

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2022 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

A photograph of four men walking across a vast, flat, arid desert landscape under a clear sky. The men are dressed in heavy, layered clothing, including jackets and scarves, suggesting a cold or high-altitude environment. They are walking from left to right. The overall scene is dimly lit, with a blueish tint, and a faint map of the region is overlaid in the background.

NIGER

ROUTES SHIFT AMID POST-COVID
INCREASE IN HUMAN SMUGGLING

Alice Fereday

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, migration dynamics in Niger involved the consolidation of a trend in which the flow of irregular non-Nigerien migrants moving to Algeria overtook the numbers transiting towards Libya – historically the most popular route for sub-Saharan migrants seeking opportunities in North Africa or Europe.

Although these flows are not new, the emergence of transit hubs such as the city of Tahoua – 370 kilometres east of the capital Niamey, halfway on the road to the city of Agadez – has catered to increasing demand for journeys to Algeria. Tahoua's rise has contributed to the sustained decline of Agadez – formerly Niger's irregular-migration fulcrum and the principal gateway to Libya – while also being the result of it.

As movement to Algeria has grown, so too have the risks associated with this route, owing to sustained efforts by the Algerian authorities to counter human smuggling, including through the resumption of expulsions to Niger, which had slowed considerably in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

This shift took place amid broader fluctuations in human smuggling and trafficking in Niger, which were largely the result of restrictions implemented to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These restrictions remained in place for the first half of the year, before being gradually lifted from the middle of June onwards. The closure of land borders on 19 March 2020 was compounded by heightened surveillance and patrols by law enforcement agencies at both the Libyan and Algerian borders at the same time. These changes significantly impeded movement into and through the country, shrinking the pool of foreign migrants seeking smuggling services in Niger, which had only barely recovered from the massive contraction following the law-enforcement campaign on human smuggling instituted by Niamey in 2016.²

Nonetheless, COVID-19 restrictions also forced Nigerien seasonal workers to turn to smugglers working on remote and dangerous routes to bypass official checkpoints during the height of the pandemic. This increased the business of *passeurs* (smugglers), partly making up for the shortfall in revenue from the reduced number of non-Nigerien migrants.

The reopening of Niger's borders on 17 June 2021 did not really usher in a rise in the number of non-Nigerien migrants transiting the country towards Libya, with only slight increases registered in the second half of the year. However, the number of Nigerien seasonal migrants travelling to and from Libya increased, as these journeys to Libya were more permitted by Nigerien authorities. In 2020, business from Nigerien migrants provided an important revenue stream for *passeurs*, who had seen their business shrink following Niger's anti-smuggling campaign in 2016.



Niger's armed forces patrol at the Cheriyet touristic site in the northern Niger region of Agadez, February 2020.
Photo: Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images

Although improved bilateral cooperation between Niger and Libya led to the signing of an MOU on labour mobility in November 2021, prospects of facilitated circular migration flows were dampened as Libyan security forces began expelling Nigeriens from southern Libya at the end of 2021.³ These expulsion operations have continued in 2022 as part of a broader crackdown on smuggling activities in the Fezzan.

Throughout 2021, smugglers also continued to adapt to law enforcement measures by bypassing policed areas and venturing into more remote and dangerous territories, including areas on either side of the main route between Agadez, Dirkou and Madama, and stretches of desert to the east of Agadez. These routes saw increased use during 2021 as they remained beyond the reach of law enforcement. However, they also raised the risks posed to migrants, as they intersect with routes used by traffickers and targeted by armed bandits, whose presence has steadily increased in north and north-eastern Niger.

Although this phenomenon is not new, it has been fuelled recently by the increasing presence of Chadian armed groups, whose position as mercenaries in Libya was undermined by the 2020 ceasefire, and who subsequently moved south into the cross-border area between Niger, Chad and Libya.⁴

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

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



A convoy of vehicles carry migrants mainly from Niger and Nigeria towards the Libyan border post of Gatrone, January 2019. Photo: Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images

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

Methodology

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

Activity by field monitors was supplemented with fieldwork by GI-TOC analysts in the territories covered, though these visits were curtailed in 2020 due to COVID-related travel restrictions.

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

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



NEW HUBS EMERGE TO CATER FOR INCREASING DEMAND FOR TRAVEL TO ALGERIA

Despite Niger's gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions during 2021, northern smuggling hubs such as Arlit and especially Agadez have struggled to gain traction among non-Nigerien migrants, with only limited activities resuming during the year. However, the city of Tahoua, which sits almost equidistant from Niamey, Agadez and the Algerian border, grew substantially in importance over the course of 2021, with the number of migrants transiting (most of them travelling to Algeria) surging far beyond pre-COVID-19 levels.

Passeurs operating between Tahoua and the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset, interviewed in February 2021, confirmed that their activities were once again in full bloom, suggesting at the time that 350–700 migrants were departing weekly for Algeria. A contact in Tamanrasset, interviewed at the end of 2021, confirmed that movement remained strong; the contact estimated that an average of 400 migrants had reached Tamanrasset weekly throughout the year.

Tahoua first emerged as a significant transit hub in 2019 as a result of the decline of Agadez, which was the focus of a law enforcement campaign by the Nigerien authorities against smuggling in 2015 to 2016.

However, the rising flow through Tahoua accelerated substantially around September 2020. In that month, the flow monitoring point run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the city recorded an atypically high number of migrants transiting, when 243 migrants were observed daily, compared to 110 in September 2019 and only nine in September 2018. Since that point numbers have remained elevated, with an average of 207 migrants observed daily between January and December 2021. It should be noted that not all migrants recorded by the IOM's flow-monitoring point are travelling to Algeria, as the town is also a hub for internal movements due to its central location in Niger. Nevertheless, these figures confirm an overall upward trend of transit via the city.

