GLOBAL INITIATIVE
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CONFLICT, COPING AND COVID

Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020

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Cover: A Sudanese migrant walks out of the main dormitory at a detention centre in al-Khoms. © *Mark Micallef*

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CID	Western Criminal Investigation Directorate
CMA	Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad
DCIM	Directorate for the Combat of Illegal Immigration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GDF	Gathering and Departure Facility (Tripoli)
GNA	Government of National Accord
IDU	Investigation and Deportation Units
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KCF	Kufra Construction Fund
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LCG	Libyan Coast Guard
MJRN	Movement for Justice and the Rehabilitation of Niger
NINA	Numéro d'Identification National (Mali)
TRB	Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade
UFPR	Union of Patriotic Forces for the Rebuilding of the Republic
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Libyan army troops clash with the armed forces of Khalifa Haftar in the Salahaddin region,
Libya, May 2020. © *Amru Salahuddien/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

INTRODUCTION

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa at a detention centre in Tripoli, after they were arrested before boarding boats for Europe. © *Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

Since 2018, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has undertaken monthly monitoring of human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali. The first report of the project, 'The human conveyor belt broken', published in early 2019, described the fall of the protection racket by Libyan militias that underpinned the surge in irregular migration between 2014 and 2017. That report, in turn, updated information published by the GI-TOC publication 'The human conveyor belt', released in March 2017.[1]

This report builds on these studies and maps human smuggling trends and dynamics between 2019 and 2020, as well as the political and security dynamics that impacted and influenced smuggling and trafficking during the period. It underscores both the continuing importance of smuggling from and through Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali and the impact of conflict, insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic on this industry but also its resilience in the face of these phenomena.

In Libya, dynamics in 2019 and 2020 largely rotated around the 'war for Tripoli', a 14-month conflict during which the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under Khalifa Haftar sought to oust the Government of National Accord (GNA) from the Libyan capital. Though Haftar sought support for the war by promising to replace the previous anarchy with his own authoritarian order, the net result was the empowerment of armed groups in Tripoli and a pause in state building and security-sector reform efforts.

Prior to the LAAF war, the GNA had been able to establish a degree of authority but only under the protection of a cartel of armed groups. Militias leveraged physical control of territory into institutional power at all levels of the government, supercharging a climate of corruption and impunity. Mafia-like groups and organized crime became so embedded in the state that it could not purge them without collapsing itself. However, with the appointment of Fathi Bashagha as minister of interior in October 2018, some nascent efforts began to free the state from this group's grip.

Just six months later, the war for Tripoli froze things in place. Bashagha did not abandon the mission of building the Interior Ministry (and with it his political profile as a contender for the country's leadership), but his focus diverted as he became the de facto war minister. Throughout 2019 and 2020, the already weak will to actually push through security-sector reforms or fight corruption and the criminal activity that it spawned gave way to the logic of survival.

This impacted migration management, with corruption, ineffectiveness and abuse worsening in certain areas during this period. Across the Directorate for the Combat of Illegal Immigration (DCIM), for example, collusion between detention-centre staff and smugglers became brazen, compounding the crises caused by conflict and overcrowding. This was widely understood, but again it was mostly considered impossible to act against at a time of war.

However, despite the chaos of the war, the pressures of COVID-19 and weakening government enforcement, human smuggling did not surge anywhere near the levels seen in between 2014 and 2016. Rather, there was surprising continuity in migrant-smuggling levels, with consistently low numbers of departures both east and west of Tripoli. The subdued levels of activity during this period, in the coastal areas as well as in the interior of the country, in spite of push factors such as the war and later pandemic, has continued to confirm that the retreat of coastal militias from the protection of human smuggling between 2017 and 2018 fundamentally dismantled the former ecosystem in a way that is difficult to reverse.

At the same time, the hybrid governing structures that gain power and resources through the management of human smuggling – as well as other crimes – have proven remarkably resilient. A key question is whether these mafia-like groups will become the imperfect building blocks of a new Libyan state or instead act as barriers to progress.

Another key question concerns the LAAF, which is often overlooked when assessing organized crime and human smuggling in Libya. During the war for Tripoli, the LAAF governed eastern Libya as a weak authoritarian state producing greater order in the criminal economy than other parts of Libya. Powerful elements of the LAAF remained deeply involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking.

The LAAF also claimed suzerainty over the Fezzan, though real power continued to lie in the hands of locally rooted ethnic groups and their militias – regardless of their affiliation with the eastern military bloc. These exerted a high degree of control over their own domains and continued to allow discrete human smuggling during 2019 and 2020. There is no prospect that Libya's weak and divided state will be able to exert more direct control over this region in the foreseeable future.

For Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali the primary factor dictating the shape of human smuggling and irregular migration was not war but the COVID-19 pandemic. However, how COVID-19 impacted the situation varied substantially between the countries.

In Tunisia, between 2017 and 2019, irregular migration re-emerged after a multiyear lull in the wake of the 2011 revolution. Thousands of young Tunisians embarked for

Europe, driven by an ailing economy, social frustrations and disillusionment that the government and politicians would right the situation. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the widespread job losses it caused, further catalyzed this surge. In 2020, Italian and Tunisian authorities intercepted some 26 488 irregular migrants coming from Tunisia, a level not seen since 2011. Most were Tunisian, but record numbers of foreign migrants – primarily sub-Saharan Africans – also embarked from Tunisia.

Surging irregular migration from Tunisia was enabled in part by the activities of human-smuggling networks, though there were no major oscillations in their composition or operations in 2020. However, reliance by Tunisian nationals on the networks did shift as a growing number of Tunisian migrants turned to 'self-smuggling', involving groups of migrants jointly sourcing boats, motors and other sailing equipment, and departing autonomously.

In contrast, in the Sahelian countries of Niger, Chad and Mali, the COVID-19 pandemic produced similar trends, upending smuggling and trafficking across the region in late March 2020, and further accelerated ongoing changes in migratory dynamics.

In Niger, COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on the human-smuggling economy, mostly because of travel restrictions designed to stem the spread of the virus. The pandemic hit the industry just as it had started to recover some of the ground lost since the law enforcement campaign enacted by Niamey since 2016. In 2019, smugglers started reporting that authorities were being laxer with the enforcement of migrant smuggling, leading to a modest but noticeable increase in activity, especially towards Algeria.

When COVID-19 hit the region, the demand for smuggling services reduced immediately and made the transport of migrants more risky and costly for smugglers in the north of the country. This led to a temporary increase in smuggling prices, as smugglers adjusted to greater border security with the use of remote and often dangerous routes. Other smugglers exited the business, with many opting instead for activities in the gold-mining sector.

The human-smuggling economy in Chad was significantly less affected by the pandemic than in Niger. Movement restrictions had only a very limited impact on smuggling activity, which is closely tied to the economy around the goldfields in the northern Tibesti region. Rather, the arrival of mercenary groups coming from Libya in the gold field, which fuelled demand for workers, caused an uptick in the movement of Chadian and Sudanese migrants

Mali had been a key transit state for irregular migration patterns linking West Africa to North Africa, owing to its political geography. However, human-smuggling activities came to a standstill between April and September 2020 due to movement restrictions linked to COVID-19. While smuggling resumed in the final months of the year, it remained limited. The geography of smuggling shifted as well, with most departures in late 2020 occurring from Timbuktu, with the previously dominant migration hub of Gao decreasing in importance due to insecurity in central Mali and in neighbouring areas of Burkina Faso and Niger.

When COVID-19 hit the region, the demand for smuggling services reduced immediately and made the transport of migrants more risky and costly for smugglers.

Methodology

This report is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2019 and 2020 – the reporting period for this study – 79 local field researchers spread across Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali collected data through semi-structured interviews. This resulted in more than 600 interviews detailing information and perceptions from smugglers, migrants, community members, security-force officials, politicians, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

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

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

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

A ship carrying irregular migrants from Libya arrives at the Italian port of Lampedusa on 30 August 2020. © *Lorenzo Palizzolo/Getty Images*

COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

Migrant survivors of a deadly shipwreck on the coast of al-Khoms, November 2020.
© AFP via Getty Images

Libya

SMUGGLING DYNAMICS REMAIN STABLE IN SPITE OF WAR AND COVID-19

- Despite the enormous upheaval in Libya since April 2019, the number of migrants leaving for Europe remained remarkably constant. In 2020 there were a little under 30 000 attempted departures; this compares with approximately 19 500 in 2019, and 40 000 in 2018.
- This bears out previous analysis that smuggling dynamics changed fundamentally post 2017 when coastal militias retreated from the business, vying for integration with the GNA through a law-enforcement stance instead.
- The massive mobilization following Haftar's attack on Tripoli in April 2019, also temporarily blocked access to coastal areas and interrupted smuggling operations.
- During 2019 and 2020, occasional surges resulted from the logistical needs of smaller, clandestine outfits that must gather sufficient migrants in order to launch profitable operations.
- Movement across the southern borders also remained subdued, picking up modestly during 2019, particularly from Niger before stalling again with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TRIPOLI WAR ARRESTS DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN LIBYA

- The era preceding the war for Tripoli was defined by the establishment of the GNA in Tripoli under the protection – and eventual dominance – of a cartel of armed groups. Over the same period local fiefdoms were consolidated in smaller towns and cities, dominated by mafia-like armed groups who managed to win official recognition through integration with the state.
- Though Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli promising to replace this liberal anarchy with his own authoritarian order, the conflict arrested development in western Libya. Nascent security reforms by Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha efforts were overshadowed by the fight to survive. Armed groups needed to defend the capital could not be disciplined or disbanded.
- Corruption and disfunction in the DCIM became more entrenched: collusion with smugglers spread and the government failed to impose control on unruly centres dominated by local armed groups.
- With the Tripoli war over, Bashagha started to drive forwards with some anti-crime and corruption actions, basing his failed leadership bid in a law-and-order ticket. However, elite rivalries among pro-GNA have once again overtakes events.

Migrants held at the Al-Nasr detention centre in Zawiya in March 2019. *© Mark Micallef*

LAAF CAMPAIGN IN THE FEZZAN DOES NOT IMPACT HUMAN SMUGGLING

■ Between 2019 and 2020, the LAAF claimed to have extended its suzerainty over the Fezzan, deploying forces and securing support from key communities.

■ Initial opposition from Tebu led to a slumbering resistance. But this eventually faded, with little appetite for a sustained war against the LAAF in favour of a negligent GNA.

■ Although the LAAF secured the nominal support of key Tebu groups through diplomacy the LAAF never occupied the Fezzan in the conventional sense.

■ Real power stayed in the hands of dominant ethnic groups and their militias. These groups permit discrete human smuggling, largely carried out by their own kin.

■ As a result, the LAAF has not had any permanent impact on human smuggling dynamics in the Fezzan in the way that an occupying force or sitting army might have done.

LAAF INVOLVEMENT IN HUMAN SMUGGLING AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE CYRENAICA

■ In eastern Libya, LAAF rule remained relatively well consolidated during 2019 and 2020 resulting in greater order in the criminal economy than the rest of the country.

■ Powerful elements of the LAAF are deeply involved in crime. Subul al-Salam, the most powerful armed group in Kufra, has continued to play an important role overseeing human smuggling.

■ This is a smoothly functioning arrangement that sees convoys taxed and waived through at checkpoints controlled by Subul al-Salam despite the group's concurrent anti-smuggling role.

■ Aside from the group's involvement in human smuggling, the GI-TOC has received numerous reports indicating that it partners with high ranking affiliates within the LAAF in illicit activities.

■ Elite rivalries broke into the open in the latter part of 2020, highlighting tensions over the distribution of revenues, however, overall, there remained less conflict than the west of the country.

Tunisia

IRREGULAR MIGRATION SURGES TO LEVELS NOT SEEN SINCE 2011

- In 2020, irregular migration from Tunisia surged to levels not seen since 2011, with Italian and Tunisian authorities intercepting some 26 488 individuals. Most migrants departing Tunisia were nationals of the country, though a growing number of foreign migrants were also intercepted.
- Although human smuggling networks remained important, a growing number of Tunisian nationals turned to 'self-smuggling'.
- The surge in migration from Tunisia was driven by a complex interplay of economic and social factors, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In 2020, dynamics along the Tunisia–Libya border were marked by tension and conflict, and in the case of one set of grievances, resolution. A protest movement in Tataouine agitating for the implementation of the 2017 El Kamour agreement sparked violence and a stand-off, and was ultimately settled in the late autumn. A heightened degree of rigour adopted by military patrols led to an increase in shooting incidents, leading to the death or injury of a number of smugglers and soldiers.

A man flashes the V for victory sign and holds a bottle of crude oil as Tunisian protesters occupy an oil production site in El Kamour, in Tunisia's southern state of Tatatouine, on July 16, 2020. Hundreds of protesters on July 16 forced their way into the site to demand jobs and development in the marginalized region.
© *Fathi Nasri/AFP via Getty Images*

Sahel

NIGER: COVID-19 DEALS SMUGGLING INDUSTRY A BLOW AFTER RECOVERY FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT CAMPAIGN

- The COVID-19 pandemic hit Niger's human-smuggling economy hard in 2020, following a year in which irregular migratory flows had recovered slightly from the massive declines seen since mid-2016.

- The transformation of northern Niger's human-smuggling economy was upended by COVID-19, owing to travel restrictions introduced locally and regionally to stem its spread. This decreased demand for smuggling services and made the transport of migrants more risky and costly for smugglers.

- As a result of lowered opportunities for human smuggling, dozens of smugglers (*passeurs*) turned to alternative activities such as fuel and goods smuggling and gold mining. Some smugglers also resorted to more illicit activities such as arms and drugs trafficking, as well as armed banditry.

- Smugglers who continued to transport migrants resorted to different routes to dodge security measures at the Niger–Libya border that were implemented due to COVID-19. These routes were more dangerous and remote, and led to the deaths of dozens of migrants, as a result of unassisted vehicle breakdowns in the desert.

- Meanwhile, although Agadez remained a key hub for northbound flows, several new departure hubs emerged across the country. Tahoua, Arlit and Zinder in particular could be primed to play a substantially more important role in the human-smuggling industry through Niger.

CHAD: GOLD MINING AND MERCENARIES KEEP SMUGGLING INDUSTRY IN BUSINESS

- Movement restrictions introduced by the Chadian government to contain the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on human-smuggling activity across the country in 2020. Such smuggling remained closely tied to the goldfields in the northern Tibesti region.

- The movement of Chadian and Sudanese migrants increased in May and June 2020 on routes from eastern Chad to the Tibesti region and Libya. This was mainly due to the arrival of mercenary groups at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, which fuelled demand for workers.

- Between November 2019 and March 2020, government security pressure on the Tibesti region was alleviated, with locals at the Miski goldfield reaching a preliminary arrangement with the Chadian government.

- A reduction in government crackdowns on Kouri Bougoudi in 2020 helped re-establish this site as the main migrant transit hub in the Tibesti.

- While providing a valuable source of income for local communities, goldfields in the Tibesti remain a potential threat to the region's stability and the migrants who travel through them, who are often subjected to physical abuse and indentured labour.

MALI: SMUGGLING NETWORKS RETURN TO PRE-PANDEMIC TRENDS

- The COVID-19 pandemic saw human-smuggling activities grind to a halt across Mali from April to September 2020, but activity has resumed since the softening of border restrictions.
- Prior to the start of the pandemic, smugglers facilitated crossings to Algeria by camouflaging irregular migrants (with fake documents) with regular ones, bribing officials, or avoiding border points.
- Malians' visa-free status in Algeria creates a natural black market for fake and fraudulent Malian documents. Transnational networks operating out of Algiers and Bamako also specialize in obtaining European visas for between FCFA4 million (€6 097) and FCFA5 million (€7 621).
- The cities of Gao and Timbuktu served as northern Mali's two principal hubs of human-smuggling activities. However, from 2018 into late 2019, Gao became increasingly isolated, owing to insecurity in central Mali and neighbouring areas of Burkina Faso and Niger.
- A route linking Timbuktu to Algeria, via In-Afarak, emerged in late 2020 as the most popular for migrants. While activity in Timbuktu was returning to pre-pandemic levels, smuggling networks in Gao remained dormant, owing to widespread insecurity in the Liptako-Gourma region.
- Security in central and northern Mali remains fluid, but external factors – such as economic hardship in source countries and recovering labour markets in destination countries – will continue to shape the political economy of human smuggling in Mali.

Dao Timi checkpoint in northern Niger along the principal route to Libya.
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LIBYA

Migrants wait for work in downtown Tripoli. *© Nada Harib*

Smuggling dynamics remain stable in spite of war and COVID-19

Between 2019 and 2020, Libya underwent the enormous turmoil of war and a pandemic. By many measures these crises upended life in the country, particularly in western Libya, both for Libyans and migrants alike. However, on the measure of the number of migrants attempting to depart the coast for Europe, there was remarkable continuity.
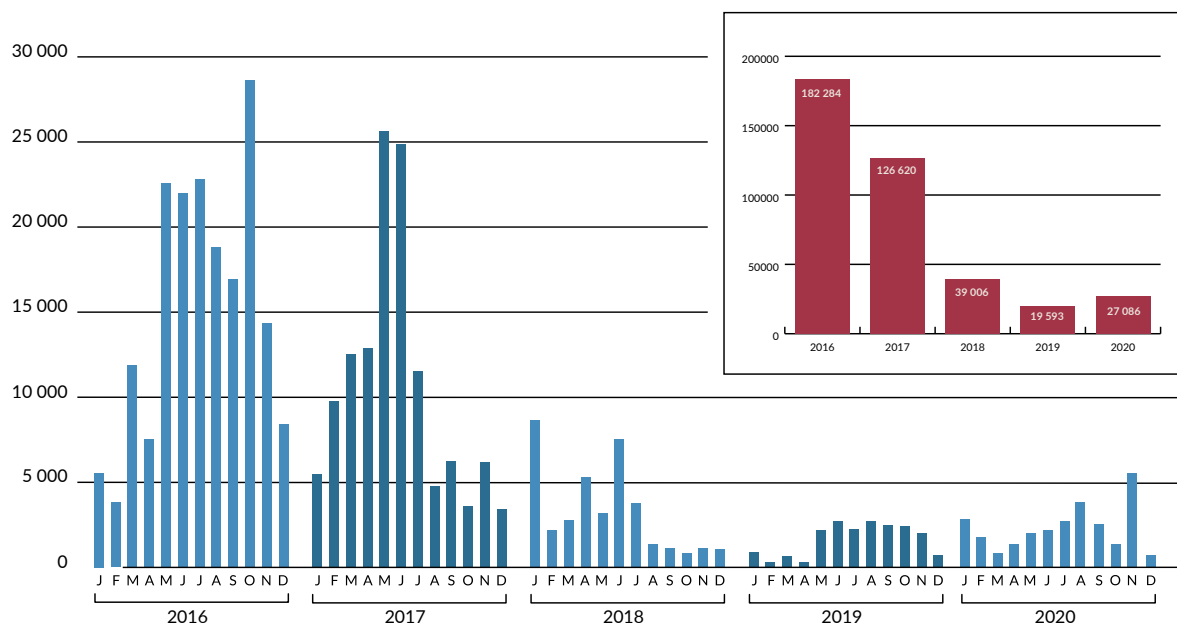

FIGURE 1 Total number of attempted departures from the Libyan coast by month.

