a regional picture of the state of organized crime in the Sahel. By setting the granular portraits developed in the country assessments against the broader regional context, we identify overall trends and flag developments to watch out for. The report therefore provides a platform for future monitoring and research, as well as a guide to inform policy responses.

Defining the geography

In The Sahel (meaning, literally, the desert 'coast') is a transitional eco-climatic belt of semi-arid territory south of the Sahara desert (often also referred to as the sea of sand). It runs across the breadth of the African continent connecting 15 countries. This report focuses on a region that is more accurately described as the Sahel-Sahara (Mali, Niger, Chad, southern Algeria, southern Libya and Darfur). For the purposes of a regional analysis of organized crime, a strict focus on the Sahel is less than ideal, as some of the most salient territories (including most of northern Mali, northern Niger, northern

Chad, large parts of southern Algeria and southern Libya) are not technically part of the Sahel region despite being interconnected from a socio-economic perspective, as well as a criminal one. In fact, there is a common pattern of criminality spanning this region that is facilitated by shared drivers: poor or weak governance, underdevelopment, insecurity and porous borders. For this reason, the term 'Sahel-Sahara' is used throughout this document to denote the research approach adopted, which was very much focused on regional flows and interconnectivity.

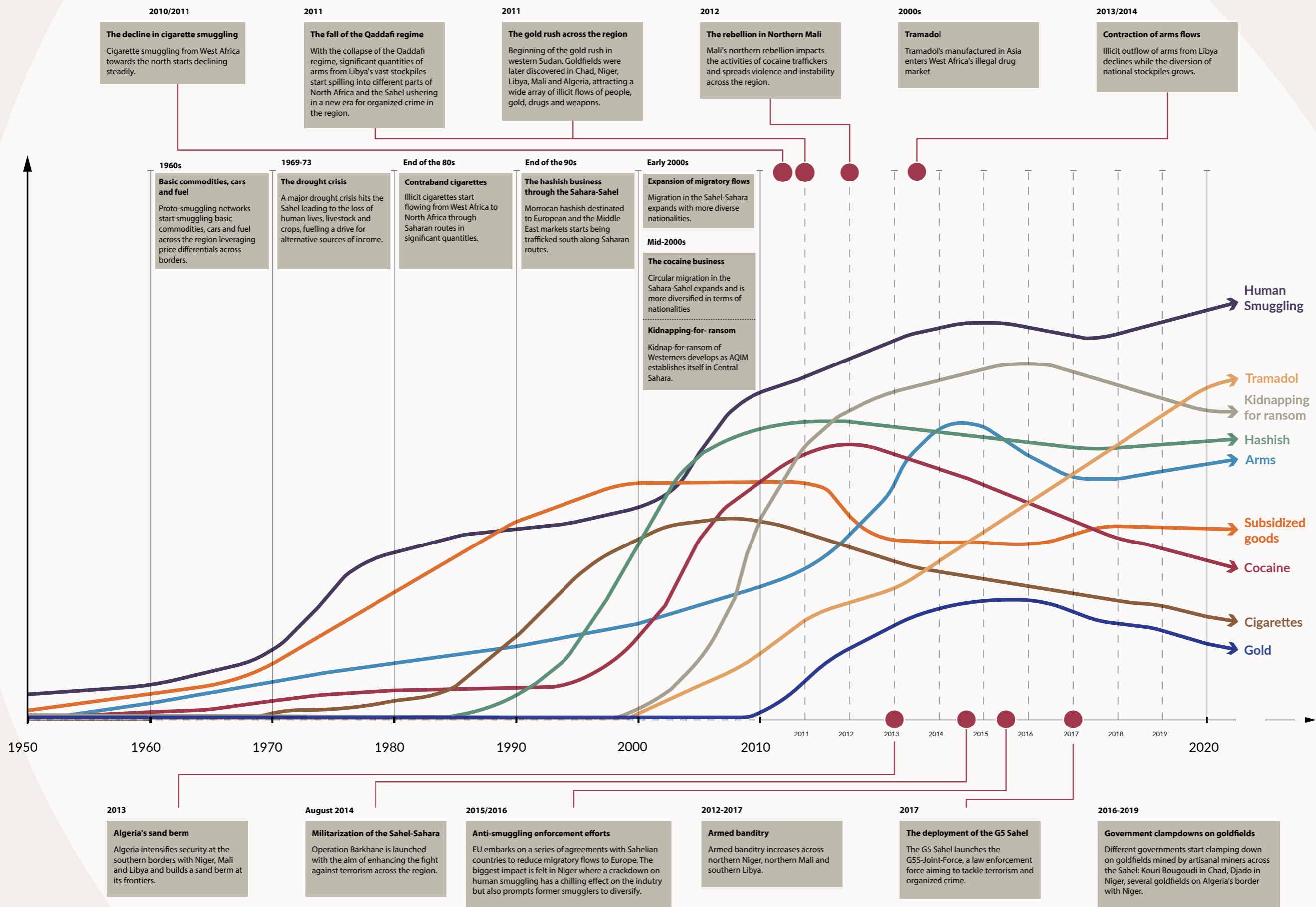


FIGURE 1: Timeline showing the evolution of black economies and criminal markets in the Sahel-Sahara. The growth of each market is to be considered indicative and is an assessment based on testimonies collected from law enforcement officials, smugglers and traffickers interviewed for this report.

REGIONAL CRIME TRENDS AT A GLANCE

Narcotics

At a time when global drug production has been growing, cocaine trafficking in the Sahara-Sahara has been experiencing a contraction brought by instability along the Mali–Niger–Libya corridor. Besides the diminishing attractiveness of desert routes, over the past ten years sea transportation of South American cocaine to Europe via West Africa, as well as to the

North African coast, established itself as a more efficient alternative route. In spite of this contraction, cocaine remains a highly profitable and competitive market that is likely to keep fuelling instability in northern Mali. Comparatively, trafficking of Moroccan hashish through Saharan routes is a more stable market with lower barriers to entry for criminal actors.

Arms

Arms trafficking across the region is under an internal restructuring since the diffusion of Qaddafi's stockpiles has largely dissipated. Current illicit arms and ammunition stocks in circulation are not matching the high demand. Weapons and ammunition are harder

to find, driving up prices. Weapons obtained through banditry, looting from local security forces, and the diversion of national stockpiles are trends that are likely to increase, as these remain the cheapest ways to acquire arms.

Human smuggling and trafficking

The human-smuggling industry underwent a major expansion in the past ten years. State collapse in Libya created ripe conditions for the development of a transnational smuggling system connecting North Africa and the Sahel like never before. This greatly amplified the movement – and often also the exploitation – of people migrating irregularly through the region, many of them heading for Europe. Since 2017, however, this trend has been reversed to a

significant degree. Partnerships struck by the EU and some individual member states with various actors in Libya and Niger especially ushered a law-enforcement campaign that reduced the industry's capacity while driving it underground. With fewer opportunities to monetize human movement, there has been a greater incidence of reported extortion and/or labour exploitation. This sector is still adjusting but we expect this trend to continue.

Tramadol and counterfeit pharmaceuticals

Trafficking of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, especially tramadol, is booming across the region, creating a major public-health issue. Tramadol trafficking is likely to continue to thrive, a trend that is driven by growing recreational use and demand for cheap pain-relief medication. Supply is fuelled by international

manufacturers that are producing doses to suit recreational users. A growing number of tramadol smugglers are also boosting supply. Typically, these are non-specialized smugglers who supplement their revenue by occasionally transporting tramadol, which is considered a low-risk activity.

Protection rackets and commodified violence

Protection rackets, organized banditry and mercenary work have steadily grown, especially in central Mali, northern parts of Niger, Chad and Sudan, and in southern Libya. Commodified violence is now an established service being sold by armed groups able to gain access

to hardware (e.g. vehicles and weapons), and leverage battlefield experience and geographic knowledge, particularly in the desert areas. There is also a steady and still evolving market for mercenaries procured in Sudan and Chad for deployment in Libya and Yemen.

Illegal gold mining

Illegal and artisanal gold mining has flourished into an informal mega-industry that straddles Sudan, Libya, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Mali after the first surface deposit discoveries in Darfur around 2011. In the absence of legitimate state presence, the remoteness of most goldfields and tensions between the interests of local communities and migrating miners have turned many goldfields in the region into unstable and dangerous criminogenic hubs. Some Sahelian governments have reacted with clampdowns that have the effect of depriving some communities of critical livelihoods, fuelling alienation and resentment. The regulation of artisanal gold mining could be a stabilizing factor and an opportunity for intervention in difficult areas.

Kidnapping for ransom

Abduction of Westerners is in decline owing to the limited numbers of potential targets in the region. Nevertheless, the kidnap-for-ransom industry is still a significant source of revenue for some terrorist and criminal groups. The industry has adjusted itself to this new reality by searching and undertaking abduction operations south of the Sahel in Burkina Faso, for instance, which is new to this kind of activity. Simultaneously, there has been a steady rise in the kidnapping of locals.

photo © Mark Micallef



COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

MALI

- The 2012 northern rebellion disrupted corrupt ties between the state and high-end traffickers, pushing the latter to seek new alliances with armed groups that gained territorial control in the north.
- Several armed actors that signed the 2015 peace agreement are engaged in various trafficking activities, both at the individual and organizational level. The state's slow return in the north is again re-directing the attention of narcotics traffickers towards government officials and the military.
- Violence and competition for control over narcotics trafficking in northern Mali have impacted the cocaine trade, making movement from Mali to Libya riskier and costlier. This process, aided by shifts in West and North Africa, has displaced much large-scale cocaine trafficking away from trans-Saharan routes. Notwithstanding, cocaine trafficking remains a profitable and fought-over activity that is likely to keep fuelling instability in years ahead.
- Growing military presence and securitization within Mali as well as in Algeria and to a lesser extent Niger are pushing criminal actors and terrorists towards border areas, often forcing these actors to share the same spots.

NIGER

- Criminalization of human smuggling in mid-2016 and the closure of the Djado goldfield in February 2017 jolted the economy of northern Niger. The region eventually pulled through despite heavy losses. However, the change has been in part responsible for an intensification in banditry seen over the past three years.
- While some human smugglers continued their activities, many shifted to smuggling tramadol, a synthetic opioid, to compensate for lost revenue. Demand for tramadol is booming across the Sahel-Sahara. This business is especially attractive to low-level smugglers, as it is seen as low risk.
- Another shift concerns human trafficking and exploitation of migrants. As in other countries that have seen a contraction in human smuggling, the incidence of human trafficking and exploitation

Several armed actors that signed up to the 2015 peace agreement are engaged in various trafficking activities, both at the individual and organizational level. However, the state's slow return in the north is pushing narcotics traffickers to seek to influence officials and the military.

- Kidnap-for-ransom targeting Westerners, which was a main revenue source for terrorist organizations in the region, has been in decline since the peak of the abduction epidemic between 2005 and 2010. This decline coincides with an increase in the targeting of locals and a southward shift towards Burkina Faso.
- Organized violence in central Mali has reached unprecedented levels, creating high demand for arms. Armed bandits are responsible for many incidents, such as attacks on markets and cattle rustling, often wrongly attributed to jihadi groups.

appears to be on the rise. Among other examples, well-established networks exploit children for labour and begging, transporting them from rural areas in southern Niger to urban centres across West Africa.

- Although securitization in Niger has helped curb trafficking flows through increased border controls and a foreign military presence since 2014, in some cases trafficking has simply been redirected away from the Madama area, where the French military had a contingent until July 2019. The withdrawal of the military might reshape flows in the future.
- Niger's political elites remain deeply involved in trans-Saharan criminal economies. In particular, funders of the ruling party and politicians have been repeatedly accused of profiting from high-level narcotics trafficking.

SOUTHERN ALGERIA

- Algeria's militarized response to terrorism and organized crime has had mixed results. It had a palpable impact on the home front, undermining various criminal activities and restraining arms flows. However, it is also displaced criminals and terrorists into neighbouring countries, particularly Libya and Mali, where they still operate.
- The Algerian army still reports significant arms and ammunitions seizures along the borders of the southern provinces of Tamanrasset, Illizi and Adrar, indicating that arms trafficking continues on the fringes of its southern and eastern territories.
- Trafficking in Borg Badji Mokhtar has been undermined by the securitization efforts along the

SOUTHERN LIBYA

- Arms trafficking in Libya has changed considerably since the proliferation seen in the aftermath of the revolution. The country is now facing a shortage of ammunition, small arms and heavy weapons in the face of ongoing demand from continuing fighting across Libya. The shortage has started impacting battlefield dynamics.
- Nigerien, Chadian and Sudanese rebel groups have based themselves in various parts of Libya, using these bases to access revenues through various forms of trafficking, protection rackets and mercenary services. Less organized armed gangs of bandits operating in southern Libya and northern Niger operate a similar model.
- Large-scale trans-Saharan cocaine trafficking is declining as Libya's conflict and banditry in Niger and Libya undermined the reliability of these routes. This dynamic has been augmented by greater use of maritime routes, connecting South America to Europe via West and North Africa, especially Morocco, Algeria and Libya.

CHAD

- The combination of long-term armed struggle, lack of economic opportunity and a weak state in northern Chad has seen the consolidation of polycriminal armed groups, which have taken advantage of the multiple opportunities offered by instability in Libya post-2011. These groups leverage their mobility and capacity for violence to

Malian border, displacing some of this activity to new hubs, such as El Akla, an open-air market at the Niger–Algeria border.

- Cannabis trafficking is well established in Algeria and has not been significantly undermined by law enforcement. Lesser-quality Moroccan hashish is increasingly trafficked across the south of the country for local consumption.
- Human smuggling along Algeria's southern borders has grown over the last three years, bucking a regional trend. Algeria is a destination in its own right for mixed flows of migrants and a gateway to Europe via the Western Mediterranean route.
- The region has seen an expansion in the trafficking and local sale of synthetic drugs and prescription medicine, particularly tramadol. Southern Libya receives consignments both from the country's own coastal region as well as from neighbouring countries on the southern border.
- Human smuggling has seen a dramatic reversal since 2017. Following a post-revolution boom, armed groups that had previously formed protection rackets around this business largely retreated from the trade, switching to law enforcement instead. The south of the country was also impacted by a reduction in the flow of migrants from Sudan and Niger, as well as multiple conflicts, especially in the Fezzan region.
- National-level military actors with ambitions to control the south have been adopting a Qaddafi-era model, co-opting militias by allowing them to self-finance through criminal activities. These are attempts to bring Libya's post-revolution predation economy under hierarchical command.

secure revenues from crime and mercenary-type activities. Criminal activities include arms, drugs or people trafficking and protection rackets around these activities, mercenary work and banditry.

- Goldfields have played a key role in attracting and facilitating the development of criminal operations in northern Chad, as mining sites act as remote



A Nigerien soldier stands on a sand dune outside the Puit de l'Espoir (Well of Hope) rest stop in the Sahara Desert, Niger, August 2018.

© Joe Penney

logistical hubs for various criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, and human smuggling and trafficking.

- Human-smuggling networks have consolidated across the country to bring young Chadian or Sudanese artisanal miners to goldfields in north-western Chad and southern Libya. These networks have also facilitated the conveying of young

DARFUR

- Networks of smugglers and armed groups interact and overlap in the Darfur region, profiting from human smuggling, conflict gold mining, and other violence-based livelihoods.
- The administration in Khartoum is the main enabler of illicit activity – either by fuelling the environment for these markets to develop, or developing patronage networks and ensuring the enrichment of individuals.
- In Darfur, the main agent of Khartoum's policy is the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (better known as 'Hemmeti'). The RSF has brought large parts of Darfur's informal economy under its control, and

Chadian Arab men to Libya, to be recruited as mercenaries in the Libyan National Army or with Saudi and Emirati contingents fighting in Yemen.

- Severe government crackdowns on goldfields in north-western Chad could create more instability in the long term, as they severely affect local border economies and may lead to population displacements.

is involved in human smuggling, procurement of mercenaries and gold mining.

- Lines are increasingly blurred between human smuggling and human trafficking. Smuggling networks are becoming more violent and abusive.
- Darfur is both an origin and a destination for smuggled weapons and ammunition. Regular illicit arm flows happen between Libya and Sudan (and vice versa).
- Violence is a fully fledged commodity, and armed Darfurian groups sell their services as purveyors of violence across the region in order to extort a rent and penetrate criminal markets.

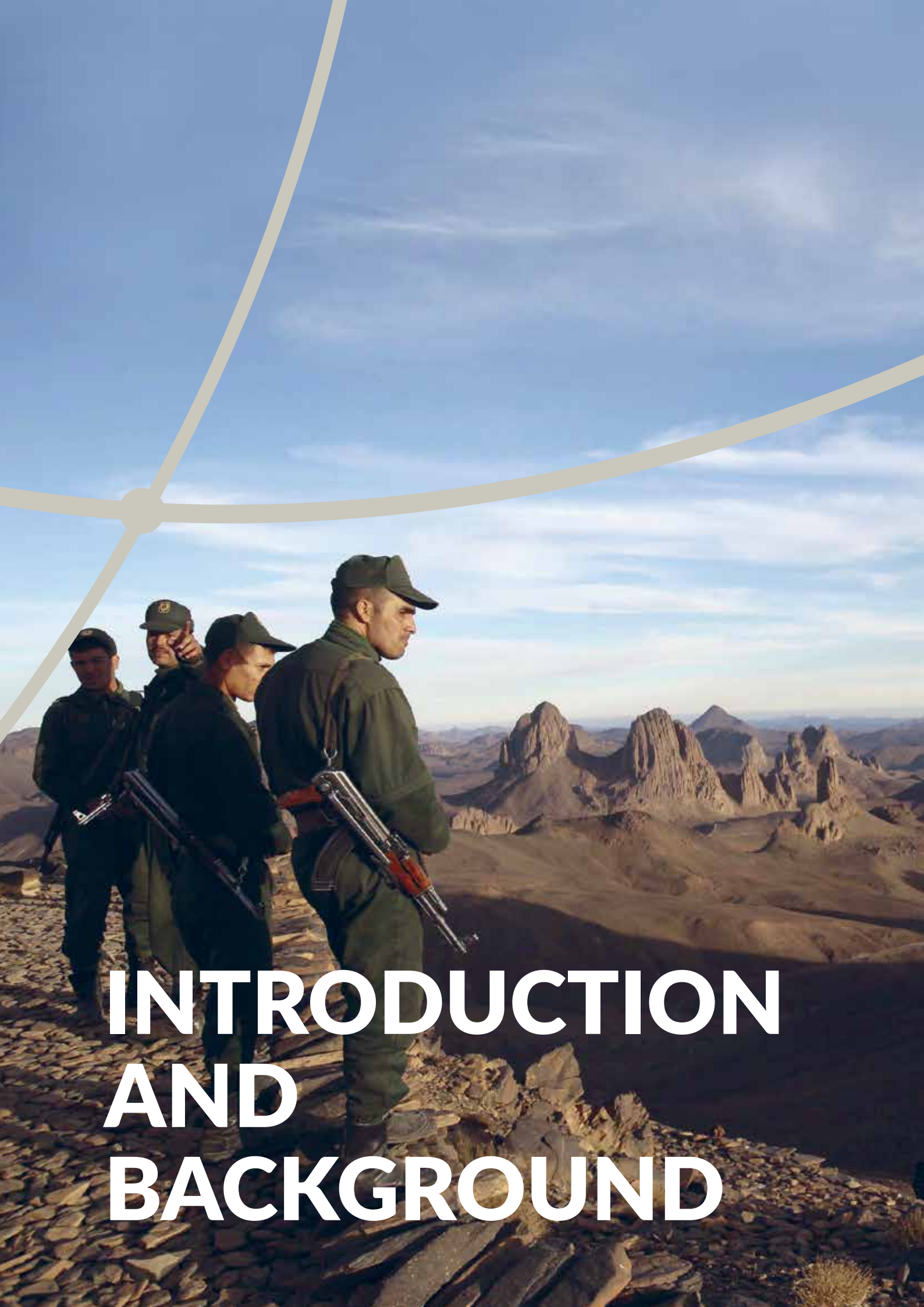
Methodology

This report is based on a mixed methodology. An extensive literature review of more than 300 documents was conducted, including policy reports, academic papers, international and local media coverage, as well as grey data on organized crime in the Sahel, published in English, French and Arabic. In order to collect this literature, the authors applied strict research stream models both on open-source platforms and authoritative databases. Extensive desk-based data collection was complemented by a set of 90 interviews with international experts, local journalists, civil-society groups, law-enforcement professionals, smugglers and members of armed groups (both current and former) operating in the area of focus. The majority of these interviews were conducted by phone between December 2018 and May 2019.

The research also benefits from the Global Initiative's monitoring programme on smuggling hubs as well as exchanges with a core field network based in Libya, Niger, Chad and Mali, Algeria and Sudan. Field researchers collect data and conduct interviews based on requests for information formulated by the Global Initiative analyst team. The information requests are based on open-source scanning and node monitoring. In all, 31 field network members were employed for this research project, and between them tapped an estimated 290-plus contacts and key informants, including community leaders, local politicians, law-enforcement personnel, smugglers and middlemen.

Nonetheless, this research is not an investigation. Although the text does refer to individual cases of trafficking and organized crime (arrests, seizures, etc.), this is always contextualized within the broader political economy of the region. The analytical framework guiding this research is based on an approach combining a political-economy analysis and criminal market and power analysis. The first analyzes the nature of the environment of criminal markets in the Sahel; the second focuses on the criminal industries themselves. Pairing these two analyses helps identify and monitor local trafficking markets while assessing how they impact the region as a whole.

Great care is taken to triangulate the information presented; however, the report should be read as a foundational analysis that will feed into more in-depth and paced research in upcoming analysis of the state of organized crime in the Sahel-Saharan region.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



How the Sahel-Sahara became fertile ground for organized crime

For centuries, trans-Saharan trade has been a vital livelihood pillar for communities in the region.⁸ Supply routes connecting hubs and oases across this vast space over time forged a culture of commercial, social and political exchange that eventually came to be at odds with the establishment of countries' formal borders associated with colonial times and the post-independence era. No sooner had Algeria and Libya implemented customs regimes in the beginning of the 1970s than local Tuareg and Arab traders started taking advantage of them, transporting goods from these countries to markets in Mali, Niger, Chad and Sudan.⁹

The spread of motor vehicles in the 1960s and 1970s revolutionized such activities, intensifying cross-border trade and opening up the market for new players.¹⁰ The *Ishumar* (literally the 'unemployed') perhaps best embody this transition. Cars lowered the barrier to entry, which meant that these young entrepreneurial Tuareg men could escape economic stagnation in their countries by driving used Toyotas to trade subsidized foodstuffs – and, later, migrants – often supplementing this work with stints doing seasonal jobs in oil-rich North Africa.¹¹

At the end of the 1960s, trafficking became a necessity for survival, as the 1969–1973 regional drought caused the death of more than 100 000 people and major losses of livestock and crops. Many communities from the Sahel escaped misery and death by moving to the borderlands of North Africa, where their presence was tolerated by the political regimes, particularly in Libya and Algeria, for the sake of solidarity and social stability.¹²

Algerian Gendarmerie officers on patrol in the Askrem Mountain area, Tamanrasset, Algeria. © REUTERS/Ramzi Boudina



FIGURE 2: Regional map: Sahel-Saharan

After this period, the number of actors in this small-scale trade multiplied and their business started extending beyond the commerce of basic goods. Algeria's massive socialist development programmes and similar state-driven spending in Libya after Qaddafi came to power in 1969 had a profound economic effect on the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

Up to this point, the transportation of migrants was marginal in the region and almost exclusively confined to truckers seeking to supplement their main income from hauling freight.¹³ By the 1980s, the opportunities in North Africa saw more drivers dedicate themselves to human movement to and from Libya and Algeria. The industry worked in a relay fashion, with one set of drivers dropping migrants at hubs like Gao (Mali), Tamanrasset (Algeria) and Agadez (Niger), and were picked up by counterparts for the next leg of the journey.¹⁴ In many parts of the region, this continues to be the case. However, a structured migrant transport system had started developing, with networks of human smugglers, brokers and agents coordinating activities across borders, triggering restrictive policies, such as in Algeria in 1986.¹⁵

Traders, particularly among Arab communities in the northern Sahel, started displaying their newfound wealth and social status by building elaborate homes in remote Saharan towns – a rite of passage of sorts that still exists to this day.¹⁶ However, while small-scale smuggling of goods and the transportation of people and migrants provide a foundational infrastructure for the region's black economy, the turning point for organized criminal activity came with the movement of contraband and counterfeit cigarettes from West Africa (Mauritania, Guinea and Benin) to North Africa, Chad and Sudan at the end of the 1980s.¹⁷

By the early 2000s, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that cigarette-smuggling revenues had exceeded the gross domestic product (GDP) of some West African states. In 2009, cigarette smuggling was valued at US\$775 million and that 80 per cent of

business in some West and North African countries was illicit.¹⁸ This illicit market was driven by well-connected West African importers, often working with complicit multinational tobacco companies aiming to circumvent tax regimes and state monopolies on cigarette distribution in the Maghreb.¹⁹

Monitoring carried out for this research project suggests that this business has significantly decreased since 2010. There are a number of reasons for this decline, including increasing local cigarette production in Algeria, the smuggling of tobacco products directly to Libya's coast (some of which are then sold in Egypt) and enhanced targeting of cigarette smuggling along its southern borders.²⁰ Algeria, in turn, has become a major supplier of contraband and counterfeit cigarettes to the Maghreb and Europe, accounting for 31 per cent of the contraband cigarettes in France in 2016.²¹ Contraband and counterfeit cigarette trafficking declined by 15 per cent in 2017; however, Algeria remained the largest source of contraband and counterfeit cigarettes (2.47 billion units in 2016 in comparison to 2.44 billion in 2017).²²

In the 1990s, the cigarette business was followed by hashish, produced in Morocco's Rif Mountains (in the northern provinces of Chefchaouen, Al Hoceima and Taunate), one of the world's most prolific sources.²³ Cannabis resin was transported along similar routes as cigarettes, transiting Mali, southern Algeria, Niger, and to a lesser extent Chad, before reaching Libya, and in some cases Egypt and Sudan, on its way to markets in Europe and the Middle East.²⁴

Hashish trafficking in North Africa has a long history but it is only in the 1990s that Moroccan hashish started being trafficked through the Sahel for export to Europe, in part as a reaction to tightening airport and port controls, and improved law enforcement on Spanish coasts and along the Moroccan border with Algeria.²⁵ This development was a precursor for cocaine trafficking, in that the hashish trade had helped establish well-structured business models and regional networks of intermediaries, particularly in the north-west of Algeria and Europe.

Hashish trafficking is a hierarchical economy in which major Moroccan drug barons, who are the real drivers of this illicit business, work with a pool of trusted wholesalers across the north-west of the Maghreb and the western areas of the Sahara. These wholesalers collaborate with smaller smuggling networks, who sell the merchandise to even smaller transporters, with the biggest profits being made by those who sell the largest quantities.

Over the years, Moroccan production fluctuated from an estimated 3 060 tonnes in 2003 to less than 1 000 tonnes in 2009 following a campaign to reduce areas of cultivation.²⁶ Around this time, it was estimated that a third of Moroccan production transited through the Sahel.²⁷ In 2016, Morocco's total cannabis resin production was estimated at 713 tons.²⁸ While there is no official estimate of the quantities of hashish moving across the Sahel today, trafficking in the region remains stable.

From around 2000, the region also saw an increase in the trafficking of cannabis herb produced in West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo and Nigeria), and increasingly in Niger and Mali.²⁹ This market is completely distinct from that of Moroccan hashish, in terms of the trafficking routes, the actors involved, and the end markets. West African cannabis products are destined mostly for markets within the region, with trafficking routes confined to the southern part of the Sahel; hashish routes, on the other hand, cross the northern parts of the region and beyond.

The third structural development in organized crime came when South American cocaine imported into coastal West Africa (primarily Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Senegal, Cabo Verde and The Gambia) started being trafficked through the Sahel on its way to Europe. The Sahel became

a strategic transit point for cocaine trafficking at a time when the European market in the mid-2000s was growing (Europe accounted for 26 per cent of world consumption) and surveillance of European airports was increasing.³⁰ Before 2003, seizures of cocaine in Africa were negligible, at approximately one tonne per year, and these were concentrated in southern Africa.³¹ However, between 2005 and 2008, 46 tonnes were intercepted in West Africa or on ships sailing to the region. In 2016, around 20 tonnes of cocaine – 14 per cent of Europe’s cocaine market, amounting to a wholesale value of US\$1 billion in Western Europe – were believed to have transited through West Africa.³²

From 2009, seizures declined again – only 160 kilograms were seized in 2009 (in Ghana), which had many actors believe that there may have been a decrease in cocaine trafficking before the infamous so-called Air Cocaine incident suggested there had likely been a shift in modus operandi.³³ A Boeing used to transport an estimated 10 tonnes of cocaine from Venezuela was found burnt out on a runway near Gao after the drugs were offloaded and traffickers set the plane on fire. Cocaine seizures continued to drop: 3.4 tonnes were seized in 2010 and 1.2 tonnes in 2015.³⁴ However, activity was still rife. Some ten other aircraft believed to have been used to carry cocaine cargos were found in the Sahara between 2006 and 2009.³⁵ In fact, during this period South American cartels were prolifically expanding their reach eastward, having secured solid protection partnerships in West Africa that enabled easy operation.

The decline in seizures was mostly a testament to buy-in of corrupt state actors across the region, alongside poor capacity in terms of detection and reporting, rather than a barometer of the flow of cocaine, as proven by major seizures of West-Africa-bound cocaine made in South America. In January 2016, for instance, Bolivian law enforcement seized 8 tonnes of cocaine in a single consignment destined to Côte d’Ivoire via Argentina and Uruguay.³⁶

Cocaine smuggling has contributed to the sudden enrichment of traffickers and continues to spawn fierce competition.

The dry spell in seizures more or less continued but was broken in a big way in early 2019. In January almost 10 tonnes of cocaine were seized on a Russian ship in Cabo Verde;³⁷ in March, 789 kilograms were taken in Guinea-Bissau, followed by a record 1.8 tonnes in September;³⁸ earlier, in July, 798 kilograms had been seized in Dakar, Senegal. These seizures come at a time when South American production is expanding: *World Drug Report 2019*, estimates the record production of 1 975 tonnes in 2017, up by 25 per cent, from just over 1 580 tonnes in 2016.³⁹

By far the most profitable criminal activity in the Sahel-Sahara, cocaine smuggling has contributed to the sudden enrichment of traffickers and continues to spawn fierce competition, which will continue to be the case in the foreseeable future, in spite of the changes outlined above. Narco-trafficking has insidiously manipulated social hierarchies in parts of the Sahel, which has undermined traditional equilibrium between communities and disrupted social status. As put by a Malian smuggler interviewed in December 2018, ‘A few decades ago, marrying your daughter to a narco-trafficker was unthinkable. Today, it is almost a blessing’.⁴⁰

Terrorism and the kidnap-for-ransom industry

By the early 2000s, a new criminal and high-profit activity was emerging in the Sahel-Sahara: the kidnapping-for-ransom industry, a development that would greatly complicate the security profile of the region, as the main recipients of the massive profits made from kidnapping were terrorist organizations.⁴¹

This industry emerged at a period when terrorists from the former Algerian group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, known by the French acronym GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat) found refuge in northern Mali in the beginning of the 2000s. The group pledged support to al-Qaeda in 2003 before rebranding itself as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. From this time on, kidnap-for-ransom became the main source of revenue for this group and fellow travellers.⁴²

The GSPC and AQIM conducted many infamous kidnapping operations in the 2000s, including the abduction of 32 European tourists in southern Algeria (2003) in the Tassili N'ajjer area. The tourists were eventually released in southern Algeria and northern Mali after being ransomed for millions of dollars. Others notorious cases include the abduction of Robert Fowler, former UN Special Envoy to Niger, and his colleague Louis Guay, held by AQIM in 2008/2009 for 130 days, as well as the 2010 kidnapping of the French employees of the Areva nuclear energy company in Niger.^{43,44}

These cases publicized the abduction of foreigners and raised awareness on how financial ransoming policies applied by some Western governments contribute to bankrolling criminal and terrorist groups.⁴⁵ On the ground, the business benefited from the uncontrolled circulation of used weapons across the region. Successive armed rebellions (since the 1960s in Mali), to inter-state war (e.g. between Libya and Chad, 1978–1987), contributed to the diffusion of arms across the region before the Libyan revolution of 2011, and the conflicts in northern Mali and Darfur (2012). Weapons reinforced the power of criminal actors to engage in

many trafficking activities, including the exercise of violence to extract rent.

