

# THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

POLICY BRIEF

## Libya: a growing hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara

11 May 2015



### Introduction

The Sahara has been a pipeline for smuggling and trafficking of many types of goods for well over a thousand years. Libya, which has ties to Europe dating back to the Roman Empire, has always been a key destination and transit area for many of these illicit flows. Since the fall of Gaddafi, the smuggling and trafficking business involving both armed groups and organized crime networks has increased dramatically in Libya. Instability and state breakdown has allowed the traditional tribal trans-Sahara trade, in drugs, counterfeit products and migrants and arms to grow to around US\$43-80m at most, distributed among a large number of traffickers, clans and groups.

The increase in flows of money and illegal goods are having repercussions across North Africa and the Sahel. Illicit finances and weaponry from Libya helped facilitate the rebellion in Mali in 2010, and continues to fuel conflict today. More significantly, the high number of migrants along the North African coast has enabled the development of a far more lucrative coastal migrant trade, valued now at US\$ 255 – 323 million per year in Libya alone. The value of this trade dwarfs any existing trafficking and smuggling businesses in the region, and has particularly strengthened groups with a terrorist agenda, including the Islamic State.

Drawn from a range of open source data and a number of recent interviews across the Saharan region, this brief documents the current scope and scale of trans-Saharan criminal economies and highlights their possible implications on stability and security. The goal of this brief is to provide a timely update of the evidence base on potential conflict drivers in the greater Sahara region, for the benefit of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. The brief is a collaboration between the Norwegian Centre for Global Analysis (Rhipto) and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

The brief concludes that given the level of illicit revenue it is currently possible to generate from the migrant flow, preventing Islamic State and coastal Libyan armed groups from becoming involved in or profiting from migrant smuggling should be of greater priority than attempting to cut off the long-established trans-Saharan trade routes passing through the Sahel towards Libya.