The city is also well connected to Niger's transport system due to its proximity to the Algerian border and its location mid-way between Niamey and Agadez. Transport companies such as Rimbo and Sonef run regular bus trips connecting Tahoua to other major towns and cities, making it easily accessible to most migrants without the need for a *passeur*.

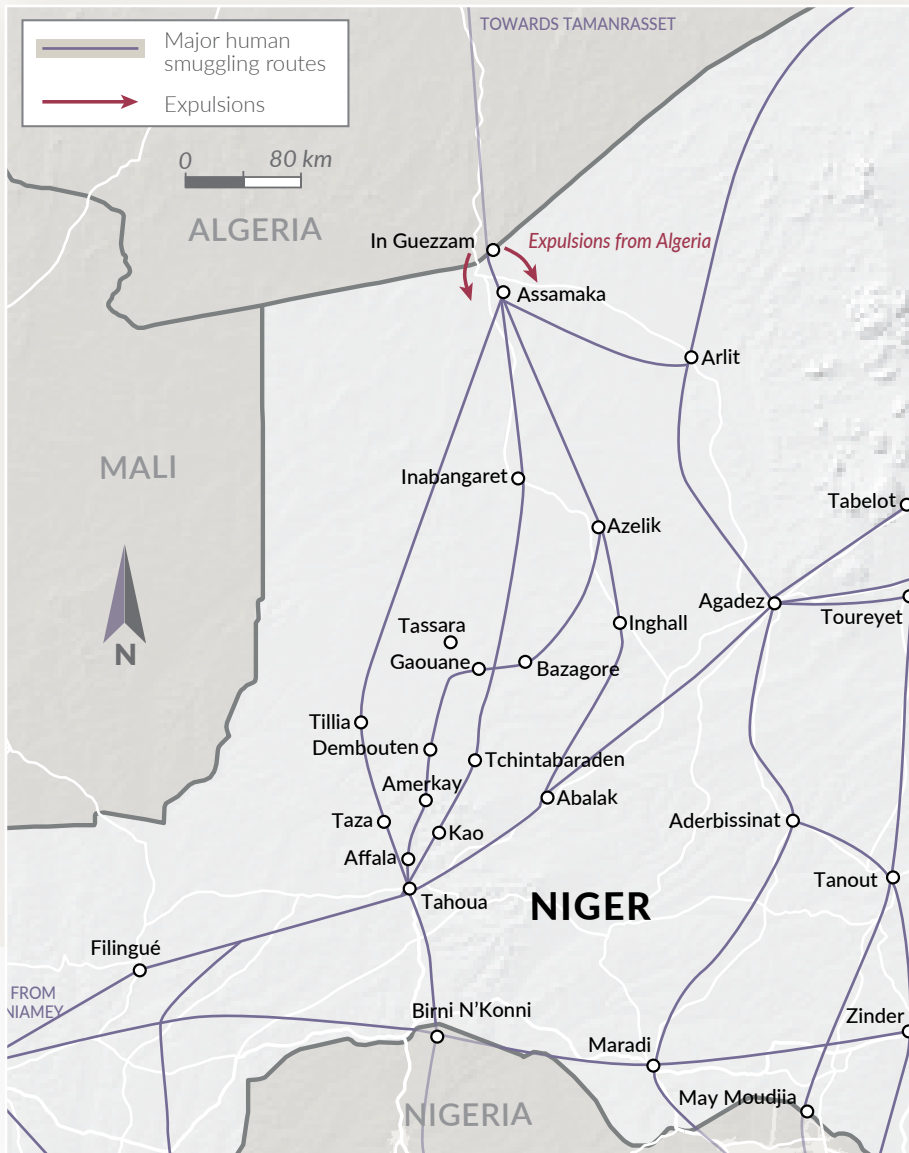


FIGURE 1 Human smuggling routes between Tahoua and the Algerian border, December 2021.

At the same time, Arlit, which has historically been another significant transit hub for those seeking to reach Algeria, has waned in importance during 2021. The town is closer to the Algerian border but is much further away from the areas where migrants typically enter Niger. Critically, migrants wanting to go to Arlit have to first reach Agadez, as that is where commercial bus transport stops; this raises the risk of being stopped by authorities and/or being asked for a bribe.

Arlit does see heavier traffic each year during the rainy season (between July and September). The town's connection to Assamaka, near the Algerian border, is via an unpaved road less affected by heavy rainfall, while the rain typically causes disruption on other routes between Niger and Algeria – in particular, those linking Tahoua to Assamaka. Nonetheless, these shifts are typically temporary. For instance, in August, smuggling activities moved from Tahoua to Arlit, though by October they had reverted back to Tahoua.

Migrants, including those from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can travel freely in Niger without a visa. However, they still often face requests for corrupt payments by security forces manning checkpoints on the way to Tahoua. The practice increased after the closure of Niger's land borders in March 2020; however, this did not have any discernible negative impact on irregular migratory flows along this route.