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

Migrants rescued off the coast of al-Khoms receive aid packages in Tripoli's naval base, February 2021. *© AFP via Getty Images*

Up to November 2020, a little under 30 000 departures had taken place, compared with approximately 19 500 in 2019, and 40 000 in 2018, according to data collated by the GI-TOC based on month-on-month monitoring of coastal activity. In comparison with 2016, when there were more than 180 000 attempted departures, (the peak of the migration crisis in the Central Mediterranean) or 2017, almost 120 000, the numbers between 2018 and the end of 2020 were both low and consistent.

Looking at departure statistics for the summer months of 2020 underscores this assessment. The period between May and September was especially significant because it has historically been the 'season' for sea crossings across the Mediterranean, and therefore is the most useful window for tracking year-on-year changes in human smuggling. According to data collated by GI-TOC, there were almost 13 500 departures from the Libyan coast over that period in 2020. This is broadly comparable with data from the same period in 2018 and 2019 when 17 050 and 12 220 departures took place, respectively. Focusing on departures as opposed to arrivals for the purposes of comparison is preferable as this excludes the impact of interceptions/

rescues in which migrants and refugees would have been returned to Libya.

This continuity bears out one of the core findings of GI-TOC research since 2018: that smuggling dynamics changed fundamentally when coastal militias retreated from the protection of human smuggling, and that the change will not be easily reversed.

Just as the involvement of militias in the human-smuggling business had been the primary driving force in the runaway expansion of human smuggling seen between 2014 and 2017, so their retreat was the principal reason for the collapse seen after 2017.[2]

Many of these militias transitioned into a law enforcement role; a process that had been taking place over some years, with the Rada Special Forces pioneering it in 2012–2013 in Tripoli.[3] The model spread to human smuggling around 2016–2017, when international attention and the occurrence of high-profile tragedies made the involvement of militias in the industry toxic and a major liability for their future survival. As armed groups sought to consolidate the dominant position they had won in previous years by distancing themselves from overt criminality and securing national and international

legitimacy, it therefore became vital to be seen as a force that opposed human smuggling rather than engaged in it.

Broadly speaking, this self-interested logic withstood the travails of 2019 and 2020. However, there are important nuances that help explain the relatively limited increase in departures during these years, and should also be noted as possible signposts for the future. An evaluation of where most departures occurred during the summer months of 2020 indicates that Zuwara had emerged as the single busiest hub, alongside Zawiya, or more precisely departure points to the east of Zawiya city (al-Harsha up to Mutrud). To the east of Tripoli, the busiest departure point was a stretch of coast around Ghnema, a coastal point between Garabulli and al-Khoms.

To put this in proper context – particularly the consolidation of Zawiya as a departure point in 2020 – it is important to note that the law-enforcement model was always beset by ambiguities and contradictions. Armed groups deeply involved in criminality did not simply turn to policing overnight, instead they used their dominant military and political positions to exert control over human smuggling and bring the numbers down in a competitive bid for legitimacy.[4]

The small polities that emerged from this process increasingly operated as separate fiefdoms, nominally under the Tripoli based Government of National Accord (GNA) but wielding a large degree of autonomy.[5] Community-based armed groups that held sway over towns such as Zawiya, Sabratha, Zuwara, parts of Warshefana, Garabulli, al-Khoms and others controlled the local organs of the state – either overtly or behind the veneer of a professional officer cadre. Examples of this included the Sabratha Security Room and al-Wadi Battalion in Sabratha; the Western Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID) in Surman; the Zawiya Security Directorate and CID, along with the al-Nasr and Abu Surra Martyrs Battalions in Zawiya; the 55 Brigade in Warshefana and, for a brief interlude in 2018, the Kani Battalion in Garabulli (this is just a sample of a vast constellation of such groups).

Although these politico-military groups mostly lacked access to the kind of resources available to those that flourished in Tripoli, local resources were available. In Zawiya, for example, Zawiya University and the Zawiya Refinery were a source of funding and influence for the powerful Awlad Buhmeira network, to which the al-Nasr and Abu Surra Martyrs Battalions are affiliated. Municipality funds for locally contracted services were another potential source of money for local armed groups, in addition to the ability to include members on the state payroll through employment sanctioned by a GNA ministry.

However, despite the law-enforcement model prevailing, the black economy was and remains a key revenue generation source for many of these armed groups to fund themselves, including the smuggling of fuel, drugs and people. The actual means of profiting are various and depend on specific conditions – they include direct involvement at the highest level, as for example was seen with Musab Abu Grein (aka Doctor Musab) in Sabratha; allowing rank-and-file to profit from their own private initiatives semi-independently; and providing protection to other criminals. In this way, western Libya hosts a multitude of hybrid arrangements where politically powerful armed groups act as managers of the criminal underworld as much as law enforcers and quasi-governors.

Smuggling dynamics changed fundamentally when coastal militias retreated from the protection of human smuggling, and this change will not be easily reversed.
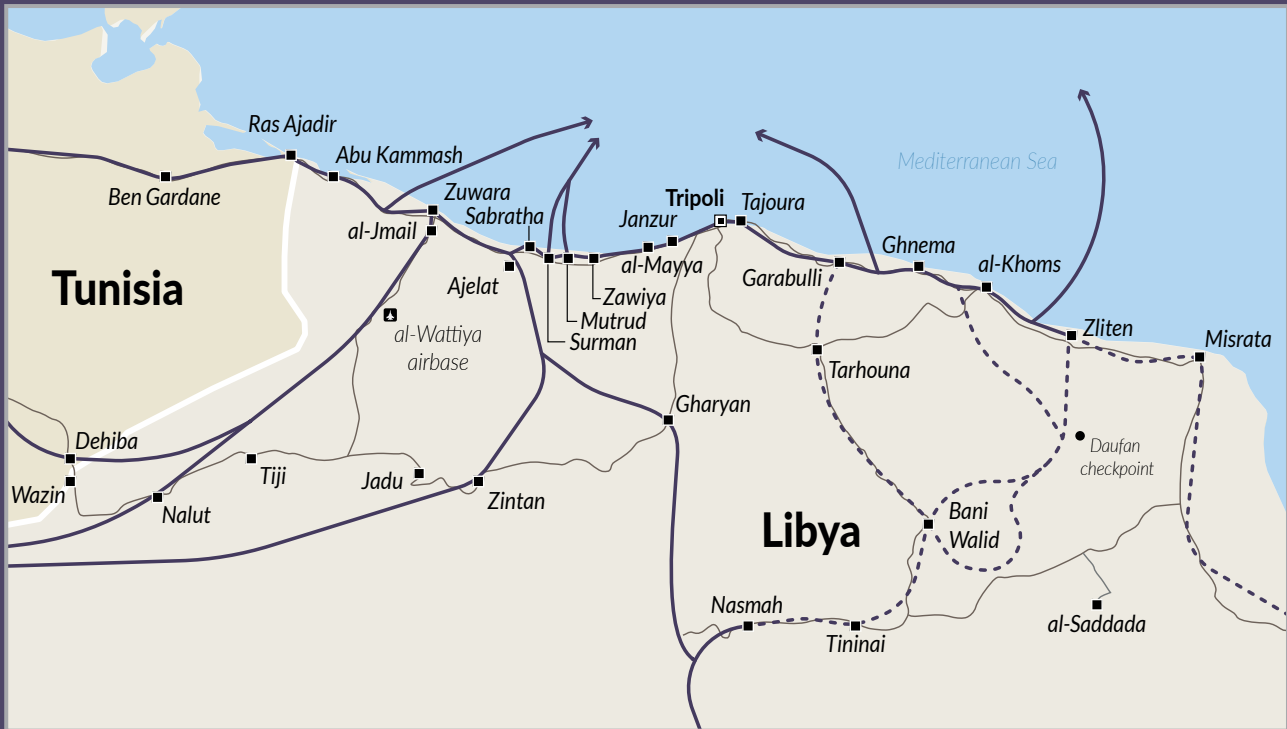
FIGURE 2 Libya's west coast, showing main people-smuggling routes, December 2020.

In terms of human smuggling, in the period after 2017, as militias disengaged from direct involvement and protection of smuggling, the business was transformed from one driven by large, logistically complex, military-political networks operating almost in the open, to smaller clandestine gangs operating from the shadows, adopting clandestine strategies to avoid detection, or leveraging less protection arrangements that were far less overt than they were pre-2017.[6]

In Sabratha, for example, where policing was officially handled by the Sabratha Security Room (before it was expelled in April 2020) but with cover provided by the al-Wadi Battalion, Doctor Musab – a UN-sanctioned smuggling kingpin – was reported by GI-TOC contacts to have been able to sustain discrete human-smuggling operations under a lower-volume higher-margin model.[7] Moreover, following the overturning of this governing structure in April 2020 and the return of Doctor Musab's principal rival, Ahmed al-Dabbashi – another notorious UN-sanctioned people smuggler – at the head of GNA forces, human smuggling did not ramp up but was contained at lower levels.

In Zawiya and the surrounding coast, which was less disrupted than Sabratha in terms of conflict, there was a gradual evolution of the law-enforcement model, with the higher numbers departing from here pointing to an increase in tolerance. Again, this was a continuation of pre-existing trends, with the Awlad Buhmeira network, in particular, playing a complex role balancing competing interests and managing the exposure from human smuggling – among other illicit activities – to ensure local stability and maximize its own interests. The uninterrupted dominance by the Awlad Buhmeira network since 2017 allowed for the consolidation of this loose governing structure and the entrenchment of associated smuggling operations, in contrast with Sabratha.

In Zuwara, different dynamics were at play behind its re-emergence as a key smuggling hot spot on the west coast. In part, this was driven by more professional outfits, which focused on offering premium services for higher prices, reflecting the town's historical reputation as Libya's coastal smuggling capital. These operations attracted migrants – often through word of mouth – and offered superior accommodation (apartments rather

than warehouses) and a better chance of success in evading the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and reaching Europe, secured via pay-offs. In the summer of 2020, a contact reported that this service was reflected in far higher prices, which could reach as much as LYD24 000 (€4 117) for accommodation and passage.

Another factor related to diminishing alternative revenue sources. In October 2020, a former smuggler from Zuwara explained that economic hardship – worsened by the closure of the Ras Ajadir port of entry, which shut off an economic lifeline for many young men – had been driving a noticeable increase in smuggling activity from Zuwara. Against this context, the Zuwara Security Directorate carried out consistent law-enforcement activity in spite of shortage of resources and struggles to cover the large area of rugged coast under its jurisdiction with insufficient vehicles.

The directorate was also unwilling to arrest and transfer suspected smugglers to the authorities in Tripoli because of the lack of due process and a perception that this would cause too much instability within the town. Instead, fines were imposed on smugglers (this is in accordance with Libyan law, which only calls for stricter sentences when there has been injury caused to migrants). The Security Directorate also imposed a fine of LYD2 000 (€343) on migrants who were intercepted before they could be released, which ultimately skewed the overall impact of their law-enforcement activities towards migrants rather than smugglers.

Overall, the fines presented a weak deterrent to professional people smugglers. A contact explained that smugglers 'are not afraid of the security directorate'. Some smugglers who charged for premium services reportedly even paid the migrants' fines to secure their release and put them in a new boat.

On the other side of Tripoli, in the area around al-Khoms, there was a relatively steady and stable rate of departures despite the upheaval that Tarhouna's involvement in the attack on Tripoli caused to this area. The continuity reflects the existence of a number of deeply entrenched networks of smugglers and law-enforcement officers that were able to take advantage of the war for Tripoli to consolidate their operations. Despite the grip of these networks, the consistency of departures from east of Tripoli tapered off during the latter part of 2020, reflecting the impact of stepped-up law-enforcement activity driven by Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha.

SHORT-TERM VARIATIONS DRIVEN BY LOGISTICAL, MILITARY AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS

In addition to the slight but sustained increase in departures between 2019 and 2020, driven by the dynamics outlined above, Figure 1 reveals a number of shorter term, month-on-month variations driven by temporary changes in political, military and logistical dynamics.

For example, the massive mobilization following the initiation of the war for Tripoli in April 2019, which pitted the GNA and allied armed groups against Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), blocked access to coastal areas and interrupted the operations of human smugglers, with only 295 departures being reported that month. However, this bounced back to 2 130 in May 2019 and activity stayed at 'normal' levels thereafter.

The convergence of multiple stressors led to rolling crises and enormous suffering for migrants in western Libya in 2019 and 2020.

The war for Tripoli did have a longer-term impact on overall mobility right along the coast, and in particular to the east of Tripoli between Bani Walid, Tarhouna and Garabulli/al-Khoms. However, various factors limited the impact of this on the number of migrants departing the coast during these turbulent months. The first was the adaptability and resilience of smugglers, who could switch up routes and cultivate relations with new or ramped up security forces in relatively little time.

However, this is only part of the picture, and relates particularly to the more vertically integrated operations that transported migrants from the south in numbers that required a degree of logistical stability. The reality in western Libya is that a substantial portion of people who decided to take boats to Europe were already living in the towns and cities of the region; they contacted coastal smugglers through their own networks and often arranged their own transport to designated points. The concept of 'routes' did not apply here and, other than at time of the most intense fighting or mobilization, blocked roads could be simply avoided.

On the other hand, logistical considerations were still able to produce anomalous variations within the modest parameters of low thousands of people. For example, in January 2020 there was a spike in departures that continued into February (2 700 and 1 800 respectively, compared to 860 and 315 the previous year), largely due to activity on the west coast. This then dropped precipitously in March as the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world. The decline seems to have been the result of the logistical dynamics of smaller, clandestine operations moving smaller numbers of migrants, often using more robust vessels and charging higher prices. This business model incentivized smugglers to gather migrants in warehouses until enough had been gathered for a profitable operation and the weather was suitable for a successful journey.

For example, a contact in the smuggling world explained that the surge in the number of migrants during January and February 2020 was in part due to a group of migrants who had been kept in a warehouse in Surman since the previous December and had left from beaches between Sabratha and Surman during a period of suitable weather conditions in late January.

The rise in departures over January and February 2020 coincided with a dramatic fall in the number of LCG operations being conducted, particularly in the second half of January, when the coastguard intercepted or rescued only 175 of the 1 310 migrants who made the crossing. This slump followed a request by Mohammed al-Shibani (also al-Marhani), the Interior Ministry Undersecretary for Migration, for the LCG to desist sending intercepted migrants to detention centres, and a subsequent order issued on 15 January by Abdulla Tumia, the commander of the Libyan navy, for the LCG to close down its SAR operations.

The reasons for these actions were obscure; contacts reported that al-Shibani was vague when quizzed by diplomats and officials from different representations. However, there were multiple reports that both al-Shibani and Tumia had received pressure from a very senior figure in government to slow down search and rescue, owing to an unusually high volume of activity at the start of the month. Although the numbers were not high by long-term standards, the detention system was in crisis and was reluctant to take more migrants.

The small increase in attempted departures described earlier, coupled with the reduction in LCG activity, combined to create a small but significant spike in successful arrivals in Italy and Malta during the early months of 2020. Although these figures were not high in absolute terms, they ran contrary to expectations for the time of year – when arrivals from Libya are normally at their lowest due to the weather – and there was alarm in some European countries that a new crisis was in the making. However, while COVID-19 did cause some further disruption to the LCG in March and April, concerted pressure combined with stepped up external assistance allowed the LCG to return to a more stable tempo of operations. In the second half of 2020, the interception capacity of the General Administration for Coastal Security was also significantly upgraded with material and training support.

MIGRANTS SUFFER IN THE FACE OF POLITICAL CONFLICT, COVID-19 AND THE TRIPOLI WAR

Despite the relatively small numbers of people involved – both attempting the crossing and caught up in Libya's detention system – the convergence of multiple stressors led to rolling crises and enormous suffering for migrants in western Libya in 2019 and 2020.

The war for Tripoli had a direct impact on detention centres that were located near front lines. Some of the most intense fighting early on took place close to the detention centres in Gasr Ben Gashir, Abu Salim and Ain Zara, putting migrants at huge risk and creating difficult challenges for the Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and others. Gasr Ben Gashir fell into LAAF hands and migrants stuck there were a matter of particular concern due to risk of abuse from soldiers or collateral damage from the fighting. Many of these were eventually relocated to the al-Nasr detention centre in Zawiya.

There were efforts to relocate migrants away from the most dangerous territory. On 10 April the UNHCR moved 150 migrants from the Ain Zara detention centre to the Gathering and Departure Facility (GDF), with contacts reporting that they were then moved to the Sabaa detention centre. The Abu Salim centre was also near the fighting. Contacts reported that there were 920 migrants at the centre, with serious concerns for their safety. Following a delay due to issues with approval, on 16 April the UNHCR evacuated 150 migrants to the GDF.[8]

Even with migrants being relocated away from the front lines, there were persistent dangers from shelling and airstrikes, as some detention centres were controlled by armed groups involved in the fighting. For example, on 2 July 2019 there was an airstrike on the Tajoura detention centre that killed more than 50 people.[9]

The war for Tripoli also sent shockwaves through the detention system due to the additional logistical challenges it imposed, coupled with overcrowding as migrants were relocated to centres further away from the fighting. During 2019 and into 2020, in addition to reports of torture, extortion, abuse and, in some cases, killings, there were consistent reports of a health crisis, unsanitary conditions and chronic food shortages for detainees locked into the detention centres during the pandemic and the war.[10]

These already difficult conditions were further worsened by a concerted effort to defund detention centres as part of a strategy of Mabrouk Abd al-Hafiz – the head of the DCIM – to root out corrupt contracts and exert greater control. Regardless of the intentions of Abd al-Hafiz, this contributed to the disfunction of Libya's detention system, ultimately to the detriment of migrants caught up in it.

For example, on 29 October 2019 more than 600 migrants were released from Abu Slim and marched to the GDF, seeking shelter. There had been protests at Abu Slim for the ten days before sparked by the provision of only a single meal a day. Eventually the guards felt they could no longer control the situation and so let the migrants leave. At the time, a contact explained that the DCIM had not paid the catering company following one of Abd al-Hafiz's investigations into historic contracts for potential corruption.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic had only a minimal and short-term impact on human-smuggling dynamics in Libya in 2020, it had a widespread effect on livelihoods, exacerbating the suffering of migrants and Libyan nationals alike.[11] Economic suffering caused by travel restrictions and lockdown measures was not limited to Libya, and also played out in Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali. However, in Libya they came as a shock to a society already facing multiple crises, particularly so in the Tripolitania, which had just emerged from war. For migrants who relied on informal and temporary work for survival, and often required access to public spaces in order to find that work, the lockdown measures had a particularly devastating impact.

