



## **The Changing Political Economies of Migrant Smuggling Networks in Africa: New Challenges and New Risks**

**Prepared by Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano**  
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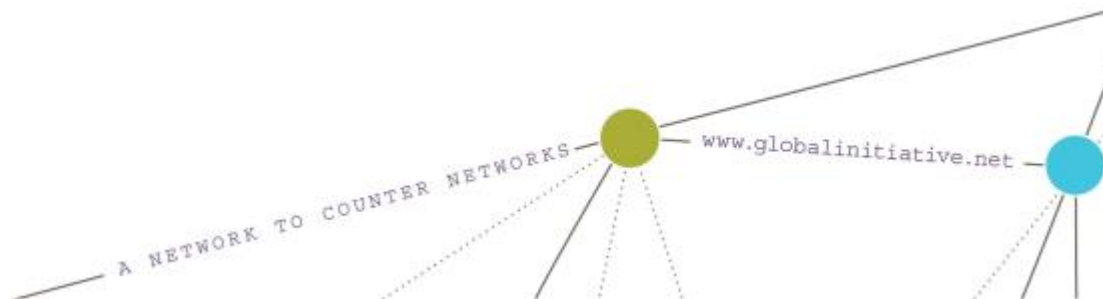
Thank you to the organizers of this event and the Center for Law and Human Behavior at the University of Texas El Paso. Thank you Chief Victor M. Manjarrez and Dr. Gabriella Sanchez for inviting me, and thanks to those of you in the audience. I am delighted to be here sharing the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime's work in front an audience of frontline practitioners. In particular, the presentation draws upon a book authored by myself and Tuesday Reitano, Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour published by Hurst and OUP in 2016, which maps the political economy of the human smuggling industry bringing refugees and migrants to Europe.

### Introduction

During this presentation, I'm going to focus on the migrant smuggling networks that are facilitating migrant flows from Africa into Europe, and the ways in which these networks are shaping the political economies of certain key smuggling hubs. I will give an overview of how these networks tend to be structured and how they function, but more specifically, I hope to offer some insight regarding how policies that have been pursued by European and African governments have created an environment that has accelerated the development of a robust and expanding migrant smuggling industry. Furthermore, many efforts to combat migrant smuggling are counter-productive because they do not address any of the underlying issues that fuel demand for smuggler services. As a result, we have seen an increase in human insecurity throughout migrant smuggling chains, with criminal organizations being empowered along the way.

If policymakers are going to adequately address the current crisis by engaging smuggling networks, they need to better understand how these networks function, how they have evolved and their increasingly outsized role within the broader political economies of entire communities.

Before I start, let me offer a quick note on language. During this presentation, I'm going to use the term migrant as a catchall for the people seeking the service of smugglers. Some of these people are asylum seekers and refugees. Some are economic migrants. Some defy these neat categorizations. Please do not construe me using the term "migrant" as a commentary on what rights these individuals should be afforded.





According to the United Nations Transnational Organized Crime Convention, migrant smuggling is “the procurement in order to obtain directly or indirectly a financial or other material benefit of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.” Put into more comprehensible English, migrant smuggling is when someone enters into a transaction with another person to help them enter a country illegally.

Human trafficking on the other hand, is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by means that use coercion. It can be abduction, fraud, deception, the threat of force, and many other forms of coercion. The line between smuggling and trafficking of persons can blur and arrangements that begin as a mutual “willing buyer and willing seller arrangement” can often turn exploitative, but the vast majority of those moving irregularly are doing so because they have sought the services of a smuggler. And in fact, I think this is the most useful and honest way to view and analyze migrant smuggling networks. The people who populate them are service providers. They are the supply to someone else's demand.