# Trans-Saharan Criminal Economies

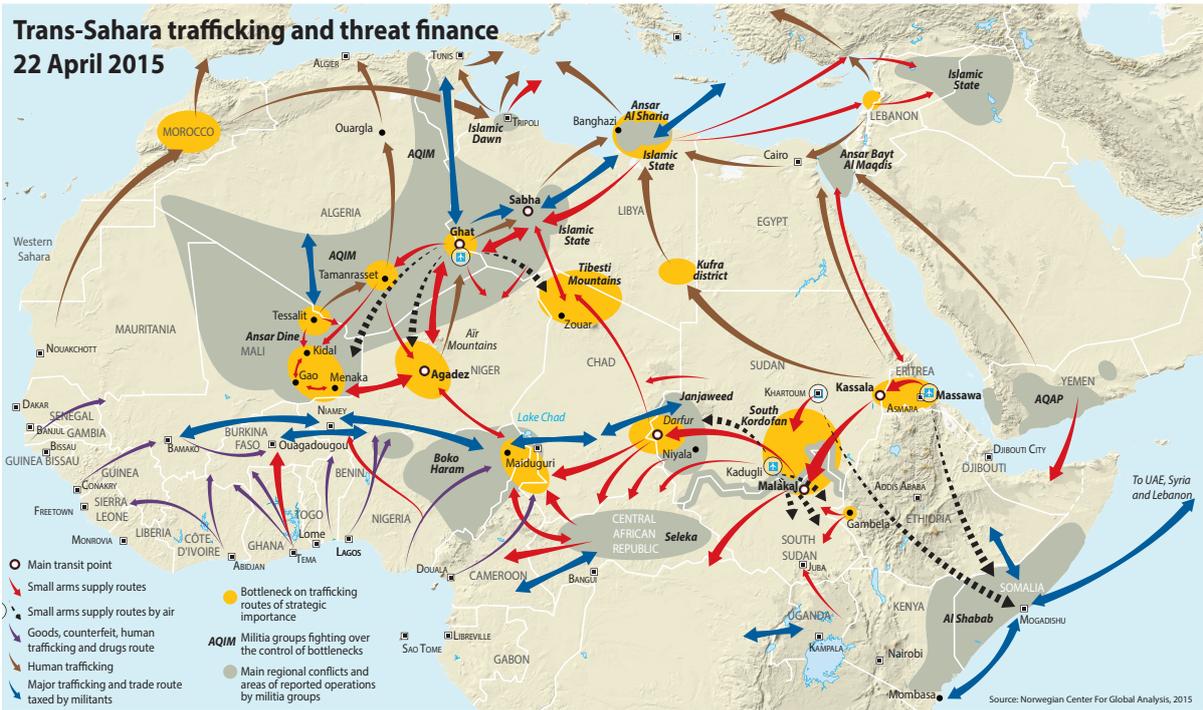


Figure 1: Trans-Sahara smuggling and trafficking routes

Traditional smuggling, involving clans in the trans-Sahara, has existed since at least the year 700 A.D. Recently, criminal operators in the region have been growing increasingly focused on particular commodities: smugglers and terrorist groups specialized in counterfeit cigarettes, drug traffickers operating light aircraft and smuggling nothing but cocaine, and arms smugglers serving almost exclusively militant armed groups, to name just three. Rough estimates of the value of some of the major criminal economies in the region are as follows:

- The Colombian drug trade via Guinea-Bissau produces drugs with a street value of some US\$1.25 billion in Europe and US\$150 million in West Africa, generating local incomes of at most US\$10-20 million for operatives in the Sahel, Algeria, and Libya.
- Libya’s collapse has allowed criminal groups to profit extensively off of a range of counterfeit and contraband goods, including illicit cigarettes, pharmaceuticals, artifacts and looted agricultural, construction and transport assets. The amount of this trade is difficult to quantify.
- The full value of the Libyan arms trade in the post-Gaddafi era is probably in the range of US\$ 15-30 million annually, with most arms being purchased in order to arm militant groups in Libya and the Sahel (including Mali, Niger, and Chad) rather than for wider distribution for profit. That said, arms shipments to the Gulf and elsewhere in Africa have been detected, and the negative impact of the arms trade is obviously much higher than its monetary value.
- The traditional Trans-Sahara migrant smuggling trade was valued previously as worth US\$ 8-20 million, but with the recent increase in migrants being smuggled, the current full value of the trade along the coast – bypassing the traditional tribal smugglers - is estimated between US\$ 255 – 323 million per year.

The following sections provide an overview of the major illicit economies of the trans-Sahara.



## Drugs

An estimated 18 tons of cocaine per year transit through the West African coastal countries, particularly Guinea-Bissau and Guinea, (having originated in Colombia), down from a peak of 47 tons in 2007. These 18 tons would be worth US\$1.25 billion wholesale in Europe, and they provide West African traffickers with a substantial income, on the order of US\$150 million per year. Earnings are likely as low as US\$15-20 million in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria.

Cocaine that transits Libya generally enters by land from the south, as part of a land route from Guinea-Bissau to the Mediterranean and on to Europe. Because cocaine is perceived as a significant security threat in Europe and North America, moving the drug through the Sahara and then to Libya has increasingly necessitated the complicity of actors within the state and the security forces.

A second drug that regularly transits Libya is cannabis and cannabis resin. Morocco is, depending on the calculations used, either the world's largest or second-largest producer of cannabis, and most Moroccan cannabis destined for the European market makes its way there via networks in Egypt and the Balkans. Two routes have developed to get the cannabis from Morocco to Egypt. One goes south and then across the Sahel in order to circumvent the closed land border between Morocco and Algeria; the other hugs the coast across the entire northern edge of the continent. The volume of cannabis trafficked through Libya is unknown, due to a lack of analysis on the topic, but is likely to be quite large, and it is known that, unlike the cocaine flow, the majority of the profits of local cannabis smuggling stay in the region and fund armed struggles.

## Counterfeits and Contraband

The Maghreb states of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia smoke 44 per cent of Africa's cigarettes, and the illicit trade in tobacco is said to be worth US\$1 billion per year, with Mali being a major distribution hub thanks to the networks established by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the Algerian salafist who was a founding member of AQIM and now heads his own breakaway group, Al Mourabitoun.