Photo: Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images

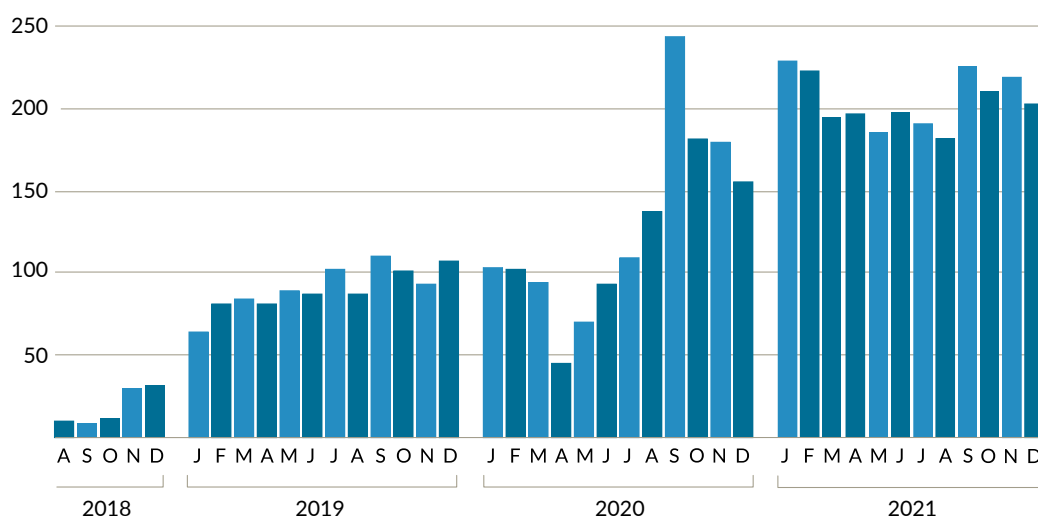


FIGURE 2 Daily average number of migrants observed at the International Organization for Migration's flow-monitoring point in Tahoua.

SOURCE: International Organization for Migration, Displacement Tracking Matrix.

Prior to their arrival in Tahoua, migrants typically contact *coxeurs* (middlemen who organize journeys for irregular migrants) based in Niger or Algeria, who organize their onward travel to Assamaka and Tamanrasset.

Most migrants transiting Tahoua come either from other parts of Niger or from West and Central African countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Ghana, Benin, Togo, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Typically, all will have chosen Tahoua as a transit hub to begin the next stage of their journey to Algeria, Morocco or, for some, Europe. One *passeur* interviewed in February 2021 explained how large numbers of migrants arrive on buses daily in Tahoua: 'There are around 20, or sometimes 40 [migrants]. Every day they arrive on buses – Rimbo, Azawad, Sonef – they split up to come with different companies.'

Transit along the Tahoua route is influenced by Algeria's security posture. Algeria's border with Niger has been nominally closed since 2013 and fortified by a sand berm two to four metres high. Migrants are usually dropped off by *passeurs* several kilometres from the berm, and then must cross it by foot before reaching the other side, where Algerian *passeurs*, operating with the Tahoua network, are nominally supposed to collect them so they can continue the journey to Tamanrasset.

This part of the journey bears significant risks, owing to regular patrolling by Algerian security forces and armed bandits who frequently target vehicles and migrants here. Many migrants left at the border reportedly do not find a *passeur* on the Algerian side to collect them, which means that they are forced to walk some 15 kilometres to In Guezzam, the first Algerian town after the border. Here, they must then find transportation to .⁵

Interviewees in Tamanrasset reported that in the wake of the harvesting season in September 2021, the number of checkpoints had doubled on the Algerian side. The 400-kilometre route between In Guezzam and Tamanrasset is usually secured by three permanent checkpoints, to which three temporary checkpoints were added in September. This led to a slight decline in migrant arrivals in Tamanrasset in November and December, though the broader trend of increasing numbers of migrants choosing this route remains, indicating that despite the difficulty and dangers of the journey, other alternatives are even more insecure.



EXPULSIONS FROM ALGERIA REMAIN STEADY AFTER RESUMPTION IN SEPTEMBER 2020

Migrants who do reach Algeria continue to face significant risks and setbacks, as expulsions of migrants to Niger have steadily picked up after officially resuming in October 2020. Algeria's deportations policy has waxed and waned in recent years, with expulsions decreasing considerably during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic before resuming in September 2020.

The treatment of expelled migrants differs according to nationality. Nigerien migrants are returned to Niger by official convoys organized as part of a 2014 agreement between Niger and Algeria on the repatriation of Nigerien nationals. Foreign migrants, mostly West and Central Africans who the Algerian government considers to be in an irregular residential status in the country, are transported to the border through expulsion operations that were not part of the bilateral agreement.

On 14 July 2021, Algeria reopened its border with Niger, which had been closed since March 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Indications in August suggested that despite the border reopening, expulsions had not immediately increased and remained at levels similar to those seen since their resumption in late 2020. However, data collected by Alarme Phone Sahara (APS), a humanitarian organization providing support to migrants in Assamaka and Agadez, showed that after a slight decrease in August and September 2021, expulsions increased in October, with the organization claiming of 3 266 individuals were expelled, before reportedly decreasing again to 1 846 in November.

However, specific numbers on expelled migrants are difficult to obtain, due to the unofficial nature of expulsion operations. Data from IOM, which is primarily based on the numbers of migrants assisted by the IOM in Assamaka, therefore differs somewhat from figures given by other organizations. For example, Alarm Phone Sahara reported a total of 3 266 migrants expelled in October 2021, including 1 486 foreign migrants deported in unofficial convoys, more than twice as many as the 660 recorded by the IOM over the same period.⁶



Migrants deported by Algerian authorities in unofficial convoys are left at an isolated location close to the Nigerien border. *Photo: Alarme Phone Sahara Facebook page*

Owing to gaps in openly available official data, and the irregularity in the frequency of expulsions and number of migrants expelled, it is difficult to establish clear trends. However, a comparison of IOM data since 2018 suggests that the recent uptick is in continuing with Algeria's decision to intensify expulsions in 2018 as part of a broader policy that sought to discourage arrivals to the country amid reduced irregular migrant access to Libya.⁷ This policy has been widely criticized by local and international human-rights organizations and civil society because of the risks it poses to migrants' safety and fundamental rights – many face violence and abuse during raids at the hands of Algerian police, and unofficial expulsions leave thousands of migrants stranded in the desert, forcing them to walk some 12 kilometres south across the desert to reach the nearest Nigerien town.⁸

