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Atlantic Currents and their Illicit Undertow: Fragile States and Transnational Security Implications

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Introduction

Illicit flows have come to undermine the celebration that has come with globalization, trade liberalization and improved communication capacity. The existence of a number of weak and fragile states in West and North Africa is having widespread ramifications for transatlantic security, serving as safe havens through which illicit flows and divergent ideologies can thrive.

The Arab Spring and the subsequent collapse of the 40-year regime of Col. Muammar Gaddafi in Libya has been catalytic in creating fault lines across the Greater Sahara region. Libya has become a gateway for a range of criminal trade in illicit commodities, from stolen oil to the smuggling of migrants, and at the same time, a number of armed militia groups enjoy impunity for violent, criminal, and terrorist acts in the wilderness of the country's southern border.

Like many of the oil-rich states in the Maghreb, Libya holds disproportionate influence over the stability and prosperity of its poorer neighbors in the Sahel and further south, and Gaddafi had long been a keen manipulator of ethnic politics in the Sahara. The relaxation of his imposed status quo, coupled with the liberation of the Gaddafi-era weapon stockpiles, has proved an incendiary combination that has triggered conflict and political transitions in both Libya and Mali, and has contributed to instability and the growth of extremism across the broader Sahel. Consequently, there are a growing number of fractures in the states of the Sahel and Maghreb: divisive lines built upon longstanding separatist ideals that challenge the national boundaries built in the post-colonial period and reinforced by Cold War politics.

The nature of the conflict, and the many interdependencies of populations and economies in the region, has made it difficult for external actors to engage effectively. International interventions that have sought to damp instability down in one area have proved only temporary, while new manifestations of insecurity have quickly arisen in others. This has thrown up many challenges against which the established tools of international diplomacy, cooperation, and peacebuilding are hard-pressed to respond, as it requires dealing with actors who are usually pariahs in this context, such as terrorist groups and criminals. It also requires a subtle understanding of some of the root causes of the insecurity, which often stems from historic grievances including marginalization, exclusion, impunity, human rights abuses, and a paucity of economic alternatives — all far-reaching and difficult issues that are seldom given credible room at the table. It furthermore requires accounting for the illicit trade flows and illegal activities that fund these groups, a challenge for even the most established of states.

In this chapter, our focus is to compare the impact of two illicit flows across the Sahara: drug trafficking, particularly the cocaine flow from Latin America through West Africa toward Europe, and the emerging and increasingly virulent migrant smuggling trade from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. Both of these flows have differing degrees of entrenchment and social acceptance in the fabric of the Saharan states, and consequently, their

impact on regional geo-politics, the community, and stability both at home and abroad has been different. While not exclusively to blame for the current conflict, the presence of these flows is shaping the political economy of instability in two ways: by eroding already dysfunctional states through corruption and collusion, and by strengthening their armed counterparts who have sought to “tax” the trade.

Both of these flows are increasingly having transatlantic implications as, ironically, Europe and North America are the primary destination markets for the majority of illicit flows in the Greater Sahara and yet the states through which these flows transit have become an important driver of instability on the European periphery. The nature of illicit trade is such that it is almost impossible to counter without effective state counterparts in the region, and the military interventions that are often the preferred response are poorly placed to achieve impact and they instead exacerbate social tensions. The result has been new forms of hybrid governance and the breakdown of colonial boundaries.

This chapter illustrates the detrimental impact of illicit economies on efforts toward peacebuilding and state consolidation, and discusses the rise of extremist ideologies. These are arguably the most significant developments in the Greater Sahara region since the end of colonial rule, and in an age of globalization, they are intimately connected to the drug consumption and labor habits of the former colonial powers themselves.

Deep-Rooted Trafficking Economies

A historical examination of the pre-colonial economy of the Greater Sahara reveals that networks, connectivity, and mobility are fundamental tenets of the fabric of the region’s economic and political life. Despite the vast distances involved, for reasons of geographic and climatic necessity, the Greater Sahara is so closely integrated as to constitute a single economic region.

At its peak, the Sahara was a thriving commercial zone, with a vibrant transit and export trade in a range of commodities from silk to salt.¹ Another critical industry was the slave trade: in 1858, the British consul in Tripoli estimated that slave trading represented more than two-thirds of the caravan trade across the Sahara. When slave dealing became prohibited across Europe and the British Empire, this trade slowly morphed into the facilitation of migrants across the Sahara toward employment in the Maghreb.²