The trade in counterfeit medicines and illicit pharmaceuticals has flourished in post-Revolution Libya, with prescription medicines brought in both by criminal groups in search of profits, but also by pharmacists keen to ensure stable remuneration in the chaotic post-war society. The black market for alcohol is active across the country and cross border trade with Tunisia is vibrant. Similarly, a number of militia groups have looted government sites for construction or farming equipment and have sold those to black markets across the region, making easy money to procure guns and transport to consolidate their smuggling.

Apart from the illicit cigarette trade which has long roots and established networks, on the whole these markets for counterfeits and contraband are largely opportunistic and do not systematically contribute to the financing of specific groups or conflict actors. In many occasions, contraband items are thrown on the back of a truck to boost revenues or cover the costs of a return trip.

## Arms

In 2011, estimates suggested that Libya's armed forces comprised 76,000 active personnel and 40,000 reserve personnel, and that its arsenals held 250,000-700,000 firearms, of which 75 per cent were estimated to be assault rifles. With the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the accompanying disintegration of the Libyan state, these arsenals have in many cases fallen prey to armed groups and traffickers. Conflict within Libya continues to be fueled by the soldiers and weapons that until recently formed the backbone of state power.

The price of an AK-47 in Libya typically varies from US\$150-1,000, and sometimes higher, compared to an average across the African continent of US\$500. More advanced weaponry, such as MANPADS or SA-7 shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles, sell for tens of thousands of dollars apiece. The value of the arms trade in Libya is estimated at US\$4-15 million annually for light arms. Including ammunition, the full value of the Libyan arms trade is likely to be in the range of US\$15-30 million, although the true value could be double that thanks to the uncertainty regarding how many weapons are trafficked.



The regime's firepower has also had significant impact on countries beyond Libya's borders. The UNODC has suggested that Gaddafi-era Libya possessed 22,000 Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), of which at least 17,000 are unaccounted for and 400 are known to have been trafficked. An estimated 10,000-20,000 firearms from Libya have reached Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan. Some estimates put that number much higher, possibly by a factor of 4, thanks to the breakdown of the Libyan army and state institutions.

There is much evidence to support the critical role that arms and militia groups out of Libya played in triggering the separatist movement in Mali in 2011, and has continued to fuel instability, including attacks on UN personnel and other targets. Furthermore, control over and access to arms in the trans-Sahara has become a critical factor in the ability to control trade routes and establish territorial control.

## **Migrant Smuggling**

There are now a large number of traffickers smuggling Syrian migrants and refugees via Lebanon and Egypt; Syrians account for a the largest share of the migrants smuggled through Libya, though there are a rapidly growing number of sub-Saharan Africans now also migrating along these routes. This growing business now provides what is possibly now the largest and most easily accessible threat finance opportunity for both organized crime networks and armed groups to purchase arms, establish larger and more regular armies, and demand taxation.

