

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2022 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

FRAGILE STATES AND RESILIENT CRIMINAL ECOSYSTEMS

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND
TRAFFICKING TRENDS IN NORTH
AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

Mark Micallef | Matt Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

Regular migration and human smuggling through the Sahel and North Africa are often assessed and framed through the metric of arrivals in Europe by migrants on boats. According to that metric, 2021 was an important year. On the three major routes connecting Africa to Europe – through the Central Mediterranean, the Western Mediterranean and via north-west Africa – 108 541 migrants arrived in Europe that year. This was the highest number witnessed since 2017, when there was a dramatic collapse in arrival numbers following the rapid growth seen between 2013 and 2017.¹ Data for the number of migrants intercepted prior to arriving in European waters is not as comprehensive, but likely to be high, with Tunisia and Libya alone recording 54 512 disembarkations in 2021, the highest levels ever recorded by both countries.²

However, focusing only on the metric of disembarkations of migrants in Europe is problematic. Assessed alone, these figures skew the perspective of what is a highly complex situation. Disembarkation levels, while measuring success or failure of a migrant's journey, otherwise speak to little, if anything, of how the human smuggling ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel is changing. Moreover, these statistics obscure the significance of dynamics and shifts in zones of both embarkation and transit, which are more important for understanding the current moment and central to assessing what may come next.

Movements of migrants across the deserts of the central Sahel (encompassing Mali, Niger and Chad) have continued to rebound in the wake of a sharp, though short-lived, curtailment in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ The degree of movement is difficult to quantify, with no country or entity having comprehensive control or surveillance over these border areas – on top of the fact that Sahelian states generally do not release the sort of data necessary for tracking. However, GI-TOC contacts throughout the region and international organizations have reported growing numbers of migrant arrivals in key human smuggling entrepôts, such as Timbuktu and Gao (Mali), and Tahoua, Kouri Kantana and Agadez (Niger).

The routes used by migrants, human smugglers and human traffickers to cross from the Sahel to North Africa or to Europe are also diversifying. While routes between Niger and Libya, and Sudan and Libya, remain important, movement has also diversified, with a series of routes (some historic, some new) from Niger and Mali through Algeria, branched out connecting Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal to Spain's Canary Islands, growing in importance. Intra-regional mobility, involving migration, human smuggling and human trafficking to points within the Central Sahara, is also important, significantly fuelled by the spread of artisanal gold mining in the Sahel region.

These dynamics have, in some cases, increased the dangers faced by irregular migrants on their journeys, exposing them to trafficking risks, particularly around the gold mining regions, as well as violent assaults by bandit groups and vehicle breakdowns along remote desert tracks.

These patterns of movement also underscore the resilience of North African and the Sahelian human smuggling and trafficking ecosystems. In 2020, countries across the region put in place mobility restrictions intended to control the spread of COVID-19, leading to tightened borders and sharper checks on the activities of smuggling and trafficking networks.⁴ The smuggling system survived, however, and rebounded in 2021, in some cases through shifts in how actors operated and by retooling routes to bypass restrictions that were still in force.

The resilience of the smuggling and trafficking economies contrasts with the more limited economic and systemic resilience of states in these regions, which have struggled to re-emerge from the pandemic. These deficiencies, in turn, have helped to drive demand for smuggling services and offered opportunities to traffickers seeking to recruit new victims.

Together, these factors play into the increasing politicization and instrumentalization of migration issues. In fact, migration has become a tool for international influence, with Moroccan border controls seemingly relaxed at strategic points in order to exert pressure on European states. Control of migrants has also been instrumentalized in order to address domestic political stresses, with police unions in Tunisia, for example.



FIGURE 1 North Africa and the Sahel, showing main human smuggling routes.

In other instances, such as in Libya and Mali, participation in migration enforcement has become a means for armed groups, including those partially linked to the state, to cement their domestic legitimacy and pursue political and/or financial support from foreign actors. This dynamic is entrenching the power of these armed groups, feeding their ability to resist disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) efforts, and undermining political transitions more generally.

More broadly, the short-term vision of these acts of instrumentalization fundamentally undercut the commitment and investment needed by the region's states – as well as interested international stakeholders – to address the political and economic fragility that lie at the heart of weak state responses to human smuggling and trafficking.

Methodology

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

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was also systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This 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 report should be read as a snapshot, which will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics of migration in North Africa and the Sahel.



Photo: AFP via Getty Images



RISING HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING IN COASTAL STATES

The year 2021 was marked by a sustained increase in numbers of departures from North Africa to Europe, in particular via the Central Mediterranean route.

In Libya, human smuggling activity in 2021 rose to levels not seen since 2017. Departures, more than doubled in comparison to the figures for 2020, rising to 60 249.⁵ In the first half of 2022, the rate of departures remained more or less the same as 2021 levels during the same period, both at just over 27 000.

The nationalities of those migrating through from Libya and towards Europe also shifted in 2021. The top two nationality groups of migrants reaching Europe from Libya were Bangladeshis and Egyptians, followed distantly by Eritreans, once the largest group of asylum seekers leaving Libya.⁶ Some caution is needed here, as this does not precisely match the profile of those intercepted by Libyan coastal authorities, where Sudanese, Malian and Bangladeshi were the nationalities that featured most prominently in disembarkation statistics. Nonetheless, based on information collected, a consistent rise in the numbers of Egyptians and Bangladeshis was registered throughout 2021 at different hubs across Libya and this is in part the result of criminal groups catering specifically for these nationalities.

Beyond the statistics, 2021 saw the consolidation of a trend first observed the previous year, involving the return of more sophisticated transnational networks operating across various routes targeting irregular migrants and asylum seekers from a number of different nationalities. This trend has been further reinforced in 2022.

After the height of the 'migration crisis' in the Central Mediterranean between 2014 and 2017,⁷ organized networks engaged in human smuggling operations in Libya had been undermined when militias formerly protecting this business retreated from this activity as a result of increased international and local exposure.⁸ Some of these militias cynically moved instead into the business of policing and managing migration. The more organized smuggling networks were replaced by smaller, more fragmented, and clandestine smuggling outfits with significantly reduced capacity.

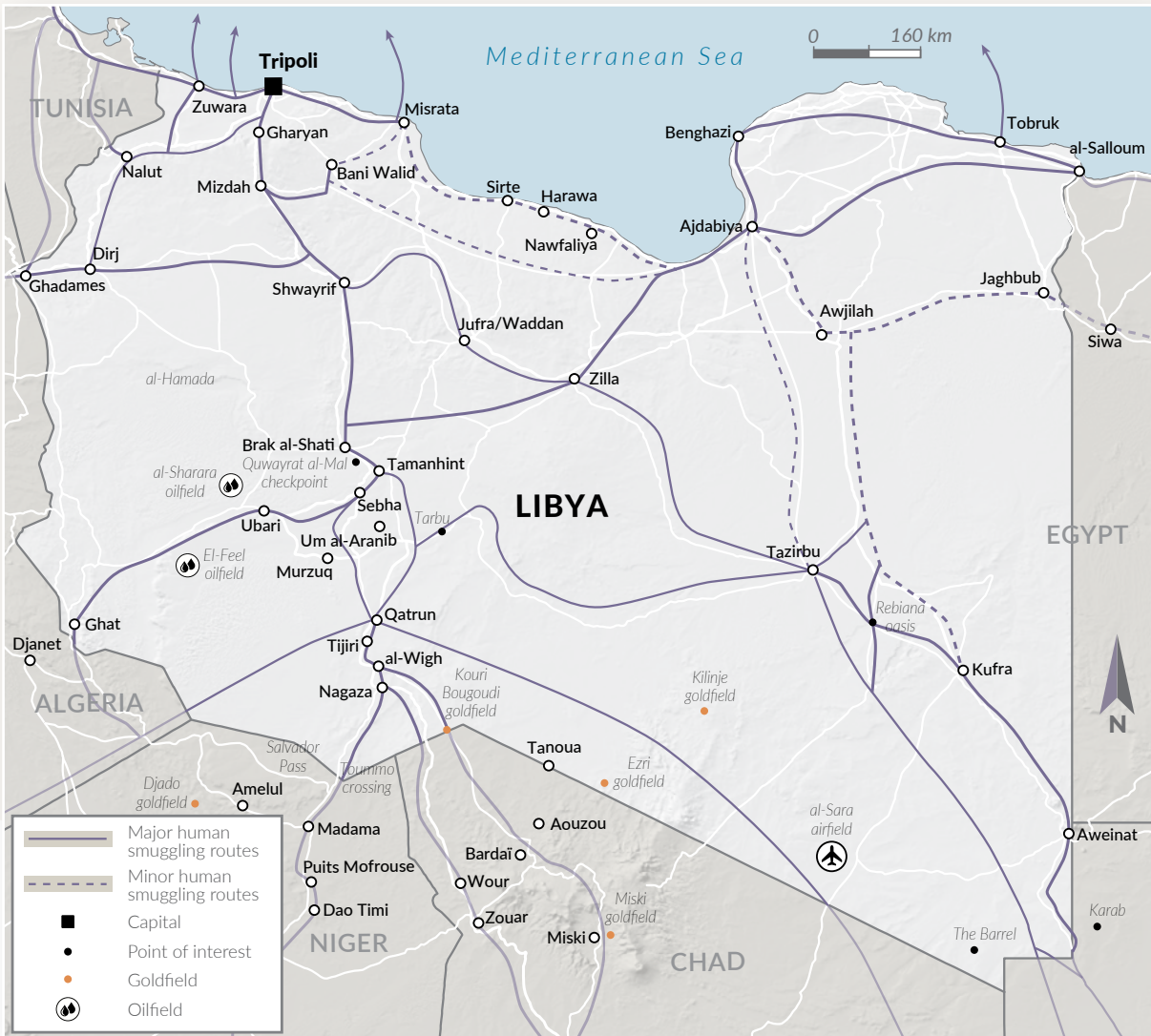


FIGURE 2 Libya, showing main human smuggling routes.

The sustained conflict-free period that followed the war on Tripoli between 2019 and 2020 facilitated organized crime in various areas, and human smuggling and trafficking were no exception. This illicit industry has now entered a new phase. Although it is yet to be developed fully, the current dynamic is seeing a sustained rhythm of human smuggling activity, especially in the coastal areas, in coexistence with an unprecedented capture of Libya's migration management and policing of migrants by some militias.⁹

Apart from rising volume, the re-emergence of more sophisticated human smuggling networks in Libya can also be seen in other aspects of human smuggling activity – for example, increased use of fixed-hull boats. Such vessels can be more expensive to procure and harder to embark, due to their size and the difficulty of concealing them. However, they make up for this in better reliability and higher passenger loads, which increased on average over 2021.