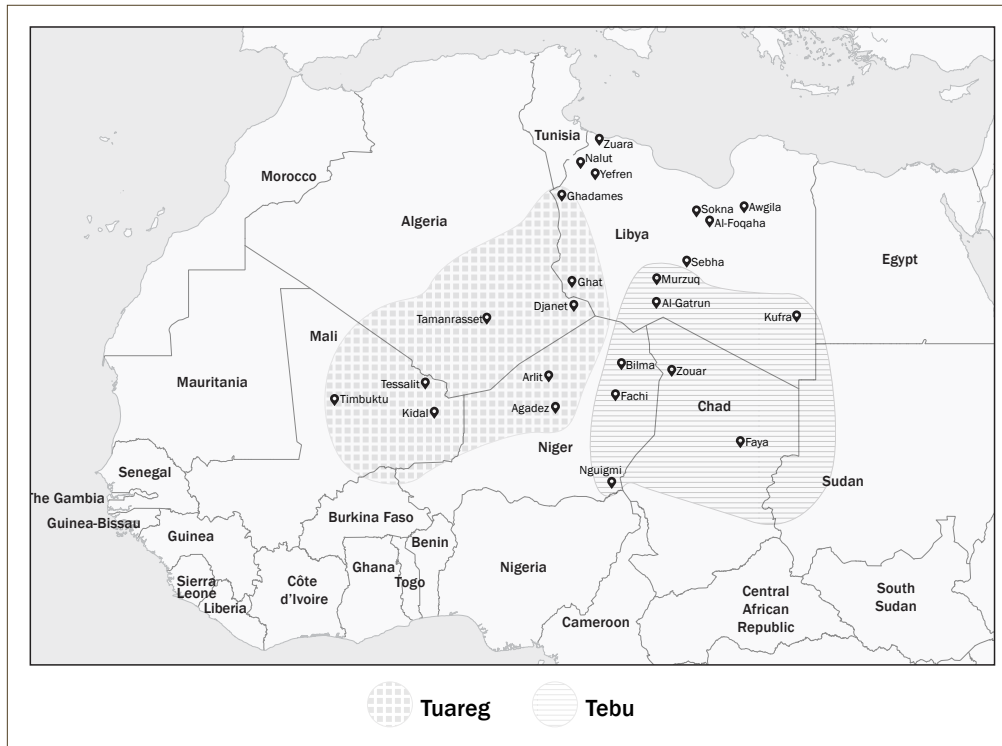
A range of minority nomadic ethnic groups operated across the Sahara, and they were historically engaged in these trades. For example, the Berber Arab Tuareg, with ancient roots dating back to the 6th or 7th century, were heavily associated with consolidating the trans-Saharan caravan trade. Similarly, the Tebu are a nomadic, pastoralist tribe of African descent, whose current population of approximately 250,000³ are concentrated largely in Chad, southern Libya, and northern Niger.

¹Yvan Guichaoua, *Transformations of Armed Violence in the Sahara* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

²John Wright, *Libya, Chad, and the Central Sahara* (London: Hurst and Co., 1989).

³The size of the Tebu population is debated, with estimates ranging from 120,000 to several hundred thousand. See Laura Van Waas, “The Stateless Tebu of Libya?” *Tilburg Law School Research Paper No. 010/2013* (May 2013).

Figure 2: Settlement areas of the Tuareg and the Tebu in the Greater Sahara



During the 1960s and 1970s, as oil reserves were discovered, trade channels expanded further east and economic activity increasingly centered around the northern oil rich economies. Since their currency was of little use in West Africa, sellers would come back with consumer goods subsidized in Algeria, and thus profitable in the Sahel.⁴ Similarly, youth migrated northwards, seeking livelihoods, creating large populations of both Tuareg and sub-Saharan Africans across the Maghreb, particularly in Libya.

Some Saharan, and most Sahelian states, failed to provide even a minimum of social and economic development, and policy decisions partially sponsored by international development priorities eroded traditional pastoralist livelihoods.⁵ Famines were strategically used “as a means of weakening marginal populations,”⁶ border controls were increased, and control over common assets (such as grazing reserves) were turned over to state control, often to the personal enrichment of state officials. Consequently, pastoralism, once the livelihood mainstay of the vast majority of Saharan people, receded as a viable means of

⁴ Saverio Krätli, Jeremy Swift, and Annabelle Powell, *Saharan Livelihoods: Development and Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

⁵ Krätli, Swift, and Powell.

⁶ Krätli, Swift, and Powell, 28

survival and those communities became more dependent on once-complementary forms of illegal trade, the smuggling of basic commodities, cigarettes, and counterfeits.⁷

Trans-Saharan trade connections were sustained over the centuries by Islamic law, and social capital was maintained through clan-based affiliations. According to Guichaoua, “success was made sustainable through constantly negotiated social alliances, and involved subtle social hierarchies.”⁸ At the same time however, a shared legal tradition and/or familial bonds were not sufficient to secure a convoy of goods given the thousands of kilometers involved. Each clan therefore developed within their ranks a capacity for “protection offered by specialists of violence,”⁹ and this function translated through the colonial period into the present day. Even during the French colonial rule, for example, the Tuaregs retained the right to collect taxes and to offer protection services for trans-Saharan caravans.¹⁰

Partly due to ethnography but also due to a certain degree of extent, the Tebu and the Tuareg historically overlapped little in terms of geographic control. According to an old political agreement signed between the Tebu and the Tuareg in 1875, Tuaregs are in charge of territory to the west of the Salvador Triangle (which is situated where the borders of Algeria, Libya, and Niger intersect, and is often considered to be the hub of all trans-Saharan trafficking) and Tebus to the east of it.¹¹ Thus, while both groups span the borders of four countries each, they are a minority group in all of them.

It has been argued that the fluidity of economic and social organizations, and the transnational mobility observed in the Sahara, structurally contradict the norms of centrally administered states.¹² Thus, the present conflicts in the Sahara are largely the result of the failure of the newly created post-colonial states to deal adequately with the problems of the nomadic, pastoralist, and other marginal populations in the modern state.¹³ It has therefore been argued that the exercise of power in the Sahara has been manifested in the ability to control or deny the freedom of movement.¹⁴ It is clear that the peculiarities of the desert’s social organization, and the long-distance interactions of Saharan trade, have created a ubiquity of arms and a particular brand of Saharan militancy.

Throughout his rule, Libya’s Gaddafi was a keen manipulator of ethnic politics, and went to great lengths to include or exclude certain minorities within his broader political goals. The Tebu, for example, were persecuted and oppressed by Gaddafi in a systematic

⁷ Krätli, Swift, and Powell.