In the mid-2000s, the average ransom paid was an estimated at US\$400 000 per Western hostage; by around 2010, the figure had reached US\$5 million.⁴⁶ AQIM accumulated US\$66 million in 2013 alone, and at least US\$125 million between 2008 and 2014.⁴⁷ Today, the average ransom is estimated at between US\$7 and 10 million.⁴⁸

The 2012 rebellion in northern Mali and instability across the region, coupled with growing public awareness of jihad kidnapping and ransom activity contributed to a significant decrease in the presence of foreigners in the Sahel. This resized the industry; jihadi groups, however, adapted by demanding greater ransoms.⁴⁹ For instance, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a jihadi organization under AQIM and currently active in northern Mali and across the Sahel, is still believed to have made up to US\$40 million since its creation in 2017, well after the heyday of the kidnapping and ransom industry.⁵⁰

There have also been instances where independent terrorist organizations, such as AQIM and the so-called Islamic State in the Great Sahara, have provided financial support to each other to cope with budget squeezes.⁵¹ The criminal groups doing the legwork in this industry also adapted in their own way. Insecurity and instability pushed low-level criminal groups to turn towards kidnapping locals, whereas high-profile groups are increasingly targeting foreigners in the south of the Sahel and West Africa.

The connection between terrorist and criminal groups evolved since the 2000s and is often not straightforward. AQIM figures, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Khalid Abu Al-Abbas), involved in both kidnapping and cigarette smuggling, came to embody the crime-terror nexus. His case more than any other spread the idea of the symbiotic connections between terrorist and criminal groups, to the point where both kinds of actors often became amalgamated.⁵²

There are some evident commonalities between criminal networks and terrorists, including the fact that both rely on impoverished and dissatisfied young men, and both thrive in environments characterized by weak governance and poor state presence. Nevertheless, there are no ideological connections between jihadis and criminals. As argued by a Malian security officer interviewed in March 2019: ‘The common interest of terrorists and criminals is the lack of a state. Fundamentally that is what links these people.’⁵³ However, most criminals do not thrive in contexts where there is too much insecurity.

The relationship between terrorist and criminal groups falls into three main categories: coexistence, cooperation and convergence.

More broadly, the relationship between terrorist and criminal groups falls into three main categories: coexistence, cooperation and convergence.⁵⁴ In the majority of cases, the two groups coexist in the same geographic space at the same time.⁵⁵ A good example is northern Mali, where narcotics traffickers and jihadi groups operate in the same territories. When terrorists took control of Gao in 2012, they burned cargoes of hashish in Gao and In-Khalil (Mali) in order to be seen as fighting vice and maintaining law and order – and Islamic purity – in territories controlled by narcotics traffickers. Yet, beyond this action, the

business continued, and jihadist groups prioritized other activities over directly challenging elites engaged in drug trafficking. In fact, they tolerated and indirectly profited from it, through discreet collaboration in the form of protection and authorization to circulate in the north-east of Kidal.

Instances of cooperation are usually ad hoc and circumstantial alliances that are unlikely to mature into long-term relationships. As discussed, for a while, the kidnap-for-ransom industry worked in this way: criminal gangs would carry out the abduction and then ‘sell’ western captives to terrorist organizations who would undertake the actual ransoming. The key to this relationship was that one group had what the other did not – criminal groups had mobility and local knowledge and contacts, while organizations like AQIM had the international contacts and network needed to conduct international ransoming.

Convergence relates to the alignment of interests between jihadi and criminal groups. As will be discussed, the pressure exerted by Operation Barkhane, as well as the law enforcement activity and surveillance undertaken by the Algerian military and other co-opted forces across the region, currently risks creating conditions of convergence by squeezing criminals and terrorists into the same spaces, facing a single enemy. This creates a need to share intelligence on military presence, informants and reconnaissance vehicles in remote northern parts, such as north-eastern Mali, north-western Niger and south-western Libya.⁵⁶

The impact of the Libyan revolution and Mali’s rebellion on organized crime

The Sahel witnessed an acute growth in organized crime between 2011 and 2013, following the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, and the knock-on effect it had on the Tuareg and Islamist rebellions in northern Mali. By April 2011 (the Libyan revolution began in February), Algeria had already reported its first seizure of weapons coming from Libya, while most of the weapons seized in Niger – a key transit country for arms trafficking in the Sahel – between 2013 and 2017 came from Libyan stockpiles.^{57,58}

In Mali, where the most direct and lasting impact was felt, Tuareg fighters who had fled Libya after being part of Qaddafi’s forces, returned with armoured vehicles and vast caches of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, mortars and heavy machine guns.⁵⁹ This helped even the odds on the side of separatists just as the clamour for revolt against the Malian government had reached boiling point in the Azawad region.⁶⁰ In the words of a Malian military officer monitoring events at the time, ‘Everyone was asking for arms –

from smaller armed groups to strong and powerful businessmen.⁶¹

By 2014, the flood of weapons had started to decline as the Libyan stockpiles began to evaporate and the demand for arms in Libya itself increased steadily.⁶² However, the damage from the proliferation of previous years had already been done. In 2015, a UN Security Council panel of experts' report on Libya concluded that 'arms originating from Libya [had] significantly reinforced the military capacity of jihadi groups operating in different parts of the region, including in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Mali in particular'.⁶³

Armed groups and criminals across northern parts of the Sahel benefited from the supply of arms to

consolidate their power, reach and, most critically, territorial control, which they then leveraged to enforce lucrative extortion and rent-extraction strategies on drugs, arms, migrants and sometimes states. In northern Mali, competition over trafficking became much more violent as militias created protection rackets, with the securing of drug convoys becoming a major source of revenue for pro- and anti-Bamako armed groups, especially those who are better equipped in arms and vehicles. Similarly, southern Libya became a safe haven for militias from Libya itself, as well as Niger, Chad and Sudan, making money through protection economies, banditry, extortion and mercenary work (see the Libya country assessment later in the report).

Militarization, instability and organized crime

The greater Sahel has seen a broad ramping-up of security since 2001 when the US launched its War on Terror to fight global violent extremism. In November 2002, the US launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative, a multi-year programme aiming to assist Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania with military training and equipment to enhance security and border capabilities, and to fight terrorist movements, arms smuggling and drug trafficking.⁶⁴

Over the years, with the growing footprint of AQIM in Algeria, Mali, southern Libya, parts of Niger and Chad, concern with terrorist activity in the region grew. The US military launched the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, a US Defense Department geographic combatant command that coordinates all US security and military operations in Africa. In March 2014, the US reinforced their engagement in the region through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, an overarching security cooperation and counterterrorism programme.^{65,66}

The Libyan revolution and the Malian rebellion further complicated the picture.⁶⁷ In January 2013, the French armed forces launched Operation Serval in Mali, aiming to stop the progress of jihadi from northern Mali towards the south. While the French mission succeeded in blocking their advance and terrorist groups had to

abandon major cities in northern Mali (Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu) the operation was not able to eradicate the threat. Terrorists took cover in remote areas and continue to operate through insurgent-type attacks against locals, army forces and UN personnel.⁶⁸

The greater Sahel has seen a broad ramping-up of security since 2001, when the US launched its War on Terror to fight global violent extremism.

The UN deployed the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in July 2013. With an initial contingent of 6 000 troops, MINUSMA aims to stabilize northern Mali and return peace, replacing the African International Support Mission to Mali, under the Economic Community of West African States. MINUSMA now accounts for 16 453 personnel, including 12 644 ground troops.^{69,70} The mission has had mixed success and has become a prime target for insurgent attacks, making it one of the deadliest UN missions on record, with 201 peacekeepers killed by the end of June 2019.⁷¹

In August 2014, the militarization of the region reached a new level when France launched the counterterrorism Operation Barkhane. The mission absorbed the former Operation Serval (Mali) and Operation Epervier in Chad, a long-standing military deployment that officially supported the Chadian regime to counter Qaddafi's expansionism in the north during the 1980s. With 4 500 military personnel deployed across five countries in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), Barkhane aims to bolster region-wide counterterrorism efforts in partnership with regional armed forces.⁷² It has an inter-army command in N'Djamena (Chad) and represents the largest French military mission abroad.

Although the fight against organized crime is not part of Barkhane's mandate, troops on the ground made occasional seizures, particularly with regard to the supply of illicit weapons in northern areas of Mali and Niger. Three months after it started (October 2014), Barkhane intercepted an armed convoy of six all-terrain vehicles carrying anti-aircraft missiles, cannon, machine guns and anti-tank rockets travelling from Libya to northern Mali.⁷³ Barkhane's airborne commandos also conducted several night-time operations in 2015 in the remote and dangerous region of the Salvador Pass, where major arm caches were discovered.⁷⁴

The European Union has also moved to strengthen the military and law-enforcement capacities of the Sahelian states. Through the EU Common Security and Defense Policy missions (CSDP), it put in place the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), and three civilian CSDP missions (EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUBAM Libya and EUCAP Sahel Niger), which provide technical assistance in security and counterterrorism strategies to police and army forces.⁷⁵

In the same vein, Algeria, a continental military power, has also adopted a tough stance at its borders to protect itself against terrorism and regional insecurity. Algerian security forces substantially militarized the southern region of the country and closed the borders with Libya, Mali and Niger between 2011 and 2013. Since then, significant seizures of weapons and drugs have been made, and hundreds of suspected criminals and terrorists arrested (see the Algeria assessment).

More recently, the military US footprint was expanded with the building of a US drone base in Agadez in 2017 and the deployment of an estimated 1 000 military personnel. Niger has become a key regional hub for drone operations, serving as an outpost for reconnaissance missions and intelligence collection, as well as airstrikes across the region.^{76, 77} What is less known is the footprint of a number of private security companies for whom the Sahel has become something of an El Dorado as a result of this security

International Organization for Migration workers and Niger's Civil Protection, escorted by the military, head out on a weekly patrol to rescue abandoned migrants in Dirkou, Niger, August, 2018.

© Joe Penney





drive. More than 21 firms are active across the region, including the Wagner Group and Berry Aviation company.⁷⁸

Private security companies operate in cargo transport, parachuting and medical evacuation, but also in intelligence collection and analysis for foreign missions. The surge in security, and particularly the presence of foreign troops, has triggered some protests among local populations. Since 2017, Malians took to the streets several times to contest the presence of the French forces.⁷⁹ Similar protests were held in Niger in May 2019, during which protesters decried the 'occupation' of the northern part of country. These frustrations represent a breeding ground for the terrorists' narrative, as well as for deeply entrenched criminal networks.

This activity has had a considerable displacement effect on terrorists, criminals and organized bandits (the latter particularly in northern Chad, northern Niger, southern Libya and Mali). It has also had a displacement effect on geographic activity. For instance, instability has spread to regions that previously had no history of mass violence, such as central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, where attacks on civilians and armed forces have reached alarming levels. Burkina Faso's Ansarul Islam terrorist group, an organization receiving support from AQIM and the so-called Islamic State in the Grand Sahara, is behind the destabilization of the northern province of Soum, and conducted major attacks in Ouagadougou in 2017 and 2018, targeting notably the army headquarters and the French embassy.⁸⁰

In such a fragile context, the recognition of the threats posed by terrorism and organized crime pushed Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad to ally in the intergovernmental body of the G5 Sahel in 2014. Three years later, the G5 Sahel launched a joint force, comprising 5 000 military and police personnel drawn from national battalions, in order to tackle terrorism and organized crime through joint cross-border operations.⁸¹ The first operation led by the Joint Force (Operation Hawbi) in the tri-border area (a zone at the connecting point of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso) was generally considered as a success.⁸² The G5 Sahel Joint Force also conducts cross-border operations with the support of the Barkhane mission and the MINUSMA troops. However, it has not reached the expected level of success in fighting trafficking and crime, and continues to face major financial and technical issues.⁸³

As will be discussed in the country sections of the report, this surge in security has had a mixed impact on the region. There is no question that various initiatives have conditioned organized criminal activity, sometimes disrupting it significantly. Broadly, there has been a displacement and squeezing of criminal activity that has caused disruptive competition between criminal groups and militias protecting them. In some areas, this has helped undermine brazen impunity. In the words of an experienced smuggler from Tessalit (Mali) interviewed for this research: 'In the aftermath of the rebellion, militant groups escorting drug convoys proudly raised their flags when passing through northern Mali. This is no longer the case. It is too risky because the cargo can immediately become a target.'⁸⁴ Criminal networks have been adapting to this new environment, with smuggling and trafficking activities becoming more clandestine, travelling in smaller convoys, moving through more remote areas in a bid to dodge surveillance. There have also been serious unintended consequences and destabilizing effects on civilian populations coming as a result of this large-scale military activity.

Cybercrime: a hidden and underestimated threat

Cybercrime is a threat to an increasing number of individuals, private companies and states in the region. The very low level of internet penetration across the Sahel should not give the impression that the region is spared online risks. On the contrary, the rapid adoption of smartphones, growing population, weak technology infrastructure and poor state legislation render the Sahelian countries highly vulnerable to cybercrime. Users face cyberattacks, ranging from malware intrusions, phishing and cybersurveillance, conducted by criminals generating substantial financial, reputational and development losses. Very few states in the Sahel have ratified the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001), and even when laws and legal cyber-provisions exist, legislative cycles lag behind the rapid pace of innovation of cybercriminals.

Law-enforcement authorities report that the volume of cybercrime-related complaints is on the rise. In West Africa for instance, it is estimated that more than 95 per cent of cyber incidents go unreported, and less than 30 per cent of cybercrimes are reported, one of the highest rates in the world. A study prepared by cybersecurity firm, Serianu group, shows that 95 per cent of public and private organizations in Africa operate below the

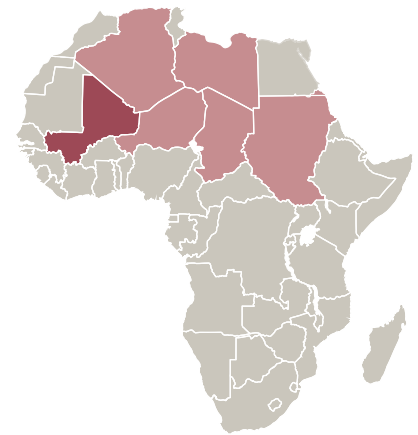
cybersecurity poverty line, that is the point below which users cannot protect themselves against cyberattacks. This is by far the highest rate in the world.

In West Africa and the Sahel, experts agree on two categories of cybercriminals. The first relates to the so-called 'Yahoo boys', a term that refers to a generation of cybercriminals who conduct low-tech, relatively straightforward online fraud, such as advance-fee scams. The profile of these cybercriminals is usually that of young, unemployed men who target multiple potential victims and mobilize different strategies to conduct fraud-type operations through email or mobile phone message scams. The second category is the 'next-level cybercriminals', which refers to cybercriminal groups engaged in more complex criminal operations using malware development, multi-phishing intrusion and encrypted tools. Their targets are usually individuals or companies; multinational companies and international CEOs have also been targets of cybercriminals from the region. Their number is rising and they are increasingly more effective. Cybercrime is not a focus of this research project. However, the increasing profile of this area warrants further monitoring and research.



MALI

**AT THE CROSSROADS OF
CONFLICT AND ORGANIZED CRIME**



Mali's recent political history is intimately connected to the development of organized crime in the region. Although the country adopted a democratic facade with the 1992 presidential elections, structural fissures remain at the very foundations of the Malian state. The administration of President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012) was marked by large-scale corruption and collusion with high-level criminals, and narcotics traffickers, especially in his government's second term (2007–2012).⁸⁵ During this time, Bamako's campaign against the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) of the 2000s rewarded loyal northern communities with access to criminal markets. This was a critical turning point that reshaped social hierarchies in the country, with criminals elevated from outcasts to role models.^{86, 87}

Northern Mali in particular has been the epicentre of trafficking activities, both before and after independence. Contemporary criminal economies are based on ancient trans-Saharan trade traditions and relationships, and on the geospatial know-how of local communities. Since independence, various subsidy regimes in Algeria and neighbouring countries gave rise to substantial price differentials, creating an opportunities for low-level contraband. For border communities, cross-border trade offered basic livelihoods and a chance to build resilience against external shocks.

With time, northern border settlements such as In-Khalil and Tessalit, as well as larger towns, like Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu grew into hubs for various forms of smuggling and trafficking with Algeria, Mauritania and Niger, ranging from basic staples to high-value illicit commodities, like cocaine, hashish and arms. Among local communities, these different activities are not judged on the basis of their legal status or the severity of their impact on the state, but on the basis of what is morally acceptable trade and what is not.⁸⁸

Criminal networks, often anchored in tribal and kinship relations, grew by exploiting the lack of economic opportunity as well as the region's porous borders, which are poorly policed by under-resourced and corrupt security forces. However, Mali's integration within transnational crime circuits only really started towards the end

Barkhane – French soldier with the Malian Armed Forces © MINUSMA

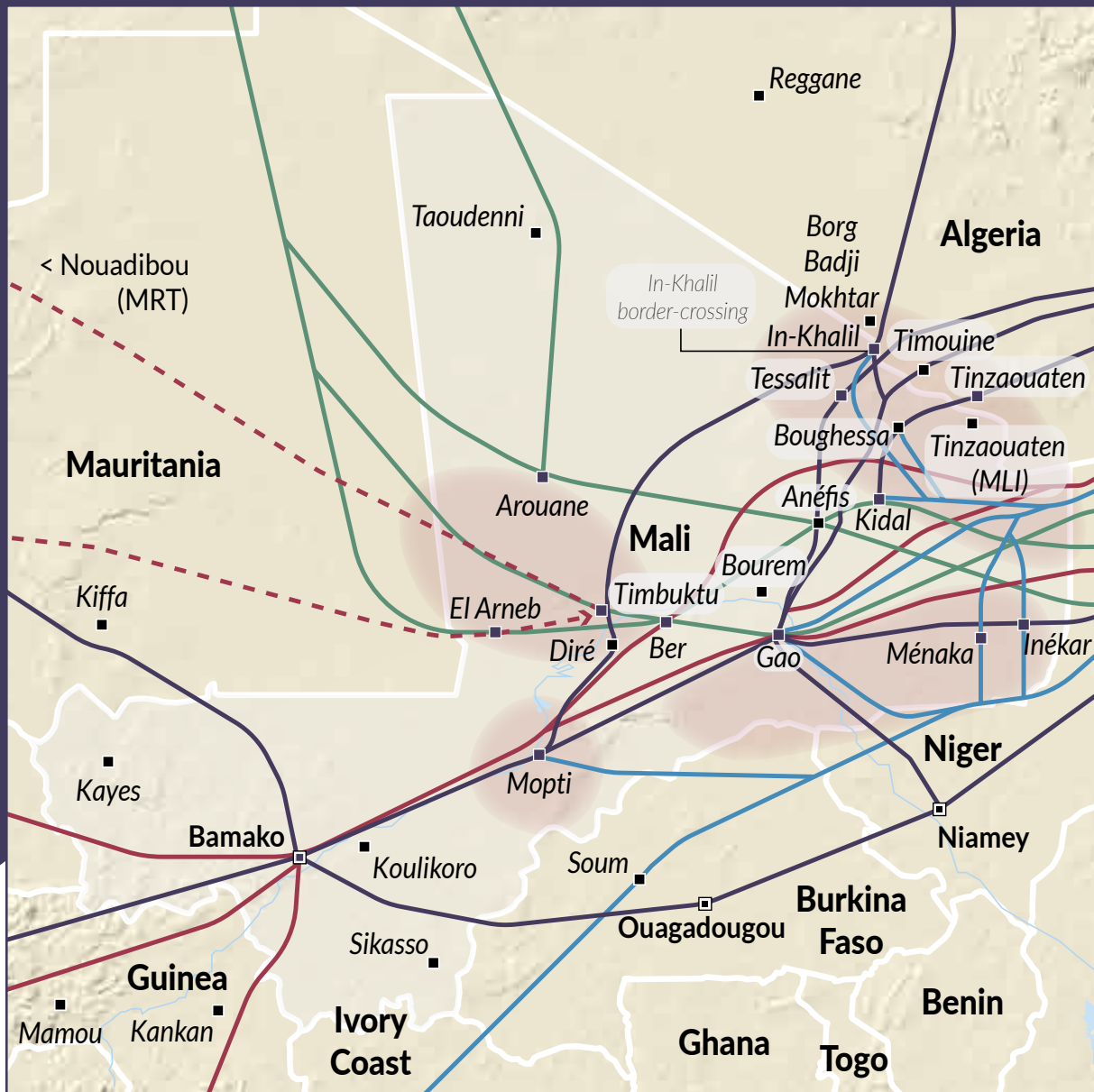


FIGURE 3: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Mali



of the 1980s with the growth of four major, intertwined criminal activities. Cigarette smuggling boomed towards the end of the 1980s, followed by the trafficking of Moroccan hashish in the 1990s. Jihadi elements in the Sahara were involved in both these activities, but specialized in systematic kidnap-for-ransom operations in the 2000s. Finally, large-scale cocaine trafficking emerged, from Latin America via West Africa.⁸⁹

Cocaine trafficking had the most devastating and longest-lasting effect on local governance, as the prospect of unparalleled profits fuelled conflict in the north. The case of the infamous Air Cocaine incident of 2009 (referred to in the Introduction), brought cocaine trafficking to the world’s attention, although it did little to expose the impact of this trade on Mali’s governance.⁹⁰

The conflict in 2012 seriously impacted organized crime in Mali. The armed groups that seized control of strategic territories built a protection racket around narcotics and other

lucrative flows, aided by the flood of Libyan arm stockpiles. Violence increased as more actors sought to participate in the drug economy, and armed groups involved in securing drug convoys started fighting one another, undermining the prospects of peace.

In recent years, organized criminal activity has also started becoming more prevalent in the south. In central Mali, local jihadi and self-defence movements are engaged in cycles of inter-communal violence that is often predicated on an underlayer of banditry and robbery.⁹¹ In 2016 alone, at least 400 incidents of banditry were identified in northern and central Mali.⁹² Since 2014, bandits have frequently targeted animal herders and traders, particularly in Douentza, Koro and Djenné, fuelling a race in arms trafficking.⁹³ Similarly, criminality in the south is also on the rise, as evidenced by increasing arms and cannabis seizures. From January 2014 to June 2018, the law-enforcement authorities arrested 455 people connected to drug trafficking, a number that has been constantly increasing over the years.⁹⁴

Criminal groups adapt their businesses in the post-2012 era

In northern Mali, organized crime, community conflicts and state interests are often intertwined. Before the 2012 rebellion, the state instrumentalized trafficking activities – particularly narcotics – as a tool to silence revolt and reward loyal communities.⁹⁵ In 2008, for instance, Bamako made a deal with pro-government Berabiche Arabs and Imghad Tuareg traffickers, in which they were allowed privileged access and control over narcotics trafficking routes in the north in exchange for fighting separatists and dissidents through local militias.⁹⁶ In January 2012, Bamako went as far as releasing from prison Mohamed Ould Awainat, a well-known Arab narcotics trafficker who was involved in the Air Cocaine affair on condition that he supported the formation of an Arab militia that would fight the Tuareg rebellion under the command of the Malian army Colonel-Major, Abderahmane Ould Meydou.⁹⁷

On the other side of the conflict, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, one of the leaders of the 2006 Tuareg rebellion, was employing similar tactics when he solicited narcotics traffickers from Kidal to finance and champion the separatist cause.⁹⁸ This co-option of traffickers by the state and separatists led to an arms race that fuelled periodic clashes from the mid-2000s onward (see below).

The 2009 local elections accentuated the violence related to the appointment of community members as politicians who can facilitate the control of trafficking routes. Several clashes erupted between traffickers, particularly between the Idnan Tuareg tribe and Lamhar Arabs.⁹⁹ Historically, trafficking networks were divided ethnically. Arab tribes, notably the Lamhar of Tilemsi (in the Gao region) and the Berabiche (mainly in Timbuktu and Taoudenni), have historically controlled narcotics trafficking (cocaine and hashish), while the Idnan and the Imghad Tuaregs act as drivers and transporters in this business. Today, one could say that narcotics trafficking is more ‘open’ to all communities, particularly the hashish business.¹⁰⁰

While some traffickers, such as Mohamed Ould Mataly, the former Member of Parliament for Bourem (Gao), became political entrepreneurs and ran for elections, the majority maintained a low profile, using their influence instead to determine appointments in the

In northern Mali, organized crime, community conflicts and state interests are often intertwined.

customs service, army and police, and to promote anointed politicians and launder criminal proceeds in legitimate businesses, especially transporting companies.¹⁰¹ The cases of Deity Ag Sidimou, a former Member of Parliament from Tessalit linked to drug trafficking, and Baba Ould Cheikh, the mayor of Tarkint, who gave clearance for and prepared the logistics around the 2009 Air Cocaine landing (nicknamed by former president Toumani Touré as 'his northern bandit'), are illustrative of the close links between local politics and narco-trafficking.¹⁰²

The rapid enrichment opportunities presented by the drug trade fuelled old rivalries between Ifogha Tuaregs, Idran Tuaregs and the Kounta Arabs against the Berabiche Arabs, the Tilemsi Arabs and the Imghad Tuaregs.¹⁰³ However, this did not prevent lower-status communities, who used to be at the bottom of the value chain, to start their own trafficking businesses when the scale of trafficking began to increase in 2007.¹⁰⁴

The outbreak of the rebellion forced a change in the protection model. As a coalition of Islamist, separatist and terrorist groups began to seize strategic sites, pushing out the state in the north, traffickers were forced to partner with new authorities. They quickly

concluded deals with loyalist, rebel or jihadi groups, according to logistical imperatives and how these squared up with those who held territorial control in areas that overlapped with trafficking routes.¹⁰⁵

Lamhar Arab traffickers (considered loyalists), for instance, became close to separatists in the MNLA in 2011. However, by 2012, the same traffickers had shifted into a new association with the Jihadist Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). This alliance was created due to the shift in territorial control between armed groups. Islamist and jihadi groups took control of the three main northern cities: AQIM in Timbuktu, MUJAO in Gao and Ansar Dine in Kidal.¹⁰⁶

Contrary to received wisdom, Malian armed groups, particularly at this point in time, were short on funding and the protection of drug convoys provided in 2012 provided a vital revenue stream that helped pay combatants and buy arms, which, in turn, consolidated territorial control and ability to provide protection.¹⁰⁷ However, the proliferation of actors (both armed groups and intermediaries) and the effect this had on the trafficking-related violence eventually increased the risks of the narcotics business.

Narco-trafficking undermined by instability, violent competition and securitization

From 2013 to 2015, scores of clashes occurred around strategic trafficking hubs, such as In-Khalil and Ber, where Arabs who were part of the Azawad Arab Movement fought with Tuaregs associated with the MNLA. On the surface, these skirmishes appeared to be ideological but the real driver was a struggle for control over trafficking routes, such as the one linking Lerneb-Ber-Gao-Ménaka or the route connecting Tiris Zemmour in Mauritania with Araouane and Tabankort in Mali. Similar clashes also took place in Kidal in June 2016 and Ménaka in March 2015.¹⁰⁸

In order to adapt to the violence, traffickers diversified connections with armed groups beyond their ethnic communities and cooperated with the highest

number of actors.¹⁰⁹ Currently, many Lamhar Arab traffickers normally associated with separatism work with members of the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA), which are part of the pro-government coalition named Plateform, while Idran Arabs and Ifoghas Tuareg, who in 2012 were counted among the supporters of the Azawad Movement, rely on members of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA).¹¹⁰

However, the adaptation was not enough to mitigate the violence and predation, which continues largely unabated to this day. For instance, in April 2018, Ahmoudou Ag Asriw, a senior commander of the GATIA, led a hashish convoy from Tabankort towards

Narcotics flows through Mali

Mali is principally a transit country for narcotics (hashish and cocaine) in the Sahel, and a destination market for amphetamines and synthetic opioids (tramadol, diazepam and codeine).

According to the Central Narcotics Office, consumption of synthetic opioids has been on the rise in Mali since 2012. Seizures in Mali increased five-fold between 2014 and 2018, when 270 000 tablets were intercepted in 2018. Tramadol trafficking in the regions of Kayes and Bamako is widespread. In 2017, the authorities seized more than 200 000 units Kayes. Timbuktu is reportedly a major hub for synthetic opioids. According to the chief of the Central Narcotics Office, tramadol arrives large consignments in Timbuktu by land from Bamako but also via fluvial canoes along the Niger River.

Latin American cocaine enters the Sahel via West African coastal countries (from Mauritania to Benin), and then is routed into Mali either through the southern border with Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso or from the border with Mauritania, before reaching northern Niger and southern Libya on its way towards end markets in Europe and the Middle East. Moroccan hashish is traditionally trafficked from the Rif region of northern Morocco to the north-east of Mauritania – a military zone since 2010 – or to a lesser extent through the south-west of

Algeria (see Algeria section) before reaching northern Mali. Like cocaine, hashish is moved in armed convoys from the regions of Kidal, Gao or Timbuktu to northern Niger.

Routes shift constantly at a micro level, according to territorial control and the presence of international forces. However, the bird's-eye view is more stable, with drugs and cigarettes following corridors within northern Mali in which the Tilemsi Valley (circle of Gao), and the cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal play a prominent role. This is in spite of instability and attacks on convoys by bandits and competing armed groups/traffickers. The primary hubs for this high-level trafficking, whether for financial transactions or for the storage of commodities, include Lerneb (Timbuktu circle), Tabankort (Gao circle), Ber (Timbuktu) and Amassine (Kidal circle). These locations took over from In-Khalil between 2012 and 2015 as the north's primary trafficking hub in part as a result of Algerian law enforcement targeting flows from this point (see Algeria section). In the south, cannabis herb produced in Ghana and Nigeria is also trafficked and re-exported regionally. Cannabis herb is also cultivated in Mali, particularly in Kayes, in much lower quantities. However, unlike hashish, it is not normally shipped north, and the two markets do not really overlap.

SOURCES: <https://maliactu.net/mali-tramadol-la-drogue-du-sahel/>; <http://rildainfo.com/railda-matin/2088-lutte-contre-l%E2%80%99abus-et-le-trafic-illicite-des-drogues-le-tramado-inonde-la-r%C3%A9gion-de-kayes.html?fbclid=IwAR1NL6YQUVMntlQvvhb72XWqxHyABsXAnvS4Db9xQPw3e8qE9-YtECQbBlo>; <https://cenozo.org/fr/articles/142-tramadol-trafficking-and-consumption-in-tombouctou-two-scourges-gaining-ground>



Armed men in northern Mali

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the Tamesna area (on the northern Nigerien–Malian border).¹¹¹ Asriw was also allegedly engaged in clashes between GATIA and CMA related to drug trafficking near Anéfis in 2017.

Aside from competition for territory, armed actors, both those formally recognized by the peace process and smaller groups of bandits or traffickers, seek to undermine the competition by intercepting convoys, a practice that has harmed the business. It is hard to make a definitive assessment of this in the absence of any reliable statistics. Drug seizures by security forces are rare and should not be taken as a barometer for

trafficking. In fact, triangulated information obtained from multiple sources in Mali, Niger and Libya, as well as focused research for a separate project in Guinea-Bissau, suggests that the flow of cocaine through the Trans-Saharan route has been undermined over recent years (see also Libya section).

Violent competition in Mali has been compounded by instability and a surge of banditry targeting high-level trafficking over the past ten years in both Niger and Libya, negatively impacting the cocaine trade (see the Libya and Niger sections).

On top of this, increased military presence following the deployment of the French Serval Operation, and then the counterterrorism mission Operation Barkhane, also conditioned traffickers and armed



groups. Primarily, these developments complicated the movement of drug convoys around strategic hub, such as Gao and Kidal, but also the movement of armed groups. It also led to some incidental seizures of drug. This was coupled with Algeria's own military activity along the border, which weakened strategic hubs, such as In-Khalil, and pushed traffickers into new territories (see the Algeria assessment).