There were challenges with little income for rent, food and other living expenses, in addition to accessing assistance from humanitarian organizations operating on limited hours, as they too were impacted by mobility restrictions and impaired logistics. In addition, migrants were often denied medical care at health facilities.

Many of these issues remain chronic challenges for migrants and asylum seekers; however, the pandemic intensified them, with sub-Saharan Africans in particular becoming the target of xenophobic attacks by some Libyans who accused them of carrying the virus. This forced thousands of migrants and asylum seekers to stay at home, for fear of being arrested or attacked arbitrarily, losing them access to income and basic services in the process. This violent environment was compounded by prevalence of armed groups and criminality, especially in the aftermath of the war.

These pandemic-linked hardships, which were ongoing at the time of writing, did not led to a massive exodus of migrants leaving Libya for Europe in 2020. By the same token, although there was an increase in cases of Libyans attempting this crossing due to the long-term deterioration in living conditions, there was not the kind of mass emigration to Europe that might have been expected.[12] As these push factors continue to worsen in 2021, however, the risk of a sudden mass movement of people endures.

Of note in this context, approximately 5 500 people attempted to leave the coast in November 2020, the highest monthly total since June 2018. This surge has not yet been explained and did not continue into December, which was unusually quiet. However, numerous contacts told the GI-TOC that there had been a noticeable increase in the presence of sub-Saharan Africans in towns in western Libya, including Zawiya and Zuwara. The situation in Zawiya was bad enough that the crisis committee established due to the COVID-19 pandemic discussed the issue in November.

A final area of concern around human-smuggling dynamics was the continued occurrence of kidnap for ransom in areas south of Tripoli, particularly Bani Walid but increasingly also Shwayrif and Mizdah, and in one recorded case in 2020, also Brak al-Shati. With political and territorial divisions bisecting this part of Libya, 2021 is likely to see the further consolidation of trafficking groups in pockets of terrain that fall in between the proper control of either side. This is a major risk factor for trafficking and kidnap for ransom operations.

Tripoli war arrests development in western Libya

It is useful to consider the period since 4 April 2019 – the date of Khalifa Haftar's attack on Tripoli – as a distinct era in the post-revolutionary history of the Libyan state, with the preceding period being defined by the establishment of the GNA in 2016 and its capture by the so-called Tripoli cartel.[13] Roughly speaking, during this earlier period, the cartel had translated its control over territory in the capital into institutional power, which ultimately meant the extortion of vast sums of money. Under these conditions, there was widespread crime, corruption and impunity, with the central state lacking any coercive power beyond the withdrawal of legitimacy or funding – a power it could not effectively wield against its own 'protectors'. A similar situation had developed throughout Libya but with a concentration in the Tripolitania, with various armed groups seating themselves at the intersection of the black economy and state institutions, while outwardly projecting an image of themselves as legitimate arms of the security apparatus.

This situation was palpable during a lengthy press conference given by the head of the Attorney General's Investigation Bureau, al-Sadiq al-Sour, in March 2018 concerning investigations into fuel and human smuggling, among other crimes. In the press conference al-Sour claimed to have evidence of police officers who were complicit with smugglers; he warned that the people who were then hiding behind militias would eventually be reached by justice. This was a powerful, if implicit, confession that criminality was deeply entrenched within the state, and that there was currently no capacity to act against this.

Al-Sadiq al-Sour during a press conference on investigations into fuel and people smuggling, March 2018.
SOURCE: YouTube

The situation had once again postponed the reconstruction of post-revolutionary Libya, led to the squandering of huge amounts of money and further polarized the country between 'winners' and 'losers'. Although there were exceptions to this, in general some towns and cities that had played a key part in the revolution, such as Zuwara, Zawiya, Misrata and Zintan, were somewhat excluded from participation in the GNA and had little stake in the government. This made the support base of the GNA dangerously narrow and allowed the cartel of armed groups to dominate it more entirely, but also ultimately exposed it to internal fracture.

Other 'losers' from the prevailing status quo sought to exploit this weakness to gain a place at the table. The Kani Battalion in Tarhouna attacked Tripoli twice in 2018, citing the need to rid the capital of the militias that had captured the state. This vulnerability to outside attack led to the closer inclusion of Misratan and Zintani forces in the GNA's structure in Tripoli – with the appointment of the Misratan Fathi Bashagha as Interior Minister in October 2018, and the return of Zintani forces under Usama al-Juwaili and Emad Trabilsi to the capital in September 2018.

This was the same period during which armed groups in smaller cities and towns outside of Tripoli consolidated their hybrid governing arrangements in semi-independent fiefdoms, for example in Sabratha and Zawiya. Together with the situation in the metropolitan areas of Tripoli, this status quo presented a conundrum to those desiring to reconstruct Libya. In both cases, the minimum of stability and law and order that had been achieved depended on groups whose interests ran contrary to further progress: figures with dubious backgrounds that could disqualify them from participation in a fully reconstructed state, and who were dependent – either personally or via their own support bases – on the profits of illicit activities.

With his appointment as Interior Minister, Fathi Bashagha appeared to recognize this conundrum and be eager to address it, seeing his mission as the dismantling of the cartel of armed groups then dominating the GNA, and building an Interior Ministry capable of actually functioning. As a revolutionary and armed leader, Bashagha had more clout than his predecessor, Abdulsalam Ashour. However, the tools he had at hand were weak and his actions helped unify opposition

from the Tripoli cartel, under the banner of the Tripoli Protection Force, with groups from Zintan and Warshefana.

The appointment of Mabrouk Abd al-Hafiz as the head of the DCIM in early 2019 was illustrative of these difficulties. By March 2019, information suggested that Bashagha had grown distrustful of the DCIM infrastructure and was seeking to have Abd al-Hafiz, a career officer, appointed as the head. However, this was opposed by Mohammed al-Khoja, the deputy head of the DCIM and de facto controller of the important Tariq al-Sikka detention centre and Mohammed al-Shibani, the Interior Ministry undersecretary for migration. These two men to a large extent represented the Tripoli status quo – figures whose power derived from militia connections, and who possessed minimal qualifications and reputations for corruption.

Although Abd al-Hafiz was eventually appointed, he was prevented by al-Khoja from taking up his place in the DCIM office and was forced instead to work from a house in Hay Andalus. This rivalry, obstruction and lack of coercive power continued to dog Abd al-Hafiz in his role as head of the DCIM and is emblematic of the wider struggles that Bashagha faced in the run up to Haftar's attack on Tripoli.

THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR FOR TRIPOLI

When Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019, the justification was that only the military strength of a national army could liberate the capital city and the state from the militias, criminals and terrorists that he claimed were holding it captive. However, the fractious GNA coalition responded to the threat with surprising unity and resolution, while groups Haftar had expected to switch sides failed to do so. As such, it soon became clear that the LAAF was not powerful enough to take the capital by force and that the coming battle would be destructive and drawn out.

In the face of such profound upheaval, with no clear end in sight, it seemed possible that the status quo of the GNA years would not survive, and that Libya would revert to an earlier phase of its post-revolutionary development. If different armed groups were sucked into all out competition among themselves

FIGURE 3 Tripoli, showing select detention centres, December 2020.

along territorial lines (for example between Sabratha and Zawiya), it was feared that they might be forced to engage in unrestrained criminality, calculating that local and international legitimacy was less urgent than the battle for survival they faced. At the same time, it was not clear that the law-enforcement model adopted by militias across the west coast would survive another civil war. One of the most pressing question arising from both considerations was whether a collapse of the law-enforcement model would lead militias back into the protection of human smuggling and trafficking,

possibly leading to a new surge in irregular migration during the summer months in 2019.

There were a number of direct consequences on human-smuggling dynamics that flowed from Haftar's attack on Tripoli. For example, April saw a sudden collapse in the number of attempted departures from the West coast. This was a result of the massive mobilization of forces around the Libyan capital. To the east of Tripoli, in particular, virtually all routes that connect coastal embarkation points in Garabulli and al-Khoms

via Tarhouna to warehousing sites in Bani Walid, Shwayrif and Nasma saw intense mobilisation, effectively blocking off access to smugglers and migrants.

By May 2019 the number of departures had begun to return to a moderate level again, reflecting a loosening of the security situation, the release of pent-up demand and the ability of smugglers to adapt. As an example of how smugglers adapted to the new security landscape around Tripoli, during May and June 2019 the coastal areas around Zliten and al-Khoms were the busiest in Libya, despite some of the most intense mobilization taking place around Tarhouna (which had sided with the LAAF). This was due to the opening of a route from Bani Walid via Zliten to al-Khoms (see Map 3). Misratan forces controlled the area between Bani Walid and Zliten, but they only had a light footprint and were not interested in targeting smugglers due to the war in Tripoli.

This example is typical of how the vagaries of the war caused activity to rise and fall along different stretches of the Libyan coast without there being a major impact on the overall number of departures, which stayed relatively constant from 2018 up to 2020.

FIGURE 4 The Libyan coast east of Tripoli, showing diverted migration routes as they stood in June 2019.

TRIPOLI FESTERS AS FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL TRUMPS REFORM

Following the attack on Tripoli, Bashagha's nascent efforts to strengthen the Interior Ministry and dismantle the power of the so-called cartel and corrupt networks in the GNA were overshadowed by the fight to survive. Bashagha himself informally took the role of war minister, diverting his focus from his own designated ministry. It is important to note that these efforts did not altogether cease. However, they were largely confined to paper exercises with no real enforcement – a problem that already existed in western Libya but was exacerbated by the war. Perhaps more critically, there does not seem to have been an overarching strategy during this period. Instead, orders were issued or statements made according to well-established themes, but without any sequencing or progress to speak of.

In the case of broader security sector reform, there were no real efforts to reform the GNA's military and security apparatus or dismantle the Tripoli cartel, for understandable reasons. Bashagha did try to maintain his distance from the Tripoli armed groups (with the exception of the Rada Special Forces) through rhetorical blandishments, even as they fought on the same side against the LAAF.

The same can broadly be said for the migration file and efforts to impose control over the DCIM. In an interview with the GI-TOC in July 2019, Abd al-Hafiz said that while Bashagha had initially been focused on reform and institution-building, the war had forced him to return more to the role of armed leader. This means that while many orders were issued and initiatives undertaken, there was little commitment to impose or follow through with them, reflecting not only a lack of capacity but a lack of political will at a time when survival was the overriding priority.

These initiatives can be broadly categorized as ordering the closure of problematic detention centres, defunding and otherwise trying to isolate detention centres through administrative means, and the continuation of political jockeying at the head of the DCIM.

As an example of the efforts to close detention centres, in August 2019 Bashagha ordered the Misrata, al-Khoms and Tajoura detention centres to begin the process of closing down by registering migrants and preparing for their transfer. The three centres were supposedly chosen because of repeated issues with abuse and management, with Tajoura also having been struck in the airstrike. Following this, at the end of 2019, Abd al-Hafiz wrote a letter to various international organizations listing 11 officially recognized detention centres and urging the organizations to commit to prior coordination with the central leadership of the DCIM. A contact at the time reported that the letter was intended to draw a clear line and put pressure on international organizations to coordinate any interaction with detention centres through him.

However, in reality the strategy of closing detention centres has been inconsistent and often unsuccessful. The al-Khoms centre had already been shut due to widespread abuse in 2018 by Abd al-Hafiz's predecessor, Mohammed Bisher. However, it reopened as a result of capacity shortages and high-level corruption. After the closure ordered by Bashagha, the al-Khoms centre continued to operate and the order had to be restated a month later; even then, contacts reported that much of the corrupt network profiting from this detention centre simply relocated to the nearby Souq al-Khamis facility.

The strategy of closing detention centres has been inconsistent and often unsuccessful.

The main dormitory of the Tajoura detention centre after having taken the blast from an airstrike on an adjacent building on 2 July 2019. © *Mark Micallef*

On top of the failure or inability to follow through on such orders, other problematic centres, such as al-Nasr in Zawiya and Tariq al-Sikka in Tripoli, were not ordered to close, despite Abd al-Hafiz admitting to the GI-TOC that they were operating outside of command structures and were corrupt. These omissions were the result of the DCIM being unable to enforce such orders, achieving little and exacerbating tensions at a time when the defence of Tripoli against the LAAF was the priority – both al-Nasr and Tariq al-Sikka were associated with armed groups that were engaged in fighting against the LAAF (the al-Nasr Battalion from Zawiya; and an informal militia loyal to Mohammed al-Khoja that fought alongside Abu Salim Central Security Force in the war for Tripoli, respectively). The result of this arbitrariness and lack of consistent strategy in the DCIM's attempts to close down detention centres was that it left a confused and opaque system in which the simple classification between formal and informal centres remained blurred.

Regarding the struggle to impose greater control over procurement and root out corruption, Abd al-Hafiz told the GI-TOC that progress was being made:

We have already managed to isolate the detention centres in terms of administration. The corrupt officials have no authority to sign for anything and this will cut off their sources of income … the corrupt detention centres are dying, in three months they won't be there, at least if the international community leaves them alone.[14]

Abd al-Hafiz also convened meetings with catering companies with past contracts with the DCIM in an apparent effort to centralize control.[15]

The impact of these measures in terms of addressing corruption and the general governance of the detention system was mixed at best. However, the action definitely wound down the relationship of several companies that proceeded to withhold service when the DCIM queried their contracts and halted funding. This further exacerbated the chaos in the system throughout 2019 and into 2020, at a time when active detention centres were already under stress as a result of the war. These factors delivered a double-blow to detained migrants, amplifying their suffering.

However, on other occasions contacts suggested to the GI-TOC that catering companies with connections to al-Shibani were more likely to be paid fast, regardless of corruption investigations, because he could use his influence in the GNA to have funds released to them. Abd al-Hafiz made a similar claim to the GI-TOC: 'We spread instructions not to deal with corrupt officials, but they are getting funds from other government departments.'

Either way, the defunding strategy of Abd al-Hafiz did not seem to have been consistently imposed and the reality was and remains that centres (or similar facilities) are seen by armed groups as opportunities for profit. It seems that corruption in the detention system was allowed to continue due to political expediency or opportunism.

This was well illustrated by the organic emergence of two so-called Investigation and Deportation Units (IDU) as facilities for holding migrants during the course of the war for Tripoli – one in Zawiya Street and one in Hay Andalus. These facilities had emerged through informal cooperation between the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB) and al-Khoja (in the case of Zawiya Street IDU) and Abd al-Hafiz and Zintani militiamen under Emad Trabilsi (in the case of Hay Andalus IDU).

In 2019 the Zawiya Street and Hay Andalus facilities began to receive significant numbers of migrants intercepted by the LCG (1 500 between August 2019 and early January 2020), with functions and conditions that were broadly similar to other detention centres. However, their origins and administrative status were obscure. At both locations, effective power lay in the hands of the armed groups that controlled the facilities, with officers from the Interior Ministry appointed as post-hoc fudges designed to lend formal legitimacy to what were opportunistic and profit-seeking enterprises by armed groups. The IDUs have continued to grow in usage and importance up to the time of writing. It remains unclear how far this has now become an active policy or remains opportunistic.

The political fighting over administrative authority between al-Shibani, al-Khoja and Abd al-Hafiz during the war for Tripoli was similarly inconclusive and circular. For example, in January 2020 Abd al-Hafiz issued a decree attempting to remove authority from al-Khoja. However, al-Khoja effectively rejected Abd al-Hafiz's

decree and made a show of force by organizing a large-scale military drill on former parading grounds adjacent to the GDF. As a result, the UNHCR announced on 30 January that it was suspending its operations at the GDF, fearing for the safety of people at the facility, its staff and partners. Al-Khoja, meanwhile, remained in place and continued to control the Tariq al-Sikka detention centre.[16]

In July 2020, these tensions came to a head when Bashagha issued an order transferring al-Khoja out of the DCIM. In the wake of that, however, there was a gradual rapprochement between al-Khoja and Abd al-Hafiz, with al-Khoja managing to retain his position as deputy after Abd al-Hafiz intervened on his behalf. Contacts reported that the new understanding was based on mutual benefit to both men, with Abd al-Hafiz having administrative authority but lacking a real power base on the ground, and al-Khoja finding himself in the opposite position following his transfer in July:

> Abd al-Hafiz has the administrative authority in the DCIM, but he does not have the power on the ground – no militias or big armed groups, and he is not even strong in Zintan [his grandfather left the town]. On the other hand, Mohammed al-Khoja has power on the ground in Tripoli, but after he was transferred, he lost his administrative power, and this has been the basis for the two making an alliance.[17]

CRIMINAL NETWORKS CONSOLIDATE IN AL-KHOMS DURING THE WAR FOR TRIPOLI

The town of al-Khoms, located on the coast east of Tripoli, is one of Libya's most important and notorious smuggling hubs. During the war, an important area for the overall defence of Tripoli lay between Tarhouna (which had flipped to the LAAF) and Garabulli on the coast to the north (which had remained under GNA control but whose inhabitants were tribally connected to Tarhouna and of suspect loyalty to the GNA). Despite the significant impact that this had on freedom of movement, al-Khoms and the surrounding area continued to be among the busiest departure points for migrants throughout most of 2020, taking boats to Europe during the entirety of the war.

The dynamics underlying this echo those described above for Tripoli, with war conditions providing space for corrupt networks to ensconce themselves in local detention centres and law-enforcement bodies. This became increasingly apparent over the summer of 2019, with a rolling crisis in the irregular and unauthorized release of migrants from al-Khoms port after they had been intercepted, and the disappearance of migrants from the Souq al-Khamis detention centre.

Bashagha was well aware of the situation in al-Khoms and did attempt to address it. In August 2019 he ordered the al-Khoms detention centre to be closed; however, contacts reported that the centre continued to receive migrants and Bashagha was driven to reiterate the closure order the next month after the unauthorized release of a large number of migrants.

There were also efforts to avoid al-Khoms altogether by having the LCG disembark intercepted migrants in Tripoli instead.

However, contacts repeatedly reported that during this period Bashagha felt unable to take stronger, more direct action against the corrupt networks of law-enforcement officers and smugglers in al-Khoms because he was wary of alienating armed groups whose loyalty was required to ensure the security of this important stretch of coast. Perhaps more importantly, the al-Khoms networks had protectors in Misrata and the need for solidarity in the face of the LAAF threat meant that Bashagha could not afford to open new conflicts within his own camp.