⁸ Guichaoua, 17.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Morten Bøås, “Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM’s Blueprint for securing Northern Mali,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, no. 4 (April 2014).

¹¹ Alain Antil and Mansouria Mokhefi, *Managing the Sahara Periphery* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

¹² Guichaoua.

¹³ Krätli, Swift, and Powell.

¹⁴ James McDougall and Judith Scheele, *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

campaign of discrimination that the UN retroactively described as being tantamount to ethnic cleansing.¹⁵ They were denied access to education, health care, and other basic services, and, in 2007, Gaddafi proceeded to strip the Tebu residents of Libya of their citizenship.¹⁶ Although when threatened by violent opposition he later recanted, the damage was done, and the Tebu ultimately played a key role in his downfall.

By contrast, the Tuaregs were favorites of Gaddafi. He welcomed Tuareg migrants from Mali and Niger, and he often referred to them as the “Arabs of the South,” “Lions and Eagles of the Desert,” and “Defenders of the Sahara.”¹⁷ He long fostered the goal of a unified cross-border Saharan region, and accordingly stoked the dreams of the Tuaregs, in particular of an independent region, the Azawad. In 1979, he created the “Islamic Legion,” an approximately 8,000-strong auxiliary armed group comprised mainly of Tuaregs drawn from Egypt, Sudan, Niger, and Mali.¹⁸ He invested economically in the Tuareg regions of Niger and Mali, and gave political support to the respective Tuareg rebellions in the 1990s and 2000s.

Drug Trafficking and the Azawad

Prior to the collapse of Gaddafi’s government, the introduction of cocaine trafficking in the Greater Sahara, which began in the early to mid-2000s, changed the dynamics of trans-Saharan trade. Entering the region from the West African coastal states and trafficked northwards by land through the Sahara, this flow intersected with the longstanding regional traffic of hashish from Morocco that is trafficked east toward destination markets in the Gulf. However, as a higher value commodity of greater international interest, the cocaine trade required higher levels of secrecy and protection than other contraband that had previously transited the Sahara.¹⁹ A new commodity with an estimated value of \$1.6 billion may have been pocket change as far as the global market was concerned, but this represents a large percentage in the context of the small and fragile economies of the Greater Sahara.²⁰

Drug trafficking has had a dual impact on the stability and security of the Sahara. On one hand, the drugs trade has undermined the integrity of the central state and the capacity of state institutions through corruption and impunity and a reorientation of priorities

¹⁵ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Summary Prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Accordance with Paragraph 15 (c) of the Annex to Human rights Council Resolution 5/1 - Libyan Arab Jamahiriya,” *UN General Assembly Resolution A/HRC/WG.6/9/LBY/3* (New York: United Nations, 2010).

¹⁶ Waas.

¹⁷ Ines Kohl, “Libya’s ‘Major Minorities.’ Berber, Tuareg and Tebu: Multiple Narratives of Citizenship, Language and Border Control,” *Middle East Critique*, vol. 23, no. 4, special issue (2014): 423-438.

¹⁸ Guichaoua.

¹⁹ Peter Tinti, Mark Shaw, and Tuesday Reitano, *Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present, and Future* (Geneva: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2014).

²⁰ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Estimating Illicit Flows from Drug Trafficking and other forms of Transnational Organized Crime* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011).

away from service delivery toward facilitating the lucrative drugs trade.²¹ Furthermore, unlike all previous forms of illicit trade — from slaves to cigarettes — the cocaine trade had neither community-level investment nor a local market. In fact, cocaine trafficking has remained tightly controlled amongst a limited number of small groups or persons of Malian Arab, Mauritanian, Sahrawi, and Moroccan nationals with international connections, colluding with highly placed government officials or people of influence in the countries concerned.²² If local groups are involved, it is at the lowest levels, as drivers or security, who may not know what commodity they travel with.²³ The West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD) report concluded that it is generally only a few individuals who are benefitting from the trade, and that they appear to be at the “top of the pyramid” of important political operators. There is apparently minimal trickle-down from the trade to the local economy and very little of the profit remains in the fragile countries through which it transits.²⁴

At the same time, however, the cocaine flow has increased the resources available to armed groups, reducing their incentives to work toward central state consolidation.²⁵ Despite the oft-used label of “narco-terrorism,” there is scant evidence that the Islamic extremist groups active in the Sahara are directly involved in drug trafficking.²⁶ Other militia groups or tribes, including the Tuareg or Tebu, may not be directly involved in the trafficking specifically, but those groups with consolidated control over territory may be able to “tax” the convoys in transit in their areas of influence.²⁷ Their share of illicit resources were often used to secure access to greater legitimacy with their immediate constituents, and to buy into local governance and security institutions. This evolved into a situation where, for example, “in the zones inhabited by Malian Tuaregs, customs officials and the smugglers often belong to the same clan.”²⁸

The parallel dynamics of undermining the central state and increasing resources to armed groups have been under-analyzed and consequently are poorly understood because of the

²¹ Etannibi Alemika (ed.), *The Impact of Organised Crime on Governance in West Africa* (Abuja: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013); Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, “People’s Perspectives of Organised Crime in West Africa and the Sahel,” *Institute for Security Studies Paper no. 254* (April 2014).

²² Antil and Mokhefi; Wolfram Lacher, *Organised Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

²³ Reitano and Shaw, “People’s Perspectives of Organised Crime in West Africa and the Sahel.”