One of the possible negative effects of this pressure is that these geographically limited military operations are displacing activity, squeezing it to the periphery, where greater potential is created for logistical and organizational cooperation between traffickers and terrorists facing the same obstacle of armed surveillance and potential strikes.¹¹²

In spite of this context, Saharan cocaine trafficking is far from moribund, as illustrated by recurrent clashes between trafficking networks in the region of Kidal, Ménaka and Gao, and the record seizure in Guinea-Bissau of almost 800 kilograms of cocaine in a Senegal-registered fish truck bound for Mali.^{113, 114} The haul in Guinea-Bissau followed a long dry spell; the last large seizure having taken place in 2007, when 635 kilograms were seized by Judicial Police near the capital.

In fact, research conducted by the Global Initiative in Guinea-Bissau – by far one of the most prolific of the coastal cocaine importers, particularly in respect to the Mali route – indicates that a shift took place after 2007 from large consignments to smaller-scale

distribution. This was in part because the protection relationship that the South American cartels enjoyed with corrupt Bissau-Guinean military had soured at this time, and because infrastructure had been building up for the distribution of cocaine in relatively small consignments throughout the region or directly to Europe.

The recent large-scale seizures in Guinea-Bissau, which in September 2019 included a 1.8 tonne haul, in which a Malian was arrested along with three Colombians and four Bissau-Guineans, are a trend to watch in respect to the impact this might have on Malian trafficking.

Interestingly, hashish trafficking, which in Mali runs more or less through the same corridors as cocaine, appears to be more stable, in part because the premium paid for the release of seized goods, when a convoy is targeted by bandits, is lower.¹¹⁵ However, another factor is that hashish is more often sold locally than cocaine is, mitigating the financial impact of banditry on the overall profitability of operations.¹¹⁶

Narrowing trafficking in northern Mali: Local mechanisms and poor international efforts

The impact of the violent competition over trafficking has been significant enough to move armed groups, traffickers and intermediaries to engage in dialogue on the stabilization of northern Mali and the regulation of trafficking. The launch of the Anéfis process from September 2014 to October 2015 in the eponymous city (Kidal region) involved wide-ranging talks between the CMA and the Plateform, and influential trafficking actors, in order to reduce violence in Kidal. The Anéfis 1 road map was adopted in October 2015, and included intercommunal reconciliation, the establishment of local interim administration, and the free movement of goods – code for safe trafficking corridors that would reduce risks of interception and the harm caused to the business.¹¹⁷

In February 2016, the fragile truce between armed groups was broken by violent incidents between the Imghad Tuaregs of the GATIA and the Ifoghas Tuareg, for the control of Kidal.¹¹⁸ In October 2017, a second agreement, Anéfis 2, which involved regrouping several elite members, was signed in Kidal between the CMA and the Plateform.¹¹⁹ This deal helped strengthen security and reduce violence related to trafficking in Kidal, and was better applied than Anéfis 1. The Anéfis 2 agreement ensured a fragile peace in Kidal as the two coalitions of armed groups refrained for a longer period from engaging in fighting over trafficking.

The Anéfis process is among the rare tools that helped to reduce inter-communal violence, and engaged the CMA and the Plateform into a dialogue on structural differences, including the control over routes and territories around Kidal.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, the process has been undermined by competing personal and communal interests among armed groups. But, despite its flaws, it has been a valuable mechanism to reduce violence and contribute to the implementation of the peace agreement through a bottom-up approach.

Since then, developments in the region have been conditioned by a new phase in which the Malian state has been very slowly returning to parts of the north. For the time

being, traffickers still seek protection principally from armed groups.¹²¹ However, as the government consolidates its footprint, they are increasingly seeking to gain influence among government officials and the military.¹²²

Bamako insists these ties ended in 2012, but, as argued by a former diplomat, ‘these corruption links cannot disappear from one day to another because some armed groups became actors in the peace process. Malians know that the state cannot reassert itself in Gao or Timbuktu without the cooperation of the *grands messieurs* [the great gentlemen]’ – a reference to the region’s influential businessmen involved in legal and illegal activities.^{123,124}

Trafficking is the blind spot of the ongoing securitization efforts. The support for the creation of the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force, which aims to fight against cross-border trafficking and organized crime, and the training and technical assistance given by the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) mission are also responses that are too weak to the challenges posed by criminal activities in these countries.¹²⁵

Trafficking is the blind spot of the ongoing securitization efforts in Mali.

Similarly, neither the Barkhane Operation nor MINUSMA have an official mandate to fight against organized crime.^{126,127} Their impact on organized crime is a by product of their footprint: traffickers often act on the (likely correct) assumption that foreign forces are deploying sophisticated surveillance systems. However, in practice, instances of interdictions and arrests have been very rare.

Even the peace agreement barely mentions organized crime, in spite of the centrality of the trafficking business to the conflict in Northern Mali. The reality is that international stakeholders are at a loss as to how to approach the problem.¹²⁸ Although the new MINUSMA’s mandate for the period July 2018 to June 2019 (Resolution 2423) refers to ‘drug trafficking as a source of conflict in northern Mali’, this is far from the comprehensive commitment needed to address the challenges of organized crime in the region.¹²⁹ In private, national and international stakeholders acknowledge that narcotics trafficking is a bigger challenge than is reflected in public discourse and that the fight against terrorism and organized crime are separate issues requiring different responses. However, there is still reluctance to take this forward, principally out of fear of the consequences it would have on relationships with partner states in the region.

Declining kidnap-for-ransom of Westerners bolsters local abductions

From the early 2000s, kidnap-for-ransom was the main source of revenues for terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel. It is believed that at the peak of the business (2005 to 2010), abduction revenues made up more than 90 per cent of terrorists’ financing in the region.¹³⁰ AQIM alone – by far the biggest player in this industry – is estimated to have made away with some US\$91.5 million between 2008 and 2014.¹³¹ From the mid-2000s to 2015, the average ransom payment for Western hostages grew from US\$500 000 to between US\$5 and US\$8 million.¹³²

However, while terrorist groups normally take the lion's share of profit from this activity, it is local gangs that typically acquire targets using their local connections and that carry out the abductions.¹³³ They then sell the hostages to terrorist groups that have the international connections and logistical capability to manage the captivity and avoid detection while executing a ransom plan and open negotiations with foreign governments or corporations through intermediaries. This *modus operandi* has not changed with the consolidation of the region's terrorist organizations under the JNIM umbrella.^{134, 135}

However, with the number of foreigners visiting central and northern Mali plummeting as a result of this very abduction epidemic and general instability starting in 2012, the kidnapping business has been recalibrating itself. At the time of writing, it is believed that there are at least nine foreign nationals being held captive by jihadi actors in the region; one of the lowest counts since the rise of the kidnapping industry.^{136, 137}

As a result, two important trends are occurring. The first is that the abduction of Westerners is moving south to places where this phenomenon was not present until relatively recently. The Sahel region of Burkina Faso is an illustrative example. In January 2019, Burkinabé Prime Minister Paul Kaba Thiéba and his entire cabinet resigned en masse. No official reason was given, but the move has been linked to the growing number of kidnappings and jihadi attacks.¹³⁸

The announcement followed the abduction of Canadian geologist Kirk Woodman from a mine exploration camp close to the border with Niger in January 2019.¹³⁹ Woodman's bullet-riddled body was found a day after the government stepped down. A month earlier, in mid-December 2018, a young Canadian woman, Edith Blais, and her Italian companion Luca Tacchetto went missing in Bobo-Dioulasso, a town in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso.¹⁴⁰ Although no organization had claimed responsibility at the time of writing, there were strong indications that the couple had been abducted by an Islamist group and taken to northern Mali.

The second trend relates to the targeting of locals. In northern and central Mali, several local officials, military and public figures, have been abducted since 2015 as part of this new phenomenon. The kidnapping of Baba Ould Cheikh, the mayor of the northern locality of Tarkint (Circle of Bourem) in February 2018, is an especially relevant example in light of the multiple hats worn by the victim.

Ould Cheikh was a well-known figure in the region who often acted as an intermediary in kidnapping negotiations with terrorist groups. According to local sources, the abduction, which took place in January 2018, was profit-driven and the captors were expecting to make a significant sum in light of Ould Cheikh's presumed involvement in high-value trafficking. After Ould Cheikh was announced dead by local organizations, he was liberated by his captors 23 days later. Many locals in northern Mali suspect that his ransom was high and might had been paid by traffickers.^{141, 142}

In general, the kidnapping of locals is less profitable, as ransoms for Malians are far lower than for foreign captives. However, not all abductions are financed through ransoms. Kidnapping is sometimes used as a way to threaten officials and undermine their authority. For instance, the kidnappings of Mamadou Diawara, the Guiré brigade commander, and Soungalo Koné, president of the Niono District Court, in October 2017 were attributed to the militant Macina Liberation Front (MLF, see below) which is part of the JNIM coalition.¹⁴³ Both men died from illness while in captivity.

According to local contacts interviewed in March 2019 for this research, that kidnapping was meant as a way for the MLF to intimidate the officials and kill the military and not as a money-making operation in itself.¹⁴⁴ Makan Doumbia, the prefect (mayor) of Ténenkou (Mopti) was taken hostage by the MLF and held captive at the same place as Mamadou Diawara and Soungalo Koné, but released in February 2019. In a video, he said that he had been kidnapped because of his political status.¹⁴⁵

The general decline in the abduction of Westerners in the region has also meant that kidnapping as a business now receives less attention than it used to. However, this is an underreported and threatening shift to local targets, which has potentially far-

reaching consequences for the further entrenchment of organized crime in the region especially because of the effect that abductions of officials have on the already weak local governance and law-enforcement institutions in the country.

Crime diffused south by wave of violence in central Mali

Violence reached unprecedented levels in central Mali from 2015, mostly because of conflicts over access to resources between semi-nomadic Fulani herders, and Bambara and Dogon farmers. During this time, the central region of Mopti became the deadliest in the country.¹⁴⁶ Conflict-related deaths soared incrementally during this time, from 78 in 2015 to more than 500 civilians in 2018.¹⁴⁷ In the first five months of 2019, more than 250 people had already been killed in central Mali and more than 50 000 people displaced during the same period as massacres grew more vicious.^{148, 149} In March 2019, 160 Peul villagers in Ogossagou village were massacred in a single day while in June, 35 people, including a reported 24 children were killed in a two-hour raid in Sobane-Kou, a Dogon village.^{150, 151} Both towns are close to the border with Burkina Faso.

The fighting has multiple layers, but the catalytic event was the establishment of the jihadi organization, Macina Liberation Front, led by Ahmadou Kouffa. During 2015, the group carried out an insurgency in Mopti targeting security forces and any civilians suspected of supporting them.¹⁵² The group's rapid rise is in large part attributable to support it got from the Peul community, of which Kouffa himself is a member.

Jihadi sympathies among members of the Peul go back some years, and had already become manifest in the 2012 rebellion (see below). However, the establishment of the MLF in Mopti was a decisive turning point that hinged on Kouffa's ability to mobilize a critical mass of young Peul to join his ranks, exploiting long-standing grievances within the community, where feelings of marginalization, stigmatization and impunity of armed forces are acute.¹⁵³ The result was that the Peul as a community were held widely responsible for the MLF's violence.

In the absence of security provision by state forces, Dogon and Bambara communities set up self-defence groups, which retaliated with indiscriminate revenge attacks on Peul civilians.

Over time, however, the conflict has developed a distinctly criminal element to it with bandits and small-scale armed groups exploiting the context to monetize on the violence.¹⁵⁴ Firstly, the instability created a natural market for protection services alongside a demand for vendettas carried out by gangs willing to target innocent civilians on commission.¹⁵⁵ In some cases, attacks on fairs and markets attributed to Jihadi groups have actually been carried out by bandits camouflaging their actions by aping the terrorists' modus operandi.¹⁵⁶

Another variant of this criminal phenomenon involves cattle rustlers, who have also taken advantage of the violence. Cattle theft is chronic in central Mali, and precedes the surge in violence post-2015. Rustling happens especially in the border areas, along the eastern border with Burkina Faso, from Mondoro to Gomoesso or in the west, particularly at the cattle market of Léré, close to the Mauritanian border.¹⁵⁷ Since 2012, rustlers have been moving north, particularly around Ansongo (Gao), where bandits have been drawn by a rapid growth in farming, reportedly the result of money trafficking coming from illicit activities and laundered as an investment.¹⁵⁸

In spite of the rooted nature of cattle rustling in central Mali, since 2015 there has been a marked expansion in this activity, especially by the Ntéré, a group of Peul cattle rustlers who are reported to be the most prolific livestock thieves in the region.¹⁵⁹ Tuareg bandits are also involved in this trafficking, as they are better armed than the Peul in general. As the

Peul are the dominant cattle herders, in many cases the Ntérééré actually target their own ethnic group.

Elements from the Ntérééré had joined the ranks of the MNLA and later the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa during the 2012 rebellion.¹⁶⁰ This provided them with hardware and valuable combat experience but, critically, also forged personal ties with fighters who are today among the leading ranks of the MLF.¹⁶¹ The inter-ethnic violence, which is largely rooted in conflict over resources (water and land), then provided the perfect context and cover for their expansion, both in terms of profits made through attacks as well as the provision of protection to Peul herders, particularly when moving livestock from one herding ground to another.

The conflict has been fuelled by a steady supply of small arms, particularly AK-style assault rifles and machine guns, which have contributed to making the attacks deadlier.¹⁶² The Peul widely saw the acquisition of weapons as a strategic political objective. 'The only way for the young and deprived Peul to be heard is to take arms,' said one young Peul.¹⁶³ However, following the broader pattern of the conflict, this triggered a race among competing communities bearing the brunt of the resulting violence, seeking to better arm themselves. Dozo hunters (a traditional brotherhood of hunters that draw from both Dogon and Bambara) have been at the forefront of the self-defence groups swapping hunting rifles for machine guns in part thanks to protection money pooled from the communities they defend, and various levels of direct support from elements within the Malian army.

Weapons trafficking grew exponentially in Mali in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution particularly when Malian Tuareg fighters returned from Libyan frontlines with heavy weapons and technicals. Weapons also flow into the country from Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where arms end up in regional streams as a result of poor control of state stockpiles or conflict, or both.¹⁶⁴ However, foreign arms supplies have been in decline since 2014. Since then, armed groups have been forced to turn to seizures from Malian stockpiles to bolster their armaments as well as their finances; distributing plunder in markets that supply smaller armed groups, bandits, and individuals across the north and the centre of Mali.¹⁶⁵

This flow of arms is increasingly moving south, feeding Central Mali.¹⁶⁶ According to local contacts, Timétrine and Tigharghar in the Kidal region are among the most prominent early hubs for this distribution.¹⁶⁷ Another focal point is the area around the Ansongo-Ménaka (close to where the borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso converge). From here, weapons move south in small quantities in private vehicles or even occasionally aboard public transport.¹⁶⁸

There have also been arms seizures in the suburbs of Bamako itself, destined for Néné and Bankass, in the Mopti region, and intended to support self-defence groups.¹⁶⁹ This is part of a broader pattern that has seen seizures of pistols, assault rifles, ammunition as well as rocket-propelled grenade launchers and missiles in 2018.¹⁷⁰

Although Bamako has not experienced mass-casualty violence since the Radisson Blu attack in 2015, when the al-Mourabitoun and AQIM killed 22 people after taking hold of the hotel, criminality in the capital is on the rise, according to the government and the police.¹⁷¹ During the first two months of 2019, a dozen cases of violent crime were recorded, including the murder of two businessmen and an Imam, while in September 2018, the coordinator of a local NGO, Alfarouk, was kidnapped by an unidentified gang in the capital, and then released by the security forces two weeks later.^{172, 173}

The government has been attempting to contain the phenomenon. In January 2019, a large-scale anti-crime operation involving more than 1 000 security and defence force operatives deployed in the eastern part of the capital carried out successful raids in which 600 suspects were arrested and dozens of weapons, vehicles and narcotics seized.¹⁷⁴

Earlier, in January 2018, the Central Narcotics Control Office seized 2.8 tonnes of cannabis herb hidden in a cargo truck in the capital. The cargo had arrived from Sikasso, on the border with Burkina Faso, after being dispatched from Ghana.¹⁷⁵ This echoed the capture of a similar-sized haul of cannabis seized in Bamako in 2016 (considered a record at the time) coming from Burkina Faso and for redistribution in Mali, Senegal and Guinea.¹⁷⁶

Central and southern Mali have always been major transit zones for various illicit commodities being moved to the north. However, as discussed, the conflict that has gripped the central region is creating greater opportunities for expansion of criminal activity in Mopti and southern Mali.

In the post-2012 landscape, organized crime has become Mali's hidden war. Criminal networks operating in the high-profit narcotics and the kidnap-for-ransom industries have adapted to a period marked by violent competition for control, shrinking opportunities and regional instability. Significantly, organized crime in Mali is no longer confined to its northern boundaries. The region of Mopti, historically spared from serious crime, is now the beating heart of arms trafficking, local banditry, jihadi presence and local abduction, feeding the cycles of violence, crime and terror. While Bamako seems preoccupied by this diffusion, it does not have the means to cope with the challenge.

It is unreasonable to expect the authorities to be able to fight organized crime in such a fragile context with poor law-enforcement capacity. However, while military and law enforcement have to be a key component of the toolkit deployed, it is crucial to find a way to reduce the systemic violence and harm generated by criminal enterprises against civilians, and prevent traffickers from interfering with the implementation of peace agreement.

In the post-2012 landscape, organized crime has become Mali's hidden war.



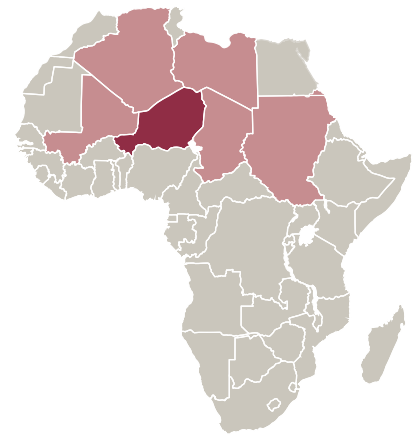
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CRIMINAL NETWORKS ADAPT
TO MILITARIZATION



In spite of Niger's relative political stability over the past ten years, organized crime in the country remains pervasive and shows little signs of abating. At the root is an extremely poor economy, based on uranium exports and the country's agriculture sector, which is chronically subject to environmental disruption, including droughts, floods and locust infestations. Consequently, 90.6 per cent of the country's estimated 21.5 million citizens were in multidimensional poverty in 2018, helping to keep Niger at the bottom of the UN human development index ranking for the past few years.^{177,178} The nature of Niger's geographic position – landlocked between the volatile regions of southern Libya, northern Mali, north-western Chad and northern Nigeria – has also contributed to making the country a node along trans-Saharan illicit trade routes.

As a result, Nigerian communities have relied on the black economy and transnational trafficking flows going through the country as a means to survive and compensate for the lack of legitimate economic opportunities.¹⁷⁹ In other words, organized criminality in Niger is intrinsically tied to local communities' resilience-building mechanisms.

The country is also impacted by jihadi-related insecurity in the Diffa, Tahoua and Tillabéri regions, which intensified since 2015, and has prompted increased foreign support to the country. Niger has now become a key regional strategic partner for the West in the fight against violent extremism, smuggling and trafficking – particularly the US, France and the EU, which have reshaped the country's security priorities in the past four years. Despite the presence and mandate of these Western partners, the increased international support has so far failed to address the foundations of the jihadi threats or the criminal networks that continue to benefit from trafficking arms, drugs and humans through the country despite increased scrutiny.

The involvement of Niger's political elite within trans-Saharan drug-trafficking economies is well known and recognized behind the scenes by international partners.

Pickup trucks crossing a stream on the route from Agadez to Dirkou, Niger

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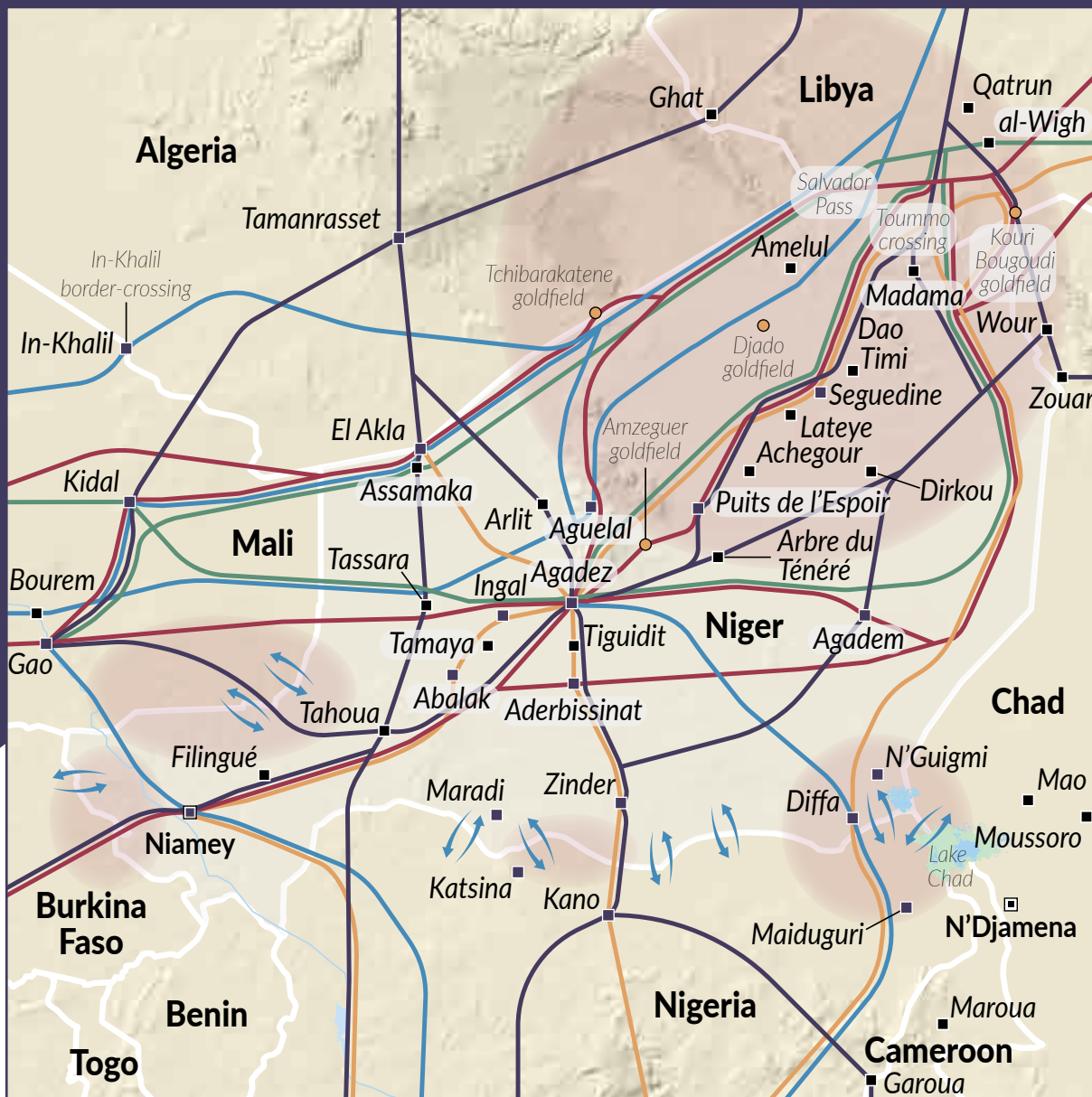
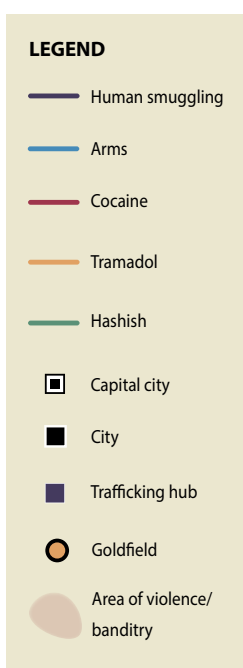


FIGURE 4: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Niger



Yet the problem has been largely ignored by these donor countries, who have focused instead on tackling lower-hanging fruit in the value chain, for fear of hampering counter-terrorism and anti-smuggling goals. So far, these strategies have been felt the most by low-level criminal actors, particularly in the sphere of human smuggling. However, their effect has also been felt by arms and drug traffickers, whose routes and *modi operandi* have adapted to the reinforced security presence across the country.

Moreover, since 2015, law-enforcement activity driven by an aid-for-migration-control package by the EU altered local socio-economic dynamics and partly re-shaped Niger's criminal economies. The collapse of the migration industry and closure of a main gold mining site in the north of the country led to further banditry and greater involvement of small criminal actors in trafficking economies, as local communities sought alternative livelihoods.¹⁸⁰

In southern Niger, instability on the Niger–Nigeria border since 2015 enabled armed actors from Nigeria and opportunistic Nigerien smugglers to trade arms, drugs and fuel,

which fed into the local criminal economies of northern Niger. That being said, criminal networks with a strong base in the south of the country have kept a distinct nature, focusing on boosting profits by exploiting the fast-growing population.

Blows to migrant smuggling and gold mining destabilize the north

Since 2016, the informal economy in northern Niger has suffered consecutive blows, profoundly altering local socio-economic dynamics and reshaping the criminal economy in the region. The first was a crackdown on human smuggling during 2016 driven by an EU agenda to stem irregular migratory flows through partnerships with source and transit countries.¹⁸¹ This came about year after the passing of a law that criminalized human smuggling for the first time with the ratification of the 2000 Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.¹⁸²

Hundreds of smugglers and intermediaries were arrested and their vehicles seized.¹⁸³ More significantly, thousands more who made a largely legitimate living from providing services supporting the migration industry (e.g. accommodation, provision of food and supplies) across the country, in towns and remote hubs, like Seguedine and Dirkou, saw revenues evaporate between 2016 and 2017.¹⁸⁴

In addition to the criminalization of the migration industry, which greatly affected the regional economy of the north, a second interlinked blow followed closely when Niamey banned gold mining on the Djado goldfield in early 2017.¹⁸⁵ At the time it was closed, the site was the largest artisanal goldfield in Niger, with around 60 mining sites over some 200 square kilometres. It provided livelihoods to an estimated 50 000 miners and communities in nearby towns and villages that provided services to the mining operations.¹⁸⁶ Officially, the government justified the enforcement of the ban on the grounds of public safety: the mines attracted criminal activity and armed bandits, and caused conflicts with local communities.¹⁸⁷

There is no question that the mining operations overlapped with criminal activity.¹⁸⁸ But shutting down Djado was also key to Niamey's campaign against human smuggling. The goldfield lies on the main migratory route linking Agadez to south-west Libya, a primary thoroughfare for thousands of sub-Saharan Africans headed for Europe.¹⁸⁹ It is therefore noteworthy that other major mining sites, including the remote goldfield of Tchibarakatene, close to the Algerian border (predominantly Tuareg territory), remained open and were allowed to develop over recent years.

These two interventions had a major destabilizing effect on the region. The human-smuggling industry was decimated, creating significant displacement of actors, routes and operational models.¹⁹⁰ Critically, both events also further fuelled grievances within Tebu and Tuareg communities, and provided the impetus for some to move deeper into the illicit

The illicit economy in northern Niger has suffered consecutive blows, profoundly altering local socio-economic dynamics and reshaping the criminal economy in the region.

economy.¹⁹¹ One major shift has been in routes, which are now more scattered and in more remote and dangerous parts of the region.

A Tuareg smuggler interviewed in Agadez in July 2018 said: 'There's too many routes now; you can't count them. We need to work to feed our families, so we're becoming creative; we're calculating everything. If I know that there's a patrol around Achegour, when I'm at the Puits de l'Espoir I know I have to keep at least 60 kilometres of distance from them.'

These routes are more prone to vehicle breakdowns and encounters with armed bandits who hijack migrant convoys – a factor that contributes to the reported increase in detected migrant deaths in the desert.¹⁹² One interviewed migrant smuggler who ran into French armed forces in May 2017, including vehicles and a helicopter, admitted he asked the 25 migrants he was transporting to dismount the vehicle, pretending it was stuck in the sand, before fleeing with a lighter vehicle so as to increase his chances of escape.¹⁹³

The increasingly clandestine nature of migrant smuggling brings it closer to other criminal activities in the north. Also, other actors previously involved in the trafficking of drugs have turned to migrant smuggling with renewed interest, as profit margins have increased fivefold or more since 2016.¹⁹⁴

The reported presence of sex workers and sex-trafficking victims in Agadez and Niamey has also increased since the crackdown on migrant smuggling in mid-2016.¹⁹⁵ This is partly explained by the more difficult and hence expensive northbound journey to Europe, which has meant that some women turn to sex work to finance their journeys to Agadez.¹⁹⁶ At the same time, the economic downturn that came with the blows to Niger's economy also meant that brothels had a smaller clientele. Sex workers interviewed in Agadez in March 2019 said they struggled to make the same amount of money per month as they did in 2016, which was meagre to start with; the reported price per encounter at the time of the interviews was FCFA 1 500–FCFA 2 000 (€2–€3).¹⁹⁷ Sex workers and victims of trafficking are mostly young Nigerian women, recruited by 'Madames' in southern Nigeria, who typically escort them, sometimes under false pretences, to urban hubs in Niger, chiefly Niamey and Agadez.¹⁹⁸ Once there, the women perform sex work to repay the transport fee to the Madame, which usually ranges between FCFA 1 million and FCFA 2 million (€1 500–€3 000).¹⁹⁹ Once their debt is repaid, they can continue northwards to Libya or Algeria through smuggling networks.

Smugglers mostly transport the women as part of mixed migration flows that include Nigeriens and labourers from West Africa more broadly, headed north for work in the gold mines. Women are often asked to dress like men and wear hoods during the journey to help disguise them.²⁰⁰ Other smugglers specialize in the trafficking of women and foreign migrants because of the opportunity for higher profit margins: transporting three Nigerian women can generate as much money as a vehicle full of local Nigerian migrants travelling for seasonal work.²⁰¹

Former drivers in the migration business and miners who formerly worked at Djado switched to other criminal activities, chiefly banditry and drug smuggling. Banditry increased in northern Niger, and is concentrated around the Tchibarakatene goldfield and the Salvador Pass, where the Libyan, Algerian and Nigerien borders meet, as a result of the increased security presence north of the French and Nigerien forces in Madama. The patrolling and surveillance activity taking place out of Madama has conditioned the landscape, confining the most high-value trafficking activity to the border areas with Algeria and Chad. This has also facilitated the targeting of traffickers by bandits.

An armed group operating around the Djado Plateau, which is reportedly mainly composed of former Chadian soldiers, has been systematically targeting convoys of artisanal miners and drug traffickers between the gold mines of Tchibarakatene and Djado.²⁰² The fighters are reported to be former Chadian peacekeepers who went rogue on their way back from a mission in Mali.²⁰³ Their presence in the Djado area has been noted since 2017. The group is strong enough to go largely unchallenged by Nigerien security forces and other bandits operating along the Niger–Libya corridor and have since offered their services to escort traffickers, while also carrying out attacks on traffickers who do not pay for the protection.

Two artisanal miners interviewed in Dirkou, who had been attacked and robbed of their weapons and satellite phones by this group while travelling to the Tchibarakatene goldfield described them as a well-armed and organized group of Chadian fighters in a convoy of up to 30 vehicles.²⁰⁴

Within this context of instability, artisanal miners travelling to and from gold mines in the region, including Djado, Tchibarakatene and Kouri Bougoudi (see the Chad section) need weapons to ensure their own protection – a dynamic that has fuelled demand for small arms. The strongest demand is for repurposed blank replicas of common 9 mm pistols, most of them trafficked through Libya.²⁰⁵ The pistols enter the market as blanks, which makes them less risky to transport even though they can be easily converted into regular firearms in the destination market.²⁰⁶

Of all the overlaps between smuggling and trafficking in Niger, possibly the most significant is the displacement of actors, particularly from the migration business, into cross-border smuggling and local distribution of prescription medication – especially tramadol.