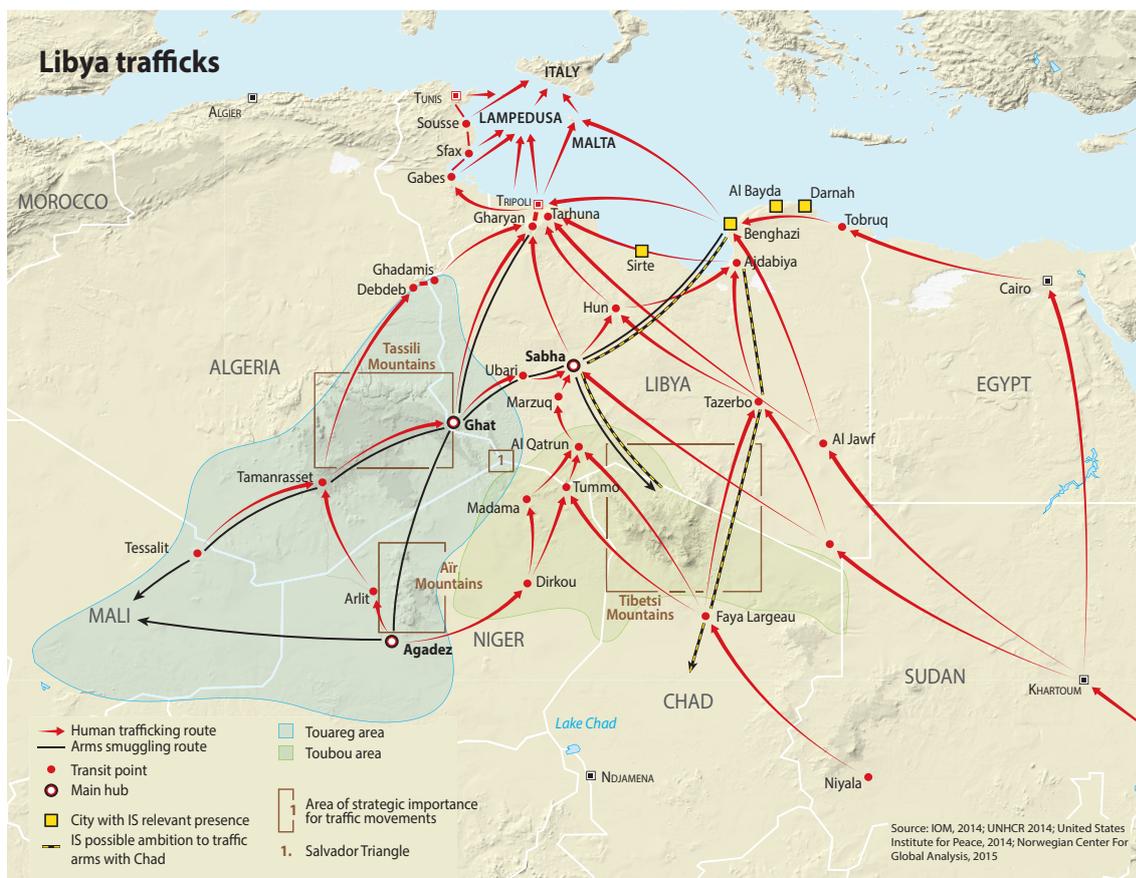
Migrant Smuggling has increased dramatically from Libya as well as Tunisia. By various means, including agreements with Italy, the Gaddafi regime had severely limited the flows of smuggled migrants and trafficked individuals between the two countries: only 4,500 seaborne refugees were picked up in 2010. By 2014, this number had skyrocketed to at least 170,000, despite the prevailing insecurity across Libya and the dangers of the Mediterranean crossing. According to Frontex, currently, illegal migrants coming to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean from Libya (the so-called "Central Mediterranean Route"), make up roughly 60% of all illegal migrants to Europe. For the 170,000 migrants who used the Central Mediterranean Route in 2014, the two most common countries of origin were Syria (39,651 migrants) and Eritrea (33,559), followed by the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (a total of 26,340 migrants).

Forced and illegal (but voluntary) migration has risen to become one of the largest sources of income in Libya, and a wide range of groups are profiting. Since the Gadhafi era, militia groups in Libya have run detention centres for migrants, and continue to do so. There are numerous accounts of militia groups rounding up migrants and extorting their families for release, or selling migrants on to smugglers.

Anyone who can access a boat can stand to make a significant profit putting migrants out to sea. Smugglers typically charge US\$ 800-1,000 per person for passage into Libya and then another US\$ 1,500-1,900 for the boat trip across the Mediterranean, often extorting the money by force. Depending on the type of boat, one crossing may include several hundred migrants. Once at sea, little regard is given for the migrants or their final destination, as it is assumed that they will be rescued at some point along the sea crossing. There is minimal evidence that smugglers operating in Libya have established networks to provide onward services from the European shores.

In order to reach Libya, the Syrian refugees often come via Egypt or Sudan, two of the few remaining countries that do not require visas for Syrian citizens. Under the Morsi government, Syrians were largely welcomed in Egypt, and many settled there in the early phase of the refugee exodus. Since his fall, however, attitudes have hardened towards the growing Syrian population, and many have moved onwards towards Libya for opportunities to reach Europe. Egypt's growing inaccessibility has pushed migrant routes south into the Sinai, where Government control is relatively weak, and this has in turn increased probability of involvement of Islamic State in taxing or facilitating transshipments of refugees is increasing. This creates incentives whereby the Islamic State can increase profit by exacerbating the migration flow by targeted attacks on civilians in their stronghold areas, or in refugee encampments in Syria's neighbouring countries of Jordan and Lebanon. This scam has been used extensively by Congolese rebels – creating a refugee population and subsequently then servicing the refugee camps. Increasing number of refugees in Syria and facilitate the migrant-trade system can thus effectively increase their ability to establish themselves more strongly in Libya.