²⁴ West Africa Commission on Drugs, *Not Just in Transit: Drugs, the State, and Society in West Africa* (Geneva: West Africa Commission on Drugs, 2014).

²⁵ Lacher, *Organised Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*; Ivan Briscoe, *Crime after Jihad: Armed Groups, the State, and Illicit Business in Post-Conflict Mali* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, May 2014); Mark Shaw and Fiona Mangan, “Illicit Trafficking and Libya’s Transition,” *United States Institute of Peace Peaceworks no. 96* (2014).

²⁶ Wolfram Lacher, *Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel* (Geneva: West Africa Commission on Drugs, 2013).

²⁷ Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption, and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel* (Geneva: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2015).

²⁸ Cedric Jourde, “Sifting Through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel: The Case of Mauritania,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies Africa Security Brief No. 15* (September 2011): 18.

southern Libya to the east. By contrast, the Tebu were eminently well placed to facilitate the eastward flow of cannabis, whose southern route follows the Libya/Chad border toward Egypt. The cannabis flow is less remunerative and is equally of lesser significance to Western interests, and has thus attracted less attention in regional drug and border control strategies.³⁰

The drug economies coalesced and proceeded relatively unrestricted until the revolution that ended the Gaddafi regime in October 2011, at which point the game changed dramatically. The nature of the revolution was not an organized political upheaval, but part of the grassroots Arab Spring movement that swept across the Maghreb. At the onset of the revolution, Gaddafi's distrust of his own national army, and his preference for creating loose coalitions of militia groups — such as the Islamic Legion previously referenced — resulted in the rapid fragmentation of the security situation. In the major coastal cities, alliances formed rapidly during the revolution, and military strength translated quickly into political influence, though these alliances were far from stable.³¹ While all eyes were on the political transition, in the borderlands a similar process consolidated local control by the marginalized tribes who continued to remain largely excluded from the nascent central government process.³² Libya's southern borders comprise about 1,400 kilometers of uninhabited desert through which the major trafficking routes transit. During the Gaddafi period, ownership of portions of the illicit economy was provided to tribes, families, and communities in his personal favor, or were given as a means of ensuring political complicity of potential rivals. After his fall, Libya's borders were blown open and competing groups fought violently for control.³³

In December 2012, the Libyan transitional government announced the closure of Libya's southern borders to Algeria, Niger, Chad, and Sudan due to the uncontrolled proliferation of smuggling, weapons, and drug trafficking. This was, however, little more than a bravado statement. The central state, torn between competing militias, had basically no capacity to exert military authority, and by that time the Tebu and Tuareg (who had continued to be largely marginalized in the central state process) had gained local empowerment and had taken control of Libya's southern region. Quite early in the early post-revolution period, the two “major minorities” had managed to negotiate an agreement around border control: the Tuareg administered the western region from Sebha, via Ubari, to Ghat, exerting military control through their own militias and parts of the new, evolving national army, whereas the Tebu controlled the region eastward from Sebha to Kufra on the eastern border with Egypt. A buffer zone was established between the Tumu border post run by Tebu and the Anay Pass that was under Tuareg control.³⁴

³⁰ Mark Shaw and Tuesday Reitano, *The Political Economy of Trafficking and Trade in the Sahara: Instability and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

³¹ Shaw and Mangan.

³² Kohl.

³³ Shaw and Mangan.

³⁴ Kohl.

This peaceful collaboration was not to last long, however. Over the subsequent three years, a new order has emerged, not only in Libya, but across the Sahel, and with intimate linkages to the ability to access and control key trafficking routes and illicit resources. The sequence of events struck particularly hard on the fortune of the Tuaregs, as the fallout from Libya destabilized the political balance in neighboring Mali³⁵ and the subsequent rise of Islamic extremism in northern Mali served as the polarizing factor that tipped the scales decisively against them.³⁶

Mali and Niger share a quite similar ethnic make-up, but have had distinctly different trajectories in terms of their political process, including attitudes toward decentralization, inclusion, and clientelism. After the first two Tuareg rebellions that occurred both in Mali and Niger, Niger moved toward a more genuinely representative central state structure and decentralized governance with an allocation of uranium resources to the northern provinces.³⁷ By contrast, Mali's leadership responded to the Tuareg uprisings with political promises of greater development in the north, but made little effort to follow through or to move toward genuine inclusivity of governance or equitable resource distribution, but instead retained a highly clientelist regime where state resources remained concentrated amongst a patronage-based elite.³⁸ Thus, when thousands of highly militarized, armed Tuaregs were released from Libya following the revolution, Mali's political and social framework proved far less resilient than Niger's,³⁹ which has, to this day, managed to avoid open conflict or major political discord. Instead, the remaining vestiges of Gaddafi's regime came home prepared and ready to finally fight for their long awaited state: the Azawad.

The rapid progression of the northern offensive, swelled as it was by the adrenalin-filled and well-armed Tuareg fighters from Libya, was surprising to all. In an astonishing three days, between March 30 and April 1, 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) managed to secure control over the cities of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. By April 6, a mere week after the offensive began, the MNLA had declared its objectives achieved and proclaimed the independence of northern Mali as the Azawad. Where the story went sour was with the displacement of the MNLA by a coalition of groups with an Islamic extremist agenda, who proceeded to impose sharia law in the newly anointed cities of the Azawad on an apparently unwilling population.⁴⁰ This crossed the red line of the international community, whose level of tolerance for the growing African "arc of instability" had apparently been reached. Concern that northern Mali had

³⁵ Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou, "Security Issues, Movement, and Networks in the Sahara-Sahel," in OECD/SWAC, *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security* (Paris: OECD, 2014), 173-224.