Tramadol is at the heart of a surge in the consumption of such drugs in the Maghreb and Sahel since around 2017.²⁰⁷ This increase cannot be attributed to these recent events in northern Niger. Considered the drug of the poor, tramadol is widely used both as a cheap way to self-medicate pain – at least when used in doses below 100 mg – as well as a recreational drug when consumed in higher doses. The trend is so established that some manufacturers in India and Pakistan have started producing tablets in higher doses.²⁰⁸

Nonetheless, the displacement of actors into the smuggling of prescription drugs has significant public-health implications for both Niger and the subregion. The boom in consumption of this drug and similar prescription medication can be explained by multiple factors.



Workers at a gold mining site near Agadez

© Giacomo Zandonini

First, tramadol is easy to conceal and some smugglers consider it less risky to transport than arms or people.²⁰⁹ Rising prices have also made it a lucrative commodity: Nigerien smugglers acquire it in northern Nigeria, where it is widely available, and can sell it for up to 15 times the initial price in Sebha, southern Libya.²¹⁰

Critically, these drugs are easily acquired, in part because of the frequent fraudulent importation of high-dose versions passed off as a regular generic,²¹¹

but also because they are the staple trade of informal street pharmacies run by local traders who serve a real need for prescription medication that is otherwise too expensive or unavailable.

Notwithstanding Niger's growing consumption of tramadol, the country remains primarily a transit area for the drug, wedged as it is between the seaports in the Gulf of Guinea – Lagos (Nigeria), Cotonou (Benin), Lomé (Togo) and Tema (Ghana)²¹² – whence the drugs enter the region, and destination markets in Algeria, Libya, Mali and Chad.²¹³

In December 2017, Nigerien law enforcement saw a boost in capacity and awareness initiatives across the



region after the UNODC sounded the alarm on the tramadol epidemic.²¹⁴ The call was prompted by the September 2017 seizure of over 3 million tramadol tablets found in a pickup truck crossing Niger from Nigeria to northern Mali. The drugs were being passed off as humanitarian aid, packed in boxes bearing the United Nations logo.²¹⁵

The outcome of this seizure was increased drug busts over the past two years.²¹⁶ So far, this has had some impact on the supply of tramadol and made trafficking the drug a riskier business. However, it has also boosted profitability, making it even more attractive for smugglers.²¹⁷

More importantly perhaps, the ease with which the drug can be concealed has attracted increasing numbers of low-level actors into the business who are sometimes former migrant smugglers, although the skills required to participate in this industry are not very high. Any young Nigerien or Nigerian capable of driving a vehicle can participate in the business. Tramadol is commonly imported from Nigeria on motorbikes, each carrying about eight containers filled with tramadol. An interviewed Gendarmerie Commander reported that in some cases drivers were promised the motorbike as a reward once they reached Agadez.²¹⁸

The Nigerien government has recently tried to alleviate the effects of these changes that have destabilized the country's the economy of the north, most recently by means of a peace deal with a group representing Tebu interests in the north, the Mouvement pour la Justice et la Réhabilitation du Niger (MJRN).²¹⁹

Throughout 2018, this group was in negotiations with the government, eventually reaching a deal in November that resulted in a handover of fighters for amnesty in February. During the negotiations, the government had agreed to four key provisions: a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration plan for MJRN fighters and joint patrols with Nigerien forces; the release the vehicles of former Tebu migrant smugglers; the reopening of the Djado goldfield; and the creation of job opportunities in oil extraction around Agadem,

some 600 kilometres east of Agadez.²²⁰ On 20 April 2019, 53 vehicles confiscated during the government's 2017 crackdown were sold back to former *passeurs* (smugglers) in Agadez, and dozens more were sold in Bilma in August 2019.²²¹

The government's aim in politically engaging the Tebu and softening the crackdown on migrant smuggling is twofold. First, it seeks to increase its revenues from oil extraction by taming any opposition to the expansion of oil extraction in Agadem. Secondly, the co-opting of the MJRN may be a potential solution to the rampant problem of banditry in the north, and generally a way to alleviate tensions in the hope of avoiding a Tebu rebellion. Nevertheless, although these developments may be positive in terms of stability, they would increase the control of Tebu militias over smuggling activities.

Niger's south – a target for Nigerian organized criminals

Niger's southern region is predominantly Hausa and closely tied to that of northern Nigeria, and its economy relies on farming and trade with Nigerian cities, especially in Kano and Katsina states. In the past three years, rising insecurity on the Niger–Nigeria border has enabled the gradual expansion of organized-criminal activity and illicit flows, which have helped sustain criminal economies in northern Niger.

However, criminal economies in the south are distinct from those in the north, as they feed on southern Niger's fast-growing impoverished population.²²² In particular, human-trafficking networks have expanded their activities and extended their reach in southern rural communities, finding new child recruits for begging syndicates in urban areas across the region (more of which below).

Since the beginning of 2016, severe insecurity connected to armed groups and bandits in Zamfara, one of the Nigerian states bordering Maradi, spilled over to Niger, leading to an outbreak of violence that undermined trade along the historic Maradi–Katsina–Kano commercial corridor, but which intensified smuggling activities.

The violence in Zamfara had begun in 2013 and was caused by cross-border cattle rustling, which prompted the state governor, Abdul-Aziz Yari Abubakar, to create a self-defence militia, the Yan Sakai ('volunteers' in Hausa), to defend sedentary Hausa communities.²²³ ²²⁴ In turn, Fulani herders, who are often suspected of cattle rustling for resale in Niger and Nigeria, organized militias to defend themselves from the Yan Sakai. At least 2 000 people have been killed in Zamfara since 2011, with 683 victims in 2018 alone.^{225, 226} By the end of May 2019, the violence had displaced an estimated 20 000, who sought safety in Niger; many of them are settled in the Madarounfa department of the Maradi region.^{227, 228}

Despite a huge security operation launched to dismantle bases used by bandits and cattle rustlers inside forests in Madarounfa, which also led to the death of Buharin Daji, a notorious armed bandit, in March 2018, violence remained cyclical. The Yan Sakai continued to operate, and Buharin Daji's groups increased their funding by kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery.^{229, 230} The immense Rugu and Baban Rafi forests on the Maradi–Zamfara border, continue to give cover to criminal groups to hide hostages, goods and weapons.

The topography of this border region, combined with escalating insecurity, has helped the transit of licit and illicit commodities from Nigeria to Libya via Niger for armed groups and opportunistic Nigerien smugglers. Continual weapon seizures on both sides of the border confirm the significant levels of assault rifles and similar small arms in circulation.²³¹ Besides cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, security officials say they believe these groups may also have profited from artisanal gold mining, tramadol trafficking and fuel smuggling.^{232, 233}

Fuel smuggling between Niger and Nigeria has also grown into an extensive and largely tolerated business in southern Niger. A litre of petrol bought for FCFA 200 (€0.3) at the border with Nigeria can be sold for FCFA 240 (€0.36) in Maradi and other nearby cities, and even more as one travels further – the official price at fuel stations across Niger is FCFA 540 (€0.80). Smugglers can transport up to two hundred litres of fuel in containers strapped on motorbikes. Therefore, each journey can earn these small-scale smugglers around FCFA 68 000 (€103), almost equivalent to the average monthly income in Niger.²³⁴ The prevalence of this business also makes it more difficult to identify smugglers who traffic other illicit goods in barrels.

Overall, the huge network of rural roads criss-crossing the Niger–Nigeria border make commodity smuggling a fairly easy task despite the existing dangers and threats in place. Currently, the most active trafficking routes connect border areas with Gazaoua, Tchadaoua and Tessaoua, heading then to Aderbissinat and Agadez. Another route, entering from Dan Isa in Nigeria, passes through Guidan Roundji, Dakoro and Gadabedji, to reach Abalak or Inghall, crossing the main highway to Agadez.²³⁵

These routes are also used by traffickers of children for labour exploitation, a well-established though under-researched phenomenon that is intrinsically linked to the rampant poverty and high population density of southern Niger, and the fact that more than half of Niger's population are children.^{236, 237} Structured networks organize the transportation and housing of children from rural towns to work as beggars in urban

Fuel smuggling is facilitated by the corruption of customs officers in Nigeria and the incredible number of rural tracks transiting the border. The smuggling of fuel is so lucrative that with two journeys on a motorbike, you can earn enough money to buy a new motorbike.

SECURITY OFFICIAL INTERVIEWED IN MARADI
IN DECEMBER 2018

centres in Niger and in the greater region. Children are recruited in rural communities by women known as *tanties* (aunties) and are instructed to bring back a certain amount of money every day.

The most infamous cases of this type of trafficking in Niger come from sophisticated rings in the region of Zinder – and in particular the commune of Kantché – that transport children to Tamanrasset, Algeria.²³⁸ The practice has become so socially entrenched in Kantché's villages that some parents reportedly encourage children to join the groups, and this also means one less mouth to feed.

Some young aspiring migrant women from Kantché adopt the status of *tantie* before migrating to Algeria, asking families to take their children with them in order to earn more money. While they would earn about FCFA 50 000 (€75) a day begging on their own, these young women can triple their earnings if they do the begging with several children.²³⁹ Parents who are complicit in this process can benefit – in some cases, reportedly, they receive between 20 per cent and 33 per cent of the proceeds.²⁴⁰

In the past few years, this model has been increasingly replicated in other parts of southern Niger, including Maradi, where security officials have warned of the growing reach of trafficking networks. While the districts of Bassora and the green belt of Niamey are key destinations for children trafficked from Maradi, networks are increasingly operating further afield.

In early November 2018, a group of 80 children and teenagers travelling in two buses were held by customs at the Ghana–Ivory Coast border, along with two men

suspected of being their traffickers. The children were later found to have been from Maradi.²⁴¹

A nexus between drug traffickers and the state

Niger has long acted as a corridor for drug trafficking along trans-Saharan drug routes. It is a key transit country for the trafficking of cannabis resin from Morocco and cocaine transiting Mali to destination markets in Europe and the Middle East. The trafficking of these drugs has mainly been controlled by Moroccan cartels and Malian and Libyan drug traffickers, but in the past seven years, Nigerien traffickers have increased their stake in the illicit trade.²⁴²

Traffickers have developed several methods to escape the scrutiny of national and foreign security forces. Drugs are usually brought in on trucks transporting goods to key hubs in the Tillabéri, Tahoua, Niamey or Agadez regions before being transferred into smaller, faster vehicles for onwards transportation along routes to Libya. Drug traffickers use routes to Libya that are off the beaten path to avoid security forces and highway bandits, who are also known to target drug convoys.²⁴³ Along these routes, traffickers usually use new vehicles to reduce the risk of breakdowns in the desert, and will avoid making stops along the way until they reach their final destination.²⁴⁴

From Mali, a number of trafficking routes are used within the Gao-Sebha axis. The mountain of Tinkhatamen, 40 kilometres east of the Kidal circle in Mali, and a key base for the MNLA, is an essential corridor used by drug traffickers en route to Niger. As many as 20 pick ups doing drug runs (in many cases while transporting other goods) are believed to transit this zone every week during peak periods of activity.²⁴⁵

Routes transiting the Tillabéri region usually go through the towns of Balaya, Abalak, Sanam, Ezagh, the commune of Tachachit (17 kilometres north-west of the town of Tchén Tabaradei), Tassara and Tahoua. West of Tassa Takorat, the area of the valley of Instiguidat is highly used by drug traffickers

travelling north towards Arlit and the Aïr mountains.²⁴⁶ South-east of the Puits d'Anékar, the Inabagat area and the dunes of Tazarzait are also a key transit zone for weapons coming from Libya, as well as drugs destined for Libya. Finally, Tiguidit (50 kilometres south of Agadez), is a key meeting point for drug traffickers arriving from Morocco before the drugs are transferred to another trafficker for their onward journey.

Information gathered over the past two years from various sources across the region (see also the Mali and Libya sections) suggests that the flow of cocaine through the Mali–Niger–Libya corridor has contracted.²⁴⁷ While such a structural assessment must remain tentative at this stage, three main factors are reported to be at play: the surge in banditry in northern Niger, southern Libya and north-western Chad; the increasing presence of French and American military forces in northern and southern Niger, and northern Mali; and the multiplication of armed groups battling for control in northern Mali and southern Libya. These factors mean that trans-Saharan routes have become less reliable, and therefore less attractive for the transportation of high-value narcotics. This is not to say that smaller consignments bought and sold by regional players will necessarily be impacted; however, information collected from various points along the way suggests there is a contraction in the scale of the cocaine being moved across the desert. This ensures that high-level narcotics trafficking remains one of the most important and lucrative organized criminal activities in the region and is perhaps the one where state collusion is felt the most.²⁴⁸

The French intervention in Niger as part of Operation Barkhane since August 2014 has sought to target jihadi activities as well as those of



Exchange of hashish north of Agadez

traffickers on the Niger–Libya border. To do so, it has mobilized 4 500 military personnel deployed in Niger, Mali and Chad.²⁴⁹ In support of the Nigerien government and French forces in the region, the American intervention in Niger started with Operation Juniper Shield in February 2013, with the deployment of special forces, and armed and unarmed drones.²⁵⁰

The continued presence of French and American troops in the north (with bases in Madama, Dirkou, Agadez and Aguelal) and south (with bases in the Tillabéri and Diffa regions) has squeezed routes towards the centre of the country, giving strategic importance to certain urban nodes pushing traffickers to seek to gain strategic influence over these locations through corrupting members of the political class. They have also gained legitimacy among the local communities in these nodes, by offering people higher earnings through participation in the drug trade.

In addition to the areas listed above, the rural commune of Tassara, which lies at the centre of the

drug-trafficking corridor from Gao in Mali to Sebha in Libya, is reported to be the most impacted by the displacement of routes towards the centre of the country. Several farmers have reportedly abandoned farming and rent their land out for storage and preparing vehicles for northbound routes. Here, the drugs are repacked before the desert crossing into smaller, faster vehicles.²⁵¹

As a result of the area's growing geographical importance in the drug trade, local politicians, including members of the Nigerien National Assembly have vied for influence in the Tahoua and Tillabéri regions. This is largely believed to be a competition for oversight over key nodes along drug routes.²⁵² Member of Parliament Sidi Lamine, who represents the department of Tahoua, has been repeatedly accused in Nigerien media of being complicit in cocaine trafficking, allegedly using his farms in Abala as logistical hubs in the drug trade.²⁵³

The March 2019 drug bust of almost 800 kilograms of cocaine in Guinea-Bissau (mentioned above) also sheds

light on the Nigerien state's political involvement in this trade. Among the four people arrested in Guinea-Bissau was Sidi Ahmed Mohamed, reportedly a Nigerien originally from Tchénouba (some 250 kilometres south-west of Agadez), who is a member of the cabinet of Ousseini Tinni, President of the National Assembly of Niger.²⁵⁴

Although hard evidence of state involvement in organized crime networks is difficult to obtain, Niger's political elite and security apparatus are persistently suspected of being involved in the illicit economy. Three main facts suggest such widespread collusion. First, high-level politicians appear to enjoy strong ties with prominent businessmen and tribal leaders involved in the black economy. Secondly, the targeting of security responses in some areas over others suggests an instrumentalization of state agencies to neutralize competitors in the illicit economy. And, thirdly, there is pervasive corruption within the security forces, who are dependent on the illicit economy for survival given the low wages.^{255,256}

Although hard evidence of state involvement in organized crime networks is difficult to obtain, Niger's political elite and security apparatus are persistently suspected of being involved in the illicit economy.

Many have explained that President Mahamadou Issoufou's rise to power is in part due to the alliances he forged with actors with a foot in the illicit economy.²⁵⁷

This was a key grievance fuelling the most recent Tuareg rebellions that rocked the country from 1990 to 1995 and 2007 to 2009. One such alliance was with Mohamed Rhissa Ali, an influential Tuareg and owner of Niger's largest transportation company, Rimbo Transport Voyageurs. Ali was linked with an offshore account in the Seychelles in documents released through the

Panama Papers leak in 2016.²⁵⁸ Rimbo's meteoric expansion from a small local company servicing the Niamey–Agadez route with three buses to a national and eventually regional bus service in less than a decade is closely connected to the role the company played in the infrastructure of Niger's migration business before 2017.²⁵⁹

Similarly, selective enforcement of the law in the gold-mining industry and ancillary black economy activities is in part determined by the proximity of the political class to powerbrokers with interests in this industry. While the closure of the Djado goldfield (predominantly Tebu territory), was enforced in February 2017 (see above), the Tchibarakatene goldfield (predominantly Tuareg territory) continued its operations despite an official closure on 20 October 2014 – a move that was widely perceived within the Tebu community as a way for Niamey to compensate the Tuareg community for lost revenue following the criminalization of the migration industry.^{260,261}

The Tchibarakatene goldfield has been dominated by Saleh Ibrahim (known locally as 'Saleh Boss' and the 'Boss of Gold'), an influential figure in the Tuareg community and reportedly a former drug trafficker.²⁶² In late 2013, Ibrahim was one of the early prospectors in Tchibarakatene, starting out with just ten

people. He now employs more than 200 miners and labourers. Ibrahim claims he has a six-year concession from the government and, by his own assessment, competes with only around nine other ‘companies’ operating in Tchibarakatene.²⁶³ Saleh Boss’s influence and high levels of political protection have helped consolidate his position in Tchibarakatene. He was able to use his connections with other mine bosses to get a military convoy in 2016: ‘We had to push the government to obtain the military escort. Before the first convoy started (late in 2016) ... we went to visit [the zone commander] and we told him about our worries. We told him it was dangerous to go back to the main city with our money. He spoke with the government and later the convoy started,’ he said.

Saleh Boss’s political connections do not stop there. In 2012, he served as adviser to Prime Minister Brigi Rafini (also an ethnic Tuareg), and his influence has grown ever since.²⁶⁴ The former health minister until 2015 and now a Member of Parliament, Mano Aghali, a Tuareg originally from Timia, visited the Tchibarakatene goldfield in August 2018. Aghali is known for being the strongman of the ruling Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS)-Tarayya party in Agadez, and is married to a relative of Saleh Boss.²⁶⁵ The Sultan of Agadez also visited the mine on 8 January 2019.

Another alliance was formed with the deceased Arab Nigerien businessman Chérif Ould Abidine (aka ‘Chérif Cocaine’, or ‘the boss of Agadez’). Abidine, the owner of the 3STV transport company, was notoriously involved in the trafficking of drugs through his transport network.^{266,267} Abidine financed the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism-Tarayya party’s political campaigns and enjoyed a close relationship with President Issoufou, who reportedly attended his funeral, and Interior Minister Mohamed Bazoum, with whom he shared ties through the Arab community.²⁶⁸ Recent cases reinforce the suspicion that Nigerien private transport services are being used in regional drug trafficking. On 31 December 2018, eight suitcases containing more than 3 million diazepam D5 and other tablets were seized in a 3STV bus in Gaya on the Niger–Benin border.^{269,270} The bus was en route from Lomé, Togo, to Niamey.

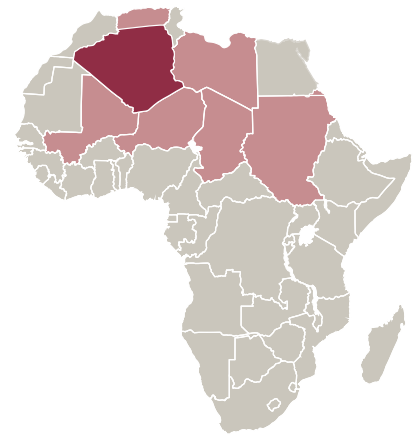
Both Ali and Abidine are regarded as barons of the ruling party’s 2011 and 2016 presidential campaigns. The dependence of Niger’s political elite on the illicit economy as a result of systemic institutional weakness suggests that state involvement in organized crime, whether direct or indirect, will remain a persistent challenge in coming years. The state will have to contend with international partners, local rebellion-prone groups and an underfunded security apparatus.

The foreign security presence in Niger has displaced smuggling routes but has failed to tackle organized crime at its core. In particular, the state’s ties with organized criminal networks has been overlooked, perhaps for fear of undermining counterterrorism objectives in the country. In truth, however, avoiding tackling organized crime and its pervasiveness in the state is not viable in the long term, as it creates the basis for cyclical conflict to be sustained.

A desert landscape with two SUVs parked on a sand dune under a blue sky with a geometric overlay. The SUVs are positioned in the lower center of the frame, facing away from the viewer. The sky is a clear, bright blue, and the desert floor is a vast, flat expanse of golden sand. A large, light-colored geometric shape, resembling a stylized 'A' or a series of overlapping lines, is overlaid on the sky and the top of the desert. The overall mood is one of isolation and exploration.

SOUTHERN ALGERIA

**HARD BORDERS IN A VOLATILE
NEIGHBOURHOOD**



Algeria, the largest country in Africa, has 6 500 kilometres of borders extending through a volatile neighbourhood containing Mali, Niger and Libya. Over the past two decades, the government's concern with instability at its southern borders has fuelled a hard security agenda pursued in the name of national security and stability.²⁷¹ This drive has had a major impact on the power and the operational capacity of criminal networks and fundamentally conditioned organized crime, not only within Algeria's borders, but also across the region.

Algeria's foreign policy towards its southern neighbours takes a differentiated approach. It is aggressive on territorial sovereignty but largely non-interventionist beyond national frontiers, at least in respect to direct military action. It mixes hard power with indirect support to communities living in the north of Mali and Niger, and is even tolerant of some black-market activity.²⁷²

The deeper context underpinning this stance stems from the prominent role of the military in Algeria, the traumatic experience of the bloody years between 1991 and 2002, the fight against terrorism, and the US war on terror from 2001 onwards.^{273, 274} The 2000 to 2014 oil boom enabled sustained increases in military spending (see figure 2), which, in turn, aligned the fight against terrorism and organized crime even more closely.²⁷⁵ While the army focused only on terrorist threats in the 1990s, it combined the combat of terrorism and organized crime the following decade in order to tackle the thriving kidnap-for-ransom economy, an industry where criminal and terrorist interests merged.

External shocks – the fall of Qaddafi in Libya in 2011 and the swell of jihadi activity in northern Mali in 2012 – also fuelled this expansion of militarized law enforcement in the south and east of Algeria. Starting in 2011, the military deployed more than 50 000 personnel, increased the number of border control points, built sand berms across large stretches of its southern borders, and expanded surveillance beyond its territory.²⁷⁶

Smugglers along the Algeria-Niger border

© Raouf Farrah

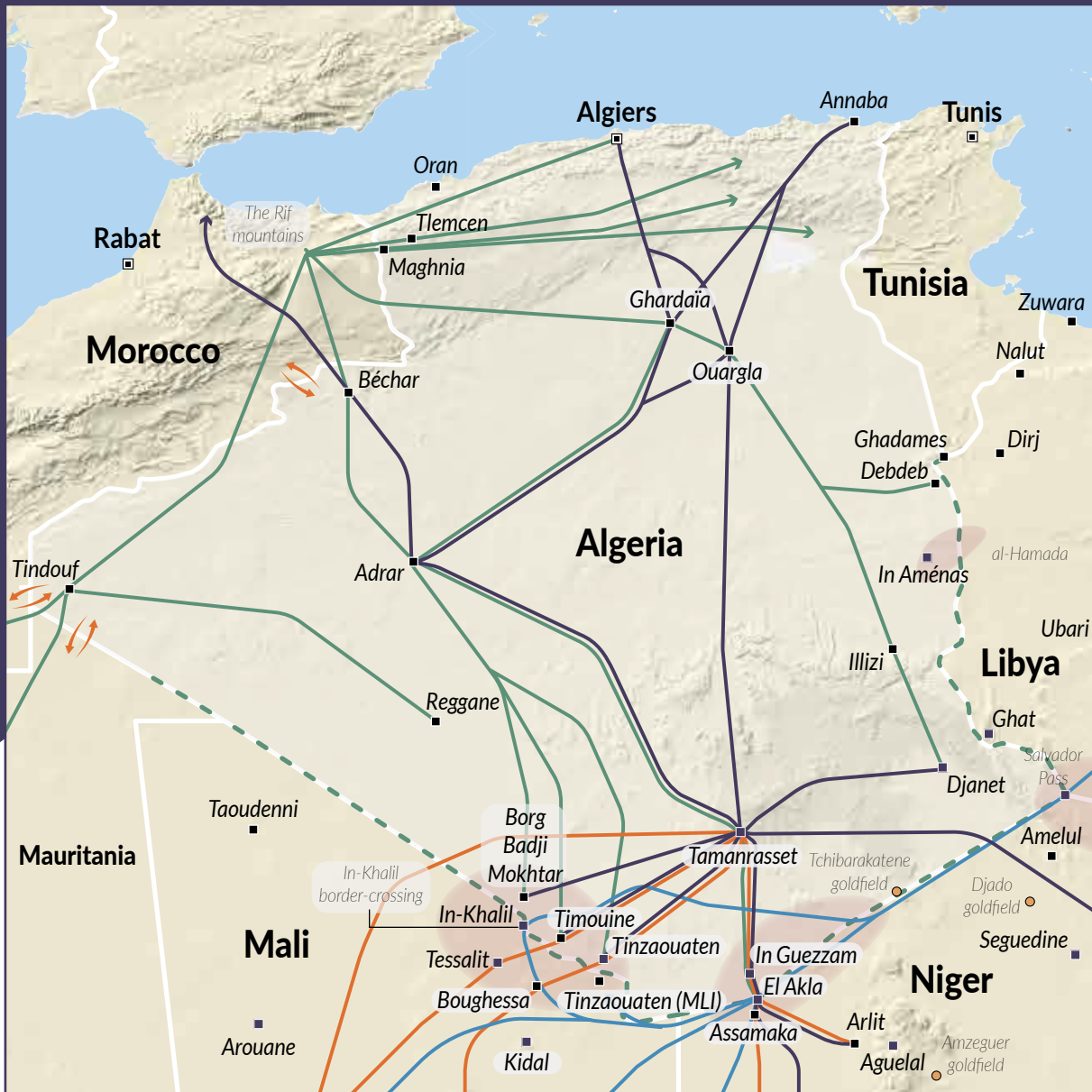


FIGURE 5: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Algeria

Algeria’s approach was also driven by a number of high-profile attacks conducted by terrorists who set up operational bases in Algeria’s borderlands following the rebellion years.²⁷⁷ The nexus between crime and terror is a reality in Algeria. But while coexistence is more of the norm than partnership, the Algerian security forces’ approach is increasingly corralling these actors into the same geographic spaces, at the periphery or beyond Algeria’s borders, while undermining the livelihood of low-level smugglers who, in some cases, are forced to turn to serious criminal activity to boost income and maintain a living.

Balancing act at the southern borders

The year 2013 saw an acceleration in Algeria’s militarization of its borderlands. In January 2013, terrorists from AQIM attacked the Tiguentourine gas plant in southwest Algeria, near the Libyan border. The ensuing hostage crisis resulted in the death

of more than 37 foreigners.²⁷⁸ Two AQIM armed groups, the Masked Brigade and Those Who Sign with Blood, spearheaded the attack under the command of infamous Algerian terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar.²⁷⁹ The experience was traumatic for the army and intelligence services, as it tarnished the image of the military institution and exposed Algeria's vulnerability, at least on the Libyan border. It also led to deep structural changes in both institutions.²⁸⁰

The authorities ramped up efforts against terrorism and organized crime, with a strong focus on controlling flows of people and goods across the south. The army increased border monitoring, using observation towers and drones, and reorganized border units into cross-sector detachments, which include the army, the gendarmerie, the border police and the customs. The borders with Niger and Mali were closed in 2013 – the Libyan border had been shut in 2011.

Intelligence gathering on terrorism and organized crime grew exponentially with the cultivation of informants in Libya, Niger and Mali. The army also enhanced its communication strategy with the circulation of reports and images of successful operations to highlight seizures and project efficiency and power.²⁸¹ Each year, the army presents a substantial and detailed balance sheet of arms seizures and arrests of terrorists and traffickers. In 2018 alone, the Algerian army claimed to have arrested 1 785 smugglers, 611 drug traffickers, 25 arms dealers and 25 terrorists, and to have killed 32 terrorists.²⁸² A year earlier, 1 881 smugglers, 19 arms traffickers and 40 terrorists had been arrested, and 91 killed.²⁸³

Some experts dispute the extent of this success, arguing that the Ministry of National Defence inflates the data to justify the outsized budget allocated to the military.²⁸⁴ Although it was not possible to conclusively assess the veracity of official figures, key informants across the region, including smugglers and middlemen themselves, say there is little doubt that raids, arrests and seizures have increased substantially.²⁸⁵

Despite this overall drive, however, illicit flows moving between Algeria's southern borderlands and the Sahel are still pervasive. For instance, while a 2014 study confirmed a significant contraction in informal border trade between 2011 and 2014, US\$740 000 worth of

goods were still being traded on the black market with northern Mali on a weekly basis in 2014.^{286, 287} Based on current information from the field, this informal trade appears to have eased somewhat, though the movement of flows is still reported to be well below the 2011 levels.²⁸⁸

The reason for this is twofold. In part, the fluidity of illicit flows stems from the sheer challenge of policing such immense and remote borders. But it is also the result of a deliberate strategy by Algerian authorities to offset their zero-tolerance approach on narcotics and arms trafficking with a looser stand on contraband and small-scale smuggling of food staples, fuels and, to an extent, human smuggling (see below).

There are also marked differences in the approach adopted in different border areas. The strictest approach is maintained at the Libyan border because that is where, according to the military, insecurity and threats are the highest.²⁸⁹ Tuareg groups straddle the border, all the way from the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset to the Fezzan town of Ubari in Libya. Algerian security forces assert aggressive control over this border and only traders who have connections with the Algerian military and intelligence services can cross with some measure of ease.²⁹⁰

On the Malian border, Algerian forces apply a tight control, particularly around Borg Badji Mokhtar, a major trafficking hub. On the Nigerien border, from the east of Ain Guezzam to Libya, the security forces' surveillance is high, particularly around the region near the gold mine of Tchibarakatene, in Niger. From the west of Ain Guezzam to the Malian border, the approach is less intense, as a limited number of businessmen are allowed to trade selected (largely legal) commodities and goods.

This differentiated approach stems from the understanding that informal trade plays a fundamental economic role in border areas. It is a way for the state to support border communities with strong transnational ties in Mali, Niger and Libya and compensate for their under-investment in the north of Mali and Niger. The approach reflects a reality on the ground that is more complex than the hard-line rhetoric publicly adopted by the authorities would suggest.²⁹¹

Small-scale actors hit hardest as crime forced to the margins

Like much of the neighbouring region, the criminal economy of southern Algeria builds on a livelihood and social ecosystem that has relatively innocuous small-scale contraband at its base. This is typically the domain of young men who use their driving and navigation skills, and cross-border connections, to profit from price differentials between Algeria, Niger and Mali. They secure modest livelihoods and many never become involved in drug trafficking, arms or migrant smuggling, though a minority may sporadically switch to these activities to boost revenue.

Despite not being targeted specifically, these low-level actors feel they are the hardest hit by the tightening of security and especially the sand berms built after 2013. One person interviewed for this research said: ‘We feel increasingly surrounded by the presence of the army. The business is risky in Mali and crossing the border is very tough. “El-contrà” [contraband] is our way of living and we don’t have any other option.’¹²⁹²

The sand berms, which run along most of the southern and eastern border, are especially disruptive to this illicit trade, even for experienced smugglers. The Algerian army has an ongoing maintenance programme that keeps increasing the height of the berms, which in the more remote areas can reach five

metres, making it virtually impossible to overcome. In practice, this means that some smugglers who used to travel 15 to 20 kilometres on dirt roads or established desert paths must now make long desert treks of 100 kilometres through remote areas. For such smugglers, whose profit margin is slim, the cost implications can be devastating.

Many adapted to this new reality by raising their prices where they can. But they also increasingly dip into more serious criminal activity at hubs on the edges of Algerian territory or beyond the country’s borders altogether.