FIGURE 5 The Libyan coast around al-Khoms, showing main people-smuggling routes, December 2020.
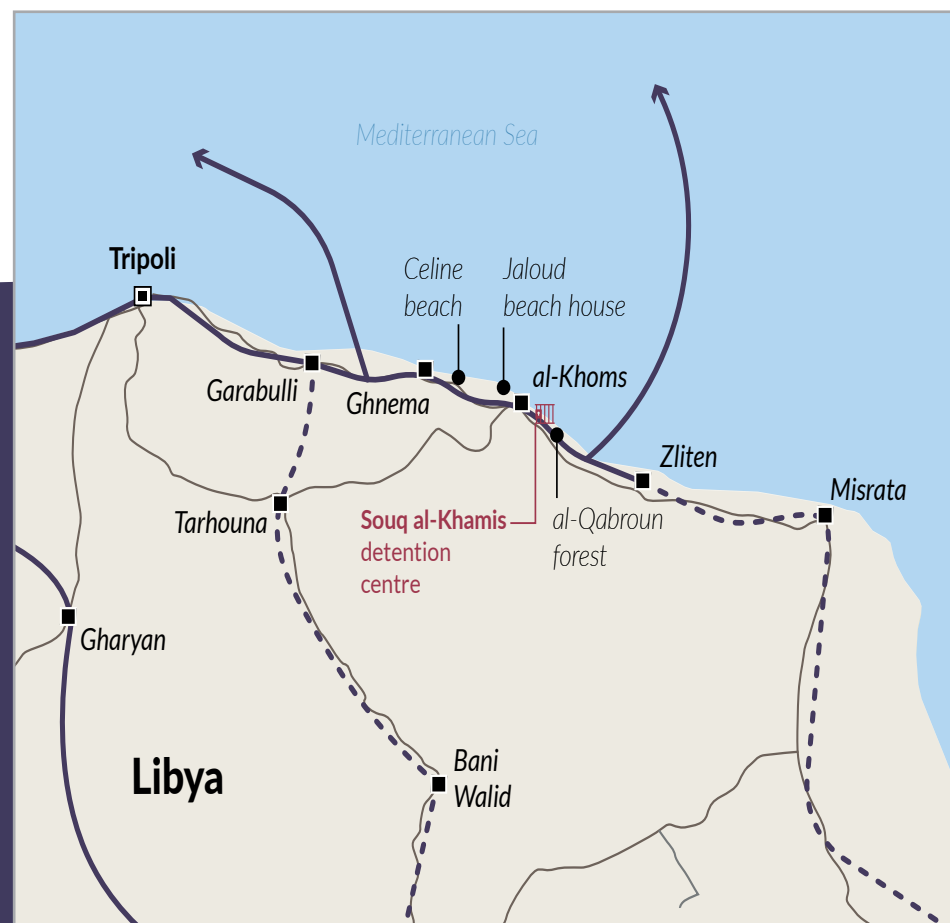
This situation led to the increasing consolidation of well-connected and deeply entrenched networks, which the GI-TOC continued to monitor throughout the war. The profiles of these networks reveal the deep entanglement between armed groups, law-enforcement actors (including the DCIM, the LCG and the General Administration for Coastal Security) and smugglers. A brief outline of these networks as they were operating in September 2020 is presented below.

Fighters aligned with the GNA on one of the frontlines in the battle for Tripoli with forces of the LAAF on 25 July 2019.
© *Amru Salahuddien*

The Hneidi network

The Hneidi network primarily operated in the Celine area of al-Khoms. The network was overseen by a family, a member of which, Abdullah Hneidi, was arrested in November 2020. Another member of the family, considered to be leading the gang, had also been arrested and interrogated for smuggling during the Gaddafi era, and in 2020 was considered to be the preeminent smuggling leader in the area stretching from Garabulli to al-Khoms. He reportedly had international connections with people smugglers in Sudan and Niger and is currently thought to be in Turkey.

The operation was reported by monitors to have the protection of a Misratan militiaman, which is a requirement given the dominance of Misrata over al-Khoms.

A senior officer in the DCIM told the GI-TOC that the logistical aspects of the operation were managed by a man who was known locally to have bought land in Celine and constructed a wall and hangars, probably funded by Hneidi.

It appears the network's security cover was partly provided by the First Division, an armed group from al-Khoms.

The Hneidi network also had connections with the Souq al-Khamis detention centre at least since 2019.

These networks reveal the deep entanglement between armed groups, law-enforcement actors and smugglers.

The Souq al-Khamis network

A second network was also reportedly active directly in the Souq al-Khamis area. The GI-TOC identified two figures associated with a militia that secures the Coastal Security base in al-Khoms. An officer in the Coastal Security unit was also reportedly involved in this network.

A man from al-Khoms managed the logistics for the network, in a manner similar to the model adopted by the Hneidi network. Multiple contacts reported to the GI-TOC that as of September 2020 the logistician in this network was a 'rising star' of the human-smuggling sector in al-Khoms and was using the earnings from his smuggling activities to buy vehicles and property.

He was connected to the Souq al-Khamis detention centre through an official in the central sector of the DCIM. The family behind this network controlled the area of the detention centre and exerted de facto control over it.

Corrupt network around Souq al-Khamis detention centre

Aside from these two networks, in 2020 there was an interconnected network around the Souq al-Khamis detention centre. This network which is linked to the family from the al-Qa'am area mentioned above, situated between al-Khoms and Zliten, intersected with both the Hneidi and Souq al-Khamis operations.

The family is influential over the area in which the Souq al-Khamis detention centre is located. They ran an operation that benefited from this influence to exploit migrants at the detention centre under official cover from colluding officials at the DC. These officials were also reportedly previously in leadership positions at the al-Khoms centre before it was closed as a result of widespread abuse and corruption.

This network was suspected of being behind the 'recycling' of intercepted migrants, arranging for their release at disembarkation or from detention centres back into the hands of smugglers (such as the Souq al-Khamis or Hneidi operations) for a fee.

Their operations extended to the al-Khoms port, incorporating the so-called Karawana militia, which had influence in the area of the port. In August 2020 a contact confirmed that the Karawana militia remained active and had members regularly at the port.

Much of this information was confirmed by well-connected contacts in the GNA; they were well aware of these characters, but for the reasons outlined above, high-level arrests were not made, at least before the arrest of Abdullah Hneidi in November 2020. At the time of writing, the GI-TOC is still seeking to understand the full impact of this arrest and others on the networks outlined above.

DESPITE SOCIAL TENSIONS, THE WEST COAST SYSTEM WEATHERS THE STORM

During the war for Tripoli, the west coast area was riven by deep divisions and territorial fragmentation along the fault lines of the ongoing conflict. Until April 2020, the towns of Sabratha and Surman were controlled by pro-LAAF groups – the Western CID in Surman, the Sabratha Security Room and the al-Wadi battalion in Sabratha.

The al-Wattiya airbase was also controlled for much of the war by pro-LAAF Zintanis. On the GNA side, there was a faction of Zintanis under Usama al-Juwaili, the well-armed Amazigh town of Zuwara, and Zawiya. A number of smaller Arab towns such as al-Jmail, Zulten and Riqdalain were nominally under the GNA but harboured LAAF sympathies. Towards the end of the war, they briefly entered the LAAF fold.

Further to the east, Zawiya was divided, with a bitter rivalry between a non-Islamist camp led by the Awlad Buhmeira network and the Islamist leaning network led by Mahmoud Bin Rajab. Ahead of the attack on Tripoli, Haftar reportedly expected the Awlad Buhmeira network led by Ali and Hassan Busriba to flip and help him secure the western approach to Tripoli by taking Gate 27. In the end, the Awlad Buhmeira did not flip and instead aided pro-GNA forces in retaking Gate 27 after a brief occupation, later contributing to the war effort south of Tripoli. Nonetheless, throughout the war for the capital there were repeated reports of ongoing backroom dialogue between the Busribas and Haftar.

Given this intensity of territorial fragmentation and social tension, the overarching fear of many leaders on the west coast was that the war would spread from Tripoli and engulf their communities. This fear, and the fine balance between the forces, combined to bring a remarkable degree of stability, both politically and in terms of security, to what remained an extremely fragile situation.

The criminal economy, and deeply interconnected law-enforcement bodies, exhibited a similar level of stability during this turbulent period, powerfully illustrating the resilience of the community-based networks that held sway here since the collapse of the large-scale human-smuggling industry in 2017.

These networks continued to operate during this period according to a rough system in which smaller groups with influence or control over suitable coastal areas carried out their own smuggling activities under the protection and loose management of larger, coordinating networks with deep investment in the status quo, in particular the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya and – at least up until April 2020 – the pro-LAAF coalition controlling Sabratha.

Up until April 2020, the situation in Sabratha was perhaps the most controlled, reflecting the more authoritarian nature of the LAAF and the militarization of this enclave during the war for Tripoli. Under the Sabratha Security Room some law-enforcement operations continued. However, reflecting the reality that emerged post-2017, well-connected smugglers continued to run low-profile and clandestine operations charging higher margins.

For example, in June 2019 a contact reported that one of Ahmed al-Dabbashi's competitors in Sabratha up till 2017 continued to operate a low-level business focused on Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants, charging about €2 650 compared to €270–€620 for other African nationalities. In Sabratha, the well-known smuggler Ali Rais remained active in the al-Wadi area (his activities also survived the fall of Sabratha to the GNA).

The most dramatic moment in the war for Tripoli, with regard to human-smuggling dynamics, came with the expulsion of the LAAF from Sabratha and Surman and the return, as part of the victorious pro-GNA forces, of Ahmed al-Dabbashi (al-Amu). Al-Dabbashi was a central player in the smuggling networks in Sabratha that contributed to the huge numbers of migrants who embarked from this stretch of coast during the height of the crisis in 2016 and 2017.[18] His expulsion from Sabratha in the summer of 2017 during a war with local rivals was a seminal moment in the winding down of the migration crisis.[19]

Given this history, his return, amid a general collapse in security and policing, appeared like a great moment of jeopardy for the structures that had kept human smuggling in check along the west coast since mid-2017. There were fears that al-Dabbashi would return to the protection system that had proved so prolific between 2014 and 2017.

However, in the end there was no surge from Sabratha. There are various explanations for this. There was recognition among many militia leaders within the victorious camp that a surge in human smuggling from newly acquired territory would reflect badly on the GNA and local forces. As such, there were efforts to ensure a minimum of law-enforcement activity in the area. These included initiatives by both the Interior Ministry and returning revolutionary figures to empower the

Sabratha Security Directorate and to bring the local tribes of the town onboard with policing efforts; and threats, arrest warrants or asset freezes issued by the Interior Ministry for notorious figures such as al-Dabbashi and Mohammed Kushlav.

Due to his understanding of the pressure and scrutiny he faced, al-Dabbashi also distanced himself from human smuggling. For example, in August, he frankly admitted in an interview to a GI-TOC contact that the security and law-and-order situation in Sabratha had deteriorated since the expulsion of the LAAF, and that human smuggling had increased. However, he insisted that the increased activity was not in Sabratha but from Zuwara and Daman, saying: 'I will stop any smugglers I find on the land, but I cannot do anything about them when they are on the sea.'

During much of the war for Tripoli, smuggling activity in Zawiya was also constrained by the militarization necessitated by the presence of LAAF forces nearby in Surman and Sabratha. However, here too smaller groups operated. In some cases, they were relatively well-known and connected. For example, in the area from al-Harsha up to Mutrud, fuel and human smuggling were controlled by a local well-connected local family. In other cases, smuggling was carried out by small groups of comprising young, opportunistic criminal entrepreneurs with low profiles.

Similar to the oversight of the al-Wadi and Musab Abu Grein in Sabratha, the potential anarchy of this mix in Zawiya was held in check by the quasi-governance of the Awlad Buhmeira network, whose influence extends to the municipality, the Zawiya Security Directorate, the Zawiya CID, the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard unit led by Abd al-Rahman Milad (al-Bija) and other bodies. Collectively, these had (and still have) a major stake in maintaining the status quo.

Broadly speaking, the governing paradigm included securing the support of subordinate groups by allowing sufficient access to resources (in many cases this meant access to criminal activity) in a semi-feudal manner, and minimizing local instability by the same means. On the other hand, this had to be balanced with the interests of the GNA, which in turn depended on the support of European countries by keeping migrant departures, and

other criminal activities, below the threshold that would attract scrutiny and reprisal.

Similar to al-Khoms, this is an ecosystem where smugglers, law enforcers and armed groups were deeply entangled. As an example of this, in June 2020 contacts described an arrangement that had prevailed over the previous period; according to this, a smuggler from Mutrud cooperated with the Zawiya coastguard as well as the al-Nasr detention centre. The smuggler is said to have been informing colluding coastguard officials when he sent out a boat and paid a fee for each boat allowed to pass out of Libyan waters. This system was reflected in the wide divergence in prices that migrants were charged by coastal smugglers. At the lower end of the scale, migrants could pay as little as LYD1 000 (€145). Larger sums were charged for boats that are guaranteed to reach international waters.

In addition to pecuniary gain, colluding LCG officials are reported to have used this arrangement to control the number of boats leaving and help prevent the kind of surge that would attract greater pressure from the GNA and European countries. In fact, the Mutrud smuggler also allegedly paid the management of the al-Nasr detention centre to release migrants who had been intercepted.

It is important to note that these should not be understood as definitive descriptions of static and permanent arrangements. This was a fluid ecosystem, with constant fluctuation over time and territory. Other factors also had a role in temporarily limiting or disrupting irregular migratory flows during this period, for example the hazard of travel that resulted from the war for Tripoli and, to a lesser extent, the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the continuity of irregular-migration dynamics throughout the upheaval of the war for Tripoli was primarily attributable to the resilience of the locally rooted and deeply compromised governing arrangements outlined here.

Somewhat distinct from these dynamics, during the latter part of the war for Tripoli, and after its conclusion, professional smuggling networks reappearing in Zuwara following a number of years' hiatus. They were responsible for a growing number of departures in mid to late 2020.

WHAT WILL FOLLOW THE END OF THE WAR FOR TRIPOLI?

One of the most important questions following the collapse of the LAAF siege of the capital has been whether progress towards reform of the state will now become possible or whether the domination of armed groups and corrupt networks is too deep and entrenched for there to be a basis on which to commence.

This is not a question that yet has an answer; however, the summer and autumn of 2020 saw a number of developments that weighed on the issue. The most obvious and dramatic was the swathe of arrests, arrest warrants and investigations ordered by al-Sadiq al-Sour in close collaboration with the Interior Ministry under Fathi Bashagha. These targeted an unprecedented number of senior officials in the GNA; the sense of purpose and real coercive power were in marked contrast with al-Sadiq al-Sour's appearance in the 2018 press conference.

The campaign of arrests and investigations extended to human-smuggling networks. Most remarkably, in October Abd al-Rahman Milad, the captain of the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard sanctioned by the UN Security Council for involvement in human-smuggling activities in 2018, was arrested in Tripoli on the strength of a warrant issued by al-Sadiq al-Sour.[20]

Following this, in early November Abdullah Hneidi was arrested in al-Khoms.[21] A contact reported that a corrupt officer in Internal Security had also been arrested and other suspects are being sought on charges of abusing or killing migrants. During November, Musa Diyab, the infamous trafficker from Bani Walid, was also arrested by the Rada Special Forces near Tarhouna.[22]

The targeting of such high-profile figures was partly made possible by the gradual increase of the coercive power available to the Interior Ministry. This was achieved through the assimilation of existing armed groups, a necessary approach to state building in Libya. A key alliance that had long been emerging tied Bashagha with al-Sadiq al-Sour and the Rada Special Forces.

A later addition to this was the General Administration of Security Operations (GASO). This umbrella designation included a group based in Tajoura known as the Law Enforcement Unit, a mixed force with long

The Nagaza checkpoint in Libya, south of Qatrun.

The 'cemetery of the unknown' in Zarzis, Tunisia. On the beaches of this town, the bodies of drowned migrants are washed up again and again. © *Simon Kremer/Picture Alliance via Getty Images*

roots in Tajoura and close ties with the town's prominent militiaman Bashir Khalfallah (al-Bugra) and the Lions of Tajoura Brigade (Usud Tajoura). The unit had migrated through different law-enforcement sections within the Interior Ministry and by the latter part of 2020 emerged as a Tripoli enforcer for the Attorney General's Office and Bashagha directly. It was responsible for the arrest of Milad. The Special Operations Force in al-Khoms was also associated with GASO as the local force responsible for security along the coast road east of Tripoli. The Special Operations Force was responsible for the arrest of Hneidi.

The participation of groups within this constellation in the arrest of both Hneidi and Milad was suggestive of the coordinated strategy that was being pushed by Bashagha in partnership with al-Sour to both build capacity and target high-profile criminals.

Perhaps more important than the gradual building of capacity, however, was the broader post-war landscape in western Libya. While the presence of Turkey along with Syrian mercenaries was not of direct benefit to law-enforcement capacity, however, they formed a kind of insurance on which Bashagha could call if his targeting of powerful figures and networks provoked an armed confrontation.[23] In this way, Turkey provided the space for Bashagha to be bolder. A close observer of Libya noted this dynamic at play in February 2020, when Bashagha publicly denounced Nawasi: 'They complained that before the Syrians showed up he needed them and would not dare to insult them, but with the Syrians he has other options and this is why he spat in their face – there is truth in this.'

Of course, the space for risk taking was also expanded by the withdrawal of the LAAF from the immediate area of the capital.

The arrest of multiple high-profile figures connected with human smuggling in Libya at this time was a welcome development that suggested Bashagha was prepared to take risks in his efforts to empower the Interior Ministry and tackle the power of organized crime in Libya.

However, it is important to understand the political context of Bashagha's actions; he was at that time vying for leadership of the government that would replace the GNA and the law-and-order campaign was a central plank in his strategy to secure local and international support for his bid to be the next Prime Minister.

This was a return to the policies Bashagha had been trying to pursue in the period before Haftar attacked Tripoli. However, the end of the war for Tripoli created a moment of great urgency and potential; with Libya's future being decided, key players had a great deal to gain if they could emerge from the brief moment in a dominant position. There was, therefore, a strong incentive for Bashagha to take on the risk of pursuing an anti-crime and corruption campaign with unusual rhetorical aggression, dispensing with past cautions.

At the same time as it was an appeal to external players and public opinion, Bashagha's anti-crime and

corruption campaign also had a harder-nosed internal dimension through targeting his political rivals: the networks of corruption and crime that consolidated their dominance on north western Libya after the arrival of the GNA in 2016 and were closely associated with it.