³⁶ Reitano and Shaw, *Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption, and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel*.

³⁷ Tuesday Reitano, "Comparing Approaches to the Security-Development Nexus in the Sahel and their Implications for Governance," *Governance in Africa*, vol. 1, no. 1 (July 2014): 4.

³⁸ Reitano and Shaw, *Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel*.

³⁹ Nwajiaku-Dahou.

⁴⁰ Reitano and Shaw, *Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel*.

become “the largest al Qaeda stronghold since the fall of Afghanistan”⁴¹ led to the authorization by the United Nations for the French intervention in the Sahel.

The military intervention by France, “Operation Serval,” was quickly successful in routing the separatists and liberating the key northern cities. The post-intervention period placed great attention on the Tuareg, as the international community sought to paper over the cracks of Mali’s fractured governance, and restore the country to a constitutional democracy.⁴² With political pacification measures on the table within the framework of the Ouagadougou Agreement and the Algiers Accords, the Tuareg splintered amidst competing political, economic, and ideological priorities, underpinned by a desire to defend territory and (drug) trafficking interests.⁴³ What remains is a complex, and often self-defeating web of rebel militias, organized crime networks, and terrorist groups, characterized by significant levels of in-fighting and violent clashes.⁴⁴

Significantly, though this was not an objective of the mission, Operation Serval interrupted the traditional cocaine route northwards, initially suspending the traffic altogether, though over time it resumed along a more easterly route through Niger. Illicit markets, much like their counterparts in the licit economy, respond to a series of both push and pull factors. Conflict, international surveillance, and significant economic changes can serve as push factors to prompt the shift of an illicit market away from an existing route. This was the result of the French intervention in northern Mali on the trans-Saharan cocaine route. At the same time, however, illicit markets can be attracted to certain conditions, and a secure, regulated marketplace is one of these. Whilst the Tuaregs were occupied with their insurgency in Mali, funneling attention, funds, weapons, and their strongest fighters south to Mali, their preferential status and capacity to control territory in Libya was being challenged on two fronts: by the Zintani forces (based in the city of Zintan) to the west and the Tebu to the east.

Winners, Losers, and the End of the Libyan State

The fall of Gaddafi opened a window of opportunity for both the Tebu and the Tuareg to emancipate themselves from protracted Arab domination, as the overthrowing of his oppressive regime led to a fragmentation of players. The Tebu played their hand more strategically than the Tuareg, and while serendipity also played a part — in the form of the mass exodus of refugees from the Syria conflict — the result has been a formidable concentration of resources and influence built predominantly on smuggling and illicit trade. The Tebu have managed to consolidate this level of control with a very low profile, trafficking mainly in goods with little interest to international security officials and that are not stigmatized by local communities.

⁴¹ Angela Sanders and Samuel Lau, *Al Qaeda and the African Arc of Instability* (Brussels: NATO Civil-Military Fusion Center, 2012): 10.

⁴² Reitano and Shaw, *Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel*.

⁴³ Tinti, Shaw, and Reitano.

⁴⁴ Sofia Sebastian, “Why Peace Negotiations in Mali Will Not Succeed,” *ISN ETH Zurich*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=190170>.

Having long been actively suppressed by Gaddafi in favor of a competing Arab tribe (the Zwaye) the Tebus were alacritous in translating the revolution into a strategic opportunity to position themselves as the dominant controller of the triple border between Chad, Sudan, and Egypt in the south. The Tebu operate less as a homogenous entity, but more as a networked coalition of several dozen interrelated groups, each with their own autonomous militia that controls a specific area and manages the flow of trafficking that goes through their territory. For these groups, control over parts of Libya's far south provides the Tebu a position of unprecedented economic and military strength, and has left them without an equivalent in terms of potential political influence.⁴⁵ While the Tebu broadly align themselves with the official Tubruq government, the group has yet to truly imprint themselves onto the bifurcated Libyan state, or to throw the full weight of their influence behind any political agenda.⁴⁶ Instead, the Tebu have become increasingly active and professional traffickers of a variety of commodities and smugglers of people, their lower profile affording them a degree of freedom to operate that the highly scrutinized Tuareg could not replicate.

Beginning in early 2012, the Tebu began a prosperous clandestine alcohol trafficking operation from Niger to Libya. The whiskey smuggling apparently profited from complicity with state officials who informally taxed the contraband trade to supplement their incomes, as salary payments by the struggling central state became increasingly infrequent.⁴⁷ This created a foundation for the Tebu to traffic a far wider range of goods, from looted construction equipment to stolen cars. The Tebu began to divert former Gaddafi weapons stockpiles to various groups in the 2012 Malian conflict, as well as to support Boko Haram's mounting terror campaign in Nigeria in 2013-14.⁴⁸ As noted, they began to also benefit from the changing nature of the cocaine flow eastwards, serving as drivers or just taxing the trade.

The Tebu translated their financial profits into military strength, which then allowed them to position themselves vis-à-vis the international community as a credible interlocutor and provider of security for Libya's lawless southern border. This began with a strategic maneuver to control the business of "protecting" the many oil facilities that are scattered across Libya's southern desert, and which produces an estimated 75 percent of the country's oil.⁴⁹ As with many protection rackets, the Tebu's move into the oil industry came with threats and extortion; for example, in June 2013, Tebu oil field guards blocked production at the Elephant field to demand (and obtain) more employment opportunities for members of the local community in the field's protection.⁵⁰ As the central government

⁴⁵ Antil and Mokhefi.