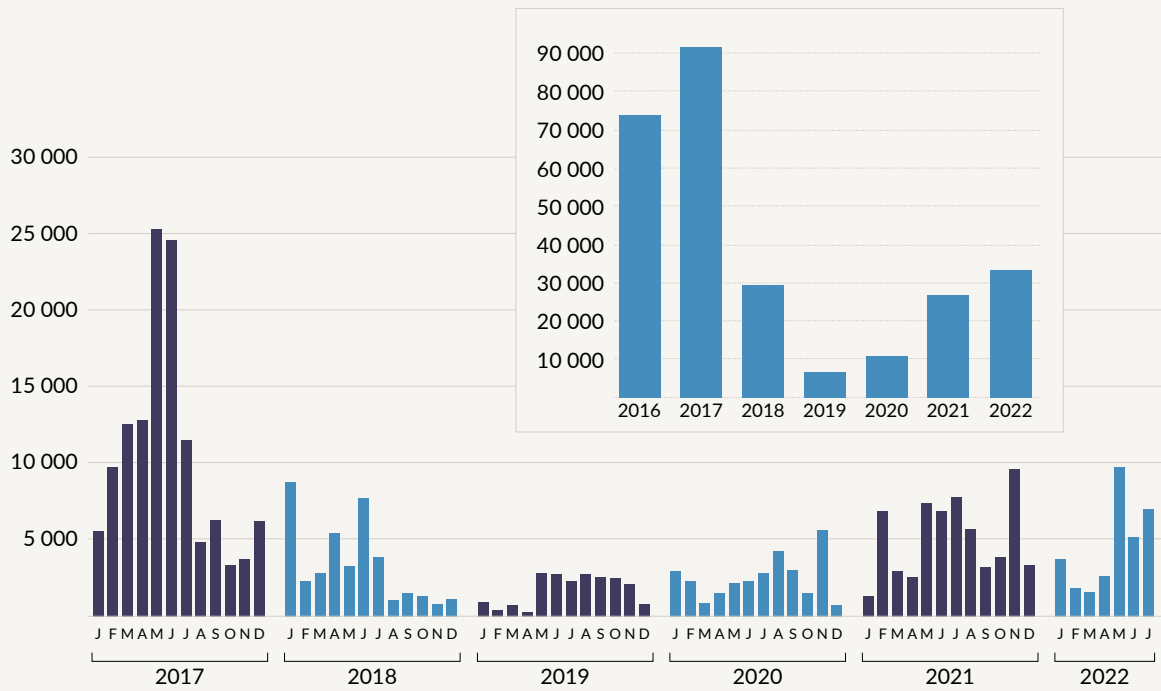


FIGURE 3 Total number of attempted departures from the Libyan coast by month.

INSET: Attempted departures between January and July, 2016–2022.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring and Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale

This, in turn, links into the change in nationalities moving via Libya, as noted earlier. Migrants from North African and Asian countries on average have greater purchasing power than typical sub-Saharan African migrants. This is why these ‘wealthier’ migrant cohorts tend to be more successful at arriving in Europe in 2021 than Sahelians and West Africans – effectively, they pay more for levels of services that make favourable outcomes more likely. As such, their greater numbers are another indicator of greater organization and the fact that serious smuggling networks were partly behind the rise in departures experienced during 2021.

While many militias have maintained – and in some notable instances greatly reinforced – their anti-migrant posture (much more so than their anti-smuggler posture), there have also been several push factors increasing demand from the pool of migrants wanting to leave Libya. The general human rights situation and living conditions of migrants in the country remained very poor and, in some cases, worsened in 2021.¹⁰ On top of this, there has been a deteriorating economic climate, alongside sustained community-driven anti-migrant campaigns, which started crystallizing during the initial outbreak of the pandemic but remained long after mobility restrictions and the initial medical emergency had been lifted. This sentiment has inspired actions by central and municipal government authorities, heightening the already grim plight faced by irregular migrants in the country.

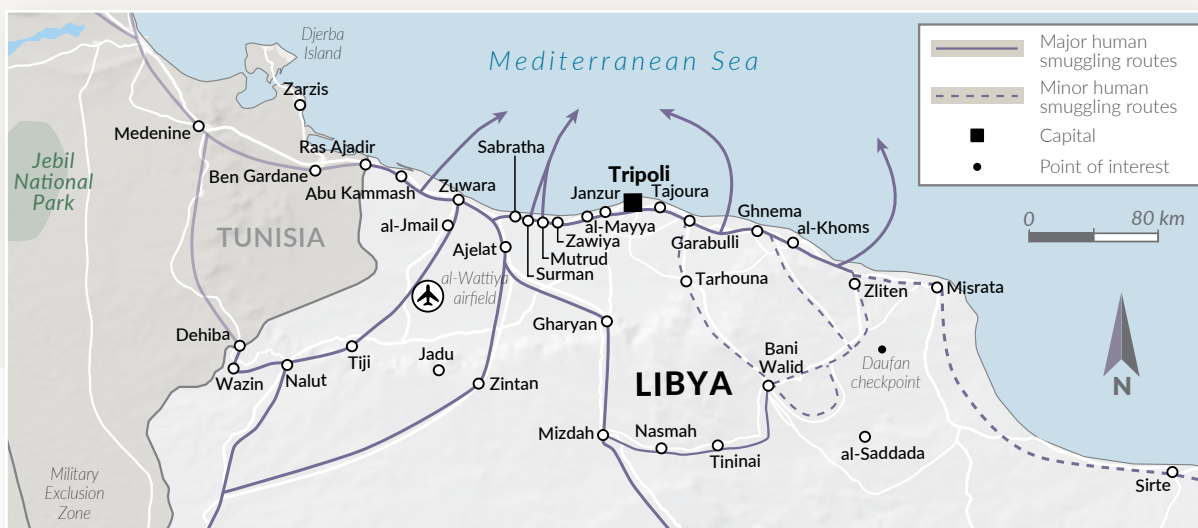


FIGURE 4 Libya's west coast, showing main human smuggling routes.

Further south, smuggling activity along the Sudanese border also increased. Prior to 2021, Tebu networks had seen their involvement curtailed by Subul al-Salam, a Zway armed group, which dominates south-east Libya. This has now changed, with both Tebu and Zway groups involved in smuggling migrants through the south-east region. On the Nigerien border, there has not been an equivalent expansion in smuggling networks. While human smuggling remains steady there, it continues to be subdued compared to the levels seen prior to 2017 during the peak, with a slight increase in movement towards Libya seen mostly among Nigerien seasonal migrants.



For more on human smuggling in Libya read 'Libya – Stability fuels rebound in human smuggling', available [here](#).

Tunisia also recorded a surge in irregular migration, with arrivals to Europe reaching the highest point since the months immediately after the 2011 revolution, building on the equally substantial growth of 2020. During 2021, Tunisian security and defence forces intercepted at least 23 328 irregular migrants in the country's coastal areas and offshore, just over double those intercepted in 2020. A similar, though less substantial, increase was registered by Italian authorities, with arrivals from Tunisia totalling 20 218 in 2021, compared to 14 685 individuals in all of 2020.¹¹

Two-thirds of irregular migrants intercepted by Tunisian authorities and three-quarters of those intercepted by Italy coming from Tunisia were Tunisians. This is in spite of a rapid rise in foreign migration through the country. For example, Tunisian interceptions of foreign migrants also almost trebled in 2021 (11 318) when compared to the previous year (4 235).

However, the high levels of Tunisians arriving in Europe reflects the greater rate of success of Tunisian irregular migrants making the crossing, who tend to be better positioned compared to foreign migrants. This, in part, is due to the rising phenomenon of ‘self-smuggling’, in which groups of migrants forgo human smuggling networks entirely and instead source necessary elements of the maritime trip (boats, motors, GPS units) and depart autonomously. Given that such migrants’ activities are largely legal up to the point they leave Tunisian territorial waters, such migrant journeys are far harder for authorities to detect, intercept and deter than ‘traditional’ migration based on commissioning human smugglers.

Nonetheless, migrant smugglers operate along the entire Tunisian coast, providing services both to Tunisians and foreign irregular migrants seeking to embark from the country. Despite the heightened risk of arrest and prosecution many face, particularly in comparison to smugglers operating in Libya, the activity is financially lucrative, especially at a time when other economic options for Tunisians are grim, offering a potent draw to the smuggling economy.

Most smugglers don’t really think of being caught as a real threat. They believe that it’s a risk that is worth taking for money they get from migrants. In these difficult times, and with the increase in sub-Saharan immigrants willing to go to Europe by sea, the business is becoming even more active.

INTERVIEW, OBSERVER IN SFAJ, MAY 2021

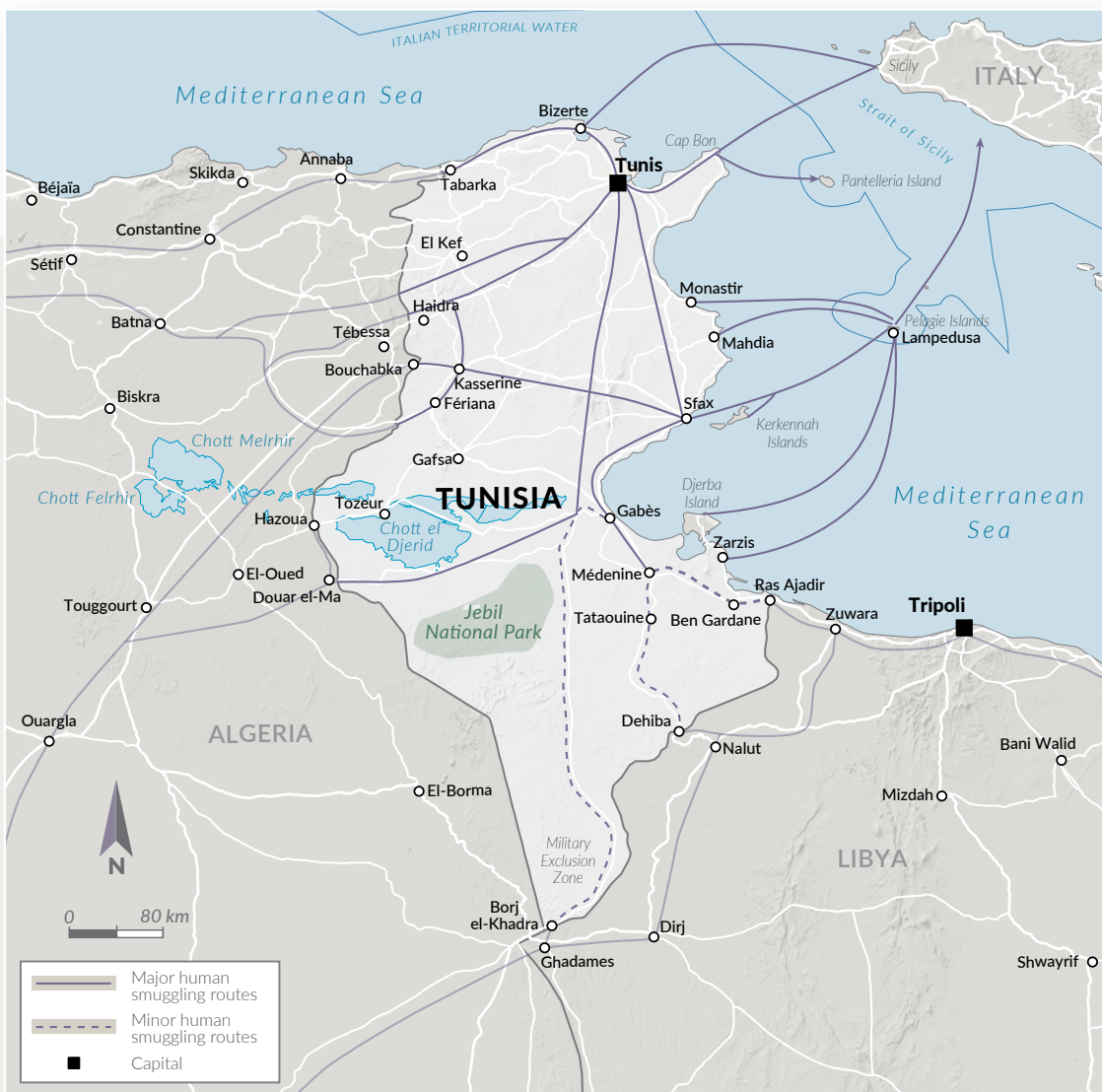


FIGURE 5 Tunisia, showing main human smuggling routes.