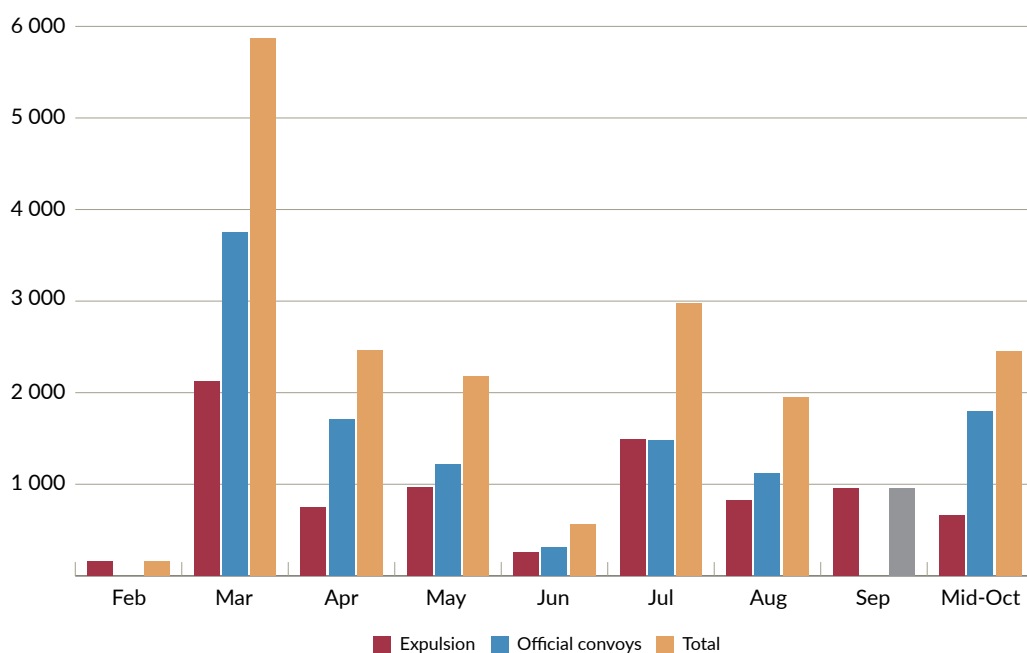


FIGURE 3 Official convoys and expulsions of foreign migrants from Algeria.

SOURCE: International Organization for Migration, Displacement Tracking Matrix, October 2021



Photo: AFP via Getty Images

This resumption of expulsions since September 2020 coincides with a renewal of Algeria's campaign against illegal migration and migrant smuggling, combined with a hardening of the government's stance towards independent civil society organizations, including those providing support to migrants or promoting human rights.⁹ A recent example of this positioning is the government's decision to dissolve¹⁰ the prominent civil-society organization Youth Action Rally (Rassemblement Action Jeunesse, RAJ), which played a leading role in the pro-democracy Hirak movement), on 13 October 2021. The RAJ, although not involved directly in migration issues in the south, has advocated more broadly for the rights of migrants in Algeria and criticized Algeria's migration policy. Worryingly, a humanitarian organization working with migrants in Tamanrasset, Green Tea, has also reportedly been threatened with dissolution by the Algerian government as part of the recent crackdown on civil society.

The continuation of expulsions and intensification of crackdowns on independent civil-society and human rights groups in Algeria represented a worrying trend in 2021 and could presage further deterioration of the treatment of irregular migrants in Algeria as economic challenges in 2022 mount. An increasingly hostile climate could lead to heightened migration to Morocco or Tunisia by members of the large irregular-migrant community in Algeria.¹¹ This, in turn, may lead to an eventual increase in departures from those points to Europe.



NIGERIEN SEASONAL MIGRATION TO LIBYA INCREASES

In June 2021, the news of the reopening of Niger's borders was welcomed by most *passeurs* in Niger, in the hope it would allow their activities to pick up after 15 months of restrictions, which had sharply limited the transportation of foreign migrants in particular.

Given the central role of human smuggling for local economies, the contraction of smuggling activities resulted in the loss of livelihoods for many *passeurs* and their communities. To compensate for lost revenue, many turned to the transportation of Nigeriens journeying to Libya or Algeria. This coping mechanism is not entirely new. It began first in 2017, when, following the contraction seen in the wake of the Niger's law-enforcement campaign on human smuggling, smugglers took advantage of – and to some extent engineered (by offering low prices) – a rise in the movement of Nigerien nationals.¹²

According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix Libya, the number of identified Nigerien migrants in Libya doubled between July 2017 and December 2019, from 64 594 (17% of the identified migrant population in Libya) to 137 544 (21%), becoming the most represented nationality among Libya's recorded migrant population. These figures have remained at similar levels since 2020, with around 114 149 Nigerien migrants in Libya identified in October 2020¹³ and 122 364 in September 2021,¹⁴ representing 20% of the identified migrant population in Libya. The slight decrease in 2020 corroborates analysis that COVID-19 restrictions somewhat impeded Nigerien migration to Libya in 2020.

These movements provided work for some 200 registered drivers from both Niger and Libya, many of whom operated as human smugglers and geared up for this clientele. Nigerien authorities largely tolerated this activity, allowing vehicles transporting Nigeriens to join the weekly military-escorted trade convoy from Agadez to Dirkou. This, despite the movement not technically being legal, since the vast majority of Nigeriens continue the journey beyond Dirkou to Libya cities such as Sebha without a requisite entry visa.

This changed with the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, leading seasonal migration in late 2020 to take place clandestinely. Security personnel manning checkpoints on the main route between Agadez and Libya allowed small numbers of Nigeriens to travel north towards Libya. However, only a maximum of 10 passengers were allowed per vehicle travelling through Dao Timi (situated 700 kilometres north-east of Agadez and 240 kilometres south of the Libyan border), a key chokepoint on the route to Libya via the Toummo crossing. As few *passeurs* were prepared to make the journey with only 10



Migrants dropped off at Kangouri wait for another passeur to take them to Diffa, January 2021. Photo: GI-TOC

passengers, those active on these routes servicing Nigerien migrants sought to bypass restrictions, including by using more remote routes that resulted in increased risks for passengers. For instance, in early June 2020, at least three bodies were found close to Seguedine; and later that month, at least another 30 Nigerien migrants were found dead east of Madama. The deaths reportedly all occurred from dehydration after the vehicles the migrants were travelling in broke down.