⁴⁶ Borzou Daragahi, "Libya's Civil War Chaos Draws in Remote South," *Financial Times*, November 4, 2014.

⁴⁷ Kohl.

⁴⁸ Antil and Mokhefi.

⁴⁹ Stratfor, *Complexities of Future Energy Investment in Libya*, July 5, 2012. <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/complexities-future-energy-investment-libya>.

⁵⁰ Antil and Mokhefi.

increasingly failed to engage effectively, international oil companies began dealing with the militia groups directly on day-to-day business.⁵¹

In parallel, the Tebu leveraged themselves with the international community as potential partners in countering the emerging threat from Arab Islamist “terrorists.”⁵² From early in the post-revolution, as they were still consolidating their control over Libya’s southern border, the Tebu were vocal in differentiating themselves from the Tuareg, and promoting themselves as a partner in the fight against terrorism. They argued that only an indigenous force could hope to chart a path through the ever-morphing smuggling networks and terrorist groups active in the Sahara.⁵³ Adding to their credibility were their state patrons, Niger and Chad, both of whom had been active players in Africa’s war on terror. Niger is the primary staging point for most of the EU and U.S. counter-terrorism operations, and Chad has been one of the highest troop-contributing countries to northern Mali’s peacekeeping operation.

The windfall that significantly contributed to the ability of the Tebu to consolidate their authority and control came in the form of the mass refugee movement from Syria. While human smuggling has always been one of the most lucrative of illicit trade flows in the Greater Sahara, the level of profit to be made from the Syrian migrants was unprecedented.⁵⁴ Prior to this, illicit migration was ubiquitous across sub-Saharan Africa, and perceived predominantly as a resilience strategy, and the use of “facilitators” was a necessity to cross the long distances and harsh terrain, not stigmatized as a criminal activity. The ability to migrate was considered a positive economic opportunity for those able to afford the journey, and the revenue made off the smuggling trade was often a significant contribution to the local economies of key border towns along the route.⁵⁵ Addressing the smuggling of migrants was far from being a priority either to the states through which the migrants transited, or to the international community, perhaps because the scale of profits to be made was insufficient to produce organized transnational networks on a large scale.⁵⁶

During the Libyan revolution and its aftermath, however, the migrant trade became increasingly commoditized. In Libya’s major cities, migrants held in detention centers managed by revolutionary brigades have been contracted out as informal work gangs, receiving no compensation⁵⁷ but garnering revenue for those that control them. Rounding

⁵¹ Stratfor.

⁵² Guichaoua.

⁵³ Antil and Mokhefi.

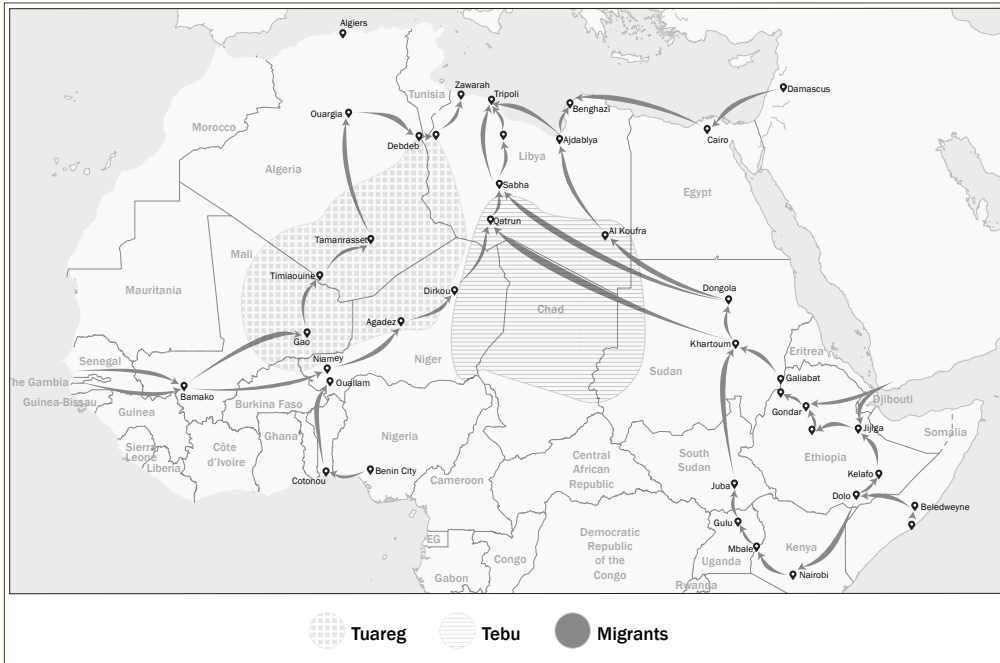
⁵⁴ Tuesday Reitano, “A Profitable but Perilous Crossing: The Changing Nature of Migrant Smuggling through Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and EU Migration Policy, 2012-14,” *European Journal of Organised Crime*, no. 3 (June 2015).

⁵⁵ Tuesday Reitano, Laura Adal, and Mark Shaw, *Smuggled Futures: The Dangerous Path of a Migrant from Africa to Europe*, (Geneva: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2014).

⁵⁶ Lacher, *Organised Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*.

⁵⁷ Danish Refugee Council, “We risk our lives for our daily bread”: *Findings of the Danish Refugee Council Mixed Migration Survey in Libya* (Copenhagen: Danish Refugee Council, January 2014).