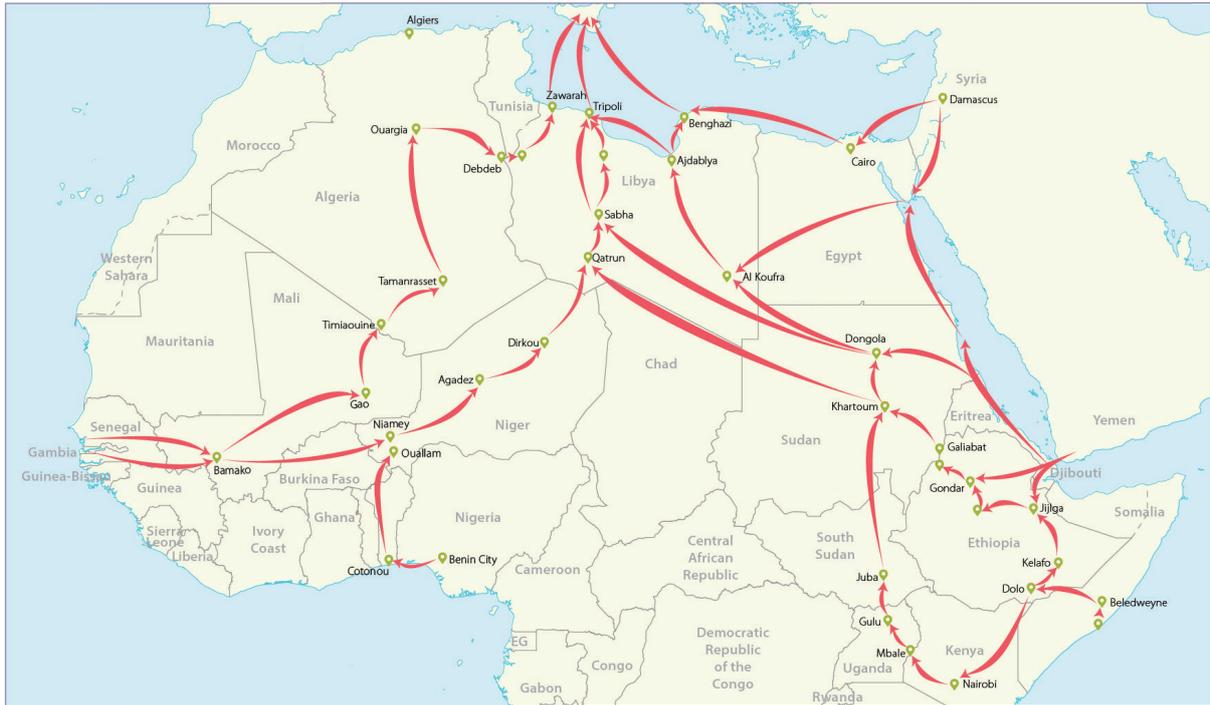


**Figure 2:** Greater resolution on some of the migrant smuggling routes in Libya. The East-West flows along the coast are of greater significance from the rise in trafficking compared to traditional Trans-Saharan routes, including of Syrians and Eritreans, suggesting coordinated action through Egypt to Sinai and Jordan and Lebanon. The trafficking on the coast is now worth at least US\$ 255 -323 million.

For the growing population of sub-Saharan migrants, there are a number of routes. The refugees from Eritrea, Somalia and the Horn of Africa are most likely to come overland through Sudan or via the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula, an area where the Egyptian government increasingly has lost control. A previous route, which crossed through Djibouti to Yemen, and then northwards towards the Gulf States has now largely closed down, due to heightened controls by the Gulf countries. Furthermore, with the current instability in Yemen, migration flows are moving in the opposite direction, with hundreds of Yemenis pooling in Djibouti, and potentially joining the migrant flow westwards, or possibly creating a new route that is seabound along the Red Sea northwards. Somalis, Eritreans and now Yemenis are qualify for *prima facie* refugee status in Europe, thus making the investment in reaching European shores particularly beneficial.