The most dramatic example of this change concerns activity between Algeria and Mali through the Borg Badji Mokhtar–In Khalil corridor, on the Algeria–Mali border. A strategic area for various illicit flows, the district of Borg Badji Mokhtar has seen some of the most intense activity by the Algerian military, which surrounded the eponymous town with a berm and greatly increased surveillance and patrolling after 2013. Over the past three years, units of the 6th Military Region – active in southern Algeria – discovered more than 100 arms caches and seized more than 300 hundred submachine guns, rifles, pistols and rockets around Borg Badji Mokhtar. The

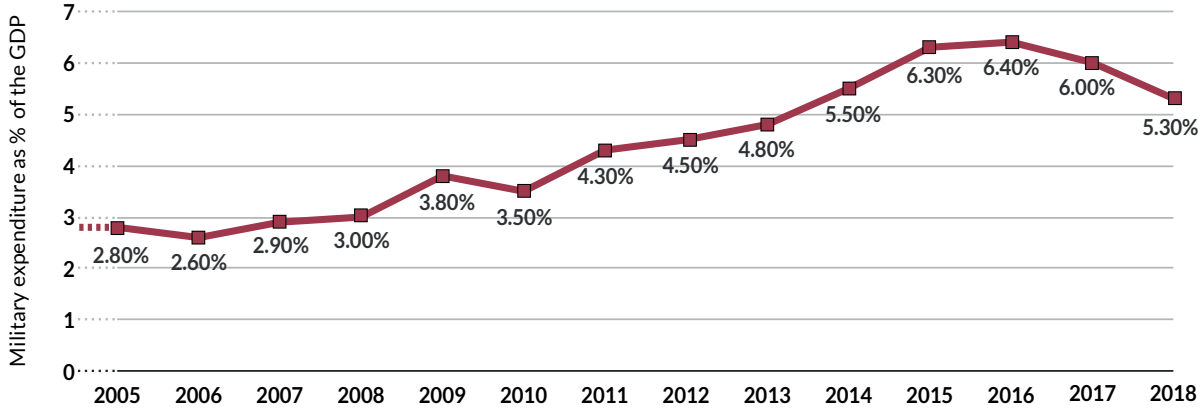


FIGURE 6: Algeria’s military expenditure, 2005–2018

heavy military action displaced smuggling flows, scattering them across an area of some 400 kilometres of difficult desert crossings and remote villages.

Another effect of the displacement of trafficking routes is the development of smuggling sites such as el-Hassi, close to the Niger–Mali–Algeria border, and more importantly, el-Akla, a market about 15 kilometres south-east of the official Algeria–Niger border point at Ain Guezzam. El-Hassi, is nothing more than a rendezvous point in the middle of the desert. It is outside of the area of focus of Algerian border forces but is also considered a dangerous zone, which makes it normally inaccessible to low-level smugglers.

El-Akla is a more established, open-air market that attracts a more diverse profile of traffickers.²⁹³ This collection of improvised sheet-metal stores, located in a no-man’s-land between Algeria and Niger, is used as a hub by traders, smugglers and traffickers.

In recent years, El-Akla has increasingly attracted trade in narcotics and arms. However, the area is also attractive to small-scale smugglers because they can travel to and from the site legally. They take advantage of special authorizations called ‘*passe-avants*’, which allow people to send basic staples to their families. Smugglers use a *passe-avant* to legally cross the official border crossing at Ain Guezzam and then proceed to el-Akla to trade their goods. Ostensibly, the site is a market for subsidized goods, but, in reality, narcotics and arms are also traded there. As a local trader said, ‘Everything is for sale in el-Akla ... You just need to ask what you are looking for. Within minutes, we can get what you need ... From a couscous dish to arms and drugs – we cater for every taste.’²⁹⁴

Although this market has existed since the beginning of the 2000s, it benefited greatly from the decline in trafficking along the Borg Badji Mokhtar–In-Khalil corridor (see below) and Ain Guezzam’s rapid development on the Algeria–Niger border.

This displacement of organized crime to the borders and beyond is very much the outcome sought by Algerian authorities: ‘What is happening in el-Akla is

not our concern. This is officially Nigerien territory. We know what is going on there ... but we don’t intervene beyond our borders.’²⁹⁵

Algerian authorities consider arms trafficking – arms flow from the south-east of Libya to the north of Mali, and are sold to various armed groups – to be the criminal activity that poses the biggest threat to national security. They have reported significant arms seizures, particularly in the borderlands of the southern provinces of Tamanrasset, Illizi and Adrar.^{296,297}

Algerian authorities consider arms trafficking to be the criminal activity that poses the biggest threat to national security.

As a result, weapons and ammunition are increasingly moving through the perimeters of Algeria’s southern territory – the border with Fezzan (Libya), the north of Niger and Mali. They are trafficked along two corridors: the first runs from the south-west of Libya via the Salvador Pass – a well-known remote crossing at the border between Niger, Libya and Algeria. Traffickers then typically drive down the Nigerien side of the Niger-Algeria border to reach northern Mali.

The second corridor runs south from the Libyan border city of Ghat before crossing towards Tassili N’Ajjer and the mountainous Hoggar Desert, then to Borg Badji Mokhtar to end up in Mali. The second route is shorter, but is less used because of tighter security.^{298,299}

Similarly, cannabis trafficking, from the north-west towards the rest of the country, has also been undergoing changes in the wake of ramped-up pressure from Algerian law enforcement. In 2018, the army seized 25 tonnes of hashish and dismantled two major cannabis trafficking networks operating in the southern provinces of Adrar and Tamanrasset. In the first quarter of 2019, more than 8.5 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized in Algerian territory,



The El Akla open-air market, about 15 kilometres south-east of the official Algeria–Niger border point at Ain Guezzam, June 2018. © Raouf Farrah

an increase of more than 18 per cent over the same period in 2018.³⁰⁰

In southern Algeria, cannabis traffickers use well-established corridors along the west region going from Maghnia (northwest) to Adrar and Reggane via Béchar until Tamanrasset and then Djanet on the Libyan border. Information gathered in the region as well as in Ghat and Ubari in south-western Libya suggests that only small volumes of hashish are exported to Libya through southern Algeria, especially when compared to the flows coming in through the south-west border with Niger (the Mali-Niger-Libya corridor).³⁰¹ Nonetheless, there is a thriving local market in the south of Algeria where lesser-quality hashish feeds local markets, particularly in Adrar, Tamanrasset, and Illizi.

Hashish trafficking networks are among the most well-established organized criminal actors in Algeria.

Hashish trafficking networks are among the most well-established organized criminal actors in Algeria. The biggest players are mostly dominant in the north-west where they enjoy long-standing relationships with

Moroccan counterparts in the Rif Mountains – in the provinces of Chefchaouen, Al Hoceima and Taunate – where some of the world’s largest cannabis production is located.³⁰²

A high-ranking officer in the customs authority estimates that more than one-fifth of Moroccan cannabis resin (around 150 tonnes a year) is consumed or transits through Algerian territory.³⁰³ Traffickers introduce cannabis cultivated in northern Morocco principally through cities in the border provinces of Tlemcen and Oran; it is then distributed across the country. Quality cannabis is sold in the north but also transits through the country and is re-exported to Tunisia and Libya through the town of Tébessa (on the Tunisian border) and the remote commune of El Borma, from where hashish is trafficked into the south of Tunisia or through Libya’s western border around the city of Ghadames. Hashish entering from this area feeds Libya’s local market.³⁰⁴

As with other illicit economies, hashish trafficking in the south has been impacted by Algeria’s securitization efforts. However, the real drivers of this industry, the drug lords based in the north who control the import and distribution networks within Algeria, are still active, while the demand for hashish is high and stable.^{305, 306}

Terrorists and criminal networks pushed into the same spaces

Securitization has pushed not only high-end criminals beyond Algeria's borders, but also terrorists. In fact, these two sets of actors – high-end smugglers and violent extremists – increasingly operate in the same space beyond Algerian territory: the borderlands of northern Mali, northern Niger and south-western Libya.

AQIM's leadership was officially established in northern Mali in 2006, but criminals and terrorists displaced from Algeria now occupy strategic routes along the arch stretching from Taoudenni (Mali) to Ménaka (Mali) to northern Niger and up to Sebha and Ghat (Libya).³⁰⁷ As seen earlier, arms trafficking, which formed part of what would have been considered 'Algerian trade' in the past, is now transiting through the Salvador Pass, a major node of activity for AQIM and Islamic State militants, despite the ongoing active surveillance and counterterrorism action conducted by the French and US military.^{308,309}

One of the most notorious Algerian drug lords, Abdellah Belakhal, sought refuge in southern Libya, where he remotely manages his trafficking activities. In September 2016, Belakhal took custody of three Western contractors (two Italians and one Canadian) near Ghat, on the Algerian border.³¹⁰ The kidnapping is interesting, in that the end goal was not a ransom but to extract concessions from the Algerian authorities. Belakhal is reportedly a billionaire and not believed to be personally involved in jihadi activity, but members

of his family are known affiliates with AQIM. Belakhal was seeking to trade the captives for the release of his brother, who was imprisoned in 2016 after being found guilty of involvement in a terrorist attack on the Kherchba gas plant – Algeria's third-biggest gas field in March 2016.³¹¹

Belakhal had actually acquired the captives from an armed group who had carried out the abduction, banking on the idea that Algeria would want to play the role of mediator in their release. In the end, the armed group of the original abductors handed themselves over to Algerian authorities in order to benefit from the amnesty still in place given to terrorists under the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation.^{312,313} Their surrender allowed an opaque arrangement for their release.³¹⁴

This case is a compelling example of the balloon effect that Algeria's securitization is having in an area where the state and law and order are weak or absent. Although Belakhal has been pushed beyond Algeria's territory, he continues to conduct his business from the other side of the border. This is an area that requires more research. However, by pushing terrorists and criminals into shared spaces and presenting them with the same challenges, Algeria's security drive risks merely displacing into neighbouring territories the feared crime-terror nexus it is trying to undermine.

Human smuggling and trafficking buck the regional trend

One area of criminal activity that has bucked a regional trend and seen an expansion over recent years has been human smuggling and ancillary monetization of migrants. There are no reliable official statistics that measure irregular migratory flows to Algeria. However, extensive fieldwork in Tamanrasset and monitoring at key nodes in Gao and Kidal in Mali and in Agadez, Niger, over 2018 and 2019 indicate that Algeria has been on the main receiving end of some of the displacement of migratory flows from Niger and Libya (see the Niger and Libya sections).

Southern Algeria has long been a major crossroads for northbound sub-Saharan migrants. However, the post-2011 securitization drive undermined the importance of historic hubs like Tamanrasset, Tinzaouaten and Borg Badji Mokhtar.³¹⁵ This is not so much because Algerian security forces had aggressively targeted human smuggling in the south than because the exponential growth of the migration business in Niger, Libya and Sudan created a snowball effect that drew in more migrants along the routes through Niger and Libya and (for migrants headed for Europe) across the Central Mediterranean.³¹⁶

With the reversal of this process and the collapse of smuggling and trafficking industries in the north of Niger and the south of Libya between 2016 and 2018 (see Niger, Libya and Sudan), Algeria started regaining importance as a gateway to neighbouring Morocco and Europe as well as a destination in its own right. In fact, the majority of migrants travelling to Algeria typically seek employment in the country itself, in southern hubs like Tamanrasset, Adrar and Ourgla, or northern cities, like Algiers and Oran.

The Algerian League of Human Rights and Amnesty International estimate that at least 100 000 irregular migrants live in Algeria.

The Algerian League of Human Rights and Amnesty International estimate that at least 100 000 irregular migrants live in Algeria, more than a quarter of them in the southern provinces.³¹⁷ However, interviews with security forces suggest that Algerian authorities believe this number is much higher, in spite of massive waves of deportation to Niger and Mali since 2014.³¹⁸ Human smuggling is not considered a high priority by southern border forces, even though it is not supported informally in the way that the smuggling of subsidized goods is. Nonetheless, border guards are more open to enter into collusive relations with human smugglers than they are with other forms of trafficking, as evidenced by sustained movement at or near official border crossings on both the Malian and Nigerien borders.³¹⁹

Although there are multiple routes, Gao and Agadez have been the two primary hubs feeding into the Algerian human smuggling systems in the south. Over recent years, smugglers have been avoiding these zones, particularly Agadez, focusing on less monitored nearby towns and villages, while still targeting the same crossing points around In-Khalil (Mali) and Ain Guezzam (Niger). Notwithstanding, there has also been increasing experimentation with desert routes away from these border crossings as a reaction

to tighter control; however, this activity is still not significant compared to reported movement close to official crossing points.

This stance at the southern borders contrasts sharply with the official position adopted by Algeria in respect to irregular migration within the country, especially in the north. Since 2016, Algerian law-enforcement authorities, particularly in the north, have conducted an aggressive deportation campaign, rounding up irregular migrants in Algiers, Oran and other coastal cities and expelling them at two border points (Ain Guezzam and Borg Badji Mokhtar) with Niger and Mali.³²⁰ In some cases, migrants are simply dropped at a remote area at the border and forced to walk through desert areas to the nearest town on the other side.³²¹ Deportations to Mali appear to have waned significantly since August 2018, while Nigerien nationals are driven to Assamaka by Algerian authorities in accordance with a deal struck between Algiers and Niamey in 2014.³²²

Migrants who have been through this process recount how their homes were broken into in the middle of the night by armed forces directly or indirectly affiliated with the Algerian state.³²³ During these raids, people are rarely allowed to gather their valuables; in some cases, they are not even able to grab their phones or get dressed. Some deportees had been previously working in Algeria for years.³²⁴

The contrast evident in this two-faced policy became sharper under the former Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, who promised a harder stand on migration, fearing what is referred to in Algeria as the '*appel d'air*' – the suction of the flows previously going to Libya via Niger.³²⁵ The former government's primary goal was to counter the perception that Algeria is a migrant-friendly destination. This policy is perhaps the best example of the balancing act Algiers is trying to achieve between pursuing its security objectives without trampling too heavily on the socio-economic interests of border communities.

However, while human smuggling remains an activity that is primarily the domain of small-level smugglers

operating as individual actors or in small groups, the aggressive messaging, and the targeting of migrants by Algerian authorities, coupled with a level of permissiveness at the southern borders, are conducive to the proliferation of forms of serious criminal activity that exploit migrants. In fact, migrants travelling through Algeria report cases of systematic extortion by law-enforcement officials during deportation raids.³²⁶ Similarly, the deportation campaigns have exposed irregular migrants to greater risk of labour exploitation.

There are other worrying trends that concern trafficking. The south of Algeria, and particularly Tamanrasset, has established itself as a destination for the trafficking of women and children from Niger, particularly from the region of Zinder, to beg for money in the streets.^{327,328} The victims are normally recruited from the community and, in the case of children, from madrasas (schools for Islamic instruction). In Tamanrasset, Nigeriens from Zinder and other sub-Saharanans dominate the human trafficking market. They transport women and children on a large scale from southern to northern Niger and then cross the border around Ain Guezzam by taking clandestine routes during night-time. When women and children arrive in Tamanrasset, they are accommodated in slum conditions in the poorest neighbourhoods of the city, namely Gat El Oued and Matanatalat.

Many women victims of trafficking in Algeria are subjected to forced labour because they are not able to repay their travel debt bondage. Some are reported as victims of sexual exploitation.³²⁹ Thirty-three cases of human trafficking were detected in 2018; the majority of the victims are foreigners. Tamanrasset and Algiers are the main sites where victims were identified.³³⁰ During the fieldwork conducted in Tamanrasset, law enforcement and migrants reported that new actors, mainly Nigerian traffickers, are taking part

in this industry. Nigerian networks are known to have strong transnational ties across West Africa and Europe. But their presence in Algeria is new and they are watched by the law-enforcement authorities. In Tamanrasset, for instance, a special police unit, the Research and Intervention Bureau (Bureau de Recherche et d'Intervention) has conducted several investigations and many raids on human-trafficking networks in the south.

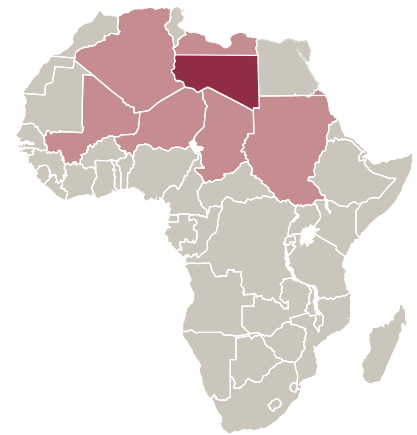
Algeria's hard border and tough-on-crime policy are displacing the problem of organized crime into the region.

Algeria faces serious security challenges related to organized crime and terrorist threats. For Algiers, this is a major source of concern, and one that requires a robust and militarized response. However, the approach taken by the Algerian security forces has two problematic consequences. First, the hard stance taken prioritizes tough anti-crime and counterterrorism responses over a well-thought-out socio-economic policy agenda. Although the government launched its first plan for the development of borderlands in October 2018, which aims to provide better socio-economic opportunities and services to borderland communities, the plan has not yet been implemented.³³¹ Secondly, Algeria's hard border and tough-on-crime policy are displacing the problem of organized crime into the region, towards the weak and conflict-affected countries of the region. Both of these elements may have lent themselves to short-term gains for Algeria, but they do nothing to help address the roots of organized criminal activity in the long term – if anything, quite the contrary.



SOUTHERN LIBYA

ORGANIZED CRIME IN A
PREDATORY ECONOMY



The Libyan revolution of 2011 was a pivotal point for the development of organized crime in the country and its southern neighbourhood. High-level criminal activity has been in flux ever since the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, as the revolution opened up opportunities that spawned new criminal industries, like kidnapping for ransom, for instance, which was virtually unheard of in the country before 2011. It also created the conditions for the expansion of established criminal markets, like drug trafficking and human smuggling, both of which grew beyond levels Libya had ever experienced before. Nonetheless, contrary to popular perception, this process has been far from linear and expansion was often accompanied by marked contractions as well as a continuous shifting of players and their stake in the criminal economy. This has been especially the case in the Libyan south, which is the focus of this research.

The south of Libya is not a singular region, it is made up of the Fezzan – which is a region in its own right, representing more than a third of the country’s territory – and greater Kufra in the south-east, which forms part of the country’s eastern region, the Cyrenaica. Together, they share a desert border of more than 3 000 kilometres with Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt, and make up almost a million square kilometres in size, with a population of just 600 000; making it one of the least populated places on earth.

The lack of population density is as telling of the harsh climatic environment of these Saharan borderlands as it is of the economic one. This was true before the revolution and has become more so eight years later. At the time of writing, the country remains divided between two power blocks: Tripoli’s Government of National Accord (GNA), which is the internationally recognized executive, and consequently counts within its orbit the Central Bank of Libya and the National Oil Corporation; and the Interim Government, based in the eastern city of Bayda, which is backed up by the Tobruk parliament, both dominated by the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. In the tussle between these two coastal power centres, the south has been especially neglected, especially the Fezzan.

A local Tuareg militia patrols the desert south of the Sharara oilfield, Ubari, January 2019.

© Mark Micallef



FIGURE 7: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Libya



In this context, cross-border trade continues to represent one of the few consistent livelihood avenues available to communities living in the south. In fact, as with the rest of the greater region, the development of organized crime in southern Libya owes its genesis to the overlap with the historic trans-Saharan trade. Trade routes, which for centuries gave life to oases and towns that connected the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa with the Maghreb, Europe and the Middle East, in the 1970s and 80s also provided foundational logistical infrastructure for the large-scale movement of contraband, people, narcotics and various other illicit goods.

A substantial part of this economy was tolerated, even encouraged by the regime, particularly during the years in which Libya was placed under an air embargo imposed by the UN Security Council between 1992 and 1999.³³² Over the years, this resulted in a hierarchical criminal ecosystem, differentiated by the value of different trafficking activities, and the actors and social groups that took part in them.

The regime's feared *Mukhabarat* (secret services) essentially sat on top of this system, co-opting and manipulating access to the black economy as a way to control tribes and

families, while policing the elements that were considered a threat (weapons trafficking and revenue-generation by groups considered inimical to the state). Compliant tribes and criminal actors were allowed to operate illicit flows in return for their loyalty, while those who were not (or were considered not to be loyal enough) were denied access. The involvement of the secret services is important because it was key to the maintenance of the system. In fact, privileged criminal actors and members of the community were often recruited as assets, spying on competitors and feeding into the regime's intelligence, which, in turn, helped enhance control.³³³

While the Libyan revolution shattered the state's control of the black economy, the system was far from obliterated.

This is not unique to Libya. Examples where the state tolerates a level of illicit activity to pacify and/or control restive border communities can be found all over the Maghreb-Sahel.³³⁴ However, the intensity with which the Qaddafi regime pitted tribes against one another to establish dominance remains unparalleled and is arguably the most pernicious legacy of his regime.

This is especially relevant to the analysis of organized-crime dynamics in the context of Libya's post-revolution context. In fact, while the Libyan revolution shattered the state's control of the black economy, the system was far from obliterated. With power decentralized into the hands of a plethora of militias, which took control of the country from the Libyan regime, control of the black economy was similarly fragmented into the hands of multiple actors.³³⁵ These armed factions sought to replicate Qaddafi's model (with varying degrees of success) by regulating the informal economy in the territory they control. The key difference is that while, under Qaddafi, the state was primarily interested in the control provided by the patronage of the black economy, taxing and protecting the criminal economy is a major revenue-generating activity for Libya's militias, and a fundamental aspect of the predation economy that characterizes, the west, east and south of the country today.³³⁶

The changing face of the arms trade

The single most significant change brought about by the revolution in respect to the reordering of organized crime in southern Libya is without question the proliferation of arms from the regime's vast stockpiles.³³⁷ While this also holds true for the rest of Libya, the southern border has been major transit zone for the transfer of weapons.

Between 2012 and 2015, arms trafficking developed into a significant top-tier criminal market in its own right, particularly along the southern and eastern borders.³³⁸ Sebha (capital of the Fezzan) and Brak al-Shaati, which are dominated by traffickers from the Arab tribes (principally the Awlad Suleiman and Magarha), as well as the Tuareg-dominated areas of Ubari and Ghat, were key regional hubs for the proliferation of the most significant flow of arms towards Mali via Algeria and Niger.^{339, 340}

Since then, a surge in demand for infantry weapons in the country following the outbreak of the civil war in 2014, along with targeted surveillance and seizures in Mali, Niger and Chad supported by Western states (chiefly France and the US), has contained this outflow to the point that demand within Libya now outstrips supply.

At the moment, I can tell you from first-hand experience, that there are buyers with cash in hand for Kornets and Milans (European-made alternatives) and they cannot find any. If you can source them, they now go for LYD 30 000 (€6 000) or more per rocket and LYD 100 000 to LYD 150 000 (€20 000–€30 000) for the launcher. In 2012, you used to be able to buy them for nothing.

MILITIA OPERATIONS ROOM MEMBER, LOCATION WITHHELD, MARCH 2019

The shortage of heavy weapons is significant and has been impacting battle dynamics in the country. In February 2019, one of the factors that contributed to the early retreat of Tebu militias resisting the advance of the LNA between the towns of Ghaduwa and Um al-Aranib, was the superior firepower of the LNA's infantry. LNA fighters coupled the use of Komet-type guided missiles with forward units of Sudanese mercenaries advancing in armoured vehicles, with which they were able to push back Tebu fighters while staying well away from their line of fire.³⁴¹

In recent years, these changes in supply and demand have led to a reorganization of this industry, which saw a change in the profile of the arms traffickers involved and their modus operandi. In fact, the short but intense and highly profitable stint of heavy international arms sales, created – or in some cases reinforced – the position of polycriminal actors who leveraged access to stockpiles (through their own military involvement in the revolution or proximity to military players) against a greater share in other lucrative activities. 'Some of the big Tuareg smugglers who were involved in sales of the rocket launchers for aircraft (portable surface-to-air rocket launchers) do not deal with weapons any more because it doesn't pay, they do drugs instead ... but only the big stuff'.³⁴²

Trade in heavy weapons still exists but it is much more limited and irregular; more-over, the lion's share of this high-level trade is now located in Tripoli, Zintan and Misrata.³⁴³ The bulk of heavy weapons movement in Libya currently relates mostly to breaches of the arms embargo by foreign states and intermediaries arming different factions in the armed conflict. Since the outbreak of war in Tripoli after the LNA advance on the capital on 4 April 2019 (sanctioned by the Parliament seated in Tobruk), these breaches by different states are no longer clandestine.³⁴⁴ Again, the LNA and Misrati forces have been major recipients of this materiel, both recently and over past years.

Some of this materiel is diverted to affiliated armed groups and then sold into the market. However, this activity is limited. In the present climate of scarcity, there is reluctance to let go of heavy weapons, especially as it could end up in the hands of hostile forces.³⁴⁵ The bulk of what is now Libya's weapons-trafficking business is made of the supply of small arms and ammunition to Libyan and regional markets.³⁴⁶ Some of this materiel is from pre-revolution stocks but new arms are also being trafficked into the country on maritime routes into ports such as al-Khoms and Misrata, and then smuggled to the southern borders overland.³⁴⁷ Weapons, and especially ammunition, are also imported through the southern borders, principally from Sudan's stockpiles.³⁴⁸

Imported weapons feed local dealers, who often deliver to clients on call or alternatively into discreet local markets, such as Ubari's so-called NATO Camp – a bazaar area where legitimate shops sell clothing and foodstuffs trade alongside dealers selling weapons, drugs and other illicit goods.³⁴⁹ (Similar markets can be found across the region: see also El-Akla, Algeria section). Beyond the borders, there has been a booming trade of handguns, pump-action shotguns and AK-pattern rifles, feeding a demand for personal protection weapons among gold miners, for instance, in Libya, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Mali.³⁵⁰ As mentioned, some of this market is catered for through blank-firing weapons that are converted to take live ammunition.

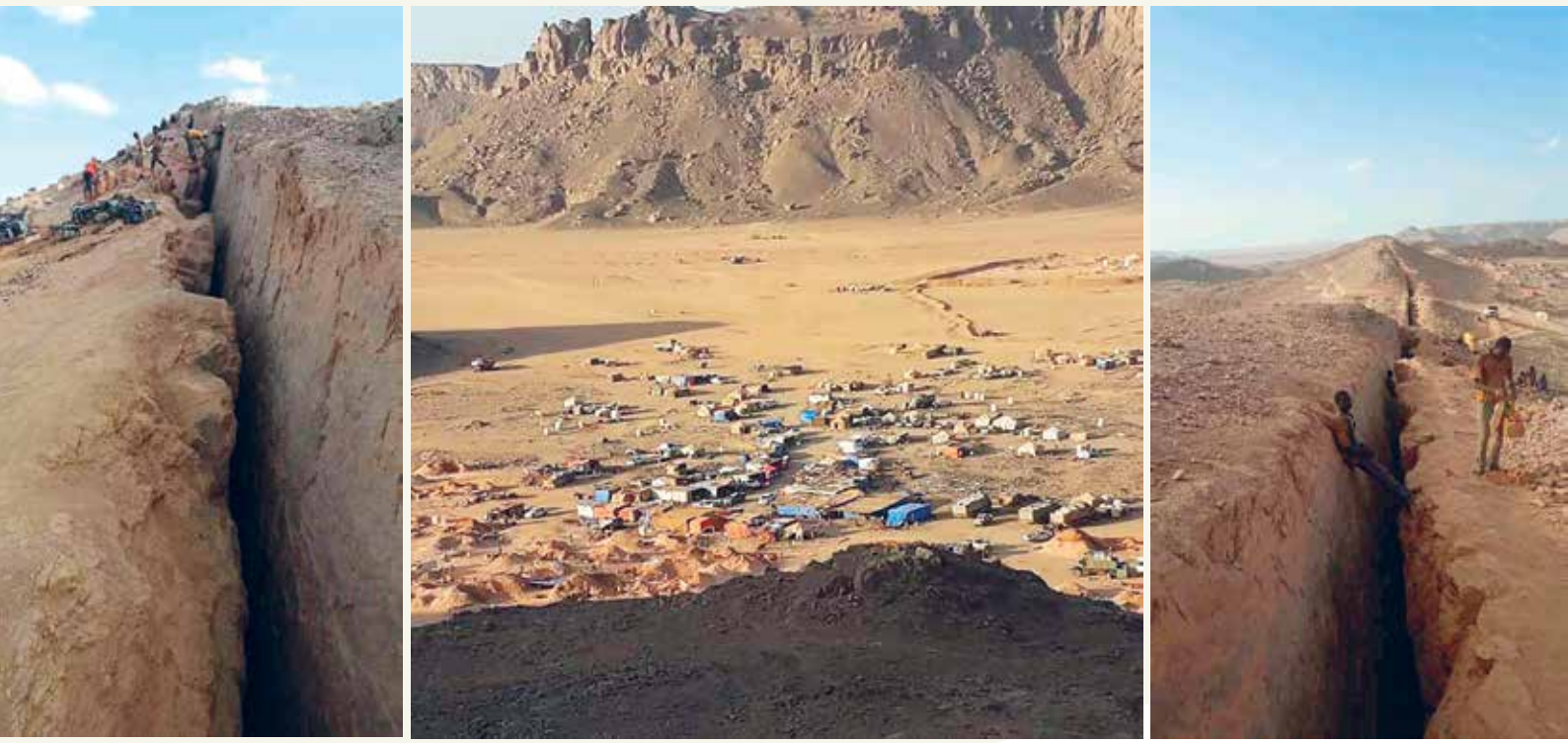
This trade is less lucrative than large-scale transfers of weapons, which were typical of the immediate post-revolution years. It is also less of a top-level security threat. However, it is more widespread and corrosive at community level, as it overlaps considerably with other legitimate and illicit trade. Conversely, high-level weapons trafficking in the immediate post-revolution years was a top-tier criminal activity reserved only for highly networked players with significant capital, which channelled large arms consignments to armed groups across the region.

Southern Libya as incubator of mercenary and bandit groups

Beyond the direct impact of the arms trade, the lasting effect of weapons on the region has been in the way this fed into the establishment of a protection economy around criminal activity, which served to expand the capacity of criminal operatives exponentially.

The involvement of armed groups in the black economy varies. Large-scale armed actors, such as Misrata's Third Force (GNA-aligned) and the LNA have attempted to perform a broad governing function that, in some cases brings armed groups under their fold nominally while allowing them to retain a degree of autonomy to run their own affairs. The more common form of protection sees militias tied to specific communities perform a law-enforcement function – such as securing roads, checkpoints and strategic infrastructure (oil facilities, airports, power plants etc) while pursuing funding from state or private-sector entities in their territory – at times through extortion, but also through regulation of illicit activity. Money is made through the taxation of both the formal and informal economy. However, militias that fall within this category also typically perform real law enforcement, clamping down on activities considered unacceptable by their constituencies or the militia leadership. Another form relates to armed groups engaged more directly in trafficking, kidnap-for-ransom and banditry.

Although banditry is a long-established activity in the region, it expanded exponentially after 2011, in part as a result of the unique strategic opportunity created by the collapse of security in the Libyan desert areas. Typically, militias engaged in banditry gather intelligence on trafficking routes with the aim of raiding lucrative flows, with the booty often being sold back to the traffickers it was stolen from in the first place. In many cases, these raids are a prelude to longer-term relationships, where traffickers



Kilinje gold mine, southern Libya

are forced to hire the bandits harassing them to protect passage along routes extending from Mali to Egypt.

In southern Libya especially, the growth in banditry (which includes highway raids, carjacking and kidnapping) has been compounded by the presence of several foreign armed and rebel groups (Chadian, Sudanese and Nigerien) that set up outposts from where they have been able to take part in the Libyan predation economy, sometimes cornering elements of it. There is a concentration of these groups in the Tebu-dominated areas – between the deep southern towns of Um al-Aranib, Murzuq and Qatrun (mostly Nigerien and Chadian militias) in the Fezzan to areas west of the al-Sara airfield, closer to Kufra, but also north of these points along the route between Tazirbu and Zilla, as well as in Jufra.³⁵¹

In some cases, petty banditry and similar criminal activity, which tend to create anger among local communities, would not necessarily be sanctioned by the leadership of the militias, especially in the case of committed political rebel groups with hierarchical structures, such as the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM), the Justice and Equality Movement (Sudan), the Chadian Union of Resistance Forces (UFR: Union des Forces de la Résistance) and the Council of Military Command for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR: Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République). However, the leadership would allow gangs within their group to self-finance themselves through whatever activity is available to them, as a means to keep them within their fold and be able to mobilize them when they are needed.³⁵²

Chadian and Sudanese groups have also been deeply involved in mercenary work in Libya (employed mostly by the LNA and Misrata). The connection between this activity and organized crime is highly relevant in the Libyan context both from the perspective of the actors recruited as guns for hire (foreigners) and from that of

the ones acting as agents (mostly Libyans working with foreign counterparts or partners).