Not all of the armed groups that dominate the capital were rivals of Bashagha. However, the Nawasi Brigade and the TRB remained staunch rivals and viewed his actions as direct threats to their interests. Outside of Tripoli, the syndicate of the Busriba brothers in Zawiya oppose Bashagha, alongside others such as Muammar al-Dhawi's 55 Brigade in Warshefana. The Zintani armed leader, Emad Trabilsi was also a political foe.

> Bashagha has a huge political incentive to fight corruption and crime. But this does not need to be noble or just for moral reasons, fighting crime also means targeting the networks in Tripoli, Zawiya and elsewhere, which he has opposed since he became Interior Minister. This is what we saw in the arrest of [Abd al-Rahman] Milad and the little shadow war in Warshefana that followed it. The political talks in Tunis are an opportunity that drives this on more.[24]

Political motivations are unavoidable, and they did not invalidate the actions of the Interior Ministry at this time. However, they inevitably invited the accusation that his targeting of certain groups was politically motivated, pulling the law-enforcement and anti-corruption campaign back into the political quagmire of Bashagha versus the Tripoli cartel that pre-dated the war for Tripoli.

These tensions revived even before the arrest of Milad in October 2020. In August there were anti-Bashagha protests staged in Zawiya in reaction at his attempt to fire the head of the Zawiya CID, an infamous militiaman called Mohammed Bahroun and the head of the Zawiya Security Directorate. At the end of August Bashagha was suspended by al-Sarraj. Although purportedly over his perceived lack of loyalty in the face of unprecedented street protests in Tripoli, it was clear that the suspension was instead a reaction to his aggressive targeting of powerful figures within the GNA for investigation or arrest.

The suspension raised the possibility that Bashagha had miscalculated and that political opposition would overwhelm his law-enforcement agenda. Although the situation was reversed when he quickly returned to office, the opposition to him did not capitulate. For example, while the Awlad Buhmeira decided to accept the arrest of Milad and lobbied instead to have his case transferred to a military court, the network and its allies in Tripoli (such as Nawasi and the TRB) and elsewhere (such as Muammar al-Dhawi in Warshefana) continued to oppose Bashagha politically and formed a powerful bulwark for the status quo.

Aside from the potential instability of these rivalries being exacerbated by Bashagha's actions, there was also a sense that political motivations incentivized Bashagha to pursue short-term, performative victories over more time-consuming, deeper-reaching progress. For example, regarding the arrest of Milad, a contact argued that Bashagha would hold him only so long as was politically expedient: 'Having the most famous smuggler in the Mediterranean under arrest is a great card for [Bashagha] to be carrying during the [political] talks and he is in a strong position.'

There were also aspects of Bashagha's alliances during this period that raised eyebrows, such as the alliance with the First Division as an enforcer for the Interior Ministry in al-Khoms (the First Division is an armed group from al-Khoms that has suspected links to human smuggling). It may have been reasonable for Bashagha to seek to recruit the most powerful armed groups regardless of their reputation, given his limited option and need for immediate impact. However, this approach was criticized by some in al-Khoms, who felt that weaker but more respectable figures had been overlooked in favour of making short-term gains.

The equivocations described here notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the arrests of high-profile smuggling suspects in the latter part of 2020 was a salutary development, in the context of past years where much of the 'war on traffickers' usually translated itself in a war on migrants.

In the end, Bashagha's campaign failed; he was beaten to the post by fellow Misratan Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba. The formation of the Dabaiba government lies outside the scope of this report. However, the challenges of security sector reform and state building with which Bashagha and many other Libyan actors grappled during 2019 and 2020, will continue to confront the new order.

The arrests of high-profile smuggling suspects is a salutary development, as in past years much of the 'war on traffickers' meant a war on migrants.

In terms of human smuggling and irregular migration to Europe, the remarkable surge in the number of departures from the Libyan coast between October and November 2020 underscored that there is no room for complacency, despite the continuity of the past years. The causes of the spike remain unclear; however, it shows both that the demand for travel to Europe remains strong and that there is capacity to put large number of people in boats over relatively little time.

It is desirable to progress beyond the status quo that has held sway in western Libya in recent years, but over the short term this could lead to further volatility as old structures give way to new.

LAAF campaign in the Fezzan does not impact human smuggling

Roughly speaking, the era outlined above – that of the war for Tripoli and its aftermath – is contemporary with the LAAF campaign to extend its control over the Fezzan. Similar to the Tripoli war, the LAAF justified this campaign on the grounds that it was the only actor in a position to bring law and order and improved services to a region that had been deteriorating since 2011 – both in terms of criminality and governance.

Unlike Tripoli, however, there was a sizeable constituency in the Fezzan that welcomed the LAAF. Partly this reflected the LAAF's success over a number of years in recruiting tribal forces. However, it was also a result of genuine popular desperation at the rampant criminality beleaguering the vast region – over 2018, kidnapping and banditry had reached crisis proportions, with desperadoes and mercenaries from Sudan, Chad and Niger freely roaming the region, taking advantage of the security vacuum and intercommunal wars.

The era of nominal LAAF control started with the mobilization of forces from the east of Libya in January 2019. These were initially deployed to friendly areas and bases, such as Tamanhint and Brak al-Shati, relying on the support of local proxies rather than moving into empty or hostile spaces. The key proxies included the 116 Brigade of Massoud Jeddi – an Awlad Suleiman force – and the 12th Infantry Brigade, a Magarha force then led by Mohammed Bin Nayl. These moves were accompanied by an aggressive media campaign designed to give the impression of overwhelming force and inevitable victory.

Sebha, a divided city with some key locations then under the control of Tebu opposed to Haftar, was more challenging. However, by 24 January the LAAF had taken over Sebha Castle and the airport and could claim to be in charge of the city, after Tebu groups controlling them agreed to withdraw, feeling unable to resist and believing that the LAAF would not advance further south.

In the Tuareg domain to the west and south of Sebha, there were disagreements over siding with the LAAF. The GNA sought to exploit this with the appointment of veteran Tuareg officer Ali Kanna as the commander of the south, hoping to galvanize local opposition to Haftar. Usama al-Juwaili also tried to negotiate the return of Zintani Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) to the Sharara oilfield. However, both these moves backfired and, following brief skirmishes around the al-Sharara oilfield,

a comprehensive list of Tuareg military units declared their support for the LAAF and called on the GNA to prevent military forces from deploying to the south.[25]

The 173 Brigade took control of the al-Sharara oil-field alongside the PFG 30 Brigade, which had been the controller and guard force there since 2015. The 173 Brigade is a Tuareg armed group led by Eghlas Mohamed-Ahmed, which is part of the LAAF and was central to securing the acceptance of the Tuareg as a

whole. The reliance on local proxy forces to secure territory in this way was a characteristic strategy of the LAAF in the Fezzan – a fact that has had important implications for its governance and law-and-order promises.

The failure of the LAAF to rely on local Tebu proxies when seeking to progress south of Sebha, instead deploying antagonistic military units dominated by the Awlad Suleiman and Zway tribes, led to the most serious fighting of the campaign. During February, there were

FIGURE 6 Libya, showing main people-smuggling routes, December 2020.

intense skirmishes and the use of airstrikes as LAAF forces tried to advance from the town of Ghaduwa, south of Sebha, down to Um al-Aranib and Murzuq.

By the end of the month, LAAF forces had briefly entered Murzuq – which was home to the most intense resistance – and other Tebu towns, facilitated in part by the mediation of Mohammed Bin Nayl. However, looting and abuse in Murzuq upset the already unstable local balance and led to repeated outbreaks of communal violence throughout the summer. In August, this culminated with the Tebu community expelling the town's Ahali population (Ahali, or Fezzazna, is the name given to the Arabic-speaking people of the Fezzan who do not belong to the larger Arab tribes and whom some consider to be descended from Arabized natives of the region).

Although this reflected deep-rooted tensions between these two communities, it also fit into the contemporary conflict, with the Ahali being seen as pro-LAAF. During August there was also an LAAF airstrike that targeted a gathering of Tebu leaders in Murzuq, killing 42 people and seriously exacerbating tensions.

Against the backdrop of these tensions, a slumbering resistance – organized under the umbrella of the Southern Protection Force (SPF), mostly made up of anti-LAAF Tebu – staged a number of symbolic attacks and parades. For example, on 9 May the SPF briefly occupied Sebha Castle and released a video showing their forces parading in Murzuq.[26]

These were supposed to be the opening gambits of the Volcano of Truth, a southern sub-operation of Volcano of Rage aimed at driving Haftar from the south. However, few other concrete actions materialized and open resistance to Haftar eventually became dormant in November 2019, after forces led by Tebu commanders Hassan

Belqasim al-Abaaj, commander of the southern border areas of the Fezzan (front row, centre), meets with the head of the Ghat municipality and southern officers in Ghat in October 2019.
SOURCE: Kufra Military Zone Facebook page

Mousa Souki and Abu Bakr al-Souki under the banner of the SPF briefly stormed the El-Feel oilfield. In retaliation, the LAAF's backers conducted precision airstrikes and the facility was quickly retaken. Hassan Musa Souki died as a result of injuries sustained in the airstrikes.

The failure of the SPF to sustain a viable resistance to the LAAF reflected the basic reality that there was no appetite among the broader Tebu community for a sustained fight against the LAAF, particularly given the perception that the GNA had neglected them and was not interested in their rights and claims. At the same time, the LAAF belatedly switched tack to adopt a more diplomatic approach, spearheaded by Belqasim al-Abaaj after his appointment as commander of the southern border areas of the Fezzan.[27]

Al-Abaaj, who was also the head of the Kufra Military Zone, has been credited with significantly easing communal tensions between the Zway and the local Tebu in Kufra through relatively inclusive and even-handed governance. Given these achievements, al-Abaaj enjoyed a degree of popularity with the Tebu in Kufra and the Fezzan. Al-Abaaj adopted a characteristically non-confrontational approach in this new position, making use of his effective mix of diplomatic skills, tribal knowledge and relatively good reputation among Tebu communities.

In an early sign of the success of this approach, in October 2019, the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade – the main pro-LAAF Tebu armed group, largely based in Um al-Aranib – entered Murzuq and assumed responsibility for security there on behalf of the LAAF.[28] Contacts from southern Libya also confirmed that Desert Shield had effectively joined the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade in its operations. The Desert Shield is one of the most important armed groups of the Tebu, having been established by the late Barka Wardago after the fall of Qaddafi.

As part of this arrangement, both groups reportedly received vehicles and weapons from the LAAF. A contact also explained that the arrangement was underpinned by family connections: the head of the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade, Yousef Hussain Saleh – a Madkhali Salafist from Um al-Aranib – is a cousin of Barka Wardago.

Prior to this, contacts reported that Barka Sharfadin – the leader of the Um al-Aranib Martyrs Brigade, another important Tebu armed group from Qatrun – had visited eastern Libya and met with Haftar, agreeing to a deal with the LAAF.
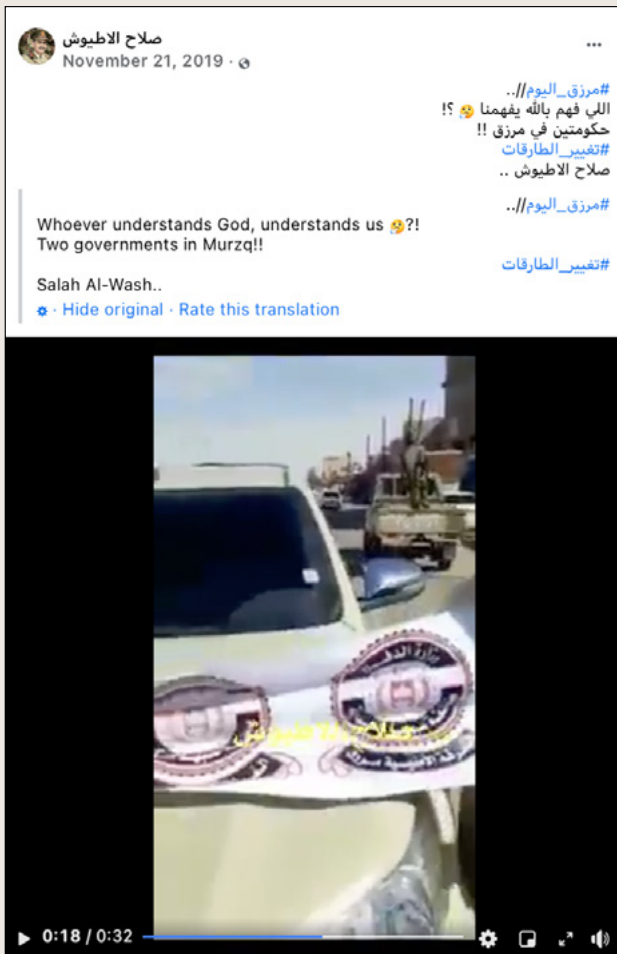
As the culmination of these efforts, al-Abaaj himself toured areas of the Fezzan in November 2019 and February–March 2020; this included visits to Murzuq on both occasions.[29] His messages were accommodating and intended to reassure – offering development and saying that the LAAF would tolerate the smuggling of fuel and goods, but not that of drugs, arms or people.

This scenario led to an effective collapse of organized anti-Haftar resistance:

> We can now see this on the ground – the groups supporting the GNA have melted away. The fighters in the SPF were mostly the sons of Kufra and Murzuq, and the tribal leaders here have made it clear that there is not to be a fight against the LAAF, and most are not willing anyway, so they have disappeared from the scene. And even if they wanted to fight now, who would they [fight]? The Tebu areas are controlled by Tebu forces, such as the Khalid Bin Walid. Before, the real reason to fight was the Awlad Suleiman or Zway presence in trying to take Murzuq, so what would the point be now that they are gone?[30]

Although this was a remarkable achievement given the strength of anti-LAAF sentiment among many Tebu the reality underpinning it was complex and, to some extent, superficial. Pro-LAAF Tebu groups never targeted or clashed with their anti-LAAF cousins, rather the two wings coexisted easily alongside each other. A series of videos from Murzuq in November 2019 apparently showing men with the insignia of the pro-GNA Sebha Military Zone joking with men in armed vehicles bearing the insignia of the LAAF viscerally demonstrated the underlying Tebu attitude to affiliations with external forces.[31]

This attitude prioritizes above all else communal solidarity, with a strong prohibition on internal conflict. Affiliations with outside groups are secondary and, to some extent, pragmatic. This is not to say that anti-LAAF groups were not committed to their cause, nor that the Khalid Bin Walid brigade was simply a cynical

صلاح الاطيوش
November 21, 2019 ·

#مرزق_اليوم//..
اللي فهم بالله يفهمنا 🤨 ؟!
حكومتين في مرزق !!
#تغيير_الطارقات
صلاح الاطيوش ..

#مرزق_اليوم//..

#تغيير_الطارقات

Whoever understands God, understands us 🤨?!
Two governments in Murzq!!

Salah Al-Wash..

⚙ · Hide original · Rate this translation

Pro-GNA and pro-LAAF Tebu fighters appear to joke with each other over political allegiances in Murzuq, November 2019. SOURCE: Facebook

and fickle ally of the LAAF. In both cases, ideology carried weight. But these considerations were trumped by Tebu solidarity. Moreover, divided loyalties were mutually acceptable as a kind of collective insurance policy against the outcomes of a wider conflict that they cannot control – no matter which sides won, there would be a local group familiar to the victorious side as a local enforcer and guarantor.

> [Desert Shield and the anti-LAAF Murzuq Military Council] are in good standing with each other, even though they are on opposing sides, that is always the condition of commu- nal-based militias … the Desert Shield is part of the LAAF, while Mohammed Wardago broke away and formed the Murzuq Military Council to oppose them. It is not surprising for two leaders to agree to break away like this when a central authority allies with a locally based group. They simply change roles.[32]

LAAF'S LIGHT FOOTPRINT HAS MINIMAL IMPACT ON HUMAN-SMUGGLING DYNAMICS

The LAAF never physically occupied the Fezzan in the conventional sense of the word, nor was it a national army whose sovereignty and control extended evenly over the vast territory.[33] This is not to say that the LAAF's presence in the Fezzan was weak; in fact, over 2020 it managed to consolidate its position.

However, it adopted a franchising model, with various armed groups pledging allegiance while retaining a high degree of autonomy. The strategy gave the impression of extended LAAF control over the territory using as few resources as possible. In the analysis of the group's impact on smuggling, understanding this dynamic is critical, as the strategy depended on appeasement of the different groups, especially by not upsetting the interests they may have in the black economy.

Even in the areas where it had and continued to have the greatest local support and possesses key military assets – for example the Magarha domain from Brak al-Shati to Shwayrif – which also happens to be a key logistical hub for different forms of smuggling and trafficking, including the warehousing of migrants jour-neying north – the LAAF did not have a permanent physical and institutional presence in the traditional sense. In the Tebu areas of the far south, the LAAF influence on the ground was negligible.

Given this, the LAAF campaign did not have any permanent impact on human-smuggling dynamics in the Fezzan.

Following al-Abaaj's tour of the far south in 2020, contacts in Niger told the GI-TOC that there were fears among people smugglers that this would lead to increased control of the border at Toummo (which al-Abaaj briefly visited), undermining their business. The main concern was the cooperation between Desert Shield and the LAAF. Desert Shield is influential in the far south and has a presence at the Toummo border crossing.

However, these fears were baseless and no significant anti-smuggling actions were undertaken by Desert Shield or any other group. The one exception to this was a series of raids and interceptions carried out in reaction to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of March, following an announcement that the Libya–Niger border had been closed. The Um al-Aranib Martyrs Brigade, the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade, Desert Shield and the local police force in Qatrun intercepted a number of migrants and deported them to Niger.

Cross-border smugglers were temporarily affected by this stepped-up security on the Libyan side by Tebu armed groups. However, by mid-April they had already adapted – taking more remote routes and avoiding security forces, sometimes with the help of inside information, as detailed further in the Niger section below. However, the increased security posture did not last and through the summer of 2020 smugglers were able to travel relatively freely from Niger into southern Libya and up to Sebha.

A contact who travelled this route with irregular migrants in November and December 2020 described the ease of movement, although caution was taken to keep the visibility of migrants as low as possible. Checkpoints were either not manned, easily avoided or passable by migrants in exchange for the payment of a small bribe. The contact also reported on payments being made to allow the transport of banned wildlife.

> In Tommou, there are the militiamen of Desert Shield who normally ask migrants for money but not this time because of a contact we had … we avoided al-Wigh with a detour so that our contact would not be seen at a checkpoint there … when we arrived at Qatrun, someone went to check

> if there was anyone at the checkpoint [normally manned by the Um al-Aranib Martyrs Brigade] but there was not so we passed by with the migrants … no one was at the checkpoint in Um al-Aranib. In Sebha we dropped some migrants off at a location and carried on with seven others hidden in the carriage, because we did not want to be seen driving in Sebha with migrants.[34]

In reality, in light of the outlined strategy, the LAAF never had an interest in stamping out human smuggling, which would have antagonized local communities that it preferred to mollify as far as possible. It therefore did not put pressure on the Tebu groups associated with it to act against smugglers. And even if the pressure had been there, the local groups associated with the LAAF would have neither the power nor the inclination to yield to it.