Refugees from West, Central and Southern Africa most likely follow old trade routes through the Sahel, such as the route from Mali to Libya via southern Algeria, or the route through Niger, to Agadez (a major trafficking hub) and up through Southern Libya to the coast. The instability in Libya has an offered an unprecedented opportunity for these largely economic migrants to reach Europe. This lucrative business has caused a dramatic increase in the number of groups involved in trafficking, from the old-school trans-Saharan nomadic tribes, such as the Tuareg and the Tebu, currently facilitating the transit of anywhere between 5-20,000 migrants a year through the trans-Sahara towards Libya. Migrants may be compelled to work for several months at intermediate stops along the smuggling routes, with sexual and physical abuse quite common. Orchestrating large-scale illegal migrations requires an established “contract” with tribal smugglers, which include people from many clans in Mali, Niger, and Chad.





**Figure 3:** Trafficking routes entering Libya from Mali, Algeria, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt. Sinai is a trafficking point from Jordan, Lebanon and also in part from Sudan/Eritrea.

## Armed Groups and Terrorist Financing

The role of criminal activities in the financing of the jihadist groups cannot be underestimated. Libya’s fragmentation and insecurity is having a knock-on effect across the Sahel and the Maghreb, and this is creating copious safe havens for terrorist groups to operate with almost complete impunity. There seems to be no lack of opportunity for these groups to make alliances with, profit from or to tax the smuggling and trafficking trades perpetuated by the proliferating number of armed groups and criminal networks in the region.

The formation of “protection economies” that have the capacity to either engage in or tax the trafficking flows is of serious consequence to the overall stability and security of the region. In some key regions, the protection economy has crowded out legitimate economic activity and undermined the capacity of the state to regulate trade. While there are different characteristics and dynamics at play, in all case those accumulating resources, controlling or protecting trans-Saharan illicit flows will have little or no incentive to support the consolidation of good governance or state control. They are more likely to challenge or undermine the state’s ability and legitimacy, or to seek opportunities presented by democratic transitions across the region to use illicit resources to gain further influence.

### Trans Saharan Terrorist Groups

Libya serves as a safe haven for several terrorist and/or jihadist groups in the Sahel. There are two main reasons for this. First, the rapid fall of the Gaddafi regime left a power vacuum throughout the Libyan state, and provided minorities such as the Touaregs, who had been the victims of persecution under Gaddafi, with what they saw as an opportunity to take revenge and assert their power. Second, the French Operation Serval in northern Mali from 2012-2014 was quite successful at driving armed groups and terrorists out of that country, many of whom found safety in Libya.

The situation in Libya is quite complex, with large numbers of militias fighting each other. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is still active in large parts of the Sahel, but the most dangerous group in Libya is probably



Al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar. In addition, both Ansar-Eddine (led by Iad-Ag-Ghali) and Boko Haram and Ansar-al Sharia are active in Mali, Nigeria and Libya respectively, and there have in the past been some linkages between Boko Haram and the Sahel based groups.

All groups are profiting to differing extents from illicit trafficking and trade, as there are few viable economic generators in the Sahel region. Al-Mourabitoun is the most notorious, as Belmokhtar has a longstanding history as an arms and cigarette trafficker, with networks well established across the Sahel and Maghreb. The group is also now linked to the cartels trafficking cocaine, via their fusion with MUJAO in 2013. MUJAO members in Mali have long been purported to have cocaine links. AQIM are renowned for their use of kidnapping for ransom as a means of financing their terrorist activities, though this has subsided as of late, apparently due to a lack of available targets rather than any strategic shift.

Both AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun enjoy freedom of movement in parts of Mali and southern Algeria, but both groups maintain their centers of gravity in Libya. Only in Libya have they been able to establish logistical bases and training camps without the risk of being detected. It is, however, likely that these groups still maintain weapons caches, small camps and logistical outposts in Mali, Niger, and Algeria. AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun use rugged mountainous terrain to their advantage: it allows them to cover their tracks, protect weapons caches, and even defeat infrared scans (heat signatures can be concealed by hiding in caves or among rocks heated up by the desert sun). The mountainous areas often used by the terrorist groups are notoriously difficult for Western armies to penetrate, with the Franco-Chadian incursion into Adrar des Ifoghas in 2012 being a rare exception.