A key attraction of mercenary work is the loot, both for Sudanese and Chadian recruits, when engaged as individuals, but especially for rebel groups, when mercenary jobs are undertaken by entire units, as is the case, for instance, with the role played by the SLA-MM with the LNA (see also Darfur section). Mercenary work typically entails a cash component, with monthly salaries varying significantly between LYD500 and LYD2 000 (€100–€400 at black-market rates in May 2019), depending on the nationality and skill of the recruit. However, this pales in comparison to what can be made through looting in a combat scenario. In fact, in this way, foreign armed actors managed to boost their stocks of hardware and vehicles, which, in many cases, were re-deployed in banditry, protection and trafficking activities.^{353,354}

Another element relates to the recruitment of mercenaries to fight on either side of the civil war, and which is a feature of the broader re-orientation of organized crime servicing the war economy. Procurement of mercenaries relies on the contacts and geospatial know-how of individuals at the intersection of politics, militias and criminality. Mercenary agents leverage contacts gleaned through transnational trafficking to gain access to Libya's political and military leadership, and thereby they secure their criminal enterprise through the privileged status they garner as procurers of fighters.

In June 2019, the release of two men imprisoned for previous activity as mercenary recruiters from a prison run by the Rada Special Forces in Tripoli illustrates where these agents sit in the overall value chain. Mabouk Jumaa Sultan al-Hanish, a member of the Magarha tribe, was released during the same week as Ali al-Ghalem, a member of the Meaisa, a subtribe of Awlad Suleiman originating in Chad.

Hanish had been arrested on 15 October 2017 in Tripoli with the help of local groups who are believed to have betrayed him. A known Qaddafi supporter who worked for the regime's intelligence service, Hanish is known to have extensive connections with Darfurian and Chadian mercenary groups. Ali al-Ghalem is also connected to Chadian groups and was arrested in 2018, also on the basis of his activity as an agent. Both men are deemed to be closer to the LNA but were released thanks to the effort of General Ali Kanna, the Tuareg GNA-appointed governor of the south, in spite of protestations from his own community concerning the release of Hanish, who worked as an agent for Tebu armed groups during the conflict between the Tebu and Tuareg in 2015.

Multiple well-placed contacts tied their release to their overall value in the tactical chess game for control of the south. As an interviewee said: 'I cannot tell you if they were released to recruit mercenaries for the GNA, but both of these men are tied to important constituencies in this war, the Qaddafi supporters and the Awlad Suleiman in Sebha.'³⁵⁵

Ali al-Ghalem, in particular, was a competitor in the mercenary procurement business of Massoud Jeddi, commander of the LNA-aligned 116 Brigade and who

In southern Libya, the growth in banditry has been compounded by the presence of several foreign armed and rebel groups.

was instrumental in convincing a majority in his tribe to switch over to the LNA. 'This release could help separate different factions within Awlad Suleiman, improving the position of anti-LNA forces in the south,' said the same interviewee.³⁵⁶ Jeddi, who is also from the Meaisa, is a key agent for Chadian fighters, pooling from the same groups as al-Ghalem (see also Chad section).

The discovery of gold at the border with Chad in Kouri Bougoudi and at the Kilinje mine site, following the earlier establishment of artisanal gold mining in Sudan, Chad and Niger, added a layer of complexity to this dynamic. Although the mine sites on the Libyan side are not believed to be as important as the goldfields in northern Niger and Chad, let alone Sudan, over the past years they have spawned a sustained informal economy that has employed thousands of artisanal gold miners from the region, as well as entrepreneurs servicing the sites (in catering, transport equipment), particularly among the Tebu communities of Qatrun, Murzuq and Um al-Aranib in the south-west, and Kufra in the south-east. The mine sites (those in Libya as well as Niger and Chad) are all located close to or actually serve as stopovers along major smuggling and trafficking routes for contraband, narcotics and migrants.

Unsurprisingly, these sites also attracted various armed groups (Libyan, Nigerien, Chadian and Sudanese) seeking to make money from gold mining itself or ancillary activities.³⁵⁷ These developments led to the establishment of desert areas in the country's deep south as incubation sites for heavily armed mobile groups involved in multiple illicit and criminal activities, from artisanal gold mining to the smuggling of contraband and subsidized goods, migrants and drug trafficking, and paid-for engagement in the Libyan conflict. As discussed, they also gave rise to widespread banditry and kidnapping, which in turn has had a negative impact on some trafficking, as will be argued.

In the words of a Tebu militiaman: 'The biggest problem for us is not the big groups ... [but other smaller bandit gangs] ... three or four cars, they take part in a battle, get some weapons or technical and then they set up their business in the deserts between Niger, Chad and Libya and start doing banditry and whatever else comes their way. They came here to do mercenary work and then they stay and get involved in all kinds of activities harming our communities.'³⁵⁸

Conflicting drug-trafficking trends

The drug-trafficking trade in southern Libya has experienced contradictory changes over the past few years. There has been a contraction in high-value narcotics trafficking, particularly cocaine, which happened concurrently with the expansion of the trade and local market for synthetic drugs and prescription pills, particularly tramadol, even though the two trends are unconnected.

Hubs in the south of Libya, particularly Sebha and Kufra, have long been logistics centres for major flows of narcotics making their way to coastal Libya as well as Egypt. Overall, the source and final destination of hashish and cocaine have not changed considerably. Morocco remains the major supplier of cannabis in the region, while cocaine comes from West Africa via Mali and Niger. Very small flows of heroin also

move north from Nigeria. The south acts almost exclusively as a transit zone for these flows, with only a relatively small portion of Moroccan hashish and West-African-produced cannabis herb finding a consumer market in the south.

The narcotics enter from the south-west via four border areas: through the western border with Algeria, around Ghadames, which is a route typically controlled by Tuareg and Zintani traffickers; through the south-west Algerian border, via the Tuareg-dominated areas of Ghat and Ubari, from where routes then diverge towards Sebha and Brak al-Shaati or the Nafousa mountains or Zintan; and finally through the Niger border, either through the Salvador Pass, which is a dangerous corridor normally used only by well-armed convoys. Cocaine is normally trafficked through this route while the other routes are used mostly for hashish.³⁵⁹

Routes that go around the hub of Kufra are used for hashish coming from Morocco, as well as heroin from Nigeria. The drugs enter Libya through Niger and then travel along the southern border, connecting hubs like Um al-Aranib with Tazirbu before heading for Ajdabiya along the coast, or to Egypt via the Siwa Oasis. Alternatively, traffickers journey from Niger to Chad, from where two principal routes are used, both charting paths close to the gold mines of Kouri Bougoudi and Kilinje.

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After the revolution, the trafficking of narcotics grew significantly, in part due to the growth in trafficking through the south of Libya and in part due to the use of Tripoli International Airport for large-scale narcotics trafficking.³⁶⁰ It is an activity that remains the domain of top-tier criminals with regional and national connections that enable their business. The revolution and subsequent conflicts across Libya's south have shaken up the order of players in the business, with newcomers from Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu elbowing out established traffickers from the Magarha and the Qaddadfa – both regime-loyal tribes that lost power and clout (particularly the latter, Qaddafi's own tribe) after the revolution. However, this should not be overemphasized, as the transnational connections needed to establish a high-value drug route are an asset in themselves and well established traffickers have tended to maintain a foothold in the business as a result.³⁶¹

On top of this shifting of players, the trafficking of cocaine through Libya in recent years appears to have been undermined. This is still to be considered a preliminary assessment due to the difficulty in obtaining reliable information on this prized trade. However, a primary reason identified during interviews carried out with more than nine smugglers and middlemen operating along these routes in the Ghat, Ubari, Sebha and Murzuq areas, relates to instability along the route in Libya itself, as well as beyond its borders.

Mali's chronic insecurity, in particular, has been fuelled by a mushrooming of players that have varying degrees of control over different territories used for drug trafficking (see the Mali section). Similarly, in northern Niger and Libya itself, banditry has directly undermined the reliability of delivery. Much of the high-level banditry in zones such as the Salvador Pass, Waw al-Kabir and south of Tazirbu is directed principally at drug trafficking.

This has been compounded by the near constant conflict that has been a feature of southern Libya since the revolution, particularly in the Fezzan, which had varying degrees of destabilizing effects on the black economy. The most recent significant conflict, at the time of writing, was in February 2019, south of Sebha. Tebu militias attempted to resist the advance of the LNA in the region before eventually conceding control of the El Feel oilfield on 21 February in a settlement that saw LNA-aligned Tebu armed groups take control of security.³⁶²

A year earlier, the Tebu were fighting Awlad Suleiman around Sebha (these two tribes also had major conflicts in 2015 and 2013), while the Tuareg and the Tebu were engaged in an intense conflict that brought virtually all illicit movement through Ghat and Ubari to a standstill at various points in 2014 and 2015. In the south-east, militias associated mostly with the Arab Zway fought the Tebu in two confrontations in 2012 and 2015. In the end, the Tebu were dislodged from Kufra and smugglers from the tribe lost their access to all trafficking on the Libya–Sudan corridor.³⁶³

Almost concurrently, as these shifts were taking place, there has been across-the-board growth in the trafficking of synthetic drugs and prescription medication for both local and regional consumption.³⁶⁴ The most common of these is by far tramadol, which is an opioid-based pain killer that is consumed widely across the greater region in several of the bordering countries. Southern Libya receives consignments from the country's own coastal region and from neighbouring countries on the southern border.

Other similar prescription drugs abused in this way include the tranquilizer clonazepam, normally sold under the Rivotril brand, produced by Roche, and Pregablin, sold under the Lyrica brand, which is prescribed to treat epilepsy and anxiety disorders.³⁶⁵

We know from occasional large-scale seizure in ports in the east and west of Libya that large quantities of prescription drugs are shipped to the country through major ports.³⁶⁶ However, while some of these drugs flow from north to south, particularly along the Ajdabiya to Kufra route, the more significant flows come from Nigeria, Benin and Togo via Niger, and to a lesser extent, from Chad to southern Libya.

The industry of prescription drugs is far less specialized than narcotics trafficking, which remains a trade reserved for the better connected – and better armed – criminals. Typically, prescription drugs and medium quantities of hashish are the domain of small-scale operators. The activity is currently in expansion and is increasingly being turned to as an alternative to other illicit economic activities that have seen a decline in recent years in the greater region, chiefly artisanal gold mining and human smuggling.

Blow to human-smuggling industry while trafficking thrives

The human-smuggling industry in southern Libya has contracted significantly since 2016 following a countrywide trend. Libya's coastal smuggling systems collapsed suddenly towards the middle of 2017, following the retreat of militias from this business.³⁶⁷ This was coupled with law-enforcement activity in Niger and Sudan a year earlier. These events sandwiched and stifled the business of human smugglers operating in the south, forcing some to abandon the business altogether or to supplement revenue from people smuggling with other activities, such as low-level drug trafficking.³⁶⁸

Before these changes, the human-smuggling industry had grown rapidly in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. However, unlike in the coastal areas, where between 2013 and 2016 this criminal economy was extensively captured by militias that dominated (or drove out entirely) the business of small-scale smuggling operations, in the south people smuggling remained to a much larger degree the domain of relatively independent individuals or crews, particularly in the Fezzan.³⁶⁹ The passive taxation of smugglers at checkpoints was still widespread and a popular means for revenue generation. However, overall, there were fewer instances where armed groups took direct control of the business when compared to the situation in the coastal Tripolitania area.

The expansion of the business in the region was mostly the result of the draw-in effect from the growing efficiency of the coastal smuggling systems and the simultaneous enhancement of smuggling systems in Niger and Sudan. The sudden growth of departures along the coast encouraged greater demand, which, in turn, attracted more smugglers, particularly young people, to the business in southern Libya and in neighbouring countries. This mobilization improved the efficiency of desert routes into Libya and drove prices down, which furthered demand in a self-propelling feedback loop.³⁷⁰

The smaller stake of militias in the human-smuggling business and the fact that informal movement of people across the borders is more culturally engrained and embedded within the communities of the southern borderlands means that the activity remained much less organized compared to in the coastal areas.³⁷¹

Two southern geographic areas that bucked this trend, with more pronounced direct involvement of militias, are the Libya–Sudan border area, areas around Kufra and Zella in the east, and the desert south of Um al-Aranib and Qatrun in the west, extending eastwards up to Waw an-Nemus and the Kilinje gold mine.

After 2011, several Tebu militias were dominant in these areas, controlling a significant share of illicit flows across more than 1 500 kilometres of border, from the frontier with Sudan right up to the tri-border where Algeria, Niger and Libya converge. A series of conflicts with the Arab Zwayya tribe in Kufra, which culminated in a decisive war in 2015, led to the tribe's displacement from the town and Tebu smugglers lost control of routes from Sudan to Libya via Kufra, as well as on routes and running westwards in

The human-smuggling industry in southern Libya has contracted significantly since 2016 following a countrywide trend.



A mixed patrol of local Tuareg and Misratis from the Third Force, Ubari, January 2019.

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parallel with the Libya–Chad border. As a result, human smuggling in the south-east of Libya is now dominated by smugglers and armed groups associated with the Zwayya tribe, in particular the Subul al-Salam (Ways of Peace).

There is a long history of competition over informal trade and trafficking to and from Sudan and northern Chad in Kufra between the Zwayya and the Tebu.³⁷² However, when post-revolution conflict erupted between the two tribes in 2015, the Zway won the upper hand, thanks to support from the LNA, which in August 2018 officially incorporated Subul al-Salam within its structure and delegated to it border-control activities.³⁷³ Much like the RSF – their counterparts on the Sudanese side of the border – the Subul al-Salam has maintained a schizophrenic posture towards illicit flows between Sudan and Libya, particularly when it comes to human smuggling. While there is evidence that they have been involved in interdictions, the group has also escorted convoys of smugglers across desert stretches as well as holding migrants in camps where it is believed some were ransomed and brutalized.³⁷⁴

Beyond the armed group dynamics or the level of organization of the human smuggling industry, however, the scale of the business across the region, the levying of taxes by militias at checkpoints, and the knock-on effect of its expansion on communities in southern Libya, make the activity highly relevant to the broader picture of organized crime in the region.

Conversely, there has been an increased incidence of various reported human-trafficking activities. With reduced opportunities to monetize on the movement of migrants, there has been a shift towards capitalizing on migrants through detention, whether in official or semi-official centres sanctioned by the country's Directorate for the Combat of Illegal (DCIM) Immigration or in private prisons.^{375,376} Systematized kidnap for ransom of migrants takes place at various locations in the south of Libya, but especially at crossing points in border areas around Kufra, Qatrun and Um al-Aranib. Greater Sebha and Brak al-Shati are also centres for systemic labour exploitation and extortion of migrants.³⁷⁷

Both of these activities increasingly come together at so-called credit houses (*Gidan Bashi* in Hausa), which are prevalent mostly in the Fezzan. Migrants who do not have the means to pay for the journey at times choose to travel on credit, which they then pay off through labour. The concept has been in place for a long time, particularly among Hausa communities journeying from Niger to Libya and seasonal labourers from southern Niger in particular.

However, over recent years the concept became exploited and some credit-house managers started to become involved in the 'purchase' of migrants who fail to pay their smugglers for various reasons – they are short of money, because of some miscommunication on the price for passage or because they would have been tricked or robbed by smugglers.

The credit-house manager would make good for the money owed to the smugglers or kidnapers but then expect a return on investment through the contracting of the victim's indentured labour. In some cases, there would be a broad agreement between credit-house manager and migrant but the control of the terms is exclusively in the hands of the credit-house manager. This is becoming even more relevant in the wake of the law-enforcement campaign instituted by Niamey on human smuggling. During 2019, monitoring by the Global Initiative in Agadez indicated that a part of the migration infrastructure (e.g. accommodation sites for migrants, known as ghettos) and actors (*passeurs*, smugglers and *coxeurs*, middlemen) are being repurposed for the migration of Nigerien seasonal migrants heading to Libya for work. Typically, southern Nigerien migrants are among the poorest in mixed migration flows and this makes them especially vulnerable to this sort of exploitation. For the time being, the information on this phenomenon remains too limited to make a robust assessment of how significant this trend is. However, it is certainly an area to watch.

Organized crime and Libya's governance question

Between January and March 2019, the LNA changed the military and political landscape with a swift advance on the Fezzan that was predicated on the region's widespread frustration with the general neglect by the GNA, which nominally governed the territory up to that point.³⁷⁸ It was also the result of a successful co-option campaign that the LNA ran over the previous three years. The silent drive managed to secure the LNA a series of deals with local militia leaders, which were then used to leverage broader tribal and social support, and eventually displace the GNA-aligned Third Force in May 2017.

The group's recruitment of Massoud Jeddi, a member of Sebha's dominant Awlad Suleiman tribe, is a prime example of this strategy in practice in Sebha. In the run-up to the May 2017 events, Jeddi was pivotal in convincing a large part of his tribe – which was previously Misrata's prime ally in Sebha – to switch alliance and force the handing over of the strategic Tamanhint military airbase north of Sebha without a single shot being fired.³⁷⁹ This outcome had been catalyzed by a horrendous massacre, carried out a week earlier by a mixed force of Islamists, radical jihadis and Misrati troops.³⁸⁰ However, the Brak al-Shati massacre had been the final straw that turned demands for the departure of the Misratis into an ultimatum on the part of elders from a large cross-section of the region's tribes.

These events are important to the analysis of organized crime in the Fezzan because, as mentioned previously, both the LNA and the Third Force have attempted to approximate the role previously played by the Qaddafi regime and its security apparatus in governing territory and the informal economy, drawing an outline of what things might look like in a post-conflict Libya. Prior to this point, the Third Force had carved itself a foothold in Sebha and Ubari, with a network of operatives and satellite armed groups in different parts of the region. The Misrati troops had first established themselves in the region in 2015 after being deployed as a peacekeeping force by the General Staff of the Libyan Army under the command of the now defunct National Salvation Government.³⁸¹

The force always faced antagonism and weak buy-in from the population. This limited its footprint and, consequently, its ability to make a difference on the law-and-order front, which on paper was the force's number-one priority. However, this did not stop the force from consolidating the business interests of key Misrati patrons and strategic allies within the Awlad Suleiman tribe, particularly in the fuel smuggling business – one of the most lucrative black economies in Sebha.³⁸²

The Third force's control of the Tamanhint airbase coupled with control of a base 160 kilometres north-west, in Jufra, strategically secured trade (legitimate and illegitimate) coming in through the route that connects Sebha to Misrata via Waddan and Abugrein. For a time, the Misrati forces had some capacity to monitor movement along a second major north-south route linking Brak al-Shati to Shwayrif and beyond. However, the force ceded this when it relinquished the Brak al-Shati airbase to the 12th Infantry Brigade in December 2016.

As with Jeedi in the events of May 2017, the assimilation of Col. Mohamed Bin Nayl and his 12th Infantry Brigade into the LNA had been critical to these shifts at the end of 2016. Bin Nayl, who is from the Magarha (a Gaddafi-loyal tribe), had been instrumental in consolidating support for the LNA within the Magarha, where misgivings with Haftar's past antagonism to the regime are common. By this point, the Misrati forces had struggled to maintain a balance between different priorities: conflicted between the need to safeguard the interests of important Misrati patrons and having to strike a balance between the stakes of different tribes in the informal economy and the grassroots demand for basic security that different communities expected of them. The LNA successfully used these grievances to rally popular support among various tribes while seeking to reassure the power brokers whom it needed on its side that its presence would not undermine illicit flows.

From 2017, when the LNA first started to take over territory under its franchise, it was able to perform better in tackling carjackings, kidnappings and others similar crimes in the areas it controlled, thanks largely to its more solid grassroots support. However, the illicit economy was largely unaffected. The pledge of support by the Magarha and the Awlad Suleiman meant that the LNA needed to safeguard the respective interests of these and allied tribes in human and fuel smuggling in Brak al-Shati and Sebha.

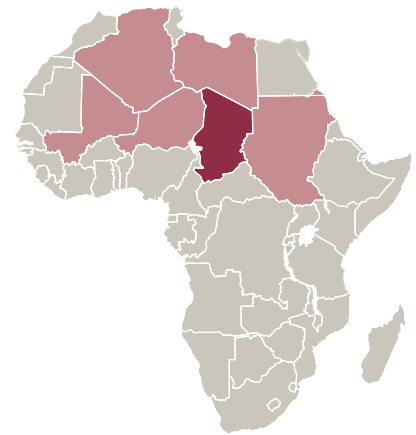
In the first quarter of 2019, the LNA consolidated control over Sebha, and enhanced its support further south, nominally taking control of the Sharara and El-Feel oilfields in Ubari and Murzuq, respectively. This was no military conquest: the LNA managed the feat by bringing under its franchise armed groups from these areas. In almost all of the cases, the groups retained their structures and leadership – and almost complete autonomy – but pledged to operate under the LNA banner. On that basis, they negotiated the takeover of installations and checkpoints from anti-Haftar counterparts within their same tribe who preferred to hand over control to groups from their same tribe than face the prospect of a protracted war.

Locals reported a further improvement in overall law and order during this time, but this was short-lived, as the LNA redeployed its forces to the north, when it advanced on Tripoli on 4 April 2019, starting a war that remains ongoing at the time of writing. Nonetheless, one could see the outline of a governance pattern that has already been adopted in the south-east. As seen in the case of Subul al-Salam in Kufra, the LNA coupled a surge in its military presence with the co-option of armed groups who are allowed to self-finance through the illicit economy as long as they respect the command structure. The Third Force had attempted to do the same during its time in the Fezzan, but unsuccessfully. Both are examples of the predation economy that Libya developed after the revolution, bringing the country around full circle to where it started in February 2011.



CHAD

**CRIMINAL NETWORKS PROFIT
FROM INSTABILITY**



Chad is more than twice the size of France but has an economy that is less than one hundredth of that of its former colonial power. This makes tight state control and policing over the country's entire territory a difficult task, especially considering the country's 6 400 kilometres of borders with volatile regions of Libya, Sudan, Niger, Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In this context, organized-criminal activities have developed the most in areas where the state exerts the least control, namely in remote border regions and areas that have experienced cyclical violence for years.

In the east, violence in Sudan's Darfur region spilling over into Chad since 2003 has had major consequences on organized-criminal activity in Chad.³⁸³ It facilitated, for instance, the poaching of around 3 000 elephants in Chad's Zakouma National Park between 2005 and 2008 – more than 90 per cent of the initial population – by the Khartoum-backed Janjawid militias (see the Darfur section) and Chadian poachers.³⁸⁴ In the west of the country, the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region has killed hundreds and displaced more than 100 000 people since 2015. The instability in Lake Chad has created an environment conducive to illicit flows and engagement with organized-crime groups.³⁸⁵ For example, Boko Haram's leader in 2014, Abubakar Shekau, infamously expressed a desire to engage with criminal groups when he threatened to sell the kidnapped Chibok girls, repeatedly stating there was 'a market for selling humans'.³⁸⁶

While Boko Haram and armed groups in eastern and southern Chad have been involved in organized crime, the most concerning and growing source of organized criminal activities is in the north of the country – in particular, the far northern region of Tibesti, which has experienced war and instability, and has seen hardly any state presence for decades. The region has become a main avenue along trans-Saharan illicit trade routes. More importantly, perhaps, over the years, the Tibesti region developed into a key trafficking hub and essential gateway linking both the Sahel and southern Chad's criminal economies to those in bordering southern Libya, the epicentre of organized crime and lawlessness in the Sahel.

Barkhan dune, Faya oasis, en route to Amoul, September 2019.

*Tibesti has become
a strategic area for
criminal activities
in the Sahel*

A vast mountainous region, it is unsurprising to see that Tibesti has become a strategic area for criminal activities in the Sahel, especially as it has suffered the ripple effects of the instability that has characterized post-Qaddafi southern Libya. Tibesti, which until recently received little attention from the central government, has recently grown into a reliable alternative to the Niger–Libya smuggling corridor for weapons, drugs and people.

Over the last 50 years, Tibesti has experienced a number of wars and insurgencies, and more often been under the control of rebel movements than that of the Chadian state.³⁸⁷ The state's continued absence led the indigenous Tebu population to rely on light forms of local governance, often overseen by customary chiefs, underscoring a culture of resistance to external interference in local affairs, both towards the state and non-state armed groups ruling their territory.³⁸⁸ These structures succeeded in providing some security and stability. Then, the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad), which waged war against the state from 1997 to 2010 in northern Chad's most recent rebellion, tried to mould the traditional governance structures into a form of administration for the areas it controlled.³⁸⁹ The traditional institutions fractured after the war as a consequence, increasing instability and reducing the ability of the government to engage a single group representing the majority of Tibesti communities.

Over the past decade, the government in N'Djamena has attempted to increase its engagement with the region, without success. In 2011, the government launched an FCFA 30 billion (€45 735 000) financial development initiative that eventually collapsed because of a reorientation of the national budget towards the war in Mali and the Boko Haram threat, closer to the capital.³⁹⁰ Left behind were a number of abandoned projects that served as relics of the state's failure to develop the region. The government's engagement with Tibesti has since focused more on security than development.

Economic opportunities eventually came with the successive discoveries of gold in Tibesti's Miski valley in 2012 and (in 2013) in Kouri Bougoudi, an immense goldfield that straddles some 50 kilometres of the Chad-Libya border. Up to 150 000 gold prospectors, roughly six times the entire local population, made their way to the region in the years following the initial gold rush.³⁹¹ Gold mining brought business opportunities for locals, for example in the form of the transportation of miners and supplies to and from gold mining areas.³⁹²

Most artisanal miners belonged to ethnic groups from eastern and southern Chad, as well as Darfur: Zaghawa, especially, but also Arabs from different tribes, including Masalit, Borgo and others.³⁹³ The arrivals caused violent clashes between local communities and 'foreign' prospectors, and among miners, sometimes fuelled by pre-existing animosity among groups.³⁹⁴ Tensions peaked in 2014 and 2015 but deaths have risen once again over the past year. On 27 and 29 December 2018, for instance, at least 100 people died during three days of clashes between Arab and Borgo artisanal miners in Kouri Bougoudi, triggered by a dispute over ownership of a mining shaft.³⁹⁵

The violence of these clashes owes itself to the availability of weapons in the northern region. The proliferation of small arms that followed the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 enabled local communities and artisanal mining groups to organize armed self-

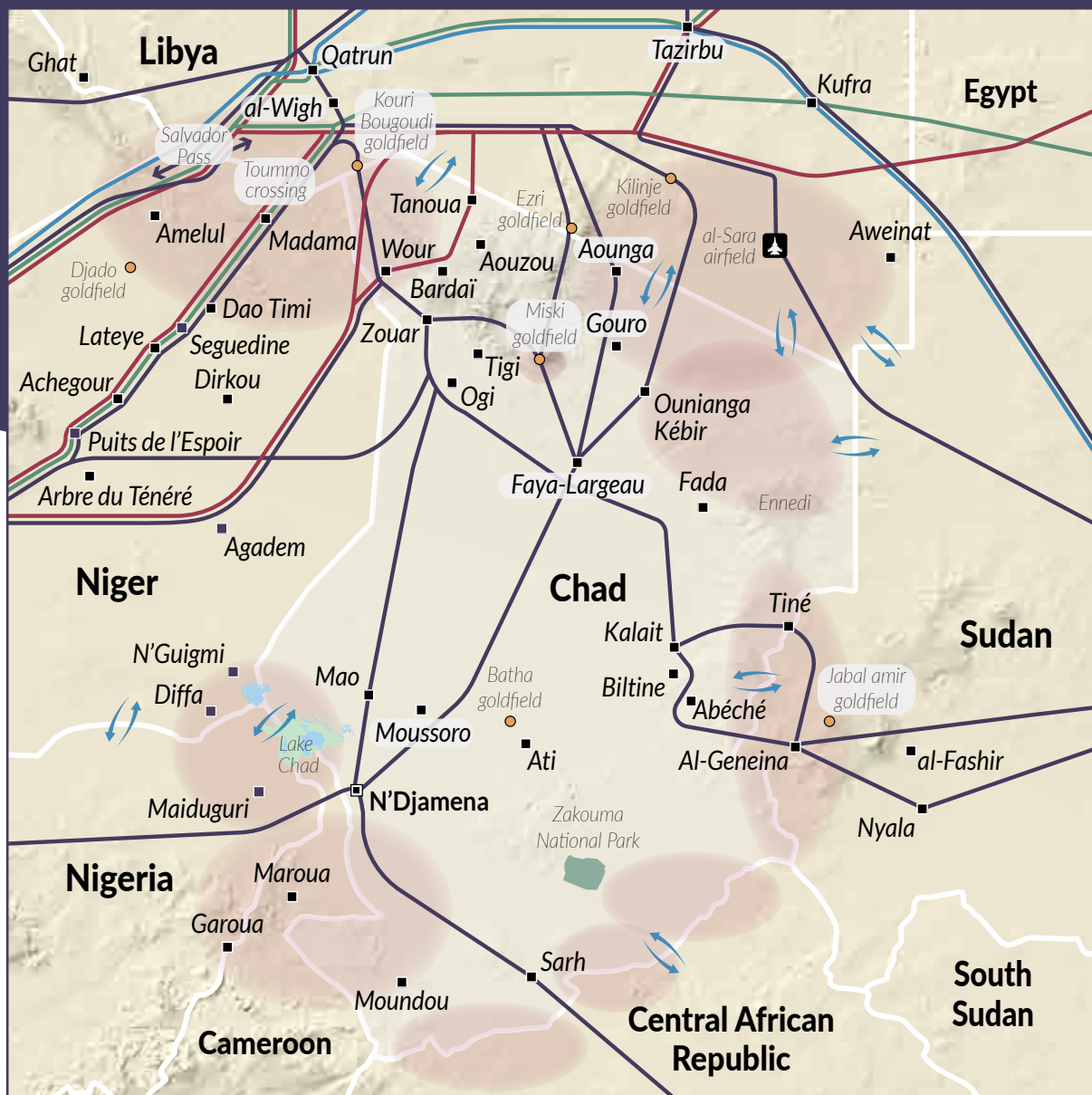


FIGURE 8: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Chad

defence groups. The post-Qaddafi chaos in southern Libya also had a magnet effect on armed groups as far as Sudan and Niger. These groups increased their involvement in illicit gold mining in northern Chad, as well as other criminal activities, including drug, arms, and human trafficking. Fighters from Chadian armed opposition groups, for example the CCMR and the UFR, and Sudanese rebels, including the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the SLA-MM, made frequent incursions from Libya into Chad either in the context of criminal activities or as part of rebel activity. The Tibesti region's natural resources, geography and topography make it ideal for groups to earn quick returns in the illicit economy while keeping a safe rear base in southern Libya, far from the scrutiny of the Chadian military.

The rising volatility and the use of northern Chad by rebel groups as a source of funding gave the government the pretext for adopting an increasingly security-based approach



to the region. More appealing still were the prospects of gaining control over local resources. Chad has experienced an economic downturn for the past few years, largely driven by the drop in global oil prices and the unfavourable terms struck with the country's main oil-extracting company.³⁹⁶

Despite increasingly frequent and harsh crackdowns since the middle of 2018, some involving local mercenary forces, such as those loyal to Nigerien Tebu

Barka Sidimi, the government has failed to control the region.³⁹⁷ The high costs of waging war more than 1 000 kilometres from the capital are part of the reason. More important perhaps is the inability of an ill-motivated military – accused of profiting from criminal activities in Tibesti (see below) – to control treacherous terrain and subdue armed communities that have long been hostile to N'Djamena's meddling in local affairs.³⁹⁸

Armed groups broaden criminal reach in the north

Armed groups in Chad have developed into polycriminal entities that leverage their mobility and capacity to fight to profit from various types of crime. This phenomenon is relatively new, as the role of armed groups has not typically been considered a major characteristic of organized crime in the Sahel. The nature of armed groups involved in criminal endeavours varies from the more organized Chadian rebel groups, such as the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT) or the CCMSR,³⁹⁹ to more experienced gun-for-hire type groups, like former Sudanese rebels from the JEM and the SLA-MM, for instance.⁴⁰⁰

Armed groups in Chad have developed into polycriminal entities that leverage their mobility and capacity to fight to profit from various types of crime.

There are three main types of involvement of armed groups in the criminal industry of northern Chad: direct involvement in the transport of arms, drugs (usually cocaine, cannabis resin and sometimes heroin) or people; escorting and protection of traffickers; and the hijacking of drug convoys and resale of their booty, sometimes to the same traffickers they have just robbed.