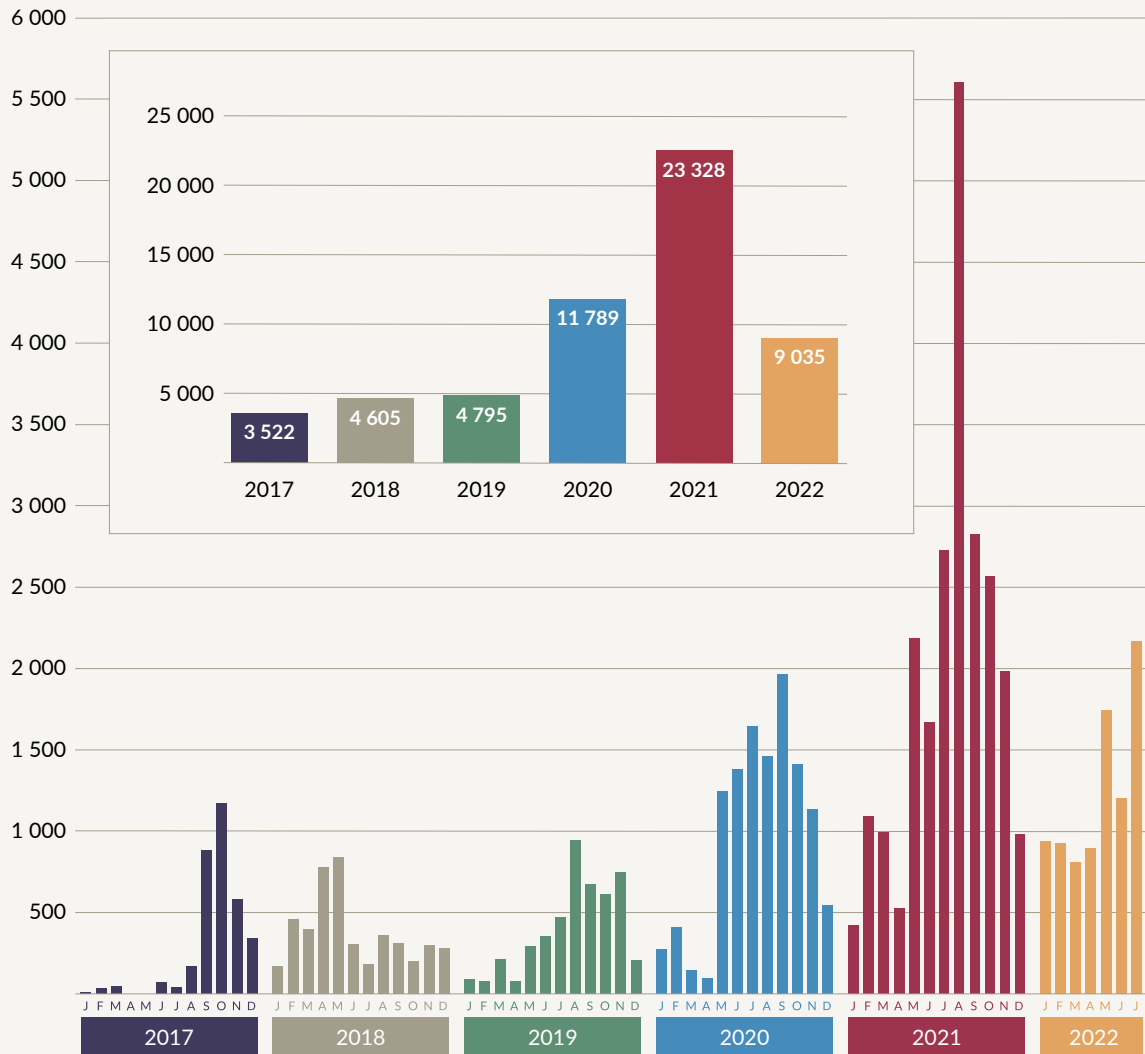
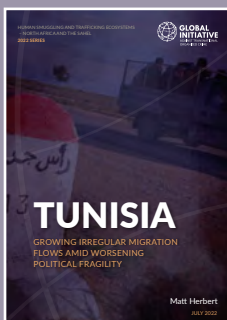


FIGURE 6 Number of interceptions by Tunisian security and defence forces by month, 2017–2022.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring



For more on human smuggling in Tunisia read 'Tunisia – Growing irregular migration flows amid worsening political fragility' available [here](#).

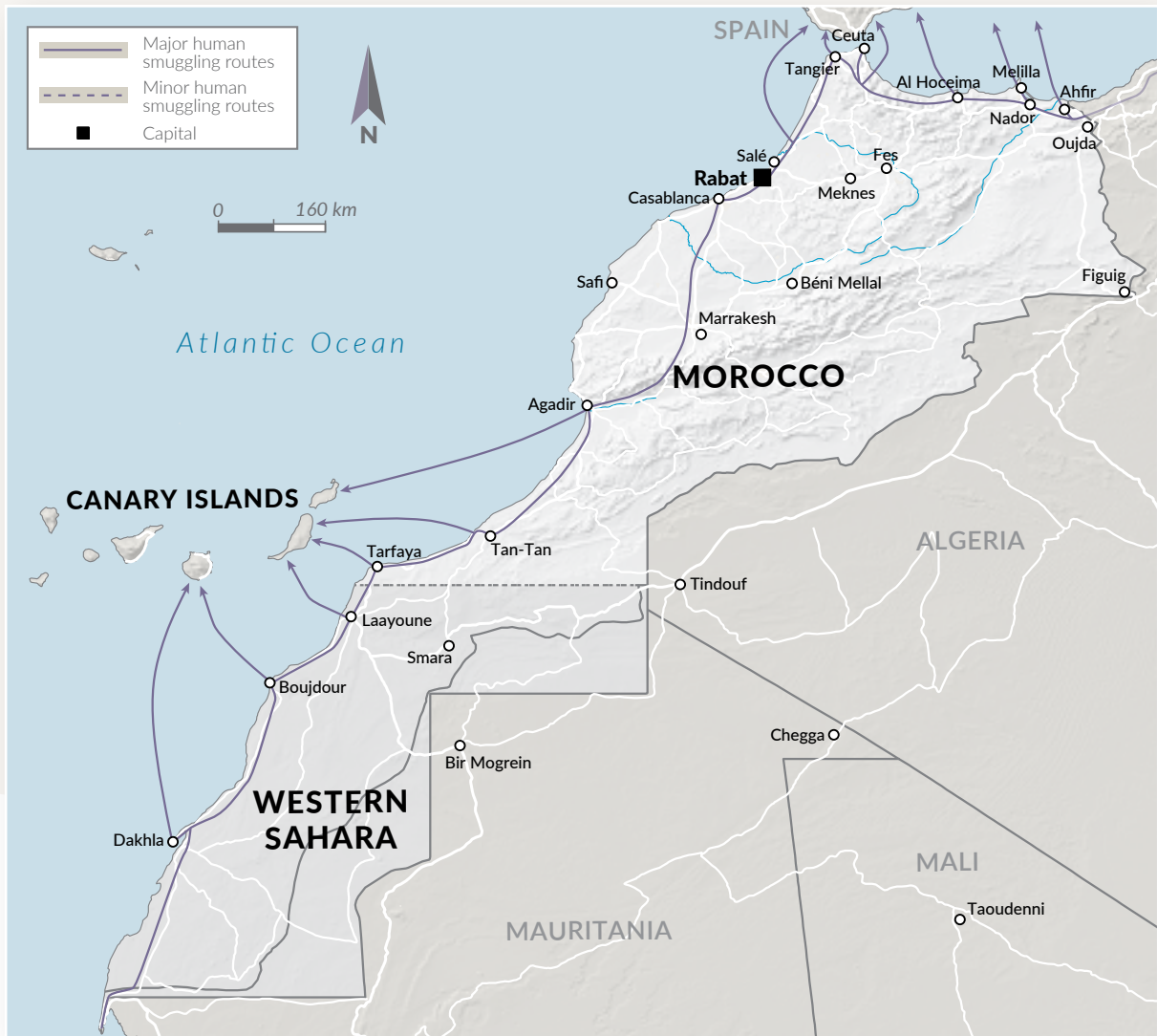


FIGURE 7 Morocco, showing main human smuggling routes.

Northern Morocco also continued to see steady levels of irregular migration, though far lower than those recorded in Libya, Tunisia, or from the south of Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara.¹² The number of Moroccans who disembarked on the Spanish mainland, after crossing the Alboran Sea, Strait of Gibraltar or the Atlantic, increased noticeably, rising from 3 521 in 2020 to 5 228 in 2021.

One reason for the relatively limited maritime activity along this route was a reportedly high level of government surveillance in recent years. This increased surveillance, which has been consolidated in 2022, contributed to a shift in operations to southern Morocco and Western Sahara in the past two years. Migrants also adapted, with Moroccans employing a similar ‘self-smuggling’ model as seen in Tunisia to reach Spain.

MONTH	ARRIVALS TO CEUTA AND MELILLA	SEA ARRIVALS TO THE SPANISH PENINSULA	SEA ARRIVALS TO THE CANARY ISLANDS	TOTAL
January	126	814	2 077	3 017
February	16	680	264	960
March	112	1 195	1 095	2 402
April	17	241	1 251	1 509
May	207	1 552	817	2 576
June	4	1 175	1 449	2 628
July	401	2 095	601	3 097
August	81	1 900	1 808	3 789
September	23	4 136	3 833	7 992
October	18	1 919	3 635	5 572
November	36	397	3 129	3 562
December	47	1 274	2 392	3 713
Total	1 088	17 378	22 351	40 817

FIGURE 8 Comparative number of arrivals to different destinations in Spanish territory, January–December 2021.

NOTE: The majority of those arriving in the Canary Islands depart from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although these figures also include migrants leaving from Mauritania, Senegal, as well as in extremely rare cases countries further south. Arrivals of Algerian nationals have been removed from the statistics as the vast majority of these arrivals come from Algeria, therefore skewing the overall picture in respect to irregular migration from Morocco to Spain.

SOURCE: Frontex

There has also been significant movement towards Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's two North African enclaves, following historic migration patterns by sea, whereby migrants float or swim to the Spanish territories, or get around or scale the tall fences that ring them. The mass crossings at the perimeter fences led to one of the largest irregular migration events in recent years anywhere in the Mediterranean, with roughly 8 000 migrants, including between 1 500 and 2 000 minors, entering Ceuta over a 48-hour period. Again, the footprint of organized smuggling groups in respect to this type of movement is weak to non-existent. As will be detailed more fully later, the surge of arrivals was almost assuredly political, linked to an ongoing dispute between Spain and Morocco.