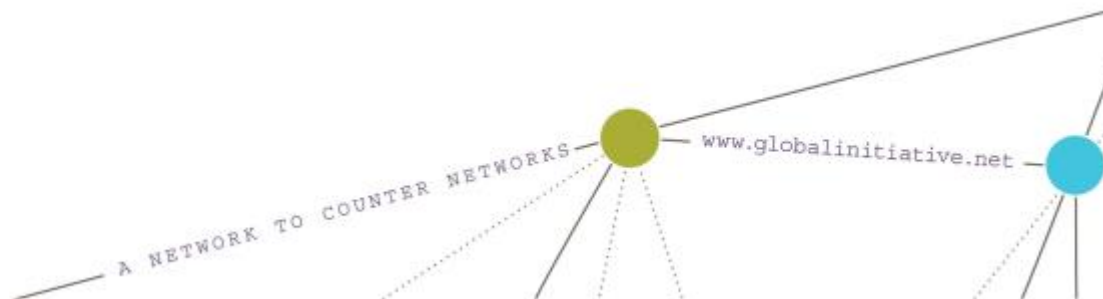
This means that in general, the migrant-smuggler relationship is almost always governed by the laws of supply and demand. There are some exceptions to this rule, but that is something I'll touch on a bit later in this presentation.

### Who is a smuggler?

For the purposes of our work, we consider a smuggler as anyone who helps a migrant overcome a boundary or barrier to enter a country through illegal or irregular channels. These barriers can be geographic and physical, in the form of a desert, or a sea, or a giant border fence, or they can be political, in the form of a policy such as a visa restriction. They can even be cultural, such as a language or religious barrier. These boundaries can change and shift, and smuggling operations change accordingly. If a new wall is built or a border policy changes, smugglers and migrants adapt accordingly.

Migrant smugglers exist because there is demand for smuggler services, and we are currently living in an era of unprecedented demand. Conflict, famine, and protracted displacement have forced tens of millions to seek refuge in countries other than their own, tens of millions of others are moving through irregular channels because they believe it is the best way to provide for themselves and their families.

Smugglers do not create markets themselves, migrant demand creates markets. That said, there are examples where smugglers seek to expand or shape the markets in ways that are to their advantage. They may seek to monopolize the market, or influence the ways in which information is shared, but in general, the migrant smuggling economy is governed by the laws of supply and demand.





Prices are set by the market, and where the barrier that needs to be overcome is low, entry into the “smuggler market” is also very low, which means prices will also be low.

Higher barriers mean that only certain smugglers have the skills to provide the service in demand, and fewer migrants will be able to afford them. Prices, therefore, are set by the rules of supply and demand. Smugglers can charge more where the barrier that migrants are trying to overcome is more challenging and requires specialized skills. Furthermore, measures that aim to counter migrant smugglers but that do not address underlying drivers of demand, often have the adverse effect of driving up the prices that smugglers can charge or driving criminal opportunists out of the market leaving only organized criminal organizations left to provide smuggler services.

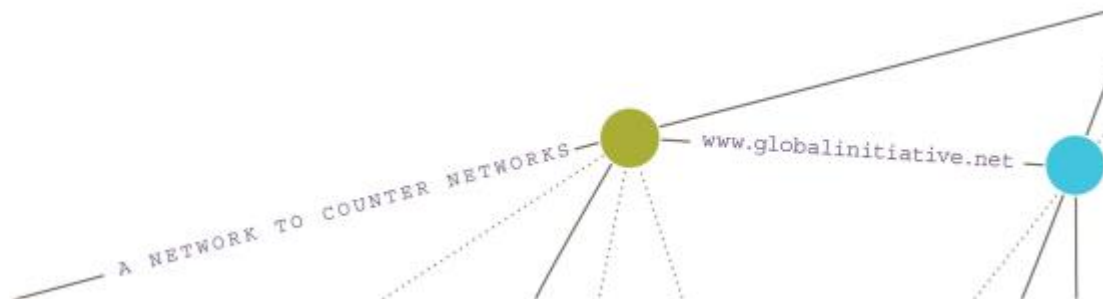
Many types of actors are involved in a smuggling market, and not all of them are people we might automatically think of when we think of a smuggler. A hotel owner on a border town who changes his prices and payment methods to cater to irregular migrants, and the shop owner who transfers money via informal financial transactions (such as *hawala*) might technically be facilitating irregular migration, and therefore in some circumstances be considered a migrant smuggler, but we probably would not lump them in the same category as the person who provides counterfeit passports, procures fake visas, and provides plane tickets for tens of thousands of dollars. Migrant smuggling takes place along a broad spectrum of organized criminality, with low-level entrepreneurs at one end of the spectrum and sophisticated organized crime syndicates at the other.