The reasons for criminal involvement depend on the nature of the group. Some groups specialize in criminal activities with profit as both the immediate and ultimate goal. Others use crime as a means to fund more strategic ends – especially the case with armed opposition groups.

That notwithstanding, the profits made through criminal activities often draw fighters away from political causes. Abdallah Abakar Nourain (commonly known as 'Banda') is an ex-commander from the Sudanese rebel group JEM and employs up to 50 fighters and some 10 vehicles engaged in mercenary and criminal activities, including the escorting and hijacking of drug traffickers transiting the border region.^{401,402} Within the CCMSR for instance, senior commander Mahamat Haki Abdraman, aka 'Hakimi', has been suspected of playing an active role in various types of trafficking, including drugs, weapons and humans.^{403,404}

More generally, rebels involved in trafficking activities tend to be younger fighters, whose membership in the group is intermittent, as they sometimes leave for months to pursue illicit activities.⁴⁰⁵ Proceeds from drug trafficking are much higher than those from artisanal gold mining, which can help purchase weapons and vehicles. Escorting traffickers, for instance, can yield between €1 500 to €4 500 per expedition per person.⁴⁰⁶

While some individuals in Chadian rebel groups may participate in trafficking through one of the three types of involvement mentioned above, individual involvement does not necessarily reflect larger group funding strategies.⁴⁰⁷ Rebel groups are usually reluctant to participate openly in illicit activities in light of the overall impact on the credibility of their political ambitions.⁴⁰⁸

Despite these claims, the involvement of high-ranking rebels in cases of trafficking suggests that the illicit economy is a key part of rebel groups' activities. In

'We do not want to be associated with the "barbu" (bearded ones) and the narco-traffickers of southern Libya. [...] The logic of a rebellion is to intervene. A movement should not stay confined to [the war of another country] [...] or a territory, to receive more material. We have enough material.'

SENIOR MEMBER OF THE UFR REBEL GROUP, FEBRUARY 2019

January 2018, a three-day meeting with high-level members of the CCMSR led to the forced resignation of Mahamat Tahir Acheick, then secretary general of the movement, after members condemned his and Hakimi's involvement in the trade of young Mahamid Arabs, who were looking to join the CCMSR as mercenaries, to other military forces and foreign governments in Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁰⁹

This transnational mercenary trade has gained momentum in southern Libya, fuelled by the war in Yemen, which began in 2015, and unremitting conflict in Libya since Qaddafi's fall in 2011. At the centre of this trade are young Arab men and boys from poor communities in Chad and some parts of eastern Niger and western Sudan.

Young Arabs are said to be ideal recruits in Libya and Yemen for three reasons. First, many share physical characteristics with Libyans and Yemenis, which is useful to conceal mercenary forces in these theatres. Secondly, as Arabic-speakers they are easier to coordinate and train. Finally, they make ideal front-line fighters, as their salaries are lower than local fighters and relatives are less likely to request financial compensation in the event of death.

The young men are often recruited in villages around Biltine, Abéché in the east of the country, Moundou in the south, the Bahr el-Gazel area, Ati in central Chad and N'Guigmi in Niger by Libyan Arabs, who gather the young Chadian Arabs, often between the ages of 13 and 20. It is unclear how much deception is used in the recruitment process, but many young men and children are said to be initially promised citizenship and a job in the UAE, before being sent to fight the Houthis in Yemen.^{410,411} The recruits are then transported in pickup vehicles to hubs in southern Libya, principally Sebha and Um-al Aranib, where they

are then inspected and enlisted by local armed groups or directly by Emirati or Saudi envoys.⁴¹²

The detection in recent months of large groups of young Mahamid Arabs travelling through northern Chad towards Libya is an indicator that this practice continues.⁴¹³ One shopkeeper in the Tibesti village of Yoh claimed he saw several vehicles with young Arabs passing through his village rapidly every night in May 2019 – possibly the result of a spike in recruitment to deal with demand for fighters after the LNA advanced on Tripoli on 4 April.

Armed groups like the CCMSR have been arranging the placement of young Arab fighters with Libyan, Saudi and Emirati armies, reportedly earning of up to LYD 8 000 (€5 100) per mercenary, paid in cash in US dollars.⁴¹⁴ Young Chadians have also been recruited into militias for criminal activities, including the hijacking of convoys. They are reportedly paid around LYD 5 000 (€1 000) per job per vehicle (there are usually around four to five people per vehicle). Others are given only housing and food but promised the loot from attacks. Prices vary according to the buyer and the role of the recruit. Recruits with lower experience who will take low-level roles, such as manning checkpoints or barracks, earn lower wages than those with combat experience who can go straight to battle fronts.⁴¹⁵

Massoud Jeddi, who heads the predominantly Arab Awlad Suleiman 116 Brigade, is a prominent buyer of recruits from Chad, paying between LYD 2 000 and LYD 3 000 (€1 280–1 900) per fighter. The 116 Brigade has been involved in transporting the new recruits to Tripoli, selling them for up to three times their initial price – between LYD 5 000 and LYD 8 000 (€3 190–5 110) – to the LNA.⁴¹⁶ The LNA rewards recruits with an initial down payment of between

LYD 2 000 and LYD 3 000 (€1 280–1 900);⁴¹⁷ they are then paid a salary of LYD 500 (€320) a month.⁴¹⁸

Some armed groups may be seeking to increase the resale value of recruits by sending them to local training camps first. Once such training camp is in the base of Jibril Baba, which was attacked by ISIS in April 2019, leaving seven dead. There are also training camps in the desert run by Hakimi, a senior CCMSR commander, in southern Libya. Another known training base is in Tamanhint, under the control of the 116 Brigade.⁴¹⁹

In the Chad-Niger-Libya triangle, goldfields have played a key role in both attracting and facilitating the development of criminal operations.

There have been reports of a high-level agreement between the Chadian and Saudi governments, which led to the sending of 1 600 Chadian Arabs to Yemen.⁴²⁰ More recently, in early 2019, a temporary recruitment office was opened by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (better known as ‘Hemmeti’) in Nyala, in South Darfur, where a Saudi delegation is reported to have visited and paid for an unspecified number of Chadian and Sudanese men and boys in cash.^{421,422} Hemmeti, who at the time of writing was the post-Bashir Transitional Military Council’s deputy chief, is the commander of the Rapid Support Forces, a powerful Sudanese paramilitary force, which the Omar al-Bashir regime raised among Darfur Arabs and then integrated into the army as the regime’s primary praetorian guard (see the Darfur section).

There have been more blatant cases of Chadian government involvement in the illicit economy. For example, officers from l’Armée Nationale du Tchad have been accused of hijacking drug convoys and reselling the looted drugs.⁴²³ Another instance includes N’Djamena’s appointment of Chidi Kallemay as a *chef de canton* (grouping of towns and villages) of Tigi in the Borkou region in 2014.⁴²⁴ Kallemay is an influential trader accused of having facilitated the smuggling of drugs between Niger and Libya through Chad and kept good relations with known traffickers.⁴²⁵

Chadian gold mines – Criminogenic hubs of trafficking economies

At the heart of the development of criminal economies in the Chad-Niger-Libya triangle, goldfields have played a key role in both attracting and facilitating the development of criminal operations, as mining activity gives rise to key logistical hubs in highly remote areas. In most cases, they are either close to or as part of well-established trafficking routes, and act as centres for the illicit trade of goods and smuggling of people.

As goldfields attracted large numbers of miners – Kouri Bougoudi for instance is said to have had 40 000 miners at its peak⁴²⁶ – an ancillary economy quickly developed after 2012, providing services such as food, water, equipment and transportation to the legions of gold miners. Libyan and Chadian Tebu were quick to benefit from this economy, using their existing networks and resources to participate in the smuggling of goods from Libya into Chad. They also taxed traders using their routes.⁴²⁷

Migrant smuggling from northern Chad to Libya is one of the major businesses that developed around Chadian gold mines, from which the local Tebu population readily benefited.⁴²⁸ Northbound migration through Chad was especially boosted by the near simultaneous anti-smuggling initiatives in Sudan and Niger in 2016, which had the effect of channelling migrant flows towards Chad.⁴²⁹ (In Sudan, the authorities undeniably put pressure on smugglers, but units on the ground, especially the RSF, also continued to benefit from smuggling through selective enforcement, cooperation with smugglers and outright smuggling.) Although flows have remained relatively low, migrant-smuggling networks supplying miners to northern gold mines consolidated their operations between 2016 and 2018.⁴³⁰

The strongest signs of consolidation appear on routes linking eastern Chad to Tibesti. One major route developed along the al-Geneina – Abéché – Faya Largeau – Zouarke axis. Another route departs from Tiné, the Sudanese twin town of Chadian Tiné, some 500 kilometres south-east of Tibesti, which has emerged as a key logistics base for Zaghawa smugglers. The town has developed into a lawless haven for smugglers and traffickers operating in Chadian territory. Sudanese and East African migrants are hosted in abandoned buildings, away from the scrutiny of Chadian security forces, before their smugglers transport them north in pickups, avoiding towns thanks to GPS equipment.^{431,432} Once the Zaghawa smugglers enter Tebu territories in Tibesti, they hand over the migrants to Tebu smugglers for onward transport.

Migrants and miners arriving in Zouarke after fleeing Kouri Bougoudi after the crackdown in 2019.





Farchana, en route to Darfur from Abéché, eastern Chad, December 2017.

© Gethin Chamberlain

Smugglers are usually organized in an opportunistic and freelance fashion, but migrants and smugglers describe more structured networks. For instance, Abdallah Banda (see above) was reportedly involved in systematically transporting hundreds of Zaghawa Darfuri migrants to work in Kouri Bougoudi. He is said to be one of the main businessmen on the goldfield, with one of the main mines, Kouri Banda, nicknamed after him. Although not initially trafficked, as they mostly come of their own accord, migrants often arrive penniless at goldfields, and have to accept whatever job they can find. This increases their vulnerability and hence risk of falling into slavery-like forced labour. Two Ethiopian migrants interviewed in Niger who spoke Guran⁴³³ said they had been forced to work on a remote site in Tibesti for around two years before eventually being released.⁴³⁴ They said they depended on the armed site owner for water and food, and were too isolated to safely attempt an escape.

In most cases, however, migrants can expect to be paid – typically around one gram of gold (about €25) for ten days of work.⁴³⁵ But revenues can also depend



on the migrants' finds. For instance, while a Darfuri migrant managed to save the equivalent of €100 in under three months before moving on, an Ivorian migrant who had worked for more than five months on gold-mining sites in Miski on a commission basis reported to have earned just FCFA 20 000 (€30).⁴³⁶ Miners sell their nuggets to local traders who visit the gold sites and are sometimes unaware of the true market price of their gold. In the first six months of 2018, a gram of gold was sold between €25 and €30 depending on the location and currency, which is between 14 per cent and 28 per cent less than the price at the London Bullion Market (around €35 per gram).^{437, 438}

Once the miners sell the gold to the traders, it is then transported in several directions. The bulk of extracted gold is transported to N'Djamena, before being exported to Dubai, in some cases avoiding customs altogether.⁴³⁹ Significant amounts are also smuggled to Libya by traders under the protection of militias operating in the Fezzan, until they reach the primary hub of Sebha.



CCMSR forces seen after clashes with Darfuri fighters in the Kouri Bougoudi area, January 2019.

© CCMSR

From there, the gold is reported to make its way to Tripoli.⁴⁴⁰ Smaller quantities of gold are reportedly smuggled to Niger and Sudan – usually carried by miners returning home or because the gold is used to pay for equipment and supplies, such as metal detectors and mercury, or water, food and transport.⁴⁴¹

Government crackdown risks causing long-term instability

All gold extraction without a special authorization from the Chadian Ministry of Mines is considered illegal. But, despite a ban on artisanal and small-scale gold mining in 2015, artisanal miners continue operating. In fact, mining operations, and the rise in criminal activities and insecurity around the gold sites, gave the government the pretext for a crackdown. The campaign intensified in recent years: in June 2017, around 40 000 miners, and 10 000 in September 2018, were said to have been displaced from Kouri Bougoudi.^{442,443}

Since early 2019, N'Djamena has shown increasing resolve to halt mining operations and clear the area of armed groups. In March 2019, the military, led by the Minister for the Administration of Public Security and Local Governance, Mahamat Abba Ali Salah, moved on Kouri Bougoudi, destroying Banda's base, supplies, equipment and a water well that supplied thousands of artisanal miners.^{444,445,446}

The reported motive for this intervention was the suspicion that Banda's operations were also funding the UFR rebel group led by President Idriss Déby's nephew, Timan Erdimi.⁴⁴⁷ The UFR had made an incursion into Chadian territories only two weeks before, which was eventually halted by French military airstrikes.⁴⁴⁸ Banda had until then run gold-digging operations undisturbed by the Chadian military, despite them being based in nearby Wour and Tanoua. Many believe this is a result of Banda's government and military ties, as well as the Chadian army's interests in continued operations there.⁴⁴⁹ Banda, a Zaghawa, is said to have benefited from relationships of trust with the authorities and security forces, where the Zaghawa wield power.^{450,451}

The government's securitized approach to Tibesti's challenges on the surface is warranted, since banditry and mercenary activity undermines the stability and development of the region. However, there is founded concern that the increased government activity really reflects an interest to create a new revenue stream through gold extraction – while choking the operations of armed opposition groups – instead of considering the needs and interests of the local civilian population. This presents a challenge because the militarization of north-west Chad, which has come with this renewed interest in the region, will add to the bitter mistrust between local communities and the state, which originates from the government's failure to prioritize the development of the region. As one Tebu trader, forced to flee Kouri Bougoudi, told us in May 2019: 'In my opinion, the sudden closure of the gold mines is only going to increase the potential use of mercenaries all over Libya. In southern Libya, crime will increase.'

The closure of the border, and creation of a mixed force, as announced in March 2019, will also most likely make import of necessity goods from Libya more difficult, and impact local communities.⁴⁵² While flows are unlikely to come to a halt given the porosity of the border, increased security will both increase the sophistication of existing smuggling networks and the price of smuggled goods once they reach destination markets. The future of organized-criminal activities in northern Chad and in the broader Sahel is therefore intrinsically tied to N'Djamena's approach to the challenges presented by artisanal gold mining in the country's north.



DARFUR

**SMUGGLING AND ILLICIT FLOWS A
BOON FOR STATE-ENABLED MILITIAS**



Darfur lies at the intersection of several regions and historical trading routes. Over history, migrants, traders, holy men, soldiers and pilgrims – some local and others from far afield – have crossed, fought in, and sometimes settled in, Darfur.

People moved across the region with wars and changing rain patterns. West Africans journeyed to Mecca; Arab herders sought pasture; African farmers sought land; Jallaba merchants from the Nile valley sought new markets and routes. The droughts of the 20th century forced entire communities south, relying on communal relations and at times also straining them. And the terrible wars that started in 2002 displaced millions, within and beyond Darfur. The result is a patchwork of tribes, African and Arab, some with strong kinship ties in neighbouring countries, especially Chad.⁴⁵³

In the 1980s and 90s, bad governance in Sudan, coupled with conflict in Chad, Libya and southern Sudan, led to violence in Darfur. The region was awash with weapons and grievances. Khartoum invested ever fewer resources in Darfur and favoured Arabs, both local and newcomers, from Chad and Niger, over local African groups. Conflict over land between African farming communities and Arab agro-pastoralists simmered for 15 years, with violent flare-ups triggered by Khartoum's pro-Arab stance.⁴⁵⁴

Full conflict erupted in late 2002 as Darfurian rebels attacked government forces. In response, Khartoum unleashed a murderous counterinsurgency campaign, carried out by Arab Janjawid militias with the support of government forces, against the non-Arab communities from which the rebels rose – Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit and others. The main rebel groups were the mostly Zaghawa JEM and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLA), the latter the more effective military force. The SLA later split in two: SLA Minni Minawi (SLA-MM, Zaghawa) and the SLA-Abdul-Wahid (SLA-AW), predominantly Fur.⁴⁵⁵

Between 2003 and 2005, government-led violence killed hundreds of thousands, displaced over two million Darfurians – one in three – and shredded the society and

Mixed border forces, Bir Saliba

© *Nikhil Acarya*

economy of rural Darfur.⁴⁵⁶ Since then, violence has ebbed and flowed with the rise of militias and the attrition of rule of law. Today, several trends are clear in Darfur:

- A pervasive tribalization of society, encouraged by the regime.
- A splintering of rebel groups and government militias alike.
- The government's retreat from the provision of law and order and services, and its focus on divide-and-rule policies enforced through various paramilitary militias.
- A dense overlap between conflicts in Darfur and neighbouring areas – Kordofan, South Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic, Libya – that facilitate the spread of weapons, fighters and instability.
- A complex web of cross-border businesses controlled by armed state and non-state actors.

People may be exhausted with violence in Darfur but, for desert communities especially, illicit activities are a way of life.

The result is an environment highly conducive to organized crime. Darfur has it all: large under-governed areas, porous borders, armed actors and regional instability. Most importantly, Khartoum has largely taken a back seat in terms of law and order, yet remains powerful enough to exert violent influence in the pursuit of illicit gains. So, while Darfur is no longer the scene of the massive human-rights abuses of 15 years ago, insecurity is rampant, few of the displaced have returned home, small arms are widely available and organized illicit activities, often enabled by the government, are widespread: war-tainted gold mining, organized banditry, racketeering, and migrant smuggling and trafficking.

These activities, abusive as they are, are not always a net loss for communities. People may be exhausted with violence in Darfur, but for desert communities especially – Abbala Arabs, Meidob, Zaghawa, in Darfur; Kabbabish in Kordofan; and Gorane and Tebu in Chad – illicit activities are a way of life, much as livestock rustling once was. Smuggling, fighting, banditry, gold panning are all livelihoods for young men who have few other options.⁴⁵⁷ Stemming them will require finding something for these communities to live from. That is not a simple task.

Migrant smuggling: The model of government-enabled organized crime

Sudan has historically been both a source of migrants and a major transit hub. The main driver is geography, and Darfur in particular lies at the intersection of powerful push factors. Poverty, repression and war in Sudan and its neighbours have internally displaced more than two million people.⁴⁵⁸ For some of these, Libya is still a land of opportunity in its own right – Sudanese migrants tend to have more access to jobs in Libya than, say, East Africans from the Horn. Others see instability and smuggling networks in the North African neighbour as offering the chance for a passage to Europe – albeit more a remote glimmer than a reality in recent years.⁴⁵⁹

The overriding factor, however, was the enabling role played by the Sudanese government under Omar al-Bashir. (At the time of writing, it is unclear what the stance of the new authorities in Khartoum on smuggling.) Unlike their counterparts in Mali, Niger or even Chad, Sudanese authorities exert control across much of their territory.



FIGURE 9: Smuggling and trafficking routes through Darfur

Khartoum has used smuggling as a reward for intelligence and paramilitary forces, particularly the RSF.

Historically, two main routes have been followed by migrants out of Sudan: the western route through Libya to the Mediterranean, and the eastern route to the Sinai and Israel. The western route includes several sub-routes: Khartoum–Dongola–Libya; Khartoum–el-Fasher–Malha–Libya; and el-Fasher–Chad–Libya, the third through the Tibesti and the gold mines on the Libya–Chad borders.⁴⁶⁰ Migrants join these routes at any point, but Khartoum’s strategic position and size make it a mustering point for both smuggling rings and migrants. Secondary hubs are el-Fasher in North Darfur and Dongola in northern Sudan.⁴⁶¹

A route north from Dongola to Egypt through the Western Desert allows migrants to avoid RSF and Libyan predation. The eastern route along the Red Sea, now less used, reflected some of the same dynamics as the Darfur routes: Rashaida and Beja smuggling

Human-smuggling operations are mostly run by small, autonomous armed bands, with few vehicles but far-reaching networks.

networks, the collusion of Sudanese security forces and the downstream sale of migrants to traffickers outside Sudan.⁴⁶²

Human-smuggling operations are mostly run by small, autonomous armed bands, with few vehicles but far-reaching networks. A UN report states that ‘organized criminal gangs’ and ‘Darfuri armed actors’, including Darfuri rebel groups and ‘Arab militia groups’ are the main groups smuggling migrants from Darfur. They levy taxes from other smugglers – the broad categories used do not exclude government actors, like the RSF.⁴⁶³ Both rebels and former rebels are active – former rebels especially, as fighters in active rebel groups may be better controlled by leaders, or find it more lucrative to operate as mercenaries – in Libya, for instance.

Tribal networks are also important, including Zaghawa in north-eastern Darfur and Chad, particularly on the routes from around Tiné to the north-west of Chad, camel-herding Meidob around Malha, and various Abbala Arabs in North Darfur.⁴⁶⁴ There is competition for territory, with RSF forces seeking to encroach on Meidob and Zaghawa territory in north-east and north-west Darfur. Former enemies also collaborate, for instance Zaghawa rebels and former Janjawid. This is normal: for generations, even during recent conflicts, these communities clashed, but they also lived together, trading, intermarrying and collaborating to find pasture, resolve disputes and face off outsiders.⁴⁶⁵

Libyan networks, primarily Tebu and Arab Zwayya (the latter have become increasingly dominant on these routes since 2016) do not reach into Sudan.⁴⁶⁶ But human smuggling along these routes has become a vector in Libyan human trafficking, and the lines between the two have blurred.⁴⁶⁷ The same migrant may be both smuggled and trafficked: the switch typically happens after the migrants’ delivery to a Libyan network inside Libya. In Um al-Aranib, for

instance, Sudanese smugglers sell migrants to Libyan traffickers, who then often abuse and ransom them, or put them to work as indentured labourers in agricultural schemes and gold mines.⁴⁶⁸

The criminal economy in Darfur has largely come under the control of the RSF in Darfur. Khartoum raised the RSF in 2013 among Darfur Abbala (camel-herding) Arabs, expanding later to other groups, to counter the rising defiance of former Janjawid leader Musa Hilal, whose militias, rebranded as Border Guards, were increasingly beyond Khartoum’s control. Enmity grew between Hilal and Hemmeti, the RSF leader – essentially an intra-Arab conflict among Northern Rizeigat Abbala clans of Darfur, Hilal’s Mahamid and Hemmeti’s Maharia. The RSF became the regime’s main praetorian guard, deployed throughout Sudan to kill restive tribal militias in Darfur, Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North rebels in the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile, and civilian protestors in cities across the country.⁴⁶⁹

In 2014, the EU initiated the Khartoum Process, providing assistance to Sudan and other countries in the region to stem irregular migratory flows towards the Mediterranean. Bilateral assistance followed from Italy, Germany and the UK Britain – a process that was amplified following the Valletta Summit of 2015. Khartoum engaged eagerly as the initiatives dovetailed with Bashir’s ambition to rehabilitate himself and his administration, following the sanctions years and his International Criminal Court indictment for war crimes in 2009.⁴⁷⁰

Under Bashir, the RSF were the regime’s primary tool to manage human smuggling. The RSF played a public role in linking anti-smuggling efforts to international recognition and in particular the lifting of sanctions⁴⁷¹ – a familiar position among armed groups across the region, wherever prospects of EU funding for border-control activities arose.⁴⁷² EU support to Khartoum has fuelled criticism that European engagement ignores Khartoum’s repressive rule and provides potential dual-use equipment to units engaged in brutal abuses, including human smuggling. The EU says it does not fund the RSF or equip Sudanese border forces with dual-use equipment.⁴⁷³ But an authoritative recent study reports an EU official stating that it is in fact



Rapid Support Forces in Siba, West Darfur

© Nikhil Acarya

‘difficult to guarantee this in practice’ and that ‘vehicles, surveillance equipment, computers and phones’ can be seen as dual-use. Moreover, the EU’s Better Migration Management programme also considered providing vehicles, computers, cameras, and even aircraft, to the Sudanese Ministry of Interior, though the provision aircraft was ‘unlikely’.⁴⁷⁴

On the ground, the RSF are at once regulators and participants, carrying out interceptions while participating in human smuggling.⁴⁷⁵ The group profits through catch-and-release actions – ransoming smugglers, confiscating their human cargo or demanding payment for passage – but more so through its own smuggling operations.⁴⁷⁶ The RSF have also absorbed former rebels, for instance the forces of former SLA-MM commander Mohammadein Orgajor, a Zaghawa who is now reported to be an RSF colonel. Local contacts say his forces remain active in migrant smuggling and that the RSF rely on him to control Zaghawa areas in north-western Darfur and

the tri-border with Chad and Libya.⁴⁷⁷ The powerful National Intelligence Security Service is also reported to benefit from human smuggling.⁴⁷⁸

In a phone interview, a Darfurian rebel commander in Libya described how, avoiding large towns in Darfur, army and security officers now escort migrants to northern mustering points, like Sodiri (North Kordofan) and al-Atroun (North Darfur), where RSF personnel then take them over for the transport across the desert to Libya.⁴⁷⁹ The RSF have also been cooperating with Subul al-Salam, a predominantly Zwayya madkhali (Salafi) militia that General Haftar’s LNA has tasked with border force operations (see also Libya section).⁴⁸⁰

Nonetheless, despite the RSF’s active role in human smuggling and trafficking, they have also had a negative effect on migratory flows on the Sudan–Libya routes. By the end of 2016, the flow of East African migrants, especially Eritreans and Ethiopians, started declining – in part due to interceptions on the routes to Uweinat and Kufra from Dongola. In the first quarter of 2017, the price for a full-package journey from Khartoum to Libya and onwards to

Europe, complete with the sea crossing, had risen to €6 000, from around €3 500 in 2015.⁴⁸¹

The decline was also the result of a dismantling of some of the Eritrean and Ethiopian smuggling networks. These networks sought alternative routes to Egypt from Dongola. Thousands of East Africans became trapped in Cairo and Alexandria throughout 2017 and the first half of 2018, while others tried to cross into Libya.⁴⁸²

Gold in the hills

Gold mining takes different forms in Sudan: industrial mining, on a large and small scale, often involving foreign capital; artisanal, hand-dug mining; and the processing of mine tailings.⁴⁸³ The relevance of this sector to the overall analysis of organized crime is that most gold mining in Sudan benefits networks with political and commercial ties with the former Sudanese regime.⁴⁸⁴ The focus here is on the intersection of artisanal mining with armed groups and smugglers.

Gold discoveries in Jebel Amir in northern Darfur in 2012 set off a gold rush that drew artisanal miners from across Darfur and the Sahel, as many as 125 000.⁴⁸⁵ The area was under control of local Beni Hussein Arabs (who were not very involved in Janjawid operations) and former Janjawid commander Musa Hilal, a northern Rizeigat Arab. In 2013, Musa Hilal expelled the Beni Hussein, killing 840 and displacing 150 000.⁴⁸⁶ Hilal then asserted control over much of Jebel Amir, where RSF commander Hemmeti also had gold-mining interests. There are also reports that a company owned by Hemmeti, al-Jineid, partnered with National Intelligence Security Service interests to process gold tailings in Jebel Amir. Other government officials also got rich: the then governor of North Darfur, Osman Kibir, a local official known as a steadfast executor of Khartoum's policies in Darfur, is reported to have grown wealthy through gold.⁴⁸⁷

In 2015, a UN report concluded that a good portion of Jebel Amir gold was aggregated in the western Darfur town of el-Geneina, then flown to the capital and hand-carried on commercial flights out of Khartoum airport, mostly to the UAE.⁴⁸⁸ The UAE charges no fees for incoming gold, and customs officials there turn a blind eye to the gold being declared as scrap (low quality). This enables smugglers to then sell the gold to emporia in Dubai, allowing it to enter the global market.⁴⁸⁹ Through a set of costing models, the UN panel of experts on Sudan said they were 'almost certain' that Jebel Amir yielded Musa Hilal an annual income of US\$54 million – US\$28 million from levies on prospectors and ancillary businesses, US\$17 million in prospecting revenue and US\$9 million in illegal gold exports – and that over the 2010 – 2014 period, Jebel Amir gold brought 'Darfurian armed groups' US\$123 million in revenues.⁴⁹⁰ These conclusions have been challenged on the basis that these figures do not account for the fact that many individual miners and service providers also benefit from the mining.⁴⁹¹ In hindsight, the UN report seems to have underestimated how other actors benefited from the gold mining in Jebel Amir, most notably the RSF and its commander, Hemmeti, and other figures tied to the Bashir regime.

After years of tension, Khartoum finally moved on Musa Hilal in late 2017, deploying the RSF to forcibly collect the weapons of rebellious Abbala and arresting Musa Hilal.⁴⁹² Hemmeti and the RSF, and affiliated Abbala Arab groups, are now the main owners of Jebel Amir gold. According to a recent report from Kabkabiya, Musa Hilal's forces are completely defeated; only a few remain around Mellit, well east of the goldfields. The RSF are in control of all three localities in the Jebel Amir area: Kabkabiya, al-Sireif Beni Hussein and Saraf Omra. They monitor the gold areas especially closely: no police forces are active there, and the RSF only are in control of security. Not even a fly can get in without their permission, according to a Tama miner who returned from the goldfields in early June. Al-Jineid, Hemmeti's company, controls all the gold. Most of the money-making operations are controlled by Hemmeti's Maharia Arabs, many of them from Chad. Miners not affiliated with the Maharia or the RSF are forced out if they are successful.⁴⁹³ A higher-level Darfurian gold trader in Khartoum also confirmed that al-Jineid is currently the main player in trading artisanal gold.⁴⁹⁴

Weapons trafficking and the commodification of violence

Darfur is both an origin and a destination for smuggled weapons and ammunition. Weapons flows from Darfur to neighbouring countries are more ad hoc occurrences than the result of organized smuggling. Libya, for instance, has been a source of arms in the subregion, both during and after Qaddafi, but Sudanese weapons, and especially ammunition, are found in Libya, most coming from Darfur. Both Libyan and Sudanese leaders recognized that Sudan provided weapons to rebel forces during the 2011 revolution.⁴⁹⁵

Darfurian armed groups also bring weapons and ammunition into Libya, where they fight on various sides of the conflicts there. In 2018 and 2019, for instance, the UN reported numerous examples of weapons outflows from Darfur to Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic.⁴⁹⁶ There are also documented reports of Arab, Tebu and Tuareg combatants in Libya and Mali acquiring small arms ammunition manufactured in Sudan in 2011, 2013 and 2014.⁴⁹⁷

Weapons also enter Darfur. For instance, Darfurian armed groups – SLA-MM and another splinter groups – entering Darfur from Libya in May 2017 brought with them large amounts of weapons, ammunition and military materiel.⁴⁹⁸ In fact, loot is often more lucrative to rebels contracted in Libya than the agreed remuneration for their mercenary services. However, these instances are more a violation of the arms embargo than weapons trafficking as such. Between 2014 and 2016, Tebu smuggling networks provided SLA-MM and JEM some of their heaviest weapons from Libya. The flow of heavy weapons diminished after 2014 as supply decreased, as a result of a depletion of Qaddafi-era stockpiles and increasing demand within Libya with more pull than the Darfur market (see Libya section).⁴⁹⁹

Armed groups also commoditize violence through criminal activities that are less visible to the outside world but that greatly affect daily life in Darfur. Armed banditry remains a ubiquitous problem, including in the big towns. The more stable areas are under the control of tribal armed groups, often former Janjawid and sometimes even government paramilitaries, who offer paid escort services to 'protect' commercial vehicles from 'bandits' – most often the very groups offering protection.⁵⁰⁰ Similarly, Arab militiamen run lucrative transport services for goods and passengers along key roads.

The practice of tollgates along trading roads is another form of organized extortion: the 195-kilometre drive between Nyala and el-Fasher, Darfur's main cities, involves nearly 40 such gates where tolls are charged. Official attempts to curb the practice led to spikes in brazen highway robbery as armed elements held up and robbed traffic in retaliation for official action against the tollgates.⁵⁰¹ The RSF also extracts money from lorry-drivers, either at tollgates or through escort fees. The practice continued after the fall of Bashir. However, in May 2019, lorry drivers went on strike in Fasher in northern Darfur, protesting the RSF escort fees.⁵⁰²

Another source of income for armed groups has been the import of looted 4x4 vehicles from the Central African Republic and Libya, which authorities legalize through licensing – a process which then makes these vehicles highly competitive on the Sudanese market.⁵⁰³ The UN reported that criminal activity surged with the arrival of such vehicles in 2016.⁵⁰⁴ A report from the ground indicates that the RSF are collecting looted vehicles in their al-Zuruq camp, near Korno in north-eastern Darfur.⁵⁰⁵

Perhaps the most destabilizing criminal activity in Darfur is the commodification of Darfuri fighters. Armed Darfurians sell their services as purveyors of violence across the Sahel – as mercenaries, highway robbers, and armed muscle for smugglers of goods, drugs and migrants.⁵⁰⁶ In Libya especially, Darfurians fight as guns for hire on all sides of the conflict – sometimes with permission to reward themselves through looting, or act as simple bandits and traffickers.