Since 2020, the north-west Africa route, which leads from Morocco and Western Sahara, Mauritania and Senegal to Spain's Canary Islands, also re-emerged, after more than a decade of near dormancy. It is now the second most popular route to Europe, with only the Central Mediterranean route outpacing it in terms of arrival numbers.¹³

In 2021, authorities on the islands intercepted 22 504 irregular migrants, virtually on a par with the 2020 figure (23 029), when arrivals had leaped from 2 718 the previous year and 1 323 in 2018. In the eight years before that, arrival numbers averaged just over 400 a year.¹⁴ Thousands of those making the journey died, while an unknown number were also intercepted by authorities in Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal.¹⁵

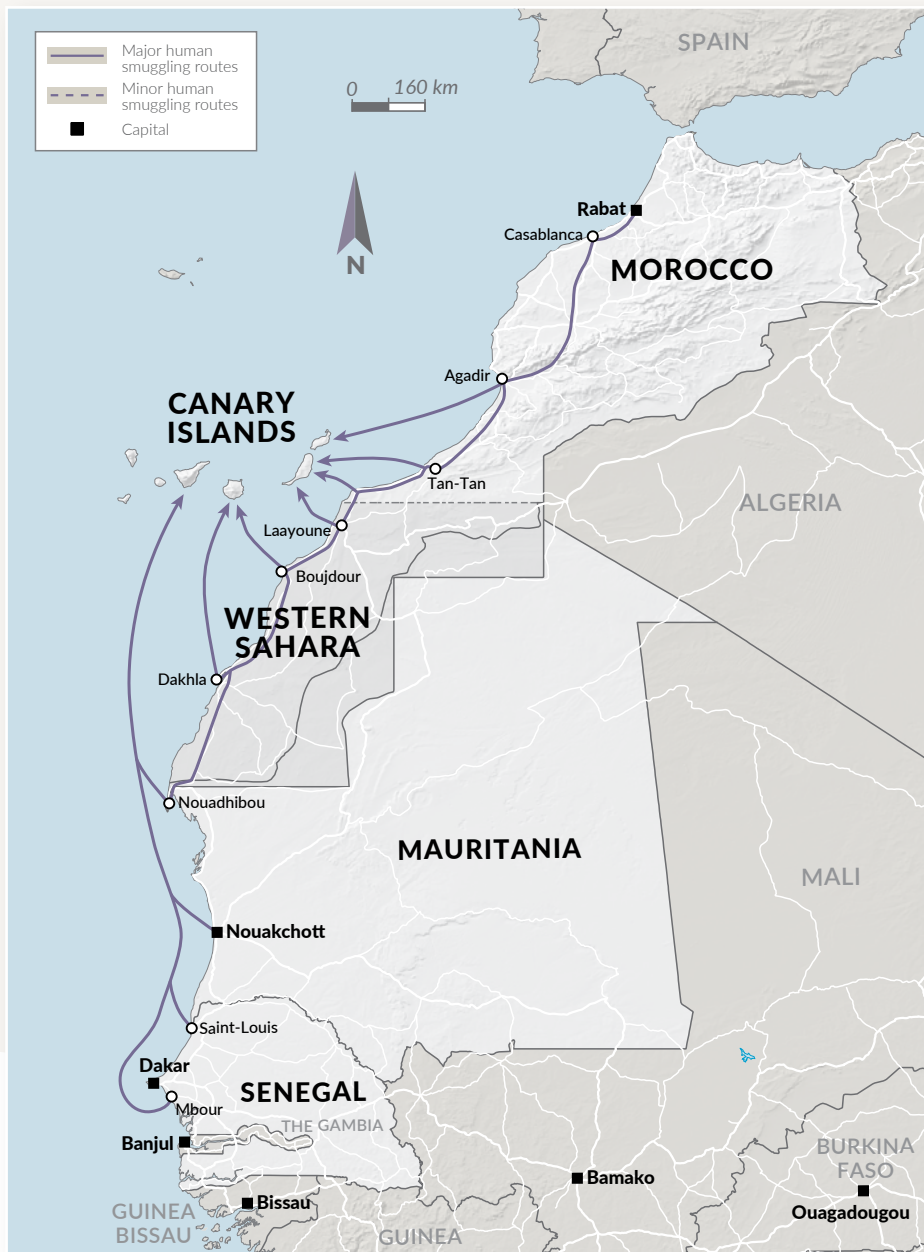


FIGURE 9 Main human smuggling routes to the Canary Islands.

The reasons why the Canary route has surged in popularity over the last two years are complex, with different factors salient in different countries and migrant nationality groups. However, some of the reasons relate specifically to Morocco. In 2021, Moroccan migrants were the most common nationality using this route, largely propelled by heightened securitization of embarkation zones along the country’s northern coast. Northern smuggling networks adapted, establishing connections to smugglers in southern Morocco and Western Sahara, and recruiting migrants in northern and central parts of the country and moving them south – where security is perceived to be more lax – before they were embarked towards the islands.

In Mauritania, a rising pattern seen in embarkation numbers is driven primarily by Malian nationals. Most come from Kayes, in western Mali, either entering Mauritania legally (if they hold the necessary documents) or contracting with smugglers to transit the border.¹⁶ From there, migrants move to either Nouakchott or Nouadhibou, in the centre and north of the country, respectively, before embarking.

In Senegal, the other primary embarkation zone, departures mainly involve Senegalese migrants, primarily driven by economic motivations (including frustrations around the government handling of COVID-19 restrictions). Unlike in Morocco and Mauritania, few established smuggling networks exist in Senegal. Rather, departures are more ad hoc, with word put out by boat owners heading north soon before departure, usually attracting passengers from small towns and cities in the north of the country, such as Mbour and Saint-Louis.

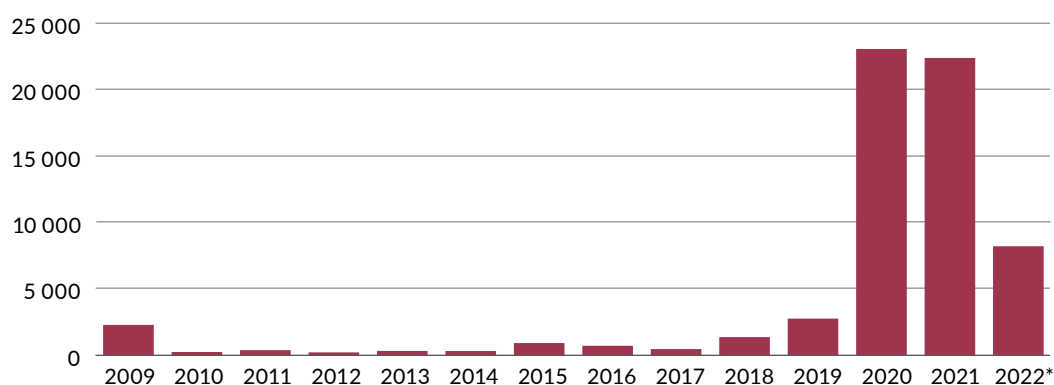


FIGURE 10 Irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands, 2009–May 2022.

NOTE: The majority of those arriving in the Canary Islands depart from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although these figures also include migrants who departed from Mauritania, Senegal, as well as in extremely rare cases countries further south.

*The figures for 2022 are from January to May.

SOURCE: Frontex



For more on human smuggling in Morocco read 'Morocco – Organized crime, geopolitics and economic woes drive new trends in 2021', available [here](#).



Photo: Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images



MOBILITY THROUGH THE SAHEL REBOUNDS AND ADAPTS

While the changes in coastal states were determining factors behind growing levels of migration activity seen during 2021, they were also driven by shifts taking place along transit routes and in key hubs in the Central Sahel. Movement in this region was generally characterized by greater smuggling activity on routes leading to Algeria, as opposed to Libya, even though substantial movement into Libya continues to take place from Sudan and Egypt.

In Niger, human smuggling has largely benefitted from the gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. However, this was felt mostly by Nigerien circular migrants (few of whom are interested in onward movement to Libya's coastal areas, let alone Europe) embarking on seasonal journeys to Libya and back.¹⁷ At the height of COVID restrictions, Nigerien migrants provided an important revenue stream for smugglers, who had already faced a contraction in their transport of foreign migrants following Niger's anti-smuggling campaign in 2016, which made the transport of foreigners illegal.

Generally, however, despite Nigerien migration picking up, irregular migratory flows through Agadez, previously the region's human-smuggling fulcrum, remained suppressed. Instead, significant smuggling activity was concentrated along a risky route through eastern Niger, linking Kano, Nigeria, to Kouri Kantana, Niger to southern Libya. Smugglers moving along this route carefully avoid towns, main roads, and Nigerien military checkpoints.

However, the northern stretches of this route run through areas where Chadian bandits operate. This, in turn, has led to a number of attacks on migrant convoys and human smugglers – in some instances resulting in vehicle thefts or kidnapping of migrants.

Activity was sustained on the routes to Algeria, with the movement of non-Nigerien migrants to the country potentially having overtaken flows to Libya. Most human smuggling and migrant movement occur along routes that centre on the city of Tahoua, 400 kilometres north-east of Niamey and 480 kilometres south of the Algerian border. Interviews with smugglers indicated that some 400 migrants reach the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset each week on this route.

There are several [human smuggling] networks in Tahoua. Each group of people arrives in Tahoua in the name of a network. Passengers will integrate [with] a network that they already know or that they received information about from a *coxeur*.

GI-TOC INTERVIEW, SMUGGLER IN TAHOUA, FEBRUARY 2021

Although Algeria is often considered safer than Libya, migrants on the move still face significant risks mostly owing to the country's hardened stance towards irregular migrants, with sustained expulsions and crackdowns on humanitarian actors.