### Basic typologies of migrant smuggling from Africa into Europe

Broadly speaking, we see two types of typologies of migrant smuggling itineraries from Africa into Europe. The first, is a pay as you go model, in which migrants carry out their journey in stages, engaging with and paying new sets of actors at each barrier they seek to overcome. The second type of scheme is a “full package” arrangement, in which migrants pay a smuggler to facilitate the entire journey, overseeing every link in the migration chain and often procuring fake or fraudulent documentation to cross borders and barriers through “legal” channels illegally. As previously mentioned, in both cases, the line between smuggling and trafficking can blur.

Within the context of pay as you go schemes, kidnapping for ransom and extortion are very common. In East Africa, for example, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and forced labor tends to take place during the leg of the journey between Khartoum, Sudan and the Libyan Coast; between northern Sudan and the Egyptian coast; or in the case of the routes from West Africa, in southern Libya once migrants have crossed into the Libyan border from Niger.

Within the context of “full-package” schemes, the transition from smuggling into trafficking usually happens upon arrival, and is most common when the migrant has entered into an agreement





in which the smuggler pays for transport and documentation in exchange for unpaid labor. The migrant then finds himself, or is often the case in these schemes, herself, in debt bondage. Similarly, kidnap for ransom and extortion are particularly common within “leave now, pay later” schemes, which are most prominent among migrant communities from Somalia. Under these arrangements, recruiters working on behalf of smugglers encourage prospective migrants to begin their journey under the promise of being able to pay later. Somewhere during the journey, usually in Sudan, the migrants are then held captive until they are able to procure ransom payments from the migrant’s family.

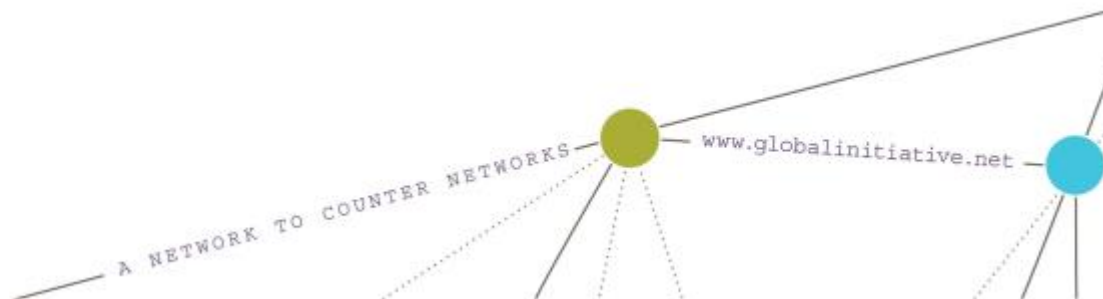
### Organized Crime Syndicates or Loose Networks of Freelancers?

Trying to assess the levels of organized criminality of various migrant smuggling networks is fraught with challenges. The structure and design is different for every route and every network, and different routes also have several different types of networks operating with varying degrees of organized criminality. There is also an analytical challenge, which stems from the “vantage point” from where you analyze the network. If you start at the end of the smuggling chain and work backwards, there is a tendency among analysts to impose a structure and levels of organization that might not actually be there. Everything looks more organized if you try to “reverse engineer” the networks, as law enforcement and policymakers in destination countries often do.

Yet if you start at the beginning of the chain, and then try to analyze it at each step, most networks, even those that are organized, will resemble a loose network of freelancers that barely constitutes a network at all. Such analyses, however, often underestimate the extent to which order, structure, and systemization can be born out of volume and repetition. Certain “rules” that govern the way smugglers interact with other smugglers take shape, and suddenly, the loose assemblage of actors meets the definition of a network, even if the actors involved do not perceive themselves as part of one.