According to a recent UN report, the largest Darfuri group in Libya is SLA-MM (with 150 to 200 vehicles), the entire fighting force of which is in the Jufra region of Libya with the LNA. The second largest group is the Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces (with 100 vehicles), also Zaghawa, and also aligned with Haftar. The SLA-AW also has a presence in Libya (50 vehicles), said to be fairly autonomous, vacillating between Haftar and anti-Haftar forces. JEM has a smaller presence (20–30 vehicles), aligned with anti-Haftar forces. Another group is the SLA-Transitional Council, aligned with SLA-MM and Haftar but also in contact with SLA-AW. Elements of the Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council, Musa Hilal's political organization, fled to Libya after the RSF routed his Border Guard (ex-Janjawid) militia, and are being courted by various factions.

Finally, individual Darfuri fighters, former rebels and pro-government fighters alike, hire out their services to all sides in the Libyan conflict (Darfuri Arabs are reportedly in greater demand to counter reciprocal accusations by Libyan groups of using African mercenaries).⁵⁰⁷ A commander with the SLA-Transitional Council described Libya as a lawless country where everyone, Libyans and foreigners, benefited from smuggling ('everyone is busy'), though he stressed that his forces had an official agreement with Haftar's LNA, and were not mercenaries.⁵⁰⁸

Beyond the Darfur–Libya axis, the Sudanese government(s) and myriad armed groups have recruited, deployed and rented out young Darfurians, as well as young men from tribes in neighbouring areas. In Yemen, the forces that the Bashir regime sent to fight in the Saudi war against the Houthis include a majority of young men, and even boys, from Darfur (see also Chad section).⁵⁰⁹ Hemmeti's RSF are heavily involved in the Saudi war in Yemen, so it comes as little surprise that the military council that seized power in Khartoum in April, of which Hemmeti was the deputy leader, stated its intent to continue sending troops to Yemen.⁵¹⁰ Hemmeti and other RSF commanders are reported to have been directly involved in recruitment for the Saudis. To this effect, a Chadian contact reports that Hemmeti had recently opened a recruitment office in Nyala, where a Saudi

delegation was able to recruit Sudanese and Chadian men and boys in cash.⁵¹¹ Despite the dangers, many young Darfurians seek to go to Yemen because of the financial rewards, even paying bribes to local leaders who act as brokers with the recruiters.⁵¹²

In South Sudan, though their presence is currently winding down, Darfurian rebel groups have been present since 2012/2013, especially JEM, fighting on the side of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) against the SPLM-IO, and more recently also against Fertit militias in western Bahr al-Ghazal, where a Masalit-dominated JEM splinter group, the Sudanese

Revolutionary Council, is also active against the Fertit militias.⁵¹³ In the Central African Republic, Darfurian fighters helped the Séléka roll into Bangui, which then triggered the anti-Balaka backlash against Muslims.⁵¹⁴ And in Sudan itself, Darfurian youth are recruited by the government and a long list of militias.

All this is a direct result of the situation the Sudanese regime created in Darfur: widely available weapons, no rule of law, a collapse of rural livelihoods, massive displacement and few alternatives for young men. The oft-cited Sudanese popular adage continues to hold strong: *al-klash bijeeb al-kash* ('the AK-47 brings cash').

Looking ahead as change hits Khartoum

The illicit markets described above are deeply intertwined. Networks of Sudanese perpetrators and victims interact and overlap across Sudan, Chad, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Libya, Niger and Mali, as well as Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea – through migrant smuggling, gold production and violence-based livelihoods. The common factor in these illicit markets has been the enabling role of the Bashir regime. Through lack of investment, economic mismanagement, political repression and war, the government has created the environment where these markets developed.

Popular protests across Sudan led to the fall of Bashir in April 2019. A Transitional Military Council (TMC) took power. The military first claimed they would yield power to civilians, but in early June, the TMC violently broke up the peaceful sit-in outside the military headquarters in Khartoum. In August a mixed civilian-military sovereign council was sworn in, and a civilian prime minister took office in September. But the power of military leaders and especially the RSF's Hemmeti remains largely unchecked.

The Bashir government profited indirectly from illicit activities, allowing militias to auto-finance, developing patronage networks, and allowing powerful individuals to amass great wealth. Given the opacity of financial

relationships within the Sudanese regime, and especially of security-related budgetary flows, it was unclear whether the RSF and other actors channelled revenue from illicit activities directly to the central government.

After Bashir's fall, however, Hemmeti claimed that the RSF had over time deposited over a billion US dollars with the Sudanese Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Sudan, sourced from the war in Yemen and the gold trade.⁵¹⁵ How true this is remains to be confirmed – Hemmeti would have many reasons to say the RSF is paying the Sudanese state (rather than stealing from it) and discredit Bashir. But his claim draws renewed attention to how closely knitted RSF activities and the Sudanese state are.

With Bashir gone, the question now is whether the successor government will wean the country from these activities, given how many armed interest groups are vested in them. At the time of writing, Hemmeti – RSF commander, shadow strongman, and key player in Sudanese smuggling dynamics – has emerged as the most powerful man in post-Bashir Sudan. His company, al-Jineid, controls much of the artisanal gold production and trade. The RSF will clearly remain an all-powerful player, and unlikely to readily forfeit lucrative illicit activities.



TRENDS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS



Criminal economies in the Sahel-Sahara have undergone significant transformations in the past five years and, as underlined by the six country assessments, these changes have greatly varied from one geographical area to the other. Some relatively new illicit markets, such as the trade in counterfeit pharmaceuticals and tramadol, are booming, whereas other criminal economies, like cocaine trafficking, have been undermined. Most criminal markets, however, have seen shifts in their modus operandi, routes and in some cases the type of actors involved.

Three major developments in the region explain these shifts. First, growing instability and banditry in northern Sahel, intensified by conflicts in southern Libya and northern Mali since 2011 and 2012, have increased the number of armed groups in the region, resulting in greater violent competition for control of trans-Saharan trafficking and smuggling routes. Violent clashes between armed groups for the tenure of protection rackets and escort services along these routes have increased the cost of trafficking, particularly of the most targeted high-value commodities, such as cocaine and weapons. This has reduced the profit margins of traffickers, and rendered the Sahel-Sahara less reliable as a transit hub for global trafficking flows.

Secondly, the French military Operation Barkhane since 2014, US surveillance operations and regional securitization, particularly in Algeria, have placed added pressure on trafficking across the region, especially in the corridor connecting northern Mali to southern Libya through northern Niger. The increased military efforts along the Algerian borders with Niger and Mali have increased the risks posed to criminal networks.

Finally, EU-backed crackdowns on migrant-smuggling economies in Libya, Niger and Sudan in 2016 and 2017, and Chad's attempts to close its border with Libya since 2017, which have been stepped up since early 2019, have further impacted transnational criminal operations.

Men building a wall to help irrigate a vegetable farm in Bilma, Niger, August, 2018.

© Joe Penney

Although some criminal economies contracted as a consequence of these interventions, most trafficking and smuggling networks simply adapted their operations to suit the new environment. For example, while the migrant-smuggling industries have reduced considerably in Niger, and to a lesser extent in Sudan, since 2016, smugglers who continue their operations have resorted to more covert activities. This has rendered the operations of those still active riskier but also increased the overlap between human smuggling and abuse of migrants, as well as between low-level drug trafficking and other more serious criminal activity. In Libya, for instance, parts of the human-smuggling economy have shifted to the extortion of migrants through torture to compensate for reduced migration and lost revenues.⁵¹⁶

Another example includes changes in the cocaine trade. In spite of the disruption to this trafficking stream, the high profit margin in this trade still makes it the most lucrative illicit economy in the Sahel. To facilitate its trade and avoid the scrutiny of security forces, new routes and strategic trafficking hubs have emerged in remote border regions of Niger and Mali in recent years. Armed groups have made the targeting of these high-value convoys their business model, helping to flourish an overlapping protection economy by militias that offer protection services to traffickers. These groups can also be involved in mercenary work in Libya or conflict in northern Mali, further underlining how organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara have become increasingly intertwined.

Current local and international interventions to tackle organized crime have focused on a securitized approach that amalgamates the fight against organized crime with countering violent extremism. This single-handed focus fails to address the root causes of organized crime, which lie in a dearth of economic opportunity and regional governments' failures to enhance local development or address criminal infiltration and corruption within states. The pervasive levels of corruption within Sahelian states and their security apparatus have permitted criminal markets to emerge in the first place and then enabled their expansion.

The future of organized crime in the Sahel remains uncertain given these realities. Inconsistent security efforts and inadequate development initiatives are not encouraging either. The regional G5 Sahel Joint Force faces persistent financial and organizational challenges, which have undermined its mission, scope and credibility.⁵¹⁷ Operation Barkhane, which has had a presence in Mali, Niger and Chad since 2014, announced in July 2019 that it would withdraw troops from its forward base in northern Niger to increase its focus on northern Mali, where enduring conflict has intensified in the past year. As for development initiatives, regional and international partners still work in silos, promoting independent development, peacebuilding and justice-reform initiatives instead of harmoniously complementing each other's efforts. Meanwhile, the Sahel-Sahara remains one of the most underdeveloped regions in the world, and weak governance in the region is unlikely to respond to the needs of the world's fastest-growing youth populations.

Evolution of criminal markets

Human smuggling goes underground

Human-smuggling activities in the Sahel have generally taken a clandestine turn since the enforcement of EU-driven policies against migrant smuggling in Libya, Niger and Sudan in 2016. The human-smuggling industry had boomed across the region in the years following the fall of Qaddafi in 2011. Independent smuggling networks swiftly profited from Libya's post-revolution crisis and the increased demand for migration to Europe to massively develop their business.⁵¹⁸

Migrant-smuggling across the region peaked in 2016 during what is commonly described as the height of the so-called 'migrant crisis', but these were quickly challenged later that same year by EU-backed initiatives, specifically targeting the operations of human smugglers.⁵¹⁹ In Libya, the sudden collapse of the coastal smuggling system heralded the development of an anti-smuggling business model by militias that undermined irregular migratory flows through the country.⁵²⁰ In Niger, a law criminalizing migrant smuggling was introduced, allowing for the arrest of intercepted migrant smugglers and the confiscation of their vehicles. In Sudan, the controversial RSF was tasked with halting migrant-smuggling activities on the Sudan–Libya border (see the Sudan country assessment).

However, although these interventions had achieved their intended effect of reducing arrivals of migrants in Europe by contracting the human smuggling industry, they have also made human smuggling a clandestine activity in which smugglers adopt sophisticated strategies and longer routes through the desert to dodge security forces, and use business models that have ushered in further abuse of migrants and human trafficking victims.⁵²¹

This shift has not only increased the cost of smuggling services, but has also boosted smugglers' profits, which has had the effect of convincing committed smugglers to continue the practice. For example, prices along the Agadez–Libya corridor for foreign migrants increased five-fold between 2016 and 2018. Smugglers attempt to justify this price increase because they pay higher fuel costs and undertake greater risks of receiving prison sentences and fines. This implies heftier bribes as these generally increase with the perceived severity of the crime. Hiding migrants in so-called 'ghettos', which frequently change location, has also become riskier and costlier.

The positive side of this law-enforcement drive is that it has stymied a ballooning illicit economy that was at least partly contributing to the coffers of destabilizing Nigerien, Chadian and Libyan armed groups. The negative side is that it has pushed a part of this industry deeper into the criminal economy, with no medium- to long-term plan on how to deal with this fallout. Given the high priority of the migration agenda for European

Human-smuggling activities in the Sahel have generally taken a clandestine turn since the enforcement of EU-driven policies against migrant smuggling.

stakeholders, the focus on tackling migrant smuggling activities is unlikely to falter in the medium term. Should this enforcement be sustained in the long term, it must be coupled with robust and effective plans to breed economic alternatives to criminal activities. More importantly, foreign intervention should not be focused solely on the human-smuggling industry but must take a more comprehensive outlook that reflects the interconnectivity between the broader black economy across the region.

Sahelian goldfields attract crime but are an opportunity for the region

Goldfields in the Sahel are likely to remain central nodes in regional criminal economies, acting as hubs for the illicit flows of people and goods, should Sahelian governments fail to prioritize their regularization in the long term.

In the past decade, the discovery of gold in the Sahel – in Sudan (in 2011), Chad (in 2012), Niger (in 2014), Mali (in 2014) and southern Algeria (in 2014) – significantly impacted organized crime in the region, not least because miners and armed groups from across the region arrived in mass, attracted by the wealth prospects offered by the gold economy.⁵²² The Kouri Bougoudi goldfield in Chad, for instance, is said to have hosted over 40 000 gold miners at its peak. Many of these miners helped to generate returns for armed groups active in the Chad–Niger–Libya border areas.

Smuggling networks profited from the presence of miners and helped develop ancillary economies around Sahelian goldfields by supporting the provision of services such as food provision, supply of mining equipment and transportation. Parallel to this development, however, goldfields also became part of well-established trafficking routes, acting as strategic centres for the illicit trade of gold, but also drugs, arms and the smuggling of people. In particular, the trafficking of tramadol to gold mines boomed as the drug gained a reputation (and, in some cases, a mythical status) as a stimulant for young artisanal gold miners looking to increase stamina when performing hard manual labour at gold-drilling sites.

Confronted with these facts, Sahelian governments have adopted a militarized approach to addressing the challenges posed by illicit artisanal and small-scale gold mining. In Niger, a deployment of the Nigerien Armed Forces helped shut down the Djado goldfield in February 2017, which was officially closed due to security concerns. In southern Algeria, security forces arrested hundreds of unlicensed miners in early 2019 between Djanet and Tamanrasset.⁵²³ Since mid-2018, in north-western Chad, the Kouri Bougoudi and Miski goldfields experienced frequent violent crackdowns by the Chadian National Army, which included ground offensives and airstrikes. Once again, the government mainly cited security concerns, although many locals believe they were also seeking to open the way for industrial gold extraction.

The willingness of some Sahelian governments to intervene in goldfields is warranted to some extent, given that armed groups and bandits, who impinge on the stability of the broader region, benefit from the criminal economies around gold hubs. Nevertheless, the current approaches are a cause for concern, as governments have broadly failed to consider the needs and interests of local communities, which largely depend on the gold economy amid repressed economic contexts. As a result, these interventions only lead to greater resentment against the state.

In the long run, a singular focus on shutting down Sahelian goldfields and seeking to partner with international mining companies is counterproductive, as it will likely impinge on strategic goals of regional stability and development. It prevents communities from benefiting from what could otherwise be a stable livelihood that weans young people away from the criminal economy. Instead, artisanal mining should be explored as a development opportunity. A process initiated by Niamey in 2018, with the help of the World Bank, is seeking to regulate small-scale artisanal gold mining, to improve safety and security on sites, bring state presence to mines and govern extraction and the flow of gold and financial flows. This is a promising exercise that should be watched closely.⁵²⁴

Arms supply fails to meet growing demand

The years following the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 were characterized by the abundant supply of heavy weapons from national stockpiles, which flooded illicit markets across the region. In the past four to five years, however, this outflow has abated. Libyan heavy weapons are in short supply as stockpiles became depleted and internal demand grew in the wake of the civil war of 2014.

This shortage is compounded by the pressure placed on arms movement in the region by French and US security forces in Niger and Libya. Similarly, the militarization of the Algerian border has also undermined flows of weapons going from south-west Libya to northern Mali.

In general, there has been a shift of focus to small arms and light weapons, which are in part being imported internationally into Libya by sea. There has also been an increase in the number of attacks by armed groups on the weapon depots of small security force units with the objective of looting weapons and ammunitions, especially in Mali and Niger. This method is gaining popularity with the spreading of violence and instability towards central Mali and western Niger. It is also more cost-effective than purchasing weapons on the black market and has the advantage of potentially yielding other valuable loots, such as vehicles and satellite phones. A significant supply of small arms traded on local Sahelian markets is also made up of recycled weapons connected to past conflicts (a phenomenon seen in Libya, Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan).⁵²⁵ In this new landscape, demand outstrips supply – a reality that has been driving prices up.⁵²⁶

In the medium to long term, the limited injection of new weapons into Sahelian arms-trafficking markets could change. Arms smugglers could take advantage of the intensified instability in northern Libya since early 2019 to move larger volumes of weapons. Increased attacks against security forces and arms depots in Mali, Niger and neighbouring Burkina Faso will also likely continue to feed the local demand for arms. These trends could be further facilitated by a loosening of western oversight over the Niger–Libya corridor. In July 2019, the Barkhane counterterrorism operation closed its temporary forward base in Fort of Madama, on the Niger–Libya border, to rationalize resources as a result of their increased focus in Mali's Ménaka and Gossi areas.⁵²⁷

Meanwhile, arms trafficking continues to have devastating effects on local communities, as it perpetuates conflict and violence in the wider region and helps to sustain the cyclical insecurity that has impeded the region's development for decades.

Narcotics trafficking takes a hit but remains a top-tier criminal economy

The trans-Saharan narcotics route has taken a hit in recent years. The multiplication of armed actors competing for territorial control and the surge in targeted attacks by armed bandits on drug convoys have increased the cost of transport and protection services, reducing traffickers' profit margins. As with other trafficking streams, the oversight effect of Operation Barkhane on trafficking routes from northern Mali to southern Libya through Niger and the growing securitization of Algeria's southern borders have made it riskier for drug traffickers to transit the region.

As a result, the reliability of Sahelian land routes has been undermined. Maritime routes that follow the West African coastline to North Africa have been sought as more secure alternatives to land routes that transit the Sahel-Sahara from West Africa's ports. Shipments arriving from South America to North African ports are usually repackaged into different cargos then shipped to Europe. Drug busts in North African coastal areas, which have risen six-fold between 2015 and 2016, accounting for 69 per cent of all African seizures in 2016, seem to confirm this trend.⁵²⁸

This shift may have been facilitated by pre-existing ties between Moroccan hashish networks and South American cartels.⁵²⁹ In October 2017, the largest cocaine seizure in Morocco's history was made in Rabat, with 2.4 tonnes intercepted. However, these imports were not limited to Morocco, – in May 2018, the Algerian coastguard also made their country's largest seizure ever, when 700 kilograms of cocaine were intercepted off the coast of Oran on a vessel transporting frozen meat from Brazil.

Moreover, the trans-Saharan route was always considered to represent a relatively small slice of the flow of cocaine moving to European and Middle Eastern markets. In fact, although cocaine production has risen globally (1 976 tonnes in 2017 – a 25 per cent increase since 2016), the UNODC estimated that only about 5 per cent of cocaine produced in South America transited through West Africa to reach these markets in 2016.^{530, 531}

However, in spite of this context, the Sahel route cannot be said to be dying. And although the trans-Saharan route is not a major one, the March 2019 seizure of 789 kilograms of cocaine close to Bissau in a fish truck that was en route to Mali cannot be taken lightly. A subsequent seizure of 1.8 tonnes in September also had a Mali connection, with one of the suspects arrested being a Malian, the other five being Bissau-Guineans and Colombians. The profitability of cocaine means it remains one of the most coveted and lucrative criminal trades in the region, with a very disruptive impact on the security and stability of fragile countries such as Mali, Niger and Libya.⁵³²

Conversely, the trafficking of cannabis resin is assessed to be more stable than cocaine. From the transportation perspective, cannabis trafficking has benefited from the more horizontally structured networks engaged in this activity from Mauritania to Libya. At the same time, the outsized role of organized Moroccan cartels ensures a level of oversight at key junctures, which is needed to sustain in a commodity where the profit margin is not as high as that of cocaine. Due to the lower value of cannabis resin, profits are only made through the cost advantages that come with scaled operations

(i.e. transporting larger quantities of cannabis at a time). Consequently, Moroccan cartels both have the need, know-how and reach to prioritize limiting the negative effects of the increased presence of armed actors on their trade.

Overall, the trafficking of cocaine and cannabis is likely to continue to remain a key driver of violence in the Sahel, harming local Sahelian populations and hampering peace initiatives in the long term. In Mali, for example, clashes between signatories of the peace agreement on securing cocaine and hashish routes are likely to continue. The escorting of drug convoys is likely to stay as a major source of revenue for militant groups and bandits working on these flows.

The trafficking of cocaine and cannabis is likely to continue to remain a key driver of violence in the Sahel, harming locals and hampering peace initiatives.

Counterfeit medicine and tramadol trafficking boom threaten public health

Trafficking of counterfeit pharmaceuticals in the Sahel has experienced a boom in different countries in the Maghreb and Sahel. This is mainly because of the persistent failures of public healthcare systems in the region, the poor control over the supply chain of imported medicines and the consolidation of trafficking economies around this low-level, low-risk trade.

Given the difficulties accessing appropriate medication and health facilities, many local communities have resorted to self-medication, purchasing cheap, and in most cases, counterfeit medicines from street pharmacies. Almost one in three pharmaceuticals available on African markets is counterfeit, and this share is likely to be higher in the Sahel region.⁵³³ Worryingly, most of these counterfeit products are antimalarials and antibiotics, and therefore cater for the treatment of serious illnesses.⁵³⁴

Similarly, tramadol consumption initially proliferated for medicinal purposes. In the past two decades, the informal sale of the synthetic opioid has tapped into a demand for more affordable painkillers.⁵³⁵ The drug also became used recreationally, fuelling a 'tramadol crisis' that has had devastating health consequences across the region.⁵³⁶

This demand is fed by imports through ports in Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Seizure data seems to corroborate this trend. In sub-Saharan Africa, tramadol seizures increased tenfold in under three years, from 300 kilograms in 2013 to just over 3 tonnes in 2016. Indian pharmaceutical companies supplying the market sustained the growth in African demand, producing increasingly higher-dosage tablets – up to 450 milligrams (as opposed to the 50- to 100-milligram pills sold in regular pharmacies).⁵³⁷ Given the unrelenting demand, companies are likely to continue to increase the dosage of tablets in the future. This will pose additional risks to consumers and increase misuse and abuse of the drug.

From an organized-crime perspective this developing industry has also driven a proliferation in the number of actors involved in the trade. Tramadol is smuggled northwards to destination markets in the Sahel and Sahara, often by small horizontally structured smuggling networks. The normalization of tramadol consumption in the region has made it a fairly safe commodity to transport, as it does not have a

reputation, unlike cocaine, for instance, of being associated with armed traffickers. As a result, the low risks associated with the trade have attracted a number of young, low-level actors, who in some cases progress into more serious crime after starting with the trafficking of this drug.

Conversely, in Niger, numerous former migrant smugglers turned to the trade of tramadol to compensate for lost revenue after the mid-2015 criminalization of human smuggling in that country. The concealability of the drug, as opposed to arms or weapons, has been seen as an additional factor facilitating its trafficking.⁵³⁸ In spite of the increasing recognition of this phenomenon in the past two years, the extent of the tramadol epidemic is yet to be fully understood and addressed effectively by Sahelian states. This is unlikely to change in the short term. Their reluctance is likely to stem from the fact that the drug is vital to respond to health needs of populations that are presently not catered for. Moreover, most governments in the region lack the means to enforce stricter control over the larger supply chain of imported medicines.

Protection rackets and trading mercenaries

Protection rackets, organized banditry and mercenary practices have been a pervasive and growing phenomenon in the Sahel in recent years. This commodification of violence has become a key source of funding for armed groups, who profit from the various conflicts in the Sahel Sahara region. Leveraging their mobility, knowledge and capacity to fight for profit, these armed groups either serve governments and military forces as mercenaries or co-opted units, and/or participate in criminal economies as guns-for-hire.

In the Tripoli war in north-western Libya, which began in April 2019, mercenaries from Sudan, Chad, and to a lesser extent Niger, have been engaged fighting alongside both GNA- and LNA-aligned forces. These include former and current fighters from the SLA and the JEM, as well as the CCMSR. Fighters from these groups make ideal front-line combatants for the LNA and GNA, as they often receive lower salaries than locally sourced fighters, and their relatives are less likely to request financial compensation in the event of death. Groups receive payments in cash but the real payout is often the loot (in the form of vehicles, cash and weapons) that they can gain access to.

Armed groups involved in mercenary activities have also oriented their activities to criminal endeavours that typically fall under three categories: direct involvement in the transport of arms, drugs or people; escorting and protecting traffickers; and the targeting and hijacking of drug convoys to resell the booty, sometimes to the same traffickers they have just robbed. These criminal activities have expanded in the wake of the Libyan civil war in 2014 across a vast stretch of territory around the intersection between the Libyan, Nigerien and Chadian borders, which has developed into an incubation area for these armed groups.

Mercenary work and the trade of young men and boys for mercenary protection rackets and organized banditry practices are likely to continue in the medium to long term, as armed conflicts and ungoverned territories remain a reality in the region. The lucrative profits made from these practices are likely to attract more young men with few economic prospects.

Policy implications

The challenges posed by organized crime in the region require a multifaceted response. On the one hand, responses should seek to minimize the hardships on local populations; on the other, they should target criminal markets while investing in long-term development solutions. All actors engaged in the region – national governments, local authorities, civil society, international partners – need to coordinate their actions through an integrated vision that aims to reduce harm and violence caused by organized crime, and ultimately, offer socio-economic opportunities to counter those provided by criminal economies.

Such a vision requires a policy agenda that is evidence-based, reflective of local realities and not dominated by security efforts. This agenda should be fed by constant monitoring of the criminal industries, so responses can be timely and adaptable to changing dynamics.

The breadth of this research project, by its nature, necessitates the sacrificing of detail. Moreover, the project was carried out in the context of major knowledge gaps that remain at the macro- and even more so at the micro-level. Tailored research is needed to elaborate specific policy recommendations country by country, and territory by territory, while not losing the overall regional perspective. Nonetheless, based on insights developed as part of this research project we can distill the following policy recommendations.

Recognize and respond to organized crime as a threat in its own right

States in the Sahel and their international partners are increasingly recognizing the negative impact of organized crime. However, the subject remains secondary to and/or conditioned by the priority of violent extremism. Organized crime needs to be seen as a threat in its own right, one that has its own features, modus operandi, challenges and effects across the Sahel-Sahara. Counterterrorism strategies are often not adaptable to combat organized crime. The blanket militarization we have seen across the region in recent years has produced mixed results on the counterterrorism front but has had a devastating effect on small actors at the bottom of the criminal value chain who make a living through the criminal economy. A portion of these actors may very well endure the economic impact but others have been seeking alternatives, at times moving into more clandestine and serious criminal enterprises as a result.

Any strategy applied to combat organized crime must acknowledge that local communities, the state and international actors often do not see criminality in the same way. Throughout the region, organized crime – and even the most violent businesses, such as banditry, mercenary work, cocaine or arms trafficking – provides economic lifelines not only to the individuals directly involved but also to the communities they spring from. Much of the organized-criminal activity described in this report is inherently the outcome of poverty, bad governance, corruption and exploitative power dynamics. Treating organized crime as a threat in its own right would help place a greater premium on achieving a balance between law enforcement and development strategies that address root causes of criminal activities across the region.

Prioritize the fight against corruption and state collusion with criminal networks

The fight against corruption should be at the centre of all counter-crime efforts in the region. Local governments and international partners should take stock of well-known collusion practices between the state (including politicians, bureaucrats and law enforcement actors) and criminal actors and businessmen involved in legal and illicit economies. Currently, this topic is taboo in diplomatic exchanges, peacebuilding efforts and international assistance programmes. This must change. Collusion between elite politicians and criminals, weak governance and the lack of accountability and impunity are pervasive. Traffickers involved in criminal economies are rarely prosecuted, and not just owing to lack of capacity, but also because there is little political will to do so.

Corruption should not be seen just as a financial or a technical challenge. In the most fragile areas of the region, it is a well-established strategy of governance. Hence, corruption should be tackled through the adoption of holistic strategies that condition international partnerships and investment, together with reform of regulatory frameworks, greater transparency, and the strengthening of judicial and law-enforcement institutions. The reality is that no sustainable results can be achieved without addressing the widespread culture of impunity that exists in the region. If states and international actors are seriously willing to fight against criminal economies, naming-and-shaming campaigns against major traffickers in the region could be a good start.

Implement tailored and agile policy actions

Current policy responses to combat trafficking and organized crime are sparse and generally uncoordinated. A policy shift is needed at this level. The diversity seen in the criminal and political/governance systems in the Sahel necessitates tailored policy responses, while maintaining a regional orientation. Critically, the lead time of action needs to be shortened. Structural changes and the military actions taken across the region, particularly since 2011, have intensified the rate of change, with the implications requiring a quick response at the political, economic and social level.

Trafficking of prescription drugs, particularly tramadol, would have less structural consequences today on Sahelian communities and public-health systems had actions been taken promptly when this phenomenon began to take root five to ten years ago. Policy actions must also be agile enough to integrate responses targeting multiple commodities where necessary, as in the case of the overlap between gold mining, human smuggling and the trafficking of prescription drugs, for instance. Overall, a better equilibrium needs to be achieved between law-enforcement and development approaches: the current security-first approach adopted across the region is short-termist and laden with the risk of unintended consequences.

Empower civil society as a vehicle for fighting organized crime and violence

International partners of Sahelian countries should support a strong civil society community as a means to combat organized crime. Investigative journalists, local civil-society organizations (CSOs), women and youth organizations as well as religious authorities and other non-state actors are all critical protagonists in informing and protecting communities from the threats posed by criminal networks.

Too often, the role of these actors is overlooked. Even when international funds are allocated to CSOs, they often do not reach small-scale community-based actors because of outreach limits and/or because local activists do not have the capacity or know-how to attract and make use of such funding. In the Sahel-Sahara context, where the state presence is weak or in some cases non-existent, civil-society actors can represent a catalyst for effective action against organized crime and act as a vehicle to boost community resilience. Strengthening the operational capacity of CSOs through technical and financial support that reaches grassroots level should be a policy priority for states or organizations aiming to build sustainable solutions.

Promote cooperation between Saharan and Sahelian states in the fight against organized crime

Better cooperation to combat organized crime is needed between the Maghreb and the Sahel. The two regions share more than just borders and socio-economic ties: trafficking networks are part of a criminal continuum that straddles the two regions – and yet current regional cooperation to combat organized crime is limited. There is an urgent need to develop joint frameworks among the countries of the Sahel, the Maghreb and the broader West African region. Agreements on common border control and monitoring exist (there are accords between Chad, Sudan, Libya and Egypt), as do joint political bilateral border committees (Algeria, Mali and Niger) and joint military commandment (Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger). However, these efforts tend to be focused on border control and implemented in institutional frameworks that are slow in responding, or meet infrequently or sporadically.

Moreover, the many initiatives and plans led by international partners to assist the Sahelian states rarely include North African countries. The Community for Sahel-Sahara States (Communauté des États Sahélo-Sahariens), a regional economic bloc that includes 29 states from West, North, and East Africa, seems to be the most suited institution to address regional organized-crime challenges. The grouping can raise awareness and initiate working groups, channels of communications and policy action. Although the institution was inactive for some time, recent initiatives, including an April 2019 summit in N'Djamena, suggest that there is a political will to build a revamped common project.^{539,540}

Increase research and monitor the evolution of organized crime in the Sahel

Research that assesses the prevalence, scale and impact of criminal economies in the region remains limited. There are significant gaps in information on how criminal markets develop and operate in the region. Moreover, good-quality data remains scarce and fragmented. Hard data that is commonly collected by law enforcement through seizure and arrests is also rare and often inconsistent. Yet data is key to empirical research and better-informed policies. Moreover, given the particular challenge presented by the criminal and geographic realities, what is needed is both a granular understanding and a regional overview. For this, there is a real need for the international community to support greater research on the political economy of organized crime in the region and build local capacity through broad-scale research initiatives and observatories with standing capacities to obtain detail and perspective simultaneously.

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