Figure 4: The intersection between oil interests and the human smuggling trade



up and imprisoning illegal migrants and extorting their families for money to purchase their release also became a ready source of income for some of the many militia groups active in Tripoli and Benghazi.⁵⁸ For the nomadic tribes, migrants were yet one more form of cross-border illicit trade to be facilitated or taxed. As noted, the involvement of the Tuareg and the Tebu dated back to the Saharan slave trade, and facilitating the smuggling of migrants extended from those networks progressively as the slave trade died away.⁵⁹ The networked Tebu in particular, with their dispersed clansmen reaching across Chad to the east and to the Horn of Africa, were particularly integrated in the trade, thanks to the consistent flow of refugees and asylum seekers from repressive regimes in Eritrea and Somalia.⁶⁰

From late 2011, however, the Syrian refugee flow completely changed the game. Syrian refugees, in comparison to their sub-Saharan counterparts, had a higher disposable income. Before the civil war, the last recorded GDP per capita in Syria was \$2,066,⁶¹ a sharp contrast to the countries of West Africa and the Sahel, for example, where anywhere

⁵⁸ Shaw and Mangan.

⁵⁹ Wright.

⁶⁰ Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, *Going West: Contemporary Mixed Migration Trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya and Europe*, (Geneva: International Organisation on Migration, June 2014).

⁶¹ Data is provided for 2007, the last recorded GDP per capita provided by the World Bank. See World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US\$)," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?page=1> (accessed December 30, 2014).

between 35 and 60 percent of the population lives below the absolute poverty line.⁶² Greater funds allowed Syrian refugees to seek a higher level of services from their smugglers, paying more for the promise of longer and safer journeys. Numerous media reports and interviews with asylum seekers and refugees cite that Syrian refugees are paying, at minimum, several thousand euros per head to get to any number of European destinations.⁶³

The Syrians come from the east. In the early days of the Syrian crisis, they would initially cross into Egypt and remain there, or would continue their journey west across the North African coast seeking a smuggler who would help them make the high-risk Mediterranean sea crossing to Europe, with Greece or Italy being the preferred destination. Transiting across the coast, the migrants would be facilitated by a loose network of the various brigades. By 2013, however, a number of factors had coalesced to push this lucrative flow further south, and deeper into the hands of the more coherent and organized Tebu. The first factor was the change of government in Egypt following Mohamed Morsi's ousting, as the new administration was much more hostile to the Syrian refugee population.⁶⁴ The second was an enhancement of border security (both on land and sea) in Greece, which put greater emphasis on entry by sea via Italy. But the most decisive factor was the growing levels of strife in Libya itself. With the schism of politics in Libya, the capacity of the already weak state institutions to affect any control of the country's borders fell away, making Libya a haven for smugglers of all kinds.⁶⁵

Mediterranean migration to Europe reached epic proportions as what appeared to be an unprecedented opportunity to reach Europe began to draw asylum seekers and economic migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. This was, in part, incited by the Tebu, and other groups active in the trade, as they reached through their diaspora communities to recruit new migrants from across the Sahara just to further swell their profits.⁶⁶ Media reports document how boats to Europe offered different "classes" of travel. Syrians paying more would receive preferential places on the boat; African migrants, paying a fraction of the cost, were locked into the holds of the boat packed like sardines in the hundreds.⁶⁷ Evidence of callous organization of profit-seeking migrant networks was found across the continent, from West Africa to the Horn. The remnants of parties of up to 100 migrants were found dead in the Saharan desert;⁶⁸ the Djiboutian government reported migration

⁶² World Bank, "Poverty," <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty> (accessed December 30, 2014)

⁶³ Reitano, "A Profitable but Perilous Crossing: The Changing Nature of Migrant Smuggling through Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and EU Migration Policy, 2012-14."

⁶⁴ Sarah Mousa and Karim Faheem, "In Egypt, a Welcome for Syrian Refugees Turns Bitter," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/world/middleeast/in-egypt-a-welcome-for-refugees-turns-bitter.html>.

⁶⁵ "Europe's Boat People: For Those in Peril," *The Economist*, April 25, 2015.

⁶⁶ Reitano, "A Profitable but Perilous Crossing: The Changing Nature of Migrant Smuggling through Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and EU Migration Policy, 2012-14."

⁶⁷ "Europe's Boat People: For Those in Peril," *The Economist*, April 25, 2015.

⁶⁸ Reitano, Adal, and Shaw, *Smuggled Futures: The Dangerous Path of a Migrant from Africa to Europe*.

at an unprecedented level, as they also witnessed large groups of Ethiopian migrants abandoned in Lake Assal without food or water.⁶⁹ The mortality rate has been extremely high.

The profits from the migrant trade, which have been estimated at \$60,000 per week just between Agadez in Niger to Sebha in Libya, have funded activities of Tuareg separatists and terrorists in the Sahel, and have helped the Tebu to consolidate their already strong position and to expand their territorial control over oil fields and trafficking routes as far south as Agadez in Niger and westwards past the Salvador Triangle.⁷⁰ This expansion has brought them into increasing open conflict with the Tuareg⁷¹ and further reduces the chances of a swift resolution to Libya's political strife and civil conflict. In other regions, such as in the Sinai, the migrant trade has served to enrich terrorist groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS) at an extraordinary rate.⁷²

Conclusion: Trafficking and the Emerging New Order in the Sahara

In two critical theaters in the Greater Sahara, illicit economies have proven detrimental to stability: they provide resources for conflict and undermine efforts at peacebuilding and state consolidation by distorting the nature of political negotiations, transforming the interests at stake and altering the balance of power between different armed groups and between armed groups and the state. While this dynamic has long been obscured — or perhaps intentionally overlooked — by the rhetoric of political events,⁷³ the extent to which the illicit economy drives events is now more than apparent, and the negative reverberations are being globally felt.