The reality is that both types of networks are almost certainly involved on any given route. There are networks that have very high degrees of organized criminality, with hierarchies, central commands, and defined roles within their structure; but these networks also exist in parallel with those that are more loose networks of freelancers. This can change over time and the shape and structure of the networks is highly influenced by both demand for smuggler services, and existing policies, as these interlinking factors change, so too do the networks and the ways they operate.

What is clear is that these networks are systems, with a whole host of actors directly and indirectly involved. Furthermore, and regardless of their structure, it is important to consider the ways in which migrant smuggling activity along certain routes and at certain hubs is part of the political economies in which they operate. For the sake of time, I will reference the single example of Niger





to illustrate how understanding role of migrant smuggling within a broader political economy is an essential component of developing coherent policies to manage irregular migration flows and to counter migrant smuggling networks.

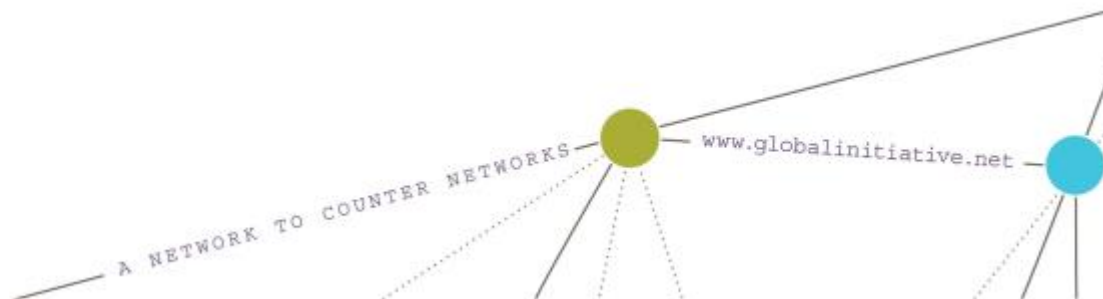
### The Niger Quagmire

Niger is one of the key areas of transit for migrants from West Africa seeking passage to Libya for onward travel to Europe. In the case of northern Niger, where the smuggling and transport of licit and illicit goods has long formed the economic basis of entire communities, migrant smuggling represents a substantial part of the local economy. In fact, the broader migrant smuggling industry, which reaches far beyond the actors that we might consider smugglers, has become thoroughly enmeshed within formal and informal political and security structures. In this context, migrant smuggling can no longer be considered an ancillary activity that takes place on the margins.

The smugglers moving migrants from northern Niger into southern Libya rely heavily on bribing law enforcement and security officials, and state security structures are in turn reliant on revenues generated through collecting rents from smugglers. According to a report by Reuters news agency, Niger's anti-corruption agency, for example, state security forces in northern Niger are reliant on bribes collected from migrant smuggling convoys in order to afford fuel, spare parts, and provisions. Public officials in northern Niger have even gone so far as to admit that the migrant smuggling trade has been a boon for the local economy, breathing life into communities that have long struggled with the effects of globalization, climate change, political instability, and food insecurity.

Certain actors who benefit from the trade, specifically those from the ethnic Toubou community who have traditionally been shut out of formal political and economic spaces, have consolidated control over certain lucrative routes linking Niger with Libya. These actors are in turn investing smuggling proceeds into other sectors of the economy and are translating this economic clout into greater informal political and military influence in the region, and forging strategic partnerships with other actors in Niger and southern Libya.

Given the realities outlined above, any policy intervention that seeks to combat migrant smuggling networks in Niger will have an impact on the political economy of northern Niger, which in turn could have serious security repercussions. It is worth considering in what contexts the migrant smuggling industry and its broader economic benefits may actually be a force for stability. From the vantage point of government officials in northern Niger, migrant smuggling is a net benefit, that at least in the short term, is holding the restive north that has been beset by rebellion and economic hardship in recent decades. A hastily planned, ill-designed policy intervention against migrant smuggling that does not adequately address the needs of communities and actors that would be negatively affected by such an intervention risks destabilizing a delicate security equilibrium in a country that represents one of the few pockets of stability in the region.