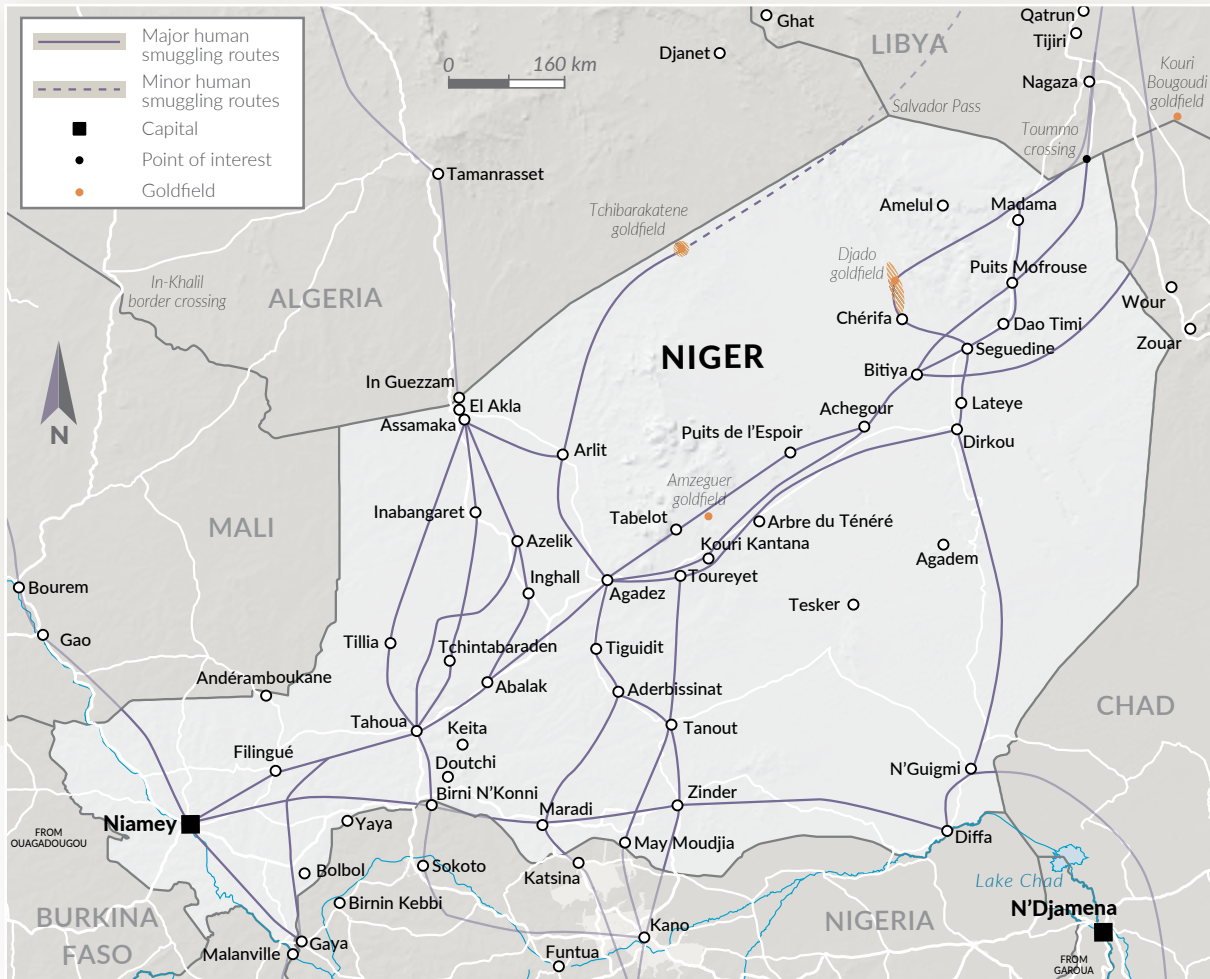


FIGURE 11 Niger, showing main human smuggling routes.



For more on human smuggling in Niger read 'Niger – Routes shift amid post-COVID increase in human smuggling', available [here](#).

In 2021, northern Mali also recorded a rebound of migrants aiming to cross into Algeria, following a major decline in 2020 due to COVID-linked mobility restrictions imposed by the Malian government, heightened border security by the Algerian government, and violence linked to terrorist-insurgencies in central Mali, Burkina Faso and western Niger.¹⁸

While not all of these dynamics changed through 2021, with violence arguably worsening, the changes that did occur – mainly around movement within Mali and a loosening of Algeria’s border security post – were sufficient to kickstart movement again, in particular in north-western Mali.¹⁹ There, most movement was centred on Timbuktu. The city saw an exponential rise in movement, with between 500 and 1 000 migrants transiting towards the Algerian border each week in the final quarter of 2021, a trend that was sustained in the first half of 2022.

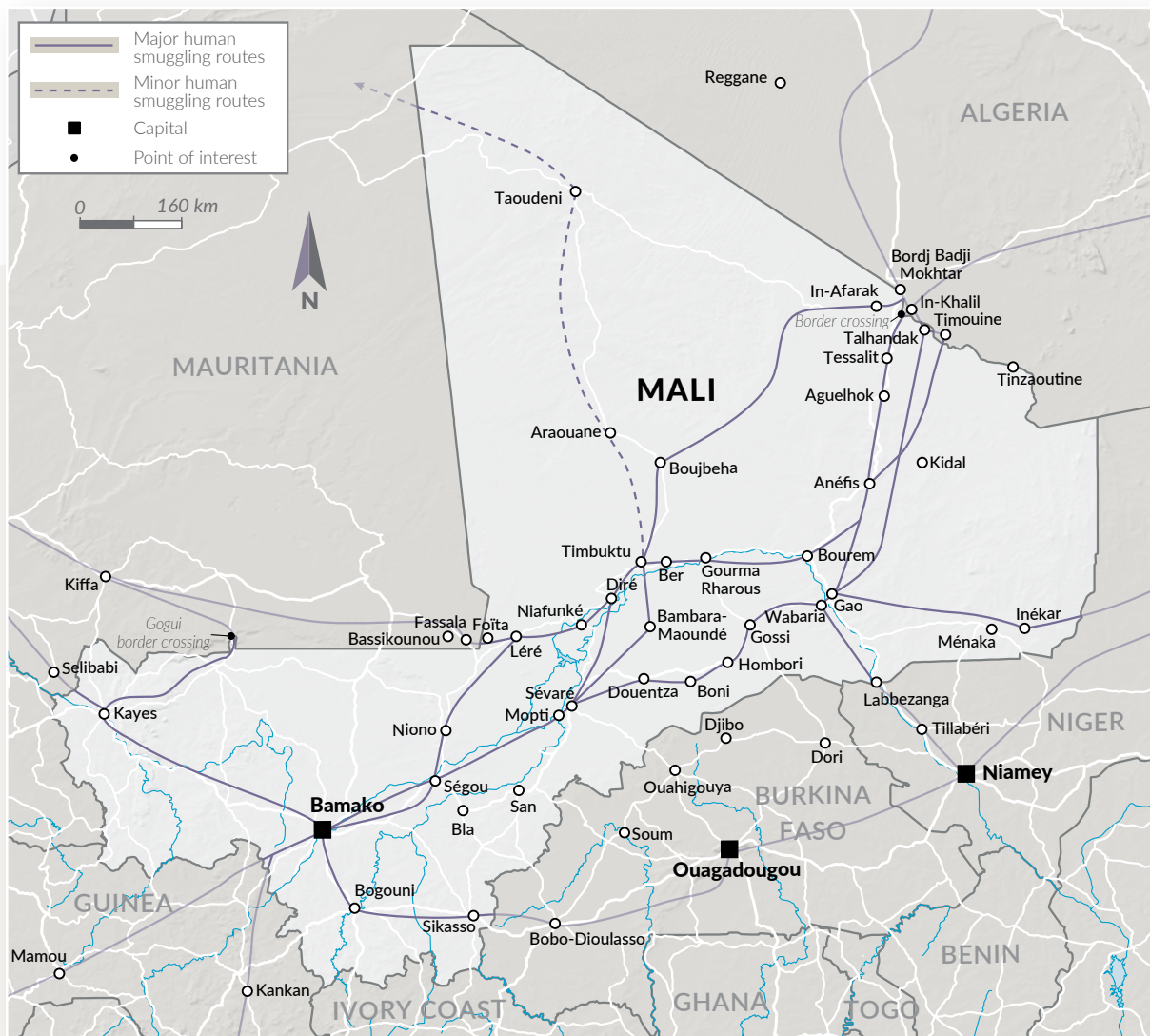


FIGURE 12 Mali, showing main human smuggling routes.

Routes from Timbuktu to Algeria also diversified, though most linked in to crossing points near In-Afarak or In-Khalil. Furthermore, the political economy of migrant transportation becoming increasingly intertwined with artisanal gold-mining economies. The ongoing proliferation of routes and diversification of actors involved in migrant transportation has coincided with increased reports of migrant exploitation and abuse, with accounts of migrants being abandoned in the desert and extorted during their journeys.

Human smugglers in Timbuktu] are well organized with various armed movements on the ground and armed militias. The *passeurs* [smugglers] might be armed, but they don't pay for separate security any more.

GI-TOC CONTACT IN TIMBUKTU, JANUARY 2021

In north-eastern Mali, the city of Gao also saw a rise in movement, though continued violence along routes connecting it to Bamako and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, limited migratory flows. In early 2022, for example, GI-TOC contacts estimated that 200 to 350 were passing through the city per month on their way to the Algerian border, typically following an itinerary that took them through Talhandak, and on to crossing points near either Timouine or In-Khalil.



For more on human smuggling in Mali read 'Mali – Human-smuggling revival after pandemic-linked slump', available [here](#).

In Chad, human-smuggling activity was heavily affected by political and security developments following an incursion by the Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT) rebel group in April 2021.²⁰ The incursion led to the death of the long-time Chadian president, Idriss Déby, in unclear circumstances.

In aftermath of the incursion, roughly from early April to May, military restrictions across the country led to a sharp drop in smuggling activities, and a stoppage in some areas. The halt in mobility was most pronounced in areas linked to the incursion, including northern parts of the country, and Kanem, an area where many FACT fighters originated from, though impediments to movement were recorded as far south as N'Djaména.

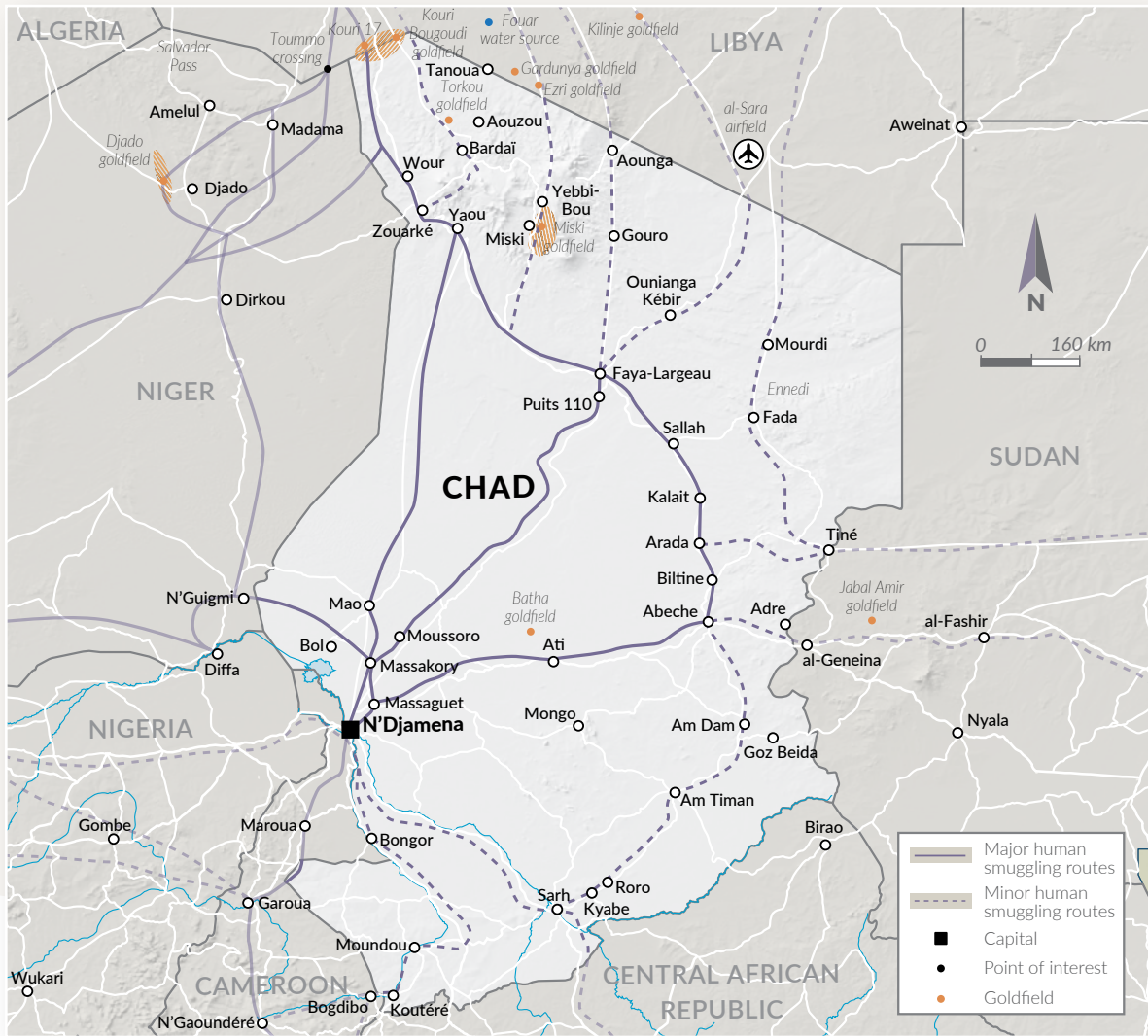


FIGURE 13 Chad, showing main human smuggling routes.