After the border reopened in June 2021, departures of Nigerien migrants initially remained low, as a result of longstanding circular-migration patterns. However, by October, the flow had picked up and appeared to have returned to levels seen prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in the region.

Nigerien circular migration follows relatively regular patterns based on the agricultural calendar. The planting season lasts from May to June and the harvest season from September to October, after which many Nigeriens seek short-term job opportunities in Libya, typically until the following planting season. In 2021, the lifting of passenger limits, the official reopening of Niger's borders and the resumption of the official convoy from Agadez to Dirkou allowed for the seasonal uptick in departures to take place in safer conditions. This was especially the case for the military convoy, which had been suspended between March 2020 and June 2021, making northbound travel more difficult and dangerous for Nigerien passengers. The convoy now allows *passeurs* to coordinate their departures and benefit once more from the protection of the weekly escort, a shift that has further fuelled Nigerien departures.

According to a *passeur* operating on the route between Agadez and Sebha, approximately 80 vehicles departed each week in December 2021, mostly as part of the convoy, transporting a total of around 1 500 Nigerien passengers. This represents a significant increase compared to the estimated 15 to 20 vehicles reported to have been departing weekly in July; and it is 15 times higher than in November 2020, when *passeurs* estimated that only 100 Nigerien migrants were departing Agadez each week because of COVID-19-related restrictions.

Nigerien migration to Libya could also be on the cusp of increasing in 2022, due to improved bilateral cooperation between Niger and Libya. On 30 November 2021, Niger's Minister of Employment and Social Protection, Dr Ibrahim Boukary, and Libya's Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation, Ali al-Abed Alreda, signed a memorandum of understanding on labour mobility between the two countries.¹⁵ The MOU reportedly includes intentions to develop employment visas for Nigeriens working in Libya to create legal pathways for migration. The move was welcomed by the IOM, whose head of mission in Niger stated:

Bilateral collaboration plays a key role in promoting the labour rights of Nigerien migrants in Libya, to improve their working conditions and thereby to facilitate the remittances to their communities of origin, by an economy and contribute to the development of their home country through remittances. [...] It will also contribute to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons and promote safe and regular migration pathways.

However, for now it is unclear whether the MOU will result in concrete developments on the ground, as attempts to formalize what have long been informal exchanges and circular movements remain ambitious. Although crossing the border into Libya without a visa is technically illegal, it has been widely tolerated both by Nigerien authorities and security forces and by Libyan armed groups operating along that country's southern borders. This makes it doubtful that regularization of these movements would result in a significant change in the modes and volumes of travel to and from Libya.

Should work visas for Nigeriens in Libya be introduced, it is likely that many Nigeriens will choose not to use them, as many travel without valid documentation anyway. Depending on the processes introduced, accessing administrative centres and gathering the paperwork could also be a challenge for many Nigerien migrant workers.

Despite initial hope that the MOU might nonetheless represent a positive development for Nigerien migrants moving between Niger and Libya, a ramp-up of anti-smuggling operations in southern Libya in November 2021 targeting Nigerien migrants put paid to these expectations. Local armed groups operating under the Libyan Arab Armed Forces in Sebha, Um al-Aranib and Qatrun began conducting raids and patrols targeting human smugglers and migrants. Migrants were initially brought to and detained by armed groups at the Tamanhint air base. What happened next depended on nationality. Nigerian migrants were segregated and sent south, towards the Toummo crossing on the border and expelled into Niger. Non-Nigerien migrants held at the Tamanhint air base were referred to IOM (though this changed in the beginning of 2022, when such migrants were also deported to Toummo). At the border, Nigerien military personnel collected the expelled migrants and took them to Madama to be registered. From Madama, migrants were moved to Agadez by private transport providers.

Several such expulsion operations took place at the end of 2021, a dynamic that accelerated in the first quarter of 2022, with greater numbers of Nigerien and non-Nigerien migrants expelled.¹⁶

The arrest and expulsion of migrants by armed groups in southern Libya is unprecedented and represents a worrying development, as several Nigerien migrants expelled during these operations have reported instances of violence and human rights violations during their arrest, detainment and deportation.



SMUGGLING OF FOREIGN MIGRANTS HEADED FOR LIBYA SEES ONLY SLIGHT INCREASE

In spite of Niger's borders having been reopened, the clandestine transport of foreign migrants to Libya reportedly increased only slightly since the lifting of restrictions. Foreign migrants can now cross regional borders legally, however, monitoring conducted since June suggests that so far this shift has not led to a massive rise in the number of migrants coming into Niger. This is mostly due to the fact that migration through Niger remains severely restricted by Niger's anti-smuggling law. However, it could also be linked to a possible reorganization of migratory flows around Niger, with increasing use of routes via Mali and Mauritania instead of Niger. The lack of significant increase in flows to Libya can also be correlated with the rise of movements to Algeria, which appears to have largely overtaken Libya during the reporting period (see below).

A *passEUR* involved in the transport of foreign migrants, who was interviewed in October, estimated that only around 200 foreign migrants were travelling to Libya each week from Niger, compared to between 140 and 170 during the border closure.¹⁷

Among these, around 40 foreign migrants are reported to now leave Agadez each week, compared to around 20 in October 2020. Nonetheless, most migrants now take alternative routes to Libya, bypassing Agadez entirely.

The most popular are the remote desert routes through eastern Niger that directly connect the Nigeria– Niger border to southern Libya, such as the route via Kouri Kantana, located 125 kilometres east of Agadez. *Passeurs* operating along this route in December 2021 estimated that around 170 foreign migrants are currently travelling this way to Libya each week, a moderate increase compared to between 120 and 150 in previous months. Most of the migrants are from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, CAR and – since March 2020 – Pakistan.