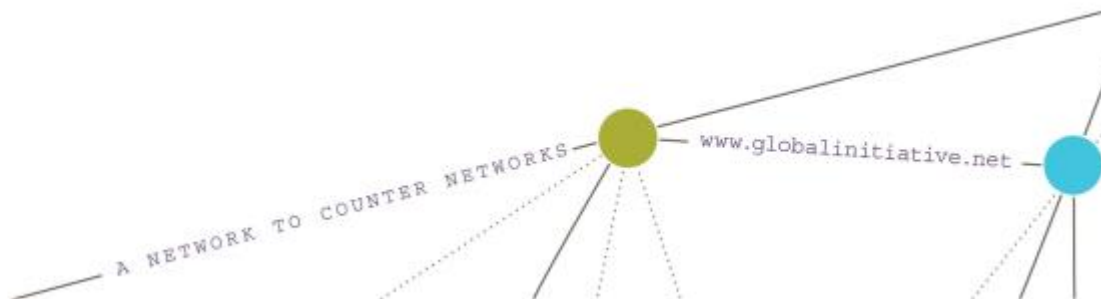




## Recommendations for Policymakers

Going forward, the challenge for policymakers in developing responses to migrant smuggling networks is to understand each route, hub, and flow as its own market, each of which requires policy response tailored to each specific market. No one policy is going to be a panacea. That said, there are some recommendations that policymakers should consider:

1. First, do no harm. Be sure that your intervention, whatever it is, does not make the problem worse, and be prepared for unintended consequences. It may very well be that a policy intervention intended to stem the flow of migrants has a destabilizing impact on certain communities, internal political dynamics, and even security. It is worth considering that in certain contexts, the broader migrant smuggling economy is a force for stability, and undermining it could turn a relatively stable situation in transit countries into an unstable, refugee/migrant-producing situation. Interventions and policies need to be context-based, and incorporate the competing incentives and interests of various actors involved.
2. Be specific about what problem you are trying to address. What is the goal of your intervention? It has to be much more specific than to “stem the flow of migrants,” or “better border management.” Once the goal is defined, it is important to consider how does this goal line up with the interests of source, transit, and destination countries along the route? Do all sides perceive it as a problem? Do they all see the same solution? If not, then where are the opportunities to work together.
3. Rethinking policies towards protracted displacement regimes. Many of the irregular migrants who are moving during the current “crisis” have been displaced for years, even generations. Protracted, perennial displacement is an untenable existence, and in the wake of funding cuts and aid shortages, the displaced are taking matters into their own hands. If refugees and asylum seekers had any hope of return, or opportunities to seek dignity closer to home, we would be much less like to see mass movements along long distances.
4. Refine and more effectively distinguish in practice and responses the distinctions between human smuggling and human trafficking. While there are apparent overlaps, in fact from a response perspective, treating them as overlapping or one and the same, is counterproductive. Not only does it make the scale of the problem overwhelming, it increases the likelihood that responses become overly punitive for human smuggling, exacerbating the criminality and risk to migrants. Instead, better to focus on the major distinction which is consent, the completion of the contract and the eventual freedom





- of the migrant. With this as the criteria, then smuggling should be addressed accordingly by maximising the opportunities for safe and legal movement, and the cases where there is genuine trafficking, another set of responses can come into play that focus on liberation and protection.
5. Develop a predictive capacity to monitor smuggling networks, collect information on prices being paid, how long trips are taking, why people are choosing certain routes in order to better understand the “smuggling market.” This requires investing in mechanisms for collecting and analyzing information from migrants, training local law enforcement and improving their understanding of the migrant smuggling industry, and developing “indicators” that can be analyzed over time to better understand these markets.

### About the authors

Peter Tinti is a freelance journalist and Senior Research Fellow at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

Tuesday Reitano is the Deputy Director of the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, and was formerly a policy specialist in the UN System.

Together they are the co-authors of Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour a much heralded exposition on the political economy of migrant smuggling networks behind Europe’s ‘migration crisis’, published by Hurst and OUP in 2016.