> Desert Shield cannot sufficiently cover the entire south-west border; instead, it has to co- operate with a range of militias to do the task of guarding under the LAAF banner, which is difficult to sustain due to the diverse makeup of militias. This is about Desert Shield being practical, which it has been ever since February 2019, when Haftar came to the Fezzan.[35]

The LAAF also did not have any permanent impact on the smuggling dynamics further north. Typically, during the period covered in this report, migrants travelled from the south with Tebu smugglers, moving via Um al-Aranib or Qatrun to Sebha, with many ending up in the so-called Compoat area to the west of the Magarha-majority area of Abd al-Kafi. In Sebha, the Tebu 'sold the migrants onto Magarha, Mashashiya and Hassawna smugglers. If the migrant had money ready, they could continue straight on; those who did not, remained and worked locally to earn the cost of onward travel.

In cases where migrants would have travelled the first leg on credit, they often entered into indentured labour arrangements with what are known as Credit Houses (*gidan bashi* in Hausa). Credit house managers at these *gidan bashi* paid smugglers their dues against a debt that migrants then had to repay with interests through labour. Many of the credit houses are in the Magarha, Mashashiya and Hassawna areas, as well as some Tebu areas in the south of Sebha. This system has been in

place for decades; however, since the revolution, it became increasingly associated with abuse through labour exploitation and in some cases even ransoming – a trend that has been growing in the past three to four years.

From Sebha, Magarha smugglers – or those partnered with them – transported migrants north towards Shwayrif, Bani Walid or other logistical hubs on the far side of the desert. As with the situation further south, activities continued largely unabated throughout 2020, with the exception of some weeks following the outbreak of the pandemic.

Under these circumstances, smugglers transporting migrants north from Sebha made some efforts to conceal the migrants, for the sake of appearances, but they were largely aided by the connivance of any law enforcement present on the route. For example, the Quwayrat al-Mal checkpoint is located at an intersection approximately 20 kilometres north-east of Sebha on the main road to Brak al-Shati. In the time of Qaddafi, and when Misrata's Third Force controlled the area, people smugglers avoided this road because of the law-enforcement presence at the checkpoint. Instead, smugglers from the Magarha tribe – and their partners from other tribes – used a route crossing the desert and an area known as Zallaf Sands to the west of the main road between Sebha and Brak al-Shati.

During the summer of 2020, a local contact explained that forces controlling the checkpoint – a joint force, consisting primarily of the 12th Infantry Brigade and the 160 Brigade – generally made a show of imposing their authority on passengers passing through, and made visible efforts to prevent human smuggling. However, there was also low-profile complicity with smugglers – or individual migrants – on account of familial ties or bribery.

A contact interviewed in March 2020 said that he had witnessed individual migrants in shared taxis be stopped at the checkpoint and be allowed to pass – despite not having any paperwork – in exchange for a bribe of LYD150 (€29 at the then black-market rate). In cases of smugglers transporting larger numbers of migrants in pick-up trucks, the smuggler had already taken LYD50 (€10) from each migrant to pay the bribe at the checkpoint.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic did little to alter this behaviour.

> It is still easy to bribe the soldiers, so they let the migrants cross the paved road or pass behind the checkpoint of the desert road without anyone stopping them. Plus, most smugglers are Magarha and most personnel at the checkpoint are Magarha too … Unfortunately, most smugglers from the young people do not care about the virus due to the great financial profit they get from smuggling, therefore they don't treat the threat with logic.[36]

Conditions at the northern end of these routes – around Shwayrif and Mizdah – were impacted by the collapse of the LAAF in Tripolitania, with negative consequences for migrants and security. The nature of law-enforcement structures in the area was ambiguous even before its collapse. There was a joint Security Directorate for Nisma, al-Shaqiqa, Shwayrif and Mizdah, headquartered in Shwayrif. This was nominally part of the GNA; however, it was led by Massoud Khawaja Bashir, who was close to the LAAF, and the local police station of the Security Directorate in Mizdah was staffed by local men supportive of the LAAF.

After the collapse of the LAAF siege on Tripoli, the 12th Infantry Brigade withdrew from checkpoints in the area, enabling the GNA to nominally expand its territorial control southwards towards Mizdah. However, this was largely on paper and between June and December 2020 the GNA did not station a permanent military presence there. A contact reported that there had been some changes in the staffing of the Security Directorate; however, in September 2020 a contact reported that 'in reality [the Directorate] still follows Haftar in the moral sense, even if this is not widely apparent in the media due to the changes in the geopolitical and military map after the storming of the city of Tarhouna.'

The Security Directorate was not strong enough to challenge the GNA, whatever the true feelings of its staff; however, a contact reported that anti-GNA sentiment was widespread. This situation – an unhappy population and an unwelcome, non-permanent GNA presence – fuelled an increase in banditry and the further deterioration of law and order. Kidnapping and robberies increased on the main road to Gharyan, including the targeting of migrant workers.

Bombed building in Sebha, January 2021.

While Shwayrif remained, at the time of writing, under the control of local pro-LAAF forces from the Magarha tribe, lawlessness here also increased.

> In Shwayrif there is unparalleled insecurity and the spread of kidnappings and banditry. On 30 August, cars belonging to the Security Directorate were robbed in the city centre and in broad daylight! There have also been more and more robberies on travellers in the Shwayrif area by outlaws from the Magarha tribe, taking advantage of their social and military cover.[37]

The fragility of security and law enforcement in this area – and the potential for the territory to become settled as a borderland between GNA and LAAF domains – has serious implications for the smuggling and trafficking of migrants, their abuse and exploitation, as well as other illicit flows.

Incidents in 2020 indicated that human-smuggling activities – particularly kidnap for ransom – were increasing in this area and in territory as far south as Brak al-Shati. In May, a large number of Bangladeshi migrants were massacred at a warehouse in Mizdah. In August, another group of Bangladeshi migrants, who were being held by a Magarhi criminal in Brak al-Shati, were released by the smuggler but as of December the group remained in custody in Brak al-Shati. The trafficker involved in the kidnapping, is a known criminal who operates in the stretch north of Brak al-Shati, was briefly arrested before being released.

On 12 September, seven Indian nationals working for the Man-Made River company in Shwayrif were kidnapped by a local gang at a fake checkpoint between Shwayrif and Qaryat. Following difficult mediation, they were released on 11 October.[38] There were also been other cases of foreign workers kidnapped both in Shwayrif and Bani Walid in late 2020.[39]

With the wider area south of Bani Walid returning to the lawless state into which it fell following the 2011 revolution, numerous contacts reported to the GI-TOC in November 2020 that the road from Bani Walid to Nasmah had been largely closed to traffic by pro-GNA forces as a precaution against banditry and terrorism.

LAAF involvement in human smuggling and organized crime in the Cyrenaica

In terms of organized crime – including human smuggling – eastern Libya faces far less scrutiny than the western half of the country between 2019 and 2020. In part, this likely reflected the fact that the internationally recognized government was based in the western half; and that it is from there that the vast majority of migrants attempting to reach Europe departed.

However, it is was the case that eastern Libya more closely resembled an authoritarian state than the territory under the GNA. Alongside the greater levels of social control this implied (relatively speaking, as eastern Libya was very far from being an effective and consolidated police state), there was also greater control and order in the criminal economy, within which the elements of the LAAF were and continue to be deeply involved.[40]

Given that a significant proportion of the migrants departing western Libya for Europe travelled from the east, and also the LAAF's claim to be a solution to – rather than a cause of – Libya's rampant criminality, it is important to survey these dynamics.

SUBUL AL-SALAM'S AMBIGUOUS LAW-ENFORCEMENT ROLE CONTINUES

Subul al-Salam is the most powerful armed group in Kufra and has played an important role underpinning the power of the Kufra Military Zone. While this has included efforts to counter human smuggling, the true nature of this role has always been ambiguous. Since 2018, the GI-TOC has reported on Subul al-Salam's involvement in human smuggling, and the group has also been implicated in human smuggling by the UN.[41] This ambiguous role continued during the period covered in this report.

Subul al-Salam oversees a huge area that stretches from the Sudanese border (and a small portion of the border with Chad) to Kufra and all the way up to Kharouba airbase.

The routes traversing this area are subject to occasional subtle alterations; however, in general the picture in 2019 and 2020 was one of continuity, with the oversight of Subul al-Salam conferring a degree of stability. Subul al-Salam routinely reported arrests and interceptions in its territory; however, for a number of years there have been consistent reports that they operated as overseers of these smuggling routes – along with the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) further south. This remains a smoothly functioning arrangement and sees convoys passing through checkpoints controlled by Subul al-Salam where taxes are imposed.

Subul al-Salam's hybrid and contradictory role in the human-smuggling business has had two notable effects. Along with the Sudanese RSF, it helped monopolize the business and push out the Tebu prior to 2018. Alongside improved border security, it also provided better security for migrant convoys on the routes in Libya, minimizing the risk and visibility of these operations.

FIGURE 7 Eastern Libya, showing main people-smuggling routes, December 2020.

African detainees wait in line before the daily morning roll call at Ganfouda detention centre on 2 February 2019 in Libya.
© *Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images*

The commonly used routes are:

- **Aweinat to Kufra.** Under the control of Subul al-Salam.
- **Kufra to Tazirbu.** Usually between five and 10 cars each containing 20 migrants travelled from Kufra to Tazirbu, under the control of Subul al-Salam.
- **Tazirbu to Brak al-Shati.** Migrants were transported from Tazirbu to Brak al-Shati, often avoiding Zilla, unlike in past years. Extortion and abuse were common risks here.
- **Kufra to Ajdabiya.** The Kufra to Ajdabiya route became less commonly used due to pressure on Bani Walid and the difficulty of using the coast road to travel west due to blockage in Sirte.

Aside from the involvement of elements from Subul al-Salam in human smuggling, the GI-TOC received numerous reports indicating that it partners with high ranking affiliates within the LAAF in respect to illicit activities, including the trafficking of drugs and cigarettes, both through shared ownership of shipments and through Subul al-Salam's provision of protection from Kufra at least as far north as Tazirbu.

For instance, involvement of elements within the LAAF in illicit flows in Kufra was partly revealed through the suspicious activities of the 106 Brigade. (The 106 Brigade was involved in the infamous case of removing money from the Central Bank in Benghazi in 2017 under murky circumstances).[42] One example of this occurred in January 2018. A local contact reported to the GI-TOC that Tebu smugglers had come across Arab smugglers from Bayda in five vehicles marked with the logo of the 106 Brigade, around 190 kilometres south of Jaghbub. The convoy was trafficking hashish

and was not protected by the Tebu protection racket operating in this area, based around the Sarir oilfield, and so the Tebu smugglers attacked the convoy, killing a number of men, kidnapping two and taking the hashish.

The contact reported that one of the 106 Brigade leaders then intervened, reportedly contacting the LAAF-affiliated guard at the Sarir oilfield and demanding to know why his shipment had been attacked. According to this account, a Tebu armed leader then spoke with the smugglers and mediated the released of the captives. This incident was reported in the media, with claims that 35 kilograms of cocaine were seized.

Another contact described a similar case in which a small-scale militia robbed Egyptian traffickers carrying a large amount of cocaine between Tobruk and Jaghbub. When they tried to sell the cocaine in Jaghbub the buyer realised that it belonged to a high-level officer in the LAAF and so tipped off the police. After the deal was busted, the 106 Brigade travelled with a large convoy from Benghazi to collect the cocaine. The contact alleged that 'everyone knew' the consignment belonged to the senior LAAF officer.[43]

Subul al-Salam has also been reportedly working together with ranking LAAF members on smuggling cigarettes to Egypt. A contact reported that on 24 June 2020, five trucks carrying cigarettes were intercepted by al-Abaaj on their way to Egypt. The contact said that local people believed that the shipment was was jointly owned by elements within Subul al-Salam and ranking affiliates of the LAAF. Another similar consignment was intercepted on 15 July, by the Department of Counter Negative and Destructive Phenomena at a checkpoint 60 kilometres south of Ajdabiya.

A detained Sudanese mother inside the female room of the Ganfouda detention centre in Libya.
© Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images

KUFRA CONFLICT SHINES LIGHT ON SMUGGLING TAXATION FUND

A growing dispute during 2020 between Subul al-Salam and Belqasim al-Abaaj – at the time the head of the Kufra Military Zone – shone a light on a complex system of imposing and collecting taxes on smuggled goods that blurs the line between licit and illicit activity (it is vital to note that this blurring reflects local realities, where much smuggling is seen as a necessary and legitimate economic activity).

As a brief outline, according to this system a local tax is imposed on all exports of subsidized vehicles and other goods to Sudan and Chad, collected either at the border by Subul al-Salam or at interior check- points. For example, in November 2019, a contact told the GI-TOC that Subul al-Salam was imposing a tax of between LYD500 and LYD5 000 (approximately €70 and €700 at then black-market rates) on all goods being smuggled to Sudan and Chad.

The taxation on goods and vehicles was approved by the Kufra Municipality, which used a law that permits municipalities to raise taxes on local businesses (a contact reported that there had been no taxes imposed on the formal economy, only on the irregular/illicit one), and the money collected was held in the Kufra Construction Fund (KCF), which was established to raise money for construction and rehabilitation projects in Kufra.

Aside from taxes on goods and fuel, Subul al-Salam also directly taxed people smug-glers. The GI-TOC did not establish whether funds from this were originally paid into the KCF or kept separate by Subul al-Salam (there is information that more recently Subul al-Salam has kept direct possession of these funds).

During the summer of 2020 contacts reported to the GI-TOC that the KCF was originally controlled by Kufra's business elite, Subul al-Salam and the municipality. There was no oversight and it was unclear if the funds were being used transparently. This was changed by al-Abaaj beginning in January 2019, when he took control of the KCF accounts and merged them with the al-Watan for Investment and Development of Kufra and Wahat, a local branch of the LAAF's Military Works and Investment Authority (MWIA) that was established in January 2019. This body was chaired by al-Abaaj and carried out the work of the MWIA in the south-east of the Cyrenaica.

Under the arrangement, cars being smuggled for export continued to be taxed and the funds deposited in the KCF; however, Subul al-Salam taxed people smugglers separately and these funds were not placed in the KCF:

> Subul al-Salam remains pretty much in control of the border point with Sudan and runs consistent patrols near the border with Chad. The taxation system is largely unchanged. Subul al-Salam continues to tax human traffickers and car smugglers of all sorts. The taxes on car smugglers to Sudan and camel imports from Chad are paid to al-Abaaj, while human traffickers often evade paying taxes to al-Abaaj and pay them once at the border to Subul al-Salam. However, car smugglers could pay twice for both al-Abaaj and Subul al-Salam.[44]

Al-Abaaj's actions to take greater control of the KCF antagonized Subul al-Salam, the municipality and reportedly also some figures in the LAAF. According to one contact interviewed in August 2020, Subul al-Salam pushed back by allowing

human-smuggling convoys close to Kufra – against the interests and wishes of al-Abaaj: 'The Kufra Military Zone frequently arrests human traffickers crossing Kufra's sand berm with their loads of migrants. These traffickers could be easily arrested by Subul al-Salam 300 kilometres away, but now they are spotted just a few kilometres away from the town.'

It is important to note that the conflict between Subul al-Salam and the municipality, on the one hand, and al-Abaaj, on the other, was not simply over the control of the KCF, but reflected a deeper divide at play within the Zway, pitting the powerful Jouloulat family, who controlled the steering committee of the municipality and supported Subul al-Salam, against al-Abaaj's Awlad Amira clan, who were historically dominant. These divisions also reflected opposition to al-Abaaj's relatively open and inclusive governing style towards the Tebu, which was opposed by more hawkish members of the Zway tribe.

Either way, this multifaceted internal Zway conflict came to a head in October with the temporary arrest of al-Abaaj over allegations he was planning to defect from the LAAF and had been in contact with Qaddafists.[45] On 1 November, al-Abaaj was released from house arrest in Benghazi and returned to his post after a military committee found no evidence to support the claims against him and encountered strong local support, among both the Tebu and members of his own Zway tribe.

Al-Abaaj's return to Kufra was facilitated by a number of compromise agreements over the KCF and other matters. Contacts reported that al-Abaaj would keep control of 50% of the KCF, with the remaining 50% being divided between Subul al-Salam and the municipality. Subul al-Salam was also appointed to control the distribution of fuel to Zway parts of Kufra, a move supported by the municipality.[46] Under the arrangement, Subul al-Salam took responsibility for the allocation of fuel to stations and took charge of overseeing and securing distribution. This gave the group huge power over fuel supply in Kufra and allowed it to prevent fuel from being diverted and resold illegally.

By the same token, the deal effectively gave Subul al-Salam control of the black market for fuel in Kufra, potentially a very profitable market. A contact explained that fuel was sold at an official price of LYD10 (€1.71) for 60 litres, rising to LYD120 (€20.5) on the black market inside Kufra and jumping to LYD300 (€51.4) in the so-called Triangle on the Sudanese border, a location where people and vehicle smugglers, as well as gold miners, transact business and secure supplies.

The handing of control over this file to Subul al-Salam, evidently as part of the solution to a conflict over control of locally generated revenues, said much about the LAAF's flexible and pragmatic approach to the management of theoretically illicit flows and organized crime within its ranks.

It is important to acknowledge and understand these dynamics. The LAAF has tended to present itself as a national regular army, the only force able to tackle terrorism, militia rule and organized crime in Libya. Such was its justification for the Fezzan campaign and the attack on Tripoli. It was also a key part of its offering to foreign partners, although geopolitical rivalries playing out inside Libya probably plaid a more important role in many cases. Either way, in order to understand the state of organized crime – including human smuggling – in Libya, it is necessary to incorporate dynamics in the eastern half of the country and the involvement in this of powerful elements of the LAAF.

In order to understand the state of organized crime in Libya, it is necessary to incorporate dynamics in the eastern half of the country and the involvement of powerful elements of the LAAF.

TUNISIA

A group of football supporters from Chebba, Tunisia, plan to emigrate to Italy in protest over the suspension of the city's football club and broader issues of marginalization, November 2020.
© Ali Abbes/AFP via Getty Images

Irregular migration surges to levels not seen since 2011

In 2020, irregular migration from Tunisia to Italy surged to levels not seen since 2011. In that year, post-revolutionary chaos within the security forces had created an opening, leading to nearly 28 000 Tunisians migrating, most in a concentrated two-month surge.