Despite its remote location, Kouri Kantana has become a key exchange point on a south–north smuggling route traversing Niger. According to *passEURs* interviewed in December, the route via Kouri Kantana developed around 2018, as smuggling networks sought alternatives to the established transit hubs targeted by law enforcement and developed operations to bypass major towns and checkpoints between the Nigerian and Libyan borders.

For most migrants on the route, the journey starts in Kano in northern Nigeria, around 140 kilometres from the Nigerien border. In Kano, migrants contact a *coxeur* (usually recommended to them by those who have previously made the journey) who organizes the journey to Sebha, Libya. The *coxeur* will first give migrants instructions on how to reach Kongalam, a small village 10 kilometres from the Nigerien border; this journey costs around FCFA1 200 (€1.82) by taxi from Kano. Before the reopening of Niger's borders, migrants were then instructed to use moto-taxis from Kongalam to cross the border illegally into the Nigerien town of May Moudjia, using secondary roads and tracks. Since June, however, they can once more cross the border legally.



Moto-taxis carry passengers across the border into May Moudjia, January 2021. Photo: GI-TOC

From May Moudjia to Sebha, the journey is usually divided into two stages, each of which involves different *passeurs*. First, Nigerien *passeurs*, usually Hausa-speaking Tuareg or Germa from the southern Zinder region with knowledge of its routes, transport migrants the 460 kilometres to Kouri Kantana, typically using 4x4 Toyota Hilux vehicles. In Kouri Kantana, the migrants are handed over to a second *passeur*, usually from a network of Libya-based Tebu.

Some smuggling networks instruct migrants to travel further north from May Moudjia before they are collected by the *passeur*. Depending on the network, some migrants will travel as far as Zinder or Koundou Mawa (65 kilometres west of Zinder), using public transport, and *passeurs* then collect them on the outskirts of town. Migrants can easily – and legally – take buses in southern Niger, where their movements are not associated with travel to Libya. Each smuggling network has its own *modus operandi*: while some collect migrants in May Moudjia at the border, others will operate from localities further north. According to a *passeur* working on this route, both itineraries are equivalent in terms of price and risk.

Kouri Kantana is a small marketplace traditionally used as a waypoint for fuel smugglers operating between Nigeria and northern Niger, where Nigerian fuel is sold in markets. Its remote location makes it ideal as a discreet yet accessible stopover for human smuggling. In fact, some fuel smugglers are also employed to transport migrants from May Moudjia to Kouri Kantana due to their experience and knowledge of the route.

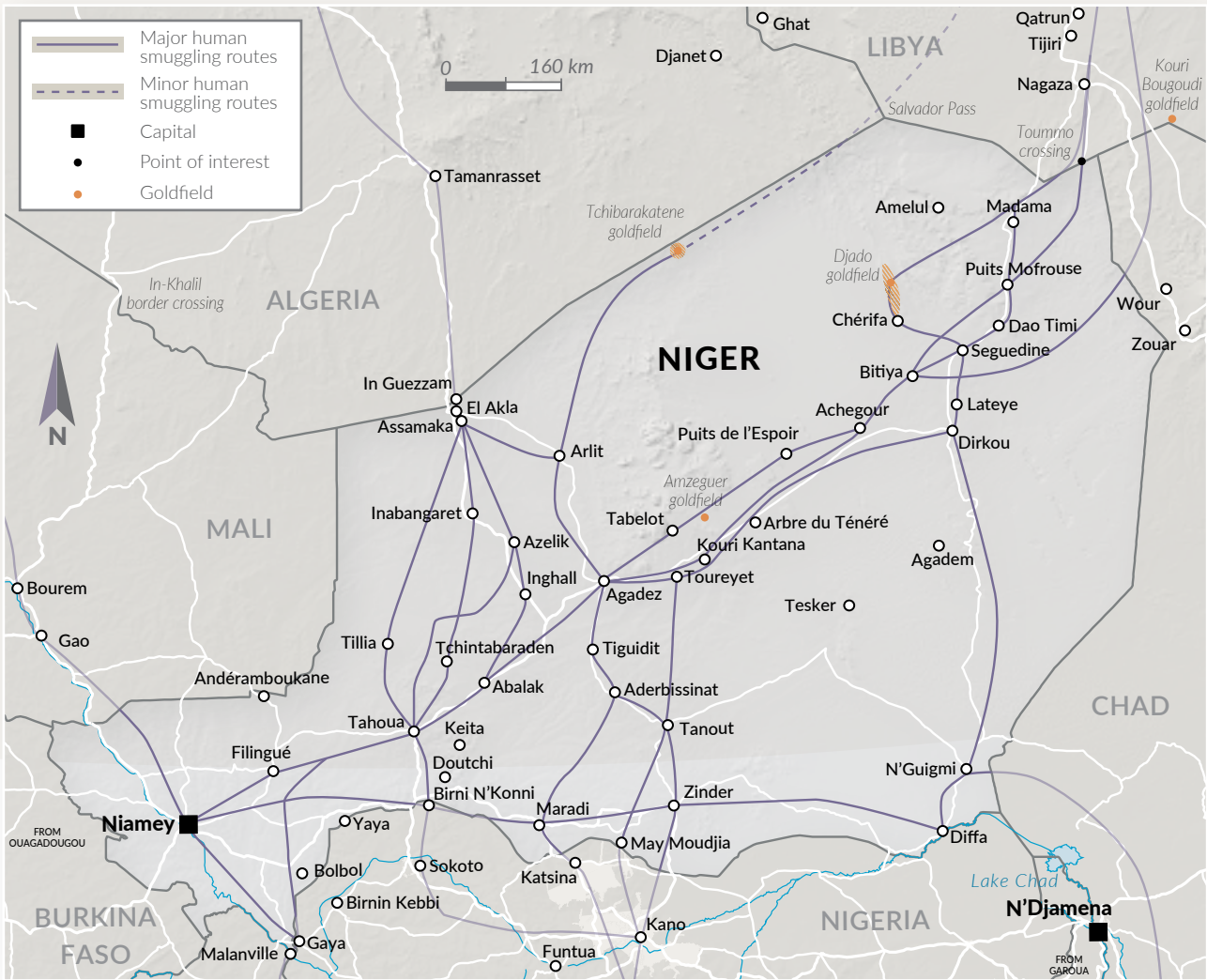


FIGURE 4 Human smuggling routes through Niger, December 2021.