After May, human smuggling and migrant movement slowly resumed, though a combination of security controls along major north–south roads and fixed checkpoints impacted smuggling from N'Djaména, Mao in Kanem and areas in southern Chad to northern areas of the country.

By September 2021, continued disruption in movement had led a growing number of Chadian migrants to seek new routes through Niger to reach southern Libya and northern Chad, transiting points such as N'Guigmi to Dirkou, or Diffa to Agadez to Dirkou. Despite some attempts by Chadian security forces to curtail movement, this flow has continued.



For more on human smuggling in Chad read 'Chad - Political crisis significantly disrupts human smuggling', available [here](#).

Finally, artisanal gold mining continues to increase in importance as an intra-regional driver of migration in the Sahel, as well fuelling other criminal activity.

Since 2012, a growing number of goldfields has emerged across the northern Sahel and central Sahara, encompassing sites in Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Sudan. Most are in rural and remote areas with limited government presence, with the mining often occurring without formal state sanction (even if state forces often tacitly allow the activity).

Artisanal gold mines have been a boon for neighbouring communities due to the economic activity they generate, even though local groups are sharply short-changed in respect to the greater developmental and economic potential of the sites.²¹ Miners working at these sites also take home a higher income than would normally be available in the rural settings they tend to hail from, with wages typically being above the gross national income per capita.²²

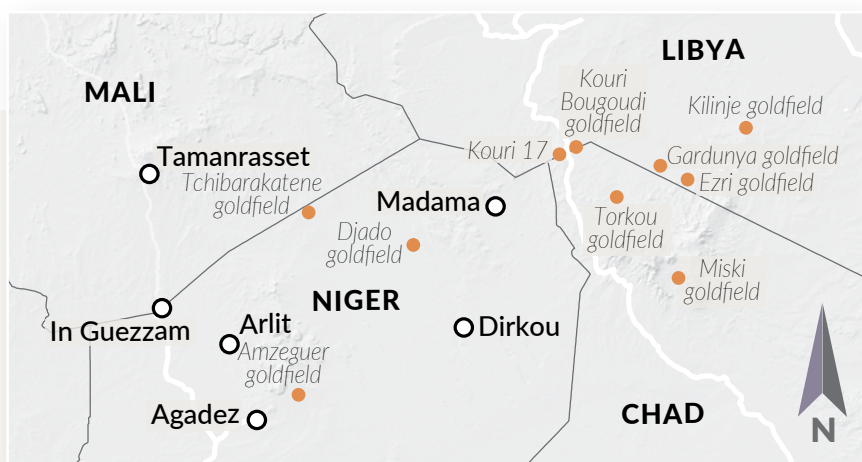


FIGURE 14 Major artisanal gold mining sites.

However, the gold rush, and the unregulated setting in which it has often taken place, has also provided ideal conditions for organized criminal activity to flourish. The artisanal mining model that predominates is rudimentary and labour-intensive, leading to continual need for workers. The resultant demand for transportation, has provided human smugglers with opportunities to replace or supplement their smuggling work with activities related to the gold mines. Smugglers have also leveraged the favourable logistics offered by mining zones located in proximity to cross-Saharan human smuggling routes to expand their smuggling business.

Human smuggling networks typically offer transport from the closest urban centres, such as Gao in Mali or Agadez in Niger. While some migrants aim to work in gold mining, others travel to goldfields to work for several months before continuing the journey north. In such cases, separate human smuggling networks exist around the sites to facilitate their onward movement.

More of concern are the human trafficking risks posed by these sites. Many miners end up in or are coerced into indentured labour, while the mines have in many instances also created a sex work industry that presents very high risks of human trafficking to women, especially considering the remoteness of many of the sites.

I travelled on credit and had to work for a long time to pay off my debt. The working conditions are very difficult, and our bosses have no mercy. They confiscate all the gold we find, saying it is to pay off our transport, or our food and water, or equipment. In the end, we have nothing left, and sometimes we changed bosses without our consent. The repayment of travel debts can go up to double or triple the [initial] amount, depending on the goodwill of the bosses ...

GI-TOC INTERVIEW, YOUNG MAN RETURNED FROM THE KILINJE GOLDFIELD, FEBRUARY 2021

The changing human smuggling and trafficking landscape, and shifting routes across North Africa and the Sahel also continue to subject migrants and asylum seekers to significant risks, which, in some instances, appear to be on the rise.

Adaptation to changing border control policies by state and non-actors has tended to divert migrants towards more remote areas, with greater likelihood of accidents and other risks.

Along coastal areas, this can be seen along the north-west Africa route, with drownings and disappearances a recurrent risk, in particular for migrants traversing the substantial distances from Senegal and Mauritania to the Canary Islands.

Inland, migrant convoys in Niger and Chad are increasingly traversing zones that overlap with areas where insurgent groups, bandits and other criminal actors, such as drug traffickers, operate. This is raising the risk of extortion and kidnapping for ransom, perpetrated either against migrants or human smugglers.

The first risk is the patrols. Second, there are the bandits. They take your fuel and money and mobile phones. They leave you with nothing. They can shoot the tyres of your vehicle. And the third risk is breakdown – if the vehicle breaks down while it is far from the main road it is a big problem.

INTERVIEW, SMUGGLER IN NORTHERN NIGER, JUNE 2022



Photo: Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images

REBOUNDED SMUGGLING ECOSYSTEMS IN A CONTEXT OF FRAGILE STATES

A key challenge in respect to the management of human smuggling and trafficking across North Africa and the Sahel stems from the level of state fragility and weak resilience in the countries under focus in this series.

Libya, Mali, Niger and Chad rank in the top 50 countries assessed for levels of organized criminality in the GI-TOC Organized Crime Index. While criminality issues were found to be less acute in Morocco and Tunisia, they, too, manifest relatively weak resilience to crime under the index, which evaluates 12 indicators across political, economic, legal and social dimensions that enable both state and non-state actors to withstand and disrupt organized criminal activities.²³

Deficiencies in resilience are particularly key because they hint at vulnerabilities to ‘criminality dynamics becoming further embedded, with long-term economic and social impacts’.²⁴

	CRIMINALITY	RESILIENCE
Morocco	4.79	4.63
Tunisia	3.79	4.83
Libya	6.55	1.54
Chad	6.01	2.46
Niger	6.01	3.21
Mali	5.89	2.38

FIGURE 15 Criminality and resilience rankings.

NOTE: Criminality and resilience are both measured on a scale from 1 to 10.

SOURCE: 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, GI-TOC

The states assessed in this monitoring project also manifest gaps in economic resilience, that has been made worse by the COVID-19-linked economic contraction in 2020, which saw GDP decline sharply and unemployment rise, hitting low-income populations and informal workers in particular.

While growth was registered in most states in the region in 2021, this was generally anaemic. Even in the best case, in Morocco, the recovery remained far below the pre-pandemic trends, a dynamic observed in nearly all countries in North Africa and the Sahel (Niger being the one exception).²⁵ Often, overall positive growth masked continued contraction in important, and often employment-heavy, sectors. In Tunisia, for example, the hospitality sector declined by 35.2% in the second quarter of 2021, while the construction sector declined by 17.1%.²⁶

	2020	2021
Morocco	-6.3%	7.4%
Tunisia	-8.7	3.3%
Libya	-23.9	31.4%
Chad	-1.6	-1.2
Niger	3.6%	1.4%
Mali	-1.2%	3.1%

FIGURE 16 Gross domestic product percentage growth, 2020 and 2021.

SOURCE: World Bank Data Portal

Any economic recovery was suppressed by rising consumer prices, in particular for food, as well as rising food shortages in some places.²⁷ As one GI-TOC contact in Kasserine, Tunisia, noted in June 2021: ‘Before, 10 dinars was enough to make dinner, but now it is not enough to make a simple *ojja* [a Tunisian staple dish of eggs].’

Weak economic resilience has had practical impacts on both migration drivers and the operations of human smuggling networks. While decisions to migrate are complex, and often influenced by a variety of variables, economic considerations – existent livelihood options at home and expected livelihood options abroad – are important considerations.

Just as the economic decline caused by COVID-19 contributed to increased migration in 2020 in some states, particularly those in North Africa, worsening economic prospects and declining living conditions due to inflation also appear to have helped fuel irregular migration in 2021 and the first half of 2022.²⁸

Notably, it is not only nationals of North African states demanding exit options, but also foreign migrants living in often irregular situations in the region, a dynamic particularly pronounced in Libya and Tunisia. Throughout the Maghreb, a substantial population of foreign irregular migrants has emerged in recent years. While some have arrived in North Africa seeking to settle there, there are also a substantial number of long-term transit migrants, who ultimately intend to migrate onwards to other destinations, typically in Europe.²⁹

Declining economic conditions have hit these populations particularly acutely, given the informal nature of their employment contracts and the limited social and legal protections they enjoy. One Ivorian national, who had lived irregularly for three years in Tunisia, explained that constrained economic circumstances had led him to seek out a smuggler in late 2021. He noted, ‘When things got hard, I decided to advance.’

The limited resilience, on both economic matters and specifically to criminal activity, underscores the general fragility of regional states. Libya, Chad, Niger and Mali are rated at the extreme high end of the Fragile States Index, among the top 25 of the 179 countries assessed globally by that index.³⁰ While Tunisia and Morocco score better, both continue to face substantial challenges. A key challenge in many of these states is weak institutions and often contentious political dynamics, with fragility impacted by and influencing resilience to key systemic shocks, such as COVID-19.³¹

This issue of fragility is important, because a focus on the metrics of a criminal phenomenon alone – such as arrests, law enforcement activity or, in the case of human smuggling, successful evasion and arrival in a destination country – offers only a limited perspective on what factors are salient to the organized crime landscape in a given country. Different countries may have similar levels of criminality, but it is how they approach the problem, their institutional capacity and political will they bring to bear, that arguably matter the most.