By comparison, in 2020, far fewer Tunisian nationals disembarked in Italy: 12 883 cases were recorded between 1 January and 31 December. However, unlike in 2011, active Tunisian security-force efforts led to some 11 789 migrant interceptions in the country's littoral areas and off its coast. As well, 1 816 foreigners who had embarked from Tunisia were intercepted by Italy. Combined, Italian and Tunisian authorities intercepted some 26 488 individuals – a level not significantly below the 2011 figure, underscoring the deep interest in and potential for large migration pulses from the Tunisian coast.
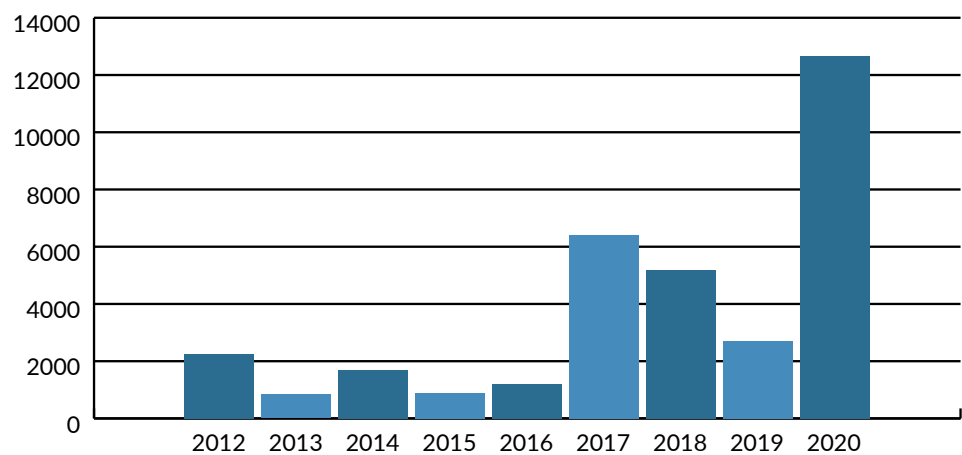

FIGURE 8 Disembarkation of Tunisian nationals in Italy, 2012–2020.
SOURCE: Government of Italy

After the period from 2012 to 2016, during which very few apprehensions were reported by either Tunisian or Italian authorities, irregular migration from Tunisia increased sharply in 2017, before declining in 2018 and 2019 (Figure 8).

In the first months of 2020, interceptions by Tunisian and Italian security forces were marginally above those recorded in 2018 and 2019. This changed in March and early April, as the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tunisia limited, though did not halt, irregular migration. This was largely due to the imposition within Tunisia of severe internal movement restrictions, which hindered the ability of would-be migrants to reach coastal embarkation zones.

Restrictions and curfews were relaxed in early to mid-May, which is when the current surge began. During that month, 1 064 migrants were apprehended by Tunisian authorities; a roughly equivalent number were intercepted in the month after that. Simultaneously, Italian interceptions of Tunisian irregular migrants, nearly all of whom are believed to have departed from Tunisia, increased sharply, rising from 37 in April, to 498 in May, to 782 in June. The concurrent increase in apprehensions in Italy and Tunisia underscores how the phenomenon was not attributable to heightened enforcement by either country. Rather, it reflected a sharp, absolute increase in the number of individuals migrating from and through Tunisia.

The most sustained period of migration, however, occurred in July, when Italian authorities intercepted 4 052 Tunisian irregular migrants, and Tunisian authorities arrested 1 720 migrants and smugglers of all nationalities. While migration levels generally ebbed from August onwards, due in part to increased activity by Tunisian security forces, Italian and Tunisian interception levels remained significantly above historic norms throughout the last quarter of 2020 (Figures 8 and 9).

Despite the surge, known or presumed deaths of migrants embarking from Tunisia remained relatively low, encompassing 116 men, women and children, nearly all of whom were sub-Saharan migrants. The highest number of fatalities in a single day was 7 June, when 61 people died when their vessel sank off the coast of Sfax. Another vessel sank off Sfax on 12 October killing 22, including women, children and an infant.

FIGURE 9 Arrests of migrants and smugglers by Tunisian authorities and interceptions of Tunisian irregular migrants in Italy, July–December 2020.
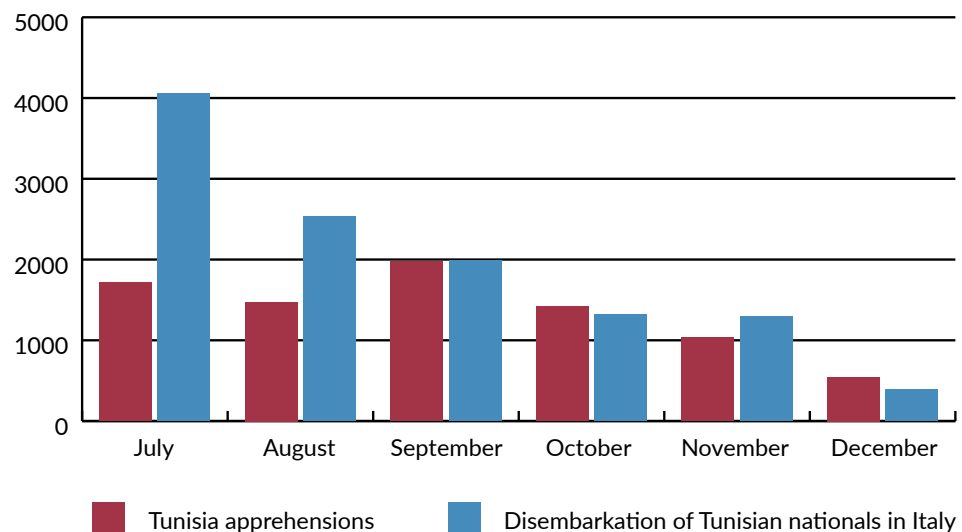
Forensic workers send the bodies of African migrants recovered on the Tunisian coast to a communal cemetery, July 2021.
© Mourad Mejaied/AFP via Getty Images

There were departures throughout the country's littoral areas in 2020, though there were pronounced differences in the levels of activity in specific governorates at different points during the year.

Nearly all attempted departures in the wake of the country's lockdown, in May and June, were concentrated in the central-southern governorates of Sfax and Mahdia, including Sfax's Kerkennah Islands. This began to change in July, with the overall rise in migration levels leading to the spread of departure locations, with noticeable increases in Medenine, mainly in and around the city of Zarzis, and Greater Tunis. However, Sfax remained the dominant embarkation point, with some 45% of Tunisian would-be irregular migrants having been arrested there.

Following a government crackdown in early August, detailed below, embarkation points dispersed further, with only 20% of Tunisian apprehensions registered in Sfax and Mahdia in September. Rather than another governorate becoming the predominant embarkation point, departures effectively spread throughout the country, encompassing longstanding hubs such as Nabeul and Medenine, but also points that had in the past seen limited levels of activity, such as Jendouba and Gabès.

In contrast to the situation in Libya, the overwhelming majority of irregular migrants intercepted after departing from Tunisia in 2020 were Tunisian nationals; in July, only 7% of migrants intercepted by Tunisian security forces were non-Tunisian. Most were young men, although women, families and relatively elderly individuals have been apprehended by both Tunisian and Italian authorities. Arrest reports indicate that these Tunisian migrants hailed from throughout the country, including coastal urban centres such as Tunis, Sfax and Bizerte, as well as marginalized interior governorates, such as Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid and Tataouine.

The high proportion of Tunisian nationals among the migrants departing from the country has been longstanding. Since 2011, very few non-Tunisians have used the country as a transit point for Europe. However, this appears to be changing. Although still in a minority, the number of sub-Saharan migrants apprehended by Tunisian authorities in littoral areas and off the country's coasts begun in 2019, but grew significantly more acute in 2020.

In May and June, the initial months of the 2020 surge, at least 939 sub-Saharans were detained while attempting to leave Tunisia to reach Europe, among them men,

FIGURE 10 Tunisian irregular departure zones, December 2020.

women and children from Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Mali and Ghana. Notably, relatively elevated levels of sub-Saharan migration via Tunisia continued to be recorded even as the overall number of Tunisians detained on migration charges declined. In November, for example, foreigners made up around 44% of arrestees. In total, at least 2 722 foreigners were detained on migration charges, compared with 1 257 in 2019.

Moreover, in contrast to broader migration patterns in Tunisia, which are distributed throughout the country, the geography of sub-Saharan-migrant interceptions remained constant throughout 2020, with most arrests occurring in Sfax, followed by neighbouring Mahdia.

Although the reasons why Sfax emerged as a hub for non-Tunisian migration attempts were unclear, the city hosts the largest population of sub-Saharan migrants in the country after Tunis. Overall, rising foreign migration

through Tunisia appears more closely linked to the country's growing population of foreign migrants in Tunisia. In 2018, an international NGO estimated that there were 10 000 sub-Saharan irregular migrants in Tunisia, including a substantial number of Ivorian migrants.[47]

SELF-SMUGGLING ATTEMPTS RISE AS SMUGGLING NETWORKS SEE LITTLE CHANGE

The rise in irregular migration from Tunisia was enabled in part by the activities of human-smuggling networks, though there were no major oscillations in their composition or operations in 2020. Such networks have operated along the Tunisian coast since the 1990s, and have long been a key means of migrant transport to Europe.[48]

In contrast to Libya, there were no dominant – or particularly notorious – human-smuggling networks in Tunisia. Rather, there were a large number of relatively small networks, each encompassing only a handful of individuals who operate in narrow geographic areas.[49]

Mostly, Tunisian human smugglers focused on relatively small vessels, each carrying a half-dozen to two dozen migrants. In a limited number of cases in 2020, however, large boats – typically fishing vessels, holding 75 to 110 individuals – were also intercepted, mostly coming from Sfax governorate. This followed a trend first seen in the area in late 2017 and early 2018 in which large boats began to be used for smuggling.

Reported prices charged by smugglers in 2020 were relatively low and stable, typically ranging between TND 3 000 and 3 500 (€904–1 055) per person, which is effectively unchanged from 2019.

Some higher-end transport services were also observed for migrants, including use of speedboats from Bizerte governorate and privately owned yachts departing from urban areas such as Tunis and Sousse. These options were significantly more expensive, with passage on yachts ranging from 8 000 to 12 000 Tunisian dinars (TND) (€2 412–3 618) per person.

Although human-smuggling networks did not substantially change in 2020, the reliance by Tunisian nationals on them did shift. A growing number of Tunisian migrants turned to 'self-smuggling', known locally by the term 'comita'. With self-smuggling, groups of migrants, often friends or family members, source boats, motors and other sailing equipment, and depart autonomously, with one or more of the migrants at the helm of the vessel.

Although only a minority of departures from Tunisia in 2020 involved self-smuggling, the method grew significantly in popularity, especially among young people in littoral areas.

Self-smuggling varies widely in cost, depending on the equipment purchased and the number of individuals involved. In general, however, it is not significantly cheaper than the cost of passage charged by smugglers. Polyester-resin boats cost TND10 000 (€3 015) and motors TND4 000 (€1 206); many groups purchased two motors for safety.

Rather than price being the motivation, it was safety and security that led an increasing number of Tunisian migrants to turn towards self-smuggling.

> Some Tunisian youth don't use the traditional way of irregular migration, which involved leaving with smugglers, because of how dangerous irregular migration has become and because of the lack of trust between those who want to leave and the smugglers. A lot of smugglers work with the police and tell them when and where the boats will leave from, even after they have taken money from the migrants.[50]

GI-TOC contacts found that among potential migrants, there was the perception that self-smuggling trips yielded a higher level of success than those organized by smugglers and that they are relatively straightforward. As one youth in Bizerte noted, to navigate, you simply have to set 'the compass at 26 (degrees) and go straight to Italy'.[51]

The growing phenomenon of self-smuggling in Tunisia posed a challenge to security-force efforts to clamp down on irregular migration, a dynamic also observed in Morocco and Algeria, where self-smuggling is also employed.[52] Because self-smuggling attempts were undertaken by small groups of linked individuals and, until the point of departure, involved only licit commercial activity, opportunities for security forces to identify and interdict the groups were far more limited than with traditional smugglers. In part because of this, the GI-TOC expects self-smuggling to continue to grow in popularity among Tunisian migrants in 2021.

Finally, a small number of migration attempts from Tunisia in 2020 involved efforts to stowaway on container ships and cruise ships docked in commercial ports, primarily of La Goulette and Radès, near Tunis. At one point, in September, some 10% of migrant interceptions by Tunisia's security forces were stowaway attempts.

Such attempts have always been a component of Tunisian irregular migration, with many involving groups of youths who have attempted to enter commercial ports. Sometimes these groups have been large – up to 50 individuals.

While groups and individuals who attempted to stowaway on ferries most likely knew where they will end up, there is little indication that stowaways on containerships necessarily knew the next port of call for the vessels. In other contexts, notably Morocco, this led to groups of youth inadvertently smuggling themselves to West Africa, for instance.[53]

Because of the relatively low stakes of stowaway attempts – with unsuccessful stowaways losing no money and facing limited sanctions from the Tunisian authorities – it is likely that this method will remain a common, though not particularly effective or rapid, means to emigrate clandestinely.

ECONOMIC NEEDS, PERCEIVED STAGNATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

There is little indication that any single factor explained the 2020 migration surge. Instead, it rested on a complex interplay of economic and social factors. As noted earlier, migration from Tunisia initially rose in 2017, and surveys consistently found high levels of interest in irregular migration by Tunisians between 2017 and 2020. One survey conducted in late 2018, for example, found that over a third of Tunisians were considering migrating, including 56% of youth.[54]

In part, this latent interest in migration has been linked to the worsening economic climate in Tunisia, where livelihood opportunities and wages have been perceived to be stagnating. One GI-TOC contact in Bizerte explained: 'People don't go to Europe to get rich; it is just to be paid normally. In Europe, you work 20 hours and you are paid something that signifies 20 hours.'

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the employment situation, leading, as it did, to widespread job losses in some sectors. As one worker in Bizerte said, 'A lot of people here lost their jobs because of corona, so they have nothing to do. A lot of people were thinking about harqa [migrating] … corona opened the path.' Other contacts in the governorate described the job losses linked to the pandemic simply as the 'final straw'.

Perceptions of opportunities elsewhere also played a role in the surge. Contacts reported that among many young Tunisians there was a sense that the present situation in Tunisia was suffocating, with few harbouring optimism that the situation would soon improve, given the country's sclerotic politics and a worsening domestic COVID-19 pandemic. As a Tunisian lawyer explained, 'Many [migrants] view dignity as a main reason for leaving. Simply, the government isn't fulfilling their basic needs as citizens'.[55]

This pessimism stands in counterpoint to the end of 2019, when many young Tunisians celebrated the election of President Kais Saied in October, hoping he would address the country's economic and social challenges. This momentary optimism may

have contributed to the relatively low levels of departures seen in 2019. In reality, partly because of the pandemic, Saied's tenure did not led to an improvement, which may have brought about rising levels disillusionment among his supporters and per-suaded some to consider emigrating to Europe in 2020.

Finally, there is also a strong social aspect to migration from Tunisia, including the 2020 surge. Contacts noted that many migrants, especially young people, departed with friends or left because friends had left. As one contact put it: 'The idea of leaving exists in people's minds as something that is a possibility, but isn't planned out, rather it is triggered. Taking a boat is often impulsive, the result of a chance meeting with a friend or a change at work. The COVID-19 pandemic created more of these trigger moments, and people had less to keep them here.'

POLITICIZATION FROM BELOW AND PRESSURE INTERNATIONALLY

The Tunisian government faced countervailing forces in its response to the irregular migration surge. Internationally, there was significant focus by European states, espe-cially Italy, on Tunisia's efforts to address migrant embarkations and readmit migrants intercepted by European states. At the apogee of the surge, in late July and early August, official delegations from Italy and the European Union arrived in Tunisia for meetings with President Saied. Largely, the talks revolved around migration, including the need to address the systemic drivers of irregular migration by Tunisians.

Though the Tunisian government had arrested a number of smugglers throughout the first months of 2020, the delegations catalyzed a more forceful government response to the smuggling issue. In a visit to the Mahdia and Sfax governorates on 3 August, Saied condemned migrant smugglers, and ordered security and defence forces to coordinate their operations against them.

In the 10 days following the president's visit, security forces arrested 32 reported smugglers, mainly in Mahdia and Sfax. These actions had a significant, though fleet-ing, impact on smuggling operations. According to one contact, 'Saied's visit caused the cancellation of many irregular-migration attempts and temporarily closed the routes [from Mahdia and Sfax] to Lampedusa and Pantelleria.' Rather than halting migration, however, the arrests simply led to the redistribution of departure locations noted earlier.

In contrast to the stance the authorities took, irregular migration was broadly viewed as legitimate by would-be migrants and their families; it was seen as a means of securing a livelihood (and sending home remittances) to help people survive in a deteriorating economy.

Such sentiments were buttressed by the limited death toll among Tunisian migrants. This stood in contrast to previous years, such as 2018, when large numbers of Tunisian migrants drowned on the crossings, leading to protests by victims' families, which forced the government to crack down on smuggling networks.

Domestic politics and popular sympathy for migration rarely find public expression in Tunisia. Underscoring the fraught politics, however, the families of irregular migrants held a protest in front of the Italian embassy in Tunis on 11 August 2020, denouncing

'Many migrants view dignity as a main reason for leaving. Simply, the government isn't fulfilling their basic needs as citizens.'

planned repatriations of migrants who had been apprehended in Italy.

There are were also indications that migration, or the threat of migration, was becoming a tool used by Tunisians to exert pressure on the government. Such a threat emerged in Chebba, a town in Mahdia governorate, when a group of protesters announced in late October that they planned to undertake a 'trip' to Italy, to protest the suspension of the city's football club and the broader issues of the city's marginalization. During an event arranged at the city's port, the organizers registered some 4 000 people who were interested in departing.

The threatened departure was the culmination of escalating unrest in Chebba, which had – until that point – failed to attract much publicity outside of the city. Then, on 12 November, when five vessels, carrying 300 people, sailed from Chebba, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi met with Taoufik Mkacher, the President of the Chebba Football Club. The government reportedly offered assurances that the dispute around the club's suspension would be addressed in short order. After sailing roughly 15 kilometres to sea, escorted by Coastguard vessels, the protesters' flotilla returned to port. The organizers claimed the event had been a success.

The threat to migrate en masse to Italy stood as a novel and very public means of pressuring the government to accept popular demands. Because it was covered in local media and streamed by participants on social-media platforms, the protesters' aims, approach and success in gaining high-level government attention was widely followed in Tunisia – although the government ultimately reneged on its promise to resolve the dispute, and protests re-erupted in Chebba.

Because of this, threatened migration as a protest tactic is likely to be emulated by other aggrieved groups in Tunisia's littoral areas, especially if social tensions and economic difficulties worsen.