Even a continued French military presence in the region, in the form of Operation Barkhane, has had limited effect stopping the armed groups. Operation Barkhane targets regional aspects of jihadi terrorist groups, and is based on an agreement between France and five Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad) that allows France to strike targets in those five countries virtually at will. Despite some successes, recent attacks by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Al-Marabitoun show that jihadists retain sufficient logistical capacity, resources, material, and personnel to strike strategic targets. Al-Marabitoun has benefited greatly from links to drug cartels since its 2013 fusion with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (better known by its French acronym, MUJAO); AQIM is more apt to turn to smuggling and kidnapping to finance its activities.

Another complicating factor is the extent to which the jihadist groups and criminal networks have inter-twined with those armed insurgent groups of the Azawad liberation movement. Since the latter are part of the official peace negotiations with the Malian government, sponsored by the international community, they are hence beyond the scope even by French forces and their criminal operations (including arms or drugs trafficking) have been broadly overlooked in the political process. Similar developments have been seen in Libya, for example where the Touareg movements also include jihadist elements, are highly active in the people smuggling trade and are reportedly also engaged in the transport of cocaine. One group largely isolated from the political processes in either Mali or Libya is the African nomadic clan, the Tebu. This group, which spans four countries in the Sahel and the Maghreb, with a concentration in Chad and southern Libya, was an early mover in the migrant trade and is said to be expanding territorial control far south into Niger.

### **The role of IS in the Sahara**

IS's role in the Sahara is still evolving, and it is too early to provide a proper assessment. While the group has not materially made any expansion of activity into the Sahel, nor have reports of oaths of allegiance sworn to IS by groups like Boko Haram yet yielded any practical benefits on the ground, given the chaotic state of Libya and the appearance of the first "proper" IS cell in North Africa it is possible that IS will use Libya as a safe haven, either for training and organization or for expansion.

The burgeoning and lucrative migrant flow will serve as a potent incentive for westward expansion into the Maghreb, especially as it is reported that other major sources of financing – oil theft and trafficking in cultural artifacts – have



become increasingly constrained. In its activities in the Middle East, the IS has proven itself as particularly adept at controlling territory and taxing both legitimate and illegitimate economies. It has arguably become far superior to any other non-state armed group in the world in efficiently establishing audit systems, social services and control.

Currently, a large portion of refugees transiting Libya on the way to Europe are Syrian, but they are being funneled through a trafficking chain from Lebanon to Libya. Attacks by IS on refugee camps in western Syria may have been deliberately intended to increase the flow of refugees along smuggling routes that the organization controls, in order to provide additional revenues. There is likely to be an overall increase in the number of refugees if the unrest in Syria and Iraq affects the stability of Lebanon and Jordan.

The weakness of the Sinai is of significant concern, given its proximity to IS strongholds in Syria and Jordan. Should they chose to expand their activities further west or south, however, it is possible that other armed or jihadist groups in Libya and the Sahel will come to view IS as unwanted competition, possibly leading to violent conflict. The Tebu, for example, has established a strong zone of protection in the eastern Sahelian band, including much of Southern Libya and the Chad border. They have secured a number of Libya's oil fields, and have monopolized the Horn of Africa migrant flow towards Libya. However, since there is historical precedent for strategic alliances amongst groups in the Sahel, especially against common enemies, it is presently not possible to predict how these interactions might play out.

For the moment, it is clear that there is considerable potential and strategic financial interest for the IS to engage in the Sahel, and the dynamic movement of people is a possible recruiting ground or cover for the movement of foreign terrorist fights, which have long been central to the IS military strength.