The exchange of migrants (*tabdil* in Arabic) among the smuggler community takes place outside the village of Kouri Kantana to avoid arousing suspicion. The *passeurs* coming from May Moudjia typically park a few kilometres from the village and send their GPS coordinates by satellite phone to the *passeurs* involved in the second leg of the trip. From there, the second *passeur* will transport the migrants directly to Sebha, roughly 1 200 kilometres north.

According to one *passeur* operating on this route, this type of smuggling activity is organized by sophisticated networks run by Nigeria- and Libya-based *coxeurs*, who supply a continual flow of migrants to *passeurs* for transport to Libya. *Coxeurs* will usually work directly with Libya-based Tebu *passeurs*. These *passeurs* in turn subcontract Tuareg drivers to bring the migrants to the exchange point in Kouri Kantana, where they then collect them and transport them to Libya.

Migrants travelling from May Moudjia to Sebha usually pay the *coxeur* in cash upfront for the entire journey.

According to a *passeur* operating on the Kouri Kantana route, the typical price for a foreign migrant is between FCFA400 000 and FCFA500 000 (€610–€762). From this, the *coxeur* will pay the Libyan *passeur* around FCFA250 000 (€380). The Libyan *passeur* will in turn pay the Tuareg driver FCFA35 000 (€53) for the first leg of the journey to Kouri Kantana.



Nigerien passeurs wait near Kouri Kantana for their Libyan counterparts involved in the next leg of the journey.
 Photo: GI-TOC

The price for migrants travelling on the Kouri Kantana route is almost double what it would cost them to travel through Agadez. Migrants typically pay between FCFA265 000 and FCFA315 000 (€404–€480) for the journey from Nigeria to Sebha via Agadez. This includes FCFA15 000 (€23) for public transport from May Moudjia to Agadez via Zinder, and between FCFA250 000 and FCFA300 000 (€380–€456) paid to the smuggler for the crossing from Agadez to Sebha.

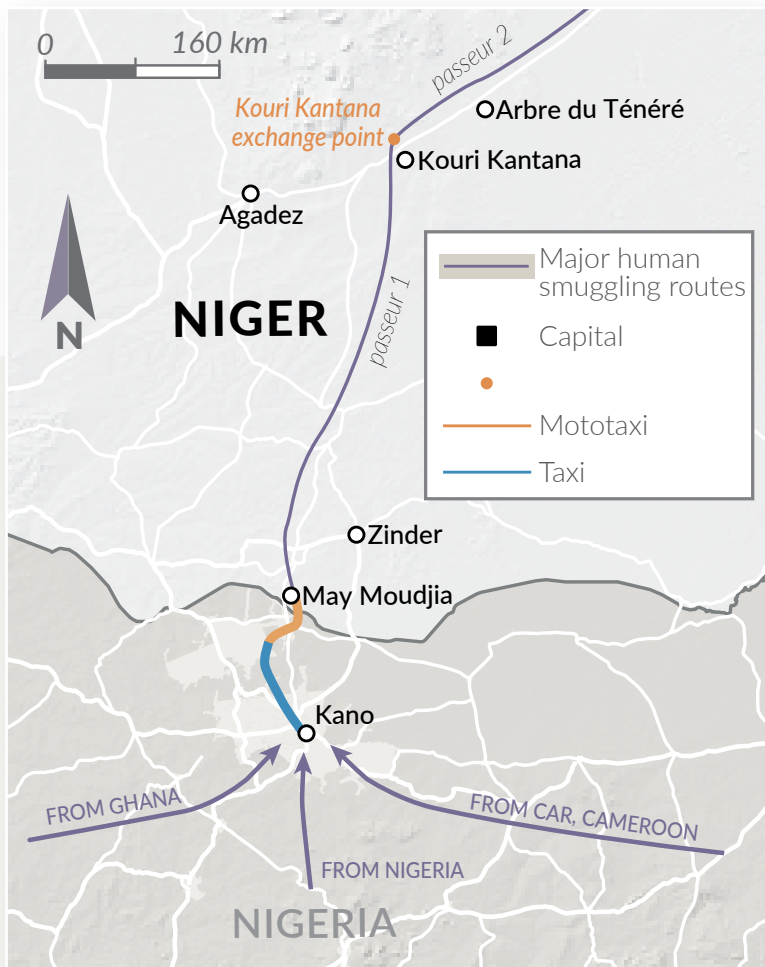


FIGURE 5 The clandestine route from Nigeria to Libya via Kouri Kantana, April 2021.



ARMED BANDITRY ON THE RISE IN NORTHERN NIGER

The problem of armed banditry is not new in Niger, having posed a challenge since before the nation's independence in 1958. The intensity of banditry, however, is perceived to have increased in recent years, as high-value goods – such as drugs and vehicles – have been increasingly smuggled through north and north-west Niger.¹⁸ The region is also rich in gold, which has encouraged bandits to target gold miners or those transporting gold. An example of such attacks happened in June 2020, when a convoy of gold miners was attacked by heavily armed bandits between Chérifa and Agadez in the department of Bilma, 600 kilometres north-east of Agadez.¹⁹ The bandits stole gold, cash, mobile phones and other valuables, but no casualties were reported. In September 2020, bandits also attacked a vehicle smuggler who was transporting pick-up trucks from Libya to Agadez, stealing all four vehicles.