Despite the considerable commitment of the international community, efforts to build peace in Mali have essentially reached a stalemate. Even with the signing of a peace accord, violence is escalating in the north of the country. The report on Mali to the UN Security Council presented in April 2015 attributed the major challenges and violence to “competition for the control of strategic commercial and trafficking routes.”⁷⁴ Similarly in Libya, governance is being held hostage and security challenges proliferate with devastating consequences domestically and abroad. In both of these contexts, any chance of immediate resolution of the current crises cannot hope to be found without engaging with rebel factions enriched and empowered by illicit flows. Yet the framework for international diplomacy and development prevents engagement with parties unrecognized or illegitimate in the political discourse. The result is that groups engaged in trafficking,

⁶⁹ Tuesday Reitano, Mark Shaw, Peter Gastrow, and Marcena Hunter. *A Comprehensive Assessment of Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking in the IGAD Region* (Addis Ababa: Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, 2015).

⁷⁰ Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and Norwegian Center for Global Analysis (RHIPTO), “Libya: A Growing Hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara,” *Policy Brief*, May 2015.

⁷¹ Rebecca Murray, “Battle Rages in Libya’s Southwest Desert,” *Middle East Eye*, January 17, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/battle-rages-libyas-southwest-desert-340707548>.

⁷² Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and Norwegian Center for Global Analysis (RHIPTO).

⁷³ Shaw and Mangan; Reitano and Shaw, “People’s Perspectives of Organised Crime in West Africa and the Sahel.”

⁷⁴ United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary General on the Situation in Mali,” *United Nations S/2015/219* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

crime, and terrorism remain spoilers, and as has been discovered in Mali, international negotiators and the central government are left with no credible counterparts capable of realistically delivering on agreement commitments.⁷⁵

The risk in demanding a greater focus on criminal networks and illicit economies is that it would be isolated within a military or security strategy, remaining divorced from the political process or the development responses that would be required to ensure a sustained resolution of certain drivers. This is exemplified in the response of the European Union to the migration surge across the Mediterranean. The published “EU ten point action plan on migration”⁷⁶ puts forward a combination of military intervention at sea and criminal investigations of smuggling rings, without recognizing the extent to which the problem is embedded in ongoing political processes. As a leading voice in the stabilization efforts for Libya and Mali, and the largest provider of development assistance, the EU has the leverage to ensure that all parties are brought to the table, should it choose to use it.

Marginalization, or exclusion from political discourse, arguably remain central to the discourse around the illicit economy, either because key groups are not offered a seat at the table or because the resources garnered along major trafficking routes remain sufficient for certain ethnic groups to recuse themselves from the state consolidation process. While the Tuareg and the Tebu are just two of the region’s major minorities, there are others who are increasingly critical. For example, in Zuwara, a coastal town north of Tripoli that has become a major launching point for migrant smuggling boats, the residents are overwhelmingly members of the Amazigh ethnic group, a historically marginalized culture and society that have long gone unrecognized by the Libyan state. Human smugglers there say they would be prepared to drastically reduce their illicit operations for a greater stake in the political future of Libya, coupled with viable legitimate livelihood alternatives.⁷⁷

In the long term, to have any chance at a stable future, both the Libyan and the Malian governments, supported by the international community, will need to change the conflict incentives. This will require breaking the markets for criminal protection, not only by building more effective national institutions, but also by ensuring that the Tuareg and Tebu, as well as armed militias from other ethnic groups, are drawn into the political process not only for their security and military capacity, but also to confer on them a certain degree of autonomy and self-determination over their local environment and livelihood generation that provides alternatives to the reliance on trafficking.

⁷⁵ Louise Arbour, “Open Letter to the UN Security Council on Mali,” *Crisis Group*, June 3, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2014/africa/open-letter-to-the-un-security-council-on-mali.aspx>; Sebastian.

⁷⁶ European Commission, “Joint Foreign and Home Affairs Council: Ten Point Action Plan on Migration,” *European Commission Press Release*, April 20, 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-4813_en.htm.

⁷⁷ Patrick Kingsley, Ian Black, Harriet Grant, Ian Traynor, and Mark Rice-Oxley, “Migrant Tragedies: What Can Be Done to End the Crisis?” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/21/migrant-tragedies-how-to-stop-the-slaughter>.

Those incentives, however, are increasingly tied to the very economic survival of the groups themselves; local control of trafficking and other resources militates against the process of political compromise that would be key to central state formation. What we are seeing in northern Mali and southern Libya then is the creation of a new zone of non-state governance outside of the old linkages of state control from the capital, and possibly the flourishing of the violent extremist ideologies that exist there. While in the past the strength of the central state may have varied, influence could still be relatively effectively projected into the areas concerned. Libya will look increasingly like Somalia — a zone of territory governed by localized power holders — but with some important differences. There will be no unifying language and ethnicity tying the last vestiges of the state together and, as has been the case, alliances over borders will matter more than weak and contested ties to the center. The result will be much greater potential for wider regional conflict, including in those states bordering on the Atlantic, and the redefining of long-standing state boundaries themselves, if not on paper, then as de facto new lines in the sand.

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