## Conclusion

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There is little doubt that the nexus between crime and terror is of immense strategic concern in the trans-Sahara. There is extensive evidence that armed groups, including those with a violent extremist agenda, are profiting richly from a range of criminal economies almost with impunity. With the current status quo of strategic approaches, the most likely scenario is that both AQIM's and Al-Mourabitoun's capacities remain intact and those of IS are rising, which will mean continued attacks against high value and strategic targets in the Sahel region including suicide attacks and attacks on western targets (embassies, hotels, night clubs) and symbols of state power (such as government houses). The longer criminal groups are left un-addressed the more established their networks and zones of protection are likely to become, and the greater influence they can leverage on political processes, should they chose to do so.

From a policy perspective, the responses to conflict, instability and terrorism have to be reinterpreted on this basis. The default policies of enhancing border security are likely to have little impact, given the extensive land and sea borders, and the broad dispersal of groups across territories. Furthermore, the intertwining of political, terrorist and criminal agendas has significant implications for the peace building strategies, as efforts to draw insurgents more closely into the state building process is either unlikely to succeed if there is heavy involvement in illicit trade, as powerful protection economies have grown up in the absence of state control, and they lack incentives to support central governance, or it will merely legitimize criminal economies under the guise of democratic process and diplomacy, but provide little return in terms of stability or development for the people.

Of all of the criminal economies, the most urgent to address is the flow of refugees across the Mediterranean as increased flows could in turn lead to further financial establishment of radical groups involved in trafficking in Sinai and Egypt and linked to Libya, Syria, and Iraq – including IS. A further increase in organized criminal networks involved in smuggling is possible on routes including to and from Jordan as well as transits to Libya and Egypt. Increasing the number of refugees originating from Syria, especially as a result of Islamic State attacks near Damascus (as we have observed around refugee camps), can thus facilitate systems of migrant smuggling and human trafficking. This effectively increases armed groups' ability to entrench themselves more deeply in Libya and to gain sources of incomes outside of Iraq and Syria.



Addressing these flows is a significant challenge, and interventions off Libya's coast alone is unlikely to significantly influence the flow of migrants given the extent of the catchment area, and may in fact increase the flow, as the smugglers already pay scant regard for the fates of migrants once they leave Libyan shores. Thus, interventions to help boat refugees must be accompanied with targeted analysis on how to reduce the profit from smuggling, and to prevent the rescuing of seaborne refugees from supporting IS's threat finance business model, which may include areas beyond Libya.

## Recommendations

It is vital that the motivation for refugees and migrants to enter the organized crime trafficking chain to Libya is reduced. Not only will this reduce the risk of physical harm to the migrants themselves, but it will also significantly impact IS's largest threat finance opportunity in North Africa. This can best be done by:

1. Improving emergency provisions for refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan by substantially increasing aid provided to, and protection of, refugee camps.
2. Promoting campaigns to inform refugees of risks of abuse, slave labor or even death incurred by engaging the services of migrant-smuggling networks.
3. Targeting more effectively the smuggling networks and choke points, such as the coast of Lebanon, Sinai, Egypt, and Sudan; or diverting and facilitating migrant flows to land routes. The Sinai should receive particular attention, along with flows from Yemen to this corridor.
4. Substantially improving intelligence and analysis on routes, choke points, and organizational structures of the migrant smuggling chain as close as possible to the source countries.
5. In the long term, reducing the number of refugees fleeing conflict zones is the only solution. However, the measures above are short-term actions which can be taken to prevent an increase in threat finance to radical groups, as well as complete destabilization of Lebanon and Jordan and the subsequent funding of armed groups in Sinai, Egypt and Libya.

## References

While this brief was drawn from a combination of open source data and interviews, the following reports were seminal in providing data, background or context:

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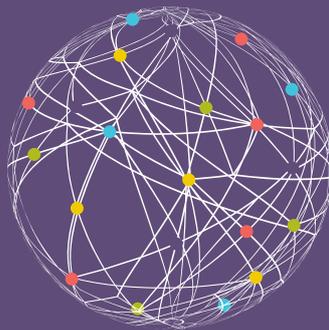
## About

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**RHIPTO**, the Norwegian Center for Global Analysis, set up to support the UN with rapid response capacities regarding acute and timely information and analysis relating to risks to the environment, development, peace and security.

**The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime** ([www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)), an independent network of prominent law enforcement, governance and development practitioners who are dedicated to seeking new and innovative strategies to end organized crime.





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