Here, Libya presents perhaps the most glaring example. The Libyan Coast Guard intercepted 24 494 migrants embarking from the Libyan coast in 2021, a record number, with similarly high interception levels also recorded by the General Administration for Coastal Security. Upon returning to Libya, many of those intercepted ended up in detention centres either run by the Department for Combating Illegal Immigration or, increasingly, by the Security and Stabilization Apparatus (detailed further below). However, in Libya large swathes of the state, including the country’s migration management system, have been captured by militias with vested interests in the criminal economy.³² In this context, this law enforcement metric often feeds into the criminal economy around detention, with detainees often either sold back to smugglers or released in exchange for bribes, leading to a recurrent cycle of the human smuggling system.³³

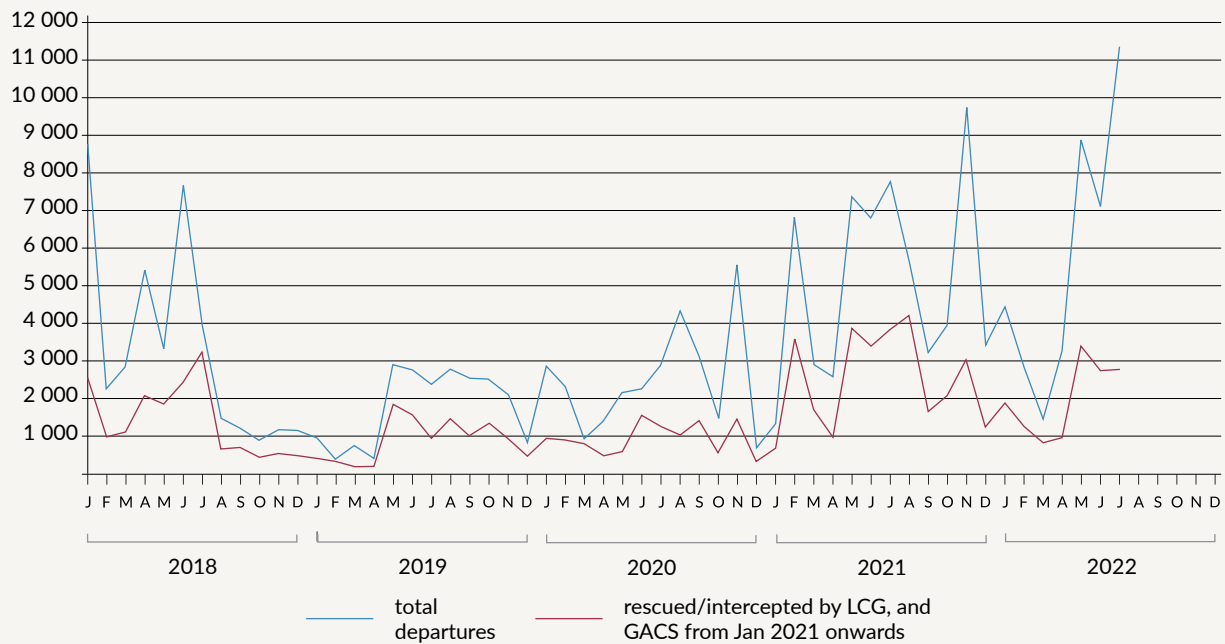


FIGURE 17 Interceptions by the Libyan Coast Guard and General Administration for Coastal Security, 2018–2021.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring



A screen grab taken from a footage of Turkish Navy frigate TCG Gokceada shows a boat carrying 17 irregular migrants, rescued offshore Misrata, Libya, on 6 May 2022. Photo: Turkish National Defense Ministry/Handout/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

In contrast to the weak resilience and fragility shown by states, human smuggling and trafficking ecosystems have generally shown great adaptability. The human smuggling and trafficking industries have successfully rebounded from and responded to major shocks threatening the functionality and continuity of activities, such as the mobility constraints put in place to combat COVID-19 in 2020.³⁴ In some instances, the 2020 shock came on top of longer-standing, national-level initiatives to halt human smuggling, such as enforcement operations in Libya against large smuggling networks post-2017, Niger's post-2016 anti-smuggling campaign and multinational efforts to halt mobility along the north-west Africa route since 2007.

In the context of North Africa and the Sahel, the resilience of these criminal ecosystems is linked to their highly diffuse nature, incorporating a large number of individuals performing different tasks, such as driving vehicles or helming boats, recruiting migrants and feeding them – activities that are often on a part-time or ad hoc basis. While those in networks usually know the activities they are engaged in contravene laws and could result in arrests or fines, the degree to which network members, and the broader communities they come from, perceive their activities to be criminal and taboo varies widely, both by specific job/function and by area. Because of this, involvement in low-level human smuggling, especially in the transportation of migrants, can be an economic coping strategy for individuals facing few other options.

Human smuggling as a coping strategy is important too because it links to the often nuanced approaches states take to the activity. In Niger, for instance, the government's law enforcement campaign had the most devastating effect on the human smuggling ecosystem between 2016 and 2018. However, Niamey was forced to relent in recent years in view of the damage that this campaign had wreaked on the livelihoods of marginalized border communities, whose relationship with national authorities was already fragile and for whom the government was not able to provide legitimate economic alternatives.



Photo: GI-TOC

The instrumentalization of migration as a political tool

One political dynamic that has come to play a pivotal role in the management of human smuggling and trafficking in these fragile contexts is the instrumentalization of migration management. For states, such instrumentalization can either be a tool for international influence or a means of addressing domestic political challenges. However, instrumentalization of migration is not restricted to states alone, with armed groups throughout North Africa and the Sahel leveraging it as a means of gaining domestic legitimacy and/or economic support.

The best-known example of state instrumentalization of migration for international influence comes from Morocco, whose perceived strategic non-enforcement of border controls is used as a tool for exerting pressure on Spain and the EU.

During 2021 this culminated in events such as the arrival of 8 000 migrants in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta over two days in mid-May, as mentioned above. The incident was preceded by rumours circulating among diaspora groups that Moroccan authorities were likely to relax border controls in the wake of Ramadan.

The migrant arrivals followed a spat between the Spanish and Moroccan governments in April 2021. Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, the movement claiming the independence of Western Sahara, travelled to Spain for medical treatment using Algerian papers.³⁵ Following months of diplomatic wrangling, Spain shifted its position on Western Sahara. In March 2022, the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sanchez, formally endorsed Morocco's position on the territory, breaking with five decades of neutrality.³⁶ Since then, Moroccan authorities stepped up law enforcement and reactivated cooperation on the deportation of Moroccan migrants from Spain.



Moroccan migrants climb a rocky cliffside as they attempt to cross the border into Ceuta on 18 May 2021.

Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images

More often, however, instrumentalizing migration in order to influence international partners is less dramatic, hingeing on rhetorical claims and threats. In Tunisia, for example, in the wake of President Kais Saied's emergency measures in July 2021, Parliamentary speaker Rached Ghannouchi warned Italian media that failing a restoration of democracy, 'over 500 000 Tunisian migrants could try to reach the Italian coasts in a very short time'.³⁷ Almost a year later, in May 2022, Saied's brother, viewed as an unofficial presidential spokesperson, warned on social media that unless foreign states supported Saied's political moves, they risked opening 'the gates, in front of hordes of terrorists and illegal migrants who will break on the northern shores of the Mediterranean'.³⁸ There is little indication that such rhetorical threats have had an impact on European actors. Nonetheless it is telling that key political figures in Tunisia continue to look at control of migration as a point of leverage for broader political goals.

It is important to stress, however, that state instrumentalization of migration also has a domestic component. Irregular migration through states in North Africa and the Sahel has generated substantial tension in some areas, especially as a rise in border securitization has expanded the length of time migrants can be 'in transit' to years, in some cases. In Niger, for example, tensions between local residents and migrants and asylum seekers is fuelled by limited local resources and community perceptions that international actors have focused funding and attention on foreigners, while doing little for the local community – a common complaint across countries under focus.³⁹

In turn, states and state-affiliated actors sought to capitalize on this tension for political gain in 2021. This manifest most acutely in Libya, where central and municipal authorities, as well as law enforcement outfits and militias, responded to the frustration of migrants by launching indiscriminate round-ups, exposing migrants to violence and abuse, particularly during periods of detention. In some instances, these campaigns became a push factor in themselves, inducing migrants to seek to leave.

In Tunisia, the country's powerful security force unions also targeted sub-Saharan migrants in 2021, terming their presence 'an unprecedented invasion' and claiming they are a 'ticking bomb threatening public and national security'. This anti-migrant rhetoric has had a detrimental impact on popular discourse around the migrants and, crucially, heightened their vulnerability to security force action. Between December 2021 and February 2022, some 300 sub-Saharan migrants, including those with residence permits, were arbitrarily detained in Tunis. Foreign student associations, whose members have been targeted, have claimed that police officers explained they were conducting a 'census' of migrants in the country, another demand issued by security force unions.

There is a risk that such incidents in 2021 represent early manifestations of a worsening trend. In particular, if the economic situation in the region deteriorates, communal grievances and state-foreigner tensions are likely to escalate.

States are not the only actors instrumentalizing migration enforcement. It has increasingly emerged as a tool for militia groups to build domestic power and legitimacy. In Mali, armed groups in the north, particularly elements within the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies, GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad-Daoussak (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad-Daoussak, MSA-D), have become involved in 'recovering' migrants in the Gao and Ménaka regions as part of a project funded by the Italian government.

Though done with the agreement of the Malian government, the project nonetheless functionally empowers, and to a degree legitimizes, the territorial control aspirations of local armed actors. It also risks creating a new revenue stream for these groups, one derived from advancing the goals of foreign states. The chances of success are unclear, in part because of the key financial role played by migration for the northern armed groups' coffers. Revenue is derived from not just taxation and protection of migrant convoys, but also profiteering off artisanal gold mining, an economic activity that would struggle without access to migrant labour.

A similar dynamic is seemingly happening in south-western Libya, where militia groups affiliated with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) have been involved in arresting migrants transiting through or living in the area, concentrating them at the Tamanhint airbase and then deporting them to Niger. Between November 2021 and March 2022, over 2 500 migrants were expelled. There are hints of some sort of external support, though no clear evidence at this time.

The most extreme example of the instrumentalization of migration, however, involves north-west Libya. During 2021, the Security and Stabilization Apparatus (SSA) – a militia conglomerate nominally under state authority – cornered migration management across a sprawling section of the country's west coast to a degree that has not been recorded before.

In practice, the SSA is effectively a vehicle of collective action for the armed group leaders that run it. The focus of this action, at a strategic level, has been to defend and expand the power its members have individually acquired over communities, locations and institutions, and cement their legitimacy to domestic and international audiences. The group now controls a sizeable share of maritime interception, with its own ports and a with a naval fleet that rivals that of the Libyan Coast Guard. This is on top of controlling a chain of detention centres as well as their patrolling and checkpoint capabilities, targeting migrants on land.

Militias all over Libya have taken on counter-migration activities as a key component of their power- and legitimacy-seeking strategies, given the salience of the issue to Libya's international partners and its sensitivity for the Libyan government. The only unique aspect of the SSA is the sheer scale of its operation.

In Mali and Libya, this dynamic is entrenching the individual power of these groups, furthering their immunity and ability to resist DDR efforts in the future, and undermining the political transition more generally. However, more broadly, the short-term gains for which these acts of instrumentalization of migration are deployed fundamentally undermine the commitment and investment to address political and economic fragility that are needed if there is to be a sustainable, long-term strategy that truly targets human smuggling and trafficking.



Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images



OUTLOOK IN TROUBLED TIMES

Throughout the rest of 2022, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Mali, Niger and Chad are likely to see a continuation of the trends identified in this report. The unpredictable factor, but one that will most likely aggravate economic conditions across the region, is how severely the conflict in Ukraine and prolonged disruption of the global economy will influence pre-existent trends, the nature of the impacts, and when they will begin to manifest in each country. These global tectonic shifts will be inevitably filtered through the prism of local dynamics.

In Libya, political instability continues to play a fundamental role, and is a key analytical entry point for any forecast. The brief, relative stability that held sway during 2021 did not last into 2022, and the country finds itself again divided between two rival governments. Non-state armed groups have been strengthened by this outcome, with key militia leaders being elevated to kingmakers in various ongoing local and international efforts to unlock the stalemate. Under these conditions, and barring the outbreak of fresh conflict – not a scenario that can be ruled out entirely – in Libya, it is assessed that observed developments in the political economy of human smuggling and trafficking will continue to consolidate.

Militias that have taken on a policing mantle, will keep playing a decisive role in managing irregular migratory flows, particularly in the coastal areas. However, their law enforcement focus will remain predominantly trained on migrants, as opposed to their smugglers and traffickers.

While, at a bird's eye view level, this appears like a contained situation, sophisticated criminal groups will likely keep finding latitude to expand their operations in this landscape. This will be increasingly the case in a context of deepening economic decline, inflation, a continued climate of abuse towards migrants and asylum seekers, which will continue to push departure numbers towards Europe in the first half of 2022. This is likely to be sustained throughout the rest of the year.

Tunisia arguably finds itself in a more acute situation in respect to the push factors on prospective irregular migrants in the country, both Tunisian nationals as well as sub-Saharan. The economic crisis in that country continues to deepen.

The situation has arguably worsened in the first six-month of 2022, amid contracting job opportunities, poor earnings, and rising inflation, linked in part to the conflict in Ukraine. Unless there is substantial and focused government action, the situation is likely to degrade in the latter half of 2022, with particular danger around a default on international debt obligations.

Furthermore, the country is now in the midst of a fully-fledged political crisis: President Kais Saied dissolved Parliament in March 2022 and began to rule largely by decree, functionally abrogating the 2014 constitution. On 25 July, a new constitution, which significantly strengthens the Presidency, was passed in a referendum, though voter rates were low.

While the passage of the new constitution is arguably a victory for Saied and his supporters, its broader impacts, and how it may change the situation in Tunisia are unclear. With the parliament and previous political order sidelined, there are no readily apparent institutional scapegoats left for Saied to blame should the changed political order not lead to an improvement of the country's economic challenges.

The economic and political situation is likely to drive greater numbers of Tunisians to migrate abroad. As of mid-2022, a new hashtag, 'The people want to flee' (#الشعب يريد الهجرة) is beginning to circulate on social media.



Tunisians demonstrate in support of President Kais Saied, in Tunis, on 8 May 2022. Photo: Fethi Belaid/AFP via Getty Images

In Morocco, the context that enabled smuggling activity to expand in 2021 appears to have started to contract in 2022, with sustained effort by Moroccan law authorities to curb movement within and across the country's borders, following the rapprochement between Rabat and Madrid in March. Increased internal deportations, meant to move migrants away from embarkation zones in both the north and south of the country and to remote areas in the interior, as well as hardening by border authorities of approaches to migrants around the Spanish enclaves, could well lead to a reshaping of the human smuggling landscape in the country. So far, however, this has not yet translated into a discernible shift in the number of migrants departing the kingdom in the first half of 2022.

However, the measures being taken by the authorities are curtailing the options for migrants amid growing push factors due to Morocco's own struggles with international inflationary pressures. This will likely lead to violent confrontations and a worsening of conditions for migrants, who would have depleted their savings to reach Morocco, only find themselves trapped just before the final leg of their planned journey.

The central Sahel also presents a highly dynamic scenario that is also informed very heavily by the state fragility of the three countries under review: Mali, Niger and Chad. As underscored by the GI-TOC reporting on human smuggling dynamics in Niger since 2019, the government in Niamey has been recalibrating its hard stance in respect to the movement of people after taking stock of the negative impact on the livelihoods for communities in northern Niger since its crackdown of 2016 and 2017.⁴⁰

After re-emerging from the COVID-related border restrictions in 2021, the current Nigerien context sees legitimate and semi-legitimate movement co-exist with clandestine human smuggling operations along more remote routes that were established over recent years, and which are especially dangerous for irregular migrants.

In the absence of a sustainable economic and development plan, particularly for the northern regions, the rolling over of this status quo in 2022 does not bode well. In the short to medium term, smuggling networks are likely to keep consolidating their business, as will criminals operating in other illicit markets, such as banditry. The force of the impact from the inflation of international commodity prices is yet to be translated into this context, but when it does, it will likely sharpen the dynamic outlined.

Niger is also hemmed in by various conflict threats coming from its neighbourhood, not just in the western Tillabéri region, where Islamist militias operating in Burkina Faso carried out multiple violent attacks in 2021 and the first half of 2022, but also, potentially from Libya and Chad, where the potential for outbreaks of violence remain present.

In Chad, 2021 marked the beginning of a complex transition following the death of President Déby. The end of the year saw significant developments for possible political process engaged by the transitional military council established to pave the way for possible elections in 2022. These included preliminary talks with armed-group leaders abroad, in preparation for the government-led 'inclusive national dialogue', which was due to take place by the end of 2021. By the second half of 2022, however, little progress had been made. This process could have ground-breaking implications for stabilization at national and international levels as well as for the criminal economy of northern Chad, if it successfully engages Chadian armed groups and their fighters.

Undoubtedly, the outcome of this transition will affect smuggling and trafficking dynamics. If it fails to meet objectives in terms of electoral process and DDR, tensions and instability in the north will persist and could lead to further crackdowns on migrant movements. In contrast, a successful transition process could also be crucial in reshaping how national authorities address illicit gold mining, which is closely linked to human-smuggling and -trafficking dynamics in Chad. Until now, the Chadian government has adopted a purely security-based approach, which has been unsuccessful and counterproductive, by feeding into local tensions and grievances.

If the political process in Chad allows for a new approach to address artisanal gold mining in the north through sustainable and credible regulation, this could reduce human trafficking and exploitation risks. More broadly, an inclusive strategy for northern Chad that allows buy-in from local communities would also pave the way for greater stability in the area.

In Mali the involvement of armed groups in 'migration management' witnessed in 2021 could fundamentally alter migrant smuggling in the region. Given that some actors within these groups are also directly involved in human smuggling, a model may emerge in which they profit from both sides of the system. Similarly, irregular migration could become a 'bargaining chip' used by armed groups to seek support from external actors eager to stem irregular migration flows in the Sahel, and vice versa, with certain external partners cooperating on issues of irregular migration and border security conditional on receiving other types of support.

In 2022, this picture became further complicated with the drawdown of French troops from the region and their replacement by mercenaries attached to the Russian Wagner Group. So far, Wagner has not interfered with the activities of armed groups in the informal economy. However, there is concern within the Cadre Stratégique Permanent – the new umbrella that incorporates pro-government and rebel armed groups – that this will change, potentially upending the equilibrium achieved in this area.



A man sits in front of a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin during a demonstration to celebrate France's announcement to withdraw French troops from Mali, in Bamako, on 19 February 2022.

Photo: Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images



Photo: David Ramos/Getty Images



CONCLUSION

Human smuggling and trafficking rebounded through North Africa and the Sahel in 2021, even as the routes used diversified. This activity continued into 2022, and seems likely to further deepen as the global economic situation deteriorates.

This has substantial ramifications for migrants who engage with smugglers and who are victimized by traffickers, increasing the risks they face, for example, from bandit groups or accidents at sea or in remote desert areas. It also has ramifications for states – countries of origin, countries of transit and destination states. North African and Sahelian states face a challenge in responding to donor pressure to address migration, even as such a course of action may detract from more pressing domestic political or law enforcement priorities.

In fragile states, organized crime, including human smuggling and trafficking, is normally perceived as a pervasive risk: smuggling rises, corruption ensues and institutions are further corrupted or weakened. This is most certainly the case in a number of contexts assessed in this brief. Money flowing from human smuggling and trafficking has a corruptive and destabilizing influence. However, it is also the case that human smuggling, and other forms of criminalized smuggling that are socially embedded and normatively accepted, actually represent coping strategies for communities living in territories where the state is weak or absent and licit economic opportunity is limited. In such a complex context, there is a risk that even well-meaning interventions, such as the capacity building of border forces, if predicated on incorrect assumptions about the salience of smuggling to local communities, risk undermining local economies and aggravating anti-state grievances and instability.

Interventions seeking better management of irregular migration flows must therefore be more sensitive to these potential outcomes and the nuances of the political economy of human smuggling and trafficking not only in different countries, but also within countries. For this reason, there needs to be more of a bottom-up focus within donor analysis and strategy development.

This is especially relevant in a context of irregular migration, which has become a medium through which engagement between international donors and actors in the region is ordered. A broad and strategic discussion among national and international stakeholders is urgently needed on the role of non-state or legitimized militias operating in the field of migration management. This is a growing problem, and as the numbers of arrivals to Europe rise, there will be greater temptation on behalf of European actors to pursue arrangements with these groups.

As discussed in this brief, the idea that groups are prepared to engage in the enforcement of human smuggling and trafficking in the territories they control is often only a partial picture that obscures their vested interests in the criminal economy. More importantly, their empowerment and legitimization, fundamentally undermine states' and communities' resilience to crime, which, in turn, erodes capacity to address these criminal economies. This is reflected in the very resurgence in migrant departures seen during 2021, which came after a collapse brought about by multiple co-option agreements between individual armed groups and state actors relevant to the Central Mediterranean route between 2016 and 2017.

International actors should also develop more robust monitoring protocols to identify emergent issues of police violence against migrants, and identify options to deter such approaches (including the cancellation or strategic halting of ongoing security sector reform programmes).

Lastly, there should be a renewed international effort to focus on the organized criminal component behind the human smuggling and trafficking industry. Since the EU's Valletta Summit on Migration in 2015, when European member states declared 'a war on smugglers',⁴¹ many initiatives implemented under this banner have largely been translated into actions against migrants on the ground. Since 2015, dynamics around human trafficking and abuse of migrants on migratory routes from Africa to Europe have evolved, as has the political environment faced by states along these routes, as well as the legal and technical instruments available to them to respond.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain among countries of origin, transit and EU member states in respect to international cooperation on information sharing, investigation, asset identification and prosecution of criminals operating in this field, as well as basic debriefing of victims, particularly those who arrive in Europe.

The extent of impunity enjoyed by high-level criminals is such that, even in Libya – by far the most challenging country of the ones under review in this brief – when rare actions targeting criminals have taken place, these have had an instant conditioning effect beyond the specific gangs being targeted.⁴²

If results can be achieved in a context as challenging as Libya's, they can be achieved across the entire North African and Sahelian smuggling and trafficking chain. Such reprioritization would help shift the crosshairs away from vulnerable migrants and aim them at specific, abusive criminal players whose actions help fuel instability and threaten state fragility.

Notes

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- 4 Ibid.
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