The rise in banditry is linked to the growing presence of ex-mercenaries in southern Libya – in particular, at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, which straddles the Chad–Libya border – from where they have engaged in predatory activities across northern Niger.

These armed groups are usually identified as Chadian, composed of members from the Zaghawa community from eastern Chad, and are often referred to in Niger as '*toroboro*'. They have substantial combat experience, as well as ample hardware and vehicles acquired during their time in Libya, providing them with the capacity to operate across vast areas between northern Chad, northern Niger and southern Libya. They have increasingly leveraged these advantages to engage in predatory and criminal activities; they have consolidated their involvement in illicit activities in the central Sahara since October 2020, as their mercenary activities in Libya became more uncertain after the signature of the ceasefire in Libya.²⁰

Nigerien military units continue to operate in the north and are aware of the presence of Chadian armed-banditry groups. However, Nigerien soldiers, often poorly equipped and posted in isolated locations, generally appear to avoid any encounters with heavily armed bandits. When the Nigerien military has faced such groups in the past, it has resulted in military casualties.²¹ For instance, in June 2018, when a patrol of the Nigerien special forces pursued a convoy of 17 heavily armed vehicles, described as belonging to 'Chadian bandits', near Arbre de Ténéré, the clashes resulted in the deaths of two Nigerien soldiers and an unknown number of bandits.



Photo: Scott Peterson/Getty Images



Young Nigerian women travel to Libya via Kouri Kantana, May 2021. Photo: GI-TOC

Nigerien security forces mainly focus on curbing smuggling activities in the area, which bears lower risk. Furthermore, such an approach holds added financial incentive, because of bribes paid by *passeurs* and migrants.

Significantly, human-smuggling activities have also been increasingly affected by banditry in Niger. Over the past year, there has been a rise in the number of incidents targeting *passeurs* operating between Niger and Libya. One of most significant incidents in recent months occurred in January 2021, when a group of 12 Pakistani migrants were kidnapped by Chadian bandits while travelling via the Kouri Kantana route.

By the end of 2021, banditry attacks had reportedly somewhat decreased, as only one new incident had been reported since the middle of the year. On 10 October 2021, an attack targeted a convoy of vehicles approximately 300 kilometres from Agadez on the route to Libya. The vehicles, which were transporting Nigerien migrants, appear to have been travelling without the protection of the weekly military convoy. No casualties were reported.

The reason for this potential shift in bandit activity is unclear. However, it could be partly linked to the mobilization of *passeurs* in response to the rise in attacks. In April 2021, a 'self-defence committee' was created to address the threats posed to human-smugglers in north-eastern Niger. However, since then, the committee appears to have gradually slowed its activities, probably as a result of the high costs associated with patrolling such a vast territory.

In the absence of any long-term and concrete improvement in regional instability, armed banditry, and the risks it poses to migrants travelling through Niger, is likely to continue – in particular, on routes to Libya. In contrast, routes to Algeria have emerged as relatively safer and shorter alternatives, despite the risks of breakdowns, security checks and expulsions from Algeria.



CONCLUSION

The lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in Niger represents an important development for Nigerien migrants making seasonal migration journeys. At the end of 2021, the business of transporting Nigerien migrants to Libya was providing a welcome alternative source of income for many *passeurs*. However, an unprecedented crackdown on Nigerien migrants in Libya began in December 2021, involving large-scale expulsions of Nigeriens via the Toummo crossing, and setting the stage for a sharp rise in such situations in 2022. Although these operations do not appear to have impacted departures from Niger, they represent a worrying development for large numbers of Nigeriens who rely on seasonal migration to Libya as one of the few employment opportunities available to them amid worsening economic conditions in Niger.

The transport of foreign migrants was less affected by the closing and reopening of Niger's land borders, as it was already happening clandestinely since Niger's 2016 anti-smuggling campaign. Overall trends in 2021 largely followed those seen in 2020, and are likely to be sustained and even accentuated in the future. Human smuggling networks have continued to adapt to restrictions by developing increasingly remote alternative routes. These bypass routes allow smugglers to avoid arrest, but put migrants at higher risk of breakdowns and attacks. These dangers are compounded by the risk of Chadian armed groups consolidating and extending their involvement in criminal activities, as well as their geographical reach in the central Sahara, if dialogue and reintegration processes fail in Chad. The kidnapping of Pakistani migrants travelling on a bypass route through eastern Niger in January 2021 by Chadian bandits is a worrying example of this. With few alternatives, migrants travelling to Libya are likely to continue to run major risks while moving north.

If Chadian fighters returning from Libya are not effectively included and reintegrated in Chad, their involvement in banditry will increase, and 2022 will see more incidents and violent attacks in eastern and northern Niger. The situation in Niger will also be affected by the outcome of Libya's political process. If a political settlement is found in Libya bringing about stability, this could lead to more effective bilateral and regional cooperation on migration and transnational organized crime. If another conflict breaks out in Libya, Niger could face a spillover of insecurity and tensions.

2021 also saw flows of irregular migrants travelling to Algeria increase, an existing trend that was further consolidated by the perception of heightened risks on routes through Libya, and the emergence of new transit hubs in Niger to cater for the higher demand for smuggling services to Algeria. However, routes to Algeria are also set to become more dangerous, as the tightening of security at the Algerian border could displace smuggling routes to riskier terrain and encourage the development of more

sophisticated smuggling networks. Those who do reach Algeria will also continue to face expulsions that remain beyond the remit of any official agreement and increase the vulnerability of migrants. After being expelled from Algeria, many migrants become stranded in Agadez, and should expulsions continue or increase in 2022, this could exacerbate the situation of both migrant and local communities in Agadez as economic opportunities remain scarce.

Finally, the worsening security situation in western Niger and the multiplication of attacks by violent extremist groups should also be closely monitored. These could affect smuggling routes through the area and further increase the risks faced by migrants taking these paths.



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