THE LIBYA–TUNISIA BORDERLANDS SIMMER

Meanwhile, dynamics along the Tunisia–Libya border were less visible and dramatic than the migration surge from Tunisia's coasts in 2020. On the border, the year was marked by tension and conflict, though in one case a resolution of grievances was reached.

A protest movement agitating for the implementation of the 2017 El Kamour agreement emerged in Tataouine governorate in May 2020. A group of protesters staged a sit-in, demanding that the government deliver on the economic and job pledges made in 2017 as part of the agreement.

By mid-June, protesters had blocked the main entrance to the city of Tataouine, seeking to force the government's hand. Security forces moved to clear the group, removing tents, arresting protest leaders, and violently dispersing and injuring others. Several days of violence ensued in the city between police and protesters, resulting in 20 injuries, including eight police officers. In the end, the military were deployed to help guard public facilities and restore calm.

As this was unfolding in Tataouine, protesters occupied a key oil-pumping station owned by the Sahara Pipeline Transport Company, which connects the oilfields in the south of the governorate to the port of Skhira. The protest cut oil and natural-gas production in Tataouine by roughly three-quarters.

In the wake of the clashes and pumping station incident, the government and protesters settled into an uneasy status quo. There were no further clashes with security forces, but economic losses due to the occupation of the pumping station mounted – reportedly reaching TND374 million (€113 million) by November.

The government, seemingly caught off guard by the intensity of the unrest and driven by the cuts in oil and gas production, agreed to negotiations. Mechichi said that the status quo was intolerable 'given the crisis it [caused] at the level of State resources'.[56]

Negotiations, which ran intermittently through the summer and autumn, were concluded in early November. The government agreed to significant economic aid to Tataouine, and to support hiring of locals by public- and private-sector entities. It also agreed to halt prosecutions of individuals for involvement in the 2017 and 2020 protests.

The implementation agreement offered a positive step towards addressing social frustrations around economic development in Tataouine. There was significant hope

FIGURE 11 Tunisia–Libya border, December 2020.

in Tataouine that, this time, things could be different. However, the government had made similar promises before – including after the original 2017 El Kamour agreement – only to indefinitely delay implementation. Tensions, although defused, did not abate, heightening the risk of protest and conflict if the government does not uphold its side of the bargain.

SMUGGLING AND VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

Although tensions around the El Kamour agreement dissipated in October and November, tension and violence linked to smuggling along the Tunisia–Libya border did not.

Tensions along the frontier have been gradually rising as the Tunisian government has militarized its border security. The military had always had a degree of involvement in border security, operating an exclusion zone in the far south of Tataouine and providing a support and emergency response force for the National Guard, which nominally holds border security responsibilities. However, following terrorist attacks in 2014 and 2015, interventions increased, with a military buffer zone established between Dehiba and Ras Ajadir on the Libyan border. Militarization continued to grow between 2015 and 2020, with increased patrolling and the use of surveillance equipment and the construction of a berm-ditch barrier. The start of the battle for Tripoli and the arrival of the pandemic led to a heightened

degree of rigour by military patrols along the frontier, aimed at preventing a violent spillover and unauthorized movement across the border.

Tensions in 2020 emerged, in part, because the military employed a far more violent approach to border security than did the National Guard. Shootings by military patrols became fairly common, especially close to the Dehiba–Wazin port of entry; there were a number of incidents in which smugglers, mostly from border communities, were wounded or killed.

At times, the injury or killing of smugglers has led to protests against the military. In early July, for example, a military patrol shot at a four-vehicle smuggler convoy coming from Libya, killing a 23-year-old man. The following night, protests erupted in Remada, outside of the main military base in southern Tataouine, with protesters reportedly stoning the barracks.

In a limited number of incidents in 2019 and 2020, smugglers sought to violently counter military patrols. In early August 2020, for example, clashes with smugglers led to the death of one soldier and the injury of another.[57] In incidents in August and September, Tunisian customs and military forces were fired on from within Libya as they pursued traffickers close to the border.

It is unclear whether violence by smugglers was spontaneous or involved a degree of preparation. One unconfirmed report by a GI-TOC contact suggested that smuggling barons in southern Tunisia and western Libya employed, or had created, dedicated armed units to protect their activities.

More broadly, the heightened tension, including violence and protests, on the border underscored the precariousness of the situation for many borderland residents. The pandemic affected, and in some cases upended, trade and smuggling patterns across the Tunisia–Libya border, leading to a 'complete and radical change in smuggling processes … in March, April and June,' as one contact noted.

Small-scale smugglers, including those transporting goods such as petrol, household items and medicine, were significantly impacted. This led, according to one NGO official, to the informal economy falling into 'a state of crisis, though one which was largely overlooked'. The crisis probably led some smugglers to take greater risks or challenge state officials with atypical violence when interdicted.

It is likely that the crisis in the informal sector on the Tunisia–Libya border, the tensions linked to it, and the ramifications of it, will only become more acute as Tunisia's economy continues to struggle with the impacts of the pandemic.

OUTLOOK

The 2020 migration surge from Tunisia had ebbed by the late autumn, with Italian security officials apprehending only 393 Tunisian migrants in December. However, the hiatus is likely be fleeting, and that 2021 is likely to see high levels of migration from the country.

Fundamentally, none of the factors propelling the 2020 wave have changed. The economic situation in Tunisia remains bleak, with the pandemic hobbling key sectors, such as tourism. Although vaccines may become available in 2021, it is unlikely that the economy will rapidly rebound or that the jobs lost to date will reappear soon.

Many Tunisians may not be able to wait. There is a seasonal rhythm to Tunisian employment, especially in littoral areas heavily reliant on tourism, when people make most of their annual income during the peak tourist months of May to September, and then live off savings over the winter months. However, the pandemic had a marked effect on limiting tourism earnings in 2020, leaving many Tunisians living off dwindling savings. This financial pressure and the perception that the situation may not improve soon are likely to drive a heightened level of irregular migration in the first half of 2021.

The Tunisian government will continue to find itself in a difficult spot, cornered between its partners abroad focused on halting irregular migration and a nation of citizens who are broadly sympathetic towards the migrants. The upcoming ten-year anniversary of the 2011 revolution, coupled with the current economic difficulties, is likely to drive a particularly intense period of protest in January. The potential ensuing social instability could well divert government attention away from migration enforcement, de facto or by decision, further enabling departures.

Even as irregular migration by Tunisian nationals seems set to increase, migration through Tunisia by foreigners is also likely to grow. Information on embarking from Tunisia, combined with the perceived relative security of doing so, has begun to percolate through migrant origin countries in West Africa. Several migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in southern Chad and Cameroon mentioned an interest in using Tunisia as a transit point to Europe, often comparing it favourably with Libya.

Dynamics along the Tunisia–Libya border are unlikely to manifestly improve. Although the concord on the implementation of the El Kamour agreement sets a positive note, and the government has taken some initial steps around employment, the ability of the government to sustain its pledges in the face of mounting budget deficits brought on by the pandemic-induced recession is unclear.

The overall economic situation in the border governorates of Tataouine and Medenine has also deteriorated as the country's economic health has declined, with both formal- and informal-sector workers impacted. It is unlikely this will improve in the near term and may well fuel social tension and protest.

The growing economic challenges in the two governorates will most likely drive a heightened reliance among border populations on smuggling. Due to the continued focus by the Tunisian state on border security, and the kinetic approaches to the task deployed by the military, heightened smuggling activity would point to an increase in heavy-handed military interventions along the border.

With social tensions already elevated, the death or injury of smugglers by government action could well lead to the recurrent unrest and social protest along the Tunisia–Libya frontier in 2021.

Tunisians protest in the southern town of Remada over the killing of a young smuggler by the military near the border with Libya. *© AFP via Getty Images*

NIGER

Migrants in Agadez before the journey to Libya, December 2020. © *GI-TOC*

COVID-19 deals smuggling industry a blow after recovery from law-enforcement campaign

Human-smuggling activity in Niger significantly declined in mid-2016 with the enforcement of an anti-smuggling law, under which at least 280 smuggling facilitators were arrested, up to 500 vehicles confiscated and dozens of 'ghettos' – transit houses where migrants would be hosted before their journeys.[58] GI-TOC field monitoring consistently indicated that the human-smuggling industry in the northern hub of Agadez shrank from its earlier levels, with the hundreds of active *passeurs* (smugglers) transporting foreign migrants diminishing to only a few dozen in 2018, who continued their operations underground.

Combined with security checks and controls at Niger's borders and on in-land routes, the law-enforcement drive drastically reduced the number of recorded migrant arrivals in Agadez – from about 350 a day in 2016 to roughly 20 a day in 2018.[59] To avoid arrest, smugglers turned their operations clandestine, shifting departures to new hubs, made at night time and with smaller numbers travelling.[60] As a result, costs to migrants rose significantly, with non-Nigerien migrants being charged up to five times pre-2016 prices to accommodate the risks of getting caught and increased fuel costs for longer and more remote routes.[61]

Between early 2019 and late 2020, however, monitoring by the GI-TOC of a number of human-smuggling hubs in northern and southern Niger pointed to a partial relaxation of the law-enforcement drive, a move by Niamey to alleviate some of the economic and social grievances in the north. This allowed for the smuggling of foreign migrants through the country to slightly increase since it plummeted between 2016 and 2018.

Ten migrant smugglers, interviewed in June, July and October 2019, reported that since early 2019, they felt that the anti-smuggling law was being enforced in a more lenient way than in the past. Moreover, they reported that if they were caught red-handed, they were more likely to be asked for substantial bribes, about FCFA500 000 (€765), than to be taken in for long-term imprisonment.

The prosecutor of Agadez provided information that corroborated these testimonies. He reported that the number of cases brought to him considerably decreased after January 2019. As of 25 October 2019, only 11 people had been forwarded for prosecution for human-smuggling related charges during the year (an average of 1.1 suspects per month), compared to 107 prosecuted and sentenced between May 2015 and December 2018 (an average of 3.45 suspects per month). The prosecutor's initial explanation for the decline was that it probably resulted from reduced human-smuggling activity. However, during a second interview conducted in October 2019, he admitted that the reduction could well be the result of smugglers being released by security forces in exchange for a bribe before criminal cases reached his office.

In a separate but significant development, on 24 October 2019, Abdoullay Malohiya and Alhadj Gombo, two of Agadez's most prominent smugglers, were released along with other smugglers from the prison where they were being held in Niamey. The next day, they flew back to their home communities in Agadez. Although the circumstances surrounding their release remained opaque, according to local contacts, the fact Malohiya left 10 months after his December 2019 arrest suggested that he did not complete a full sentence.

These releases have reinforced the perception of greater leniency towards smuggling by Niamey among smugglers interviewed in December 2019. One inter-viewee explicitly referenced Malohiya's release – a popular figure among locals in Agadez and highly influential within the ruling Parti nigérien pour la démocratie et le socialisme (PNDS-Tarayya; Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism) – as politicking by the government ahead of the 2020 national elections.

In parallel with the perceived leniency from authorities, another notable trend observed during 2019 and 2020 concerned a move by several smugglers in Agadez to repurpose their core activities from the transport of foreign migrants to that of local Nigerien labourers journeying to Libya.

This was a reaction to the drop in demand by non-Nigerien migrants for smuggling services post-2016. In particular, a reorganization of the Agadez–Dirkou weekly military-escorted trade convoy allowed Agadez smugglers to accommodate increasing demand for transport by local Nigerien migrants.

Seasonal labour migration between Niger and Libya has existed for decades. However, this movement rose during 2018 and 2019 and remained steady in the second half of 2019, despite waves of conflict in western Libya throughout the period.

Locally, these Nigerien migrants – many of them young men travelling north to find work in agriculture, con-struction, shopkeeping or domestic work across Libya – are commonly referred to as the 'exodants' (Nigerien male labourers migrating abroad for seasonal or temporary work. The term is derived from 'exodus', in reference to the high number of emigrants).

According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix Libya, the number of identified Nigerien migrants in Libya doubled between July 2017 and December 2019, from 64 594 (17% of the identified migrant population in Libya) to 137 544 (21%) and the most represented nationality among Libya's recorded migrant population.[62]

When travelling north, Nigerien migrants either contact smugglers directly or they go through 'ghetto' owners who act as middlemen (locally called 'coxeurs') and organize the entire journey for their clients. While hosting the migrants (sometimes for up to a week), these middlemen leverage their contacts to find a driver until the weekly trade convoy to Dirkou.

An interviewed ghetto owner reported that whereas he would host between 100 and 200 mostly foreign migrants per week before 2016, in 2019, he only hosted between 40 and 80 Nigerien labourers journeying to Libya. However, this represented about twice the number of Nigerien clients he had in 2018, when he hosted only about 30 labourers weekly.

The weekly military-escorted trade convoy that departs from Agadez for Dirkou, which previously catered primarily to West African migrants, came to include mostly Nigerien migrants and foreign migrants pretending to be Nigerien in 2020, according to *passeurs* and ex-*passeurs* interviewed in Agadez.

In January 2019, the Bureau de syndicat des transport voyageurs – Adalchi, a 35-member trade union made up of ex-*passeurs*, was tasked with running the weekly
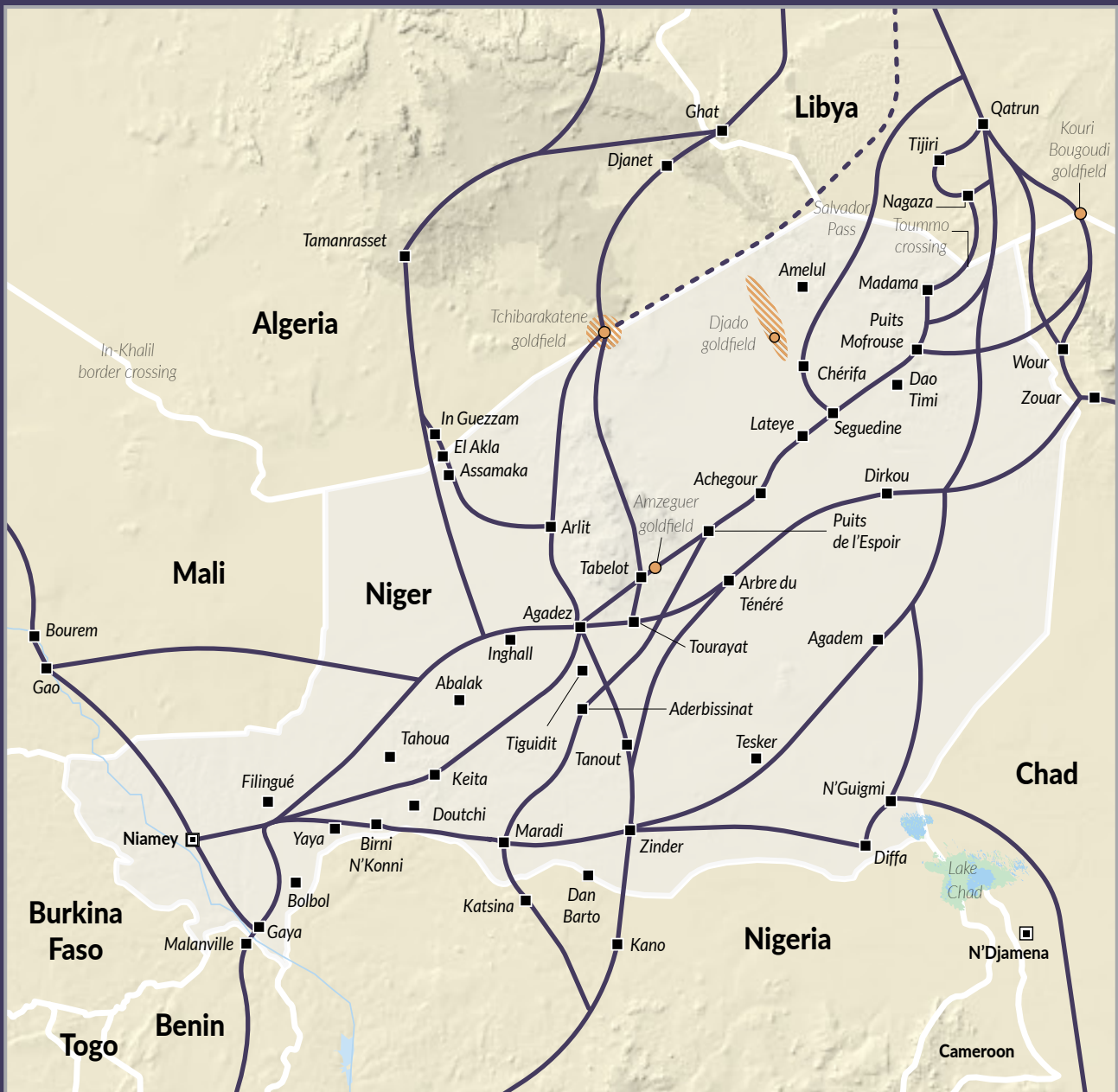
FIGURE 12 Human-smuggling routes in Niger, December 2020.

convoy to Dirkou, under the supervision of the police. The members, most of whom owned several vehicles, coordinating a number of itineraries through *chefs de ligne* (transport-line managers), officially only transported Nigeriens to Dirkou or the Djado goldfield. In reality, however, vehicles travelled all the way to Sebha, as one interviewed *chef de ligne* admitted, although this was well-known by local authorities who overviewed the organization of the convoy and tolerated the practice.

Despite police oversight, there were many fault lines in the newly introduced system. Drivers readily took advantage of these in order to include foreign migrants in their vehicles. As one ex-*passeur* explained:

> Even to leave Agadez, controls have reduced. For vehicles passing through the *gare routière*, drivers pay their taxes and then fill in the *feuilles de route* [passenger manifest] with the names of all passen-gers, and pay the police. But once you've done the

formalities, let's say on Monday morning, you can go home and add some people [to] the list, with Nigerien names. When you pass the checkpoint on Monday night, to join the weekly convoy, you just give FCFA5 000 (€7.65) to the police-man to let you pass, even if the numbers do not coincide.[63]

In December 2019, there were some 200 registered drivers from both Niger and Libya who participated in the transportation of Nigerien migrants from Agadez to Libya, according to the transport union. The work considerably aided Agadez *passeurs* in compensating for lost revenue from the dwindling demand by foreign migrants post-2016. However, with the number of foreign migrants picking up slightly in 2019 with eased law-enforcement pressure, many drivers resorted to transporting Nigeriens should they not find foreign migrants, who generally paid up to six times more than Nigeriens for their journey.

NIGER'S REVAMPED HUMAN-SMUGGLING ECONOMY TAKES SERIOUS HIT

The COVID-19 pandemic upended this transformation in the human-smuggling economy in northern Niger, chiefly because of the travel restrictions introduced locally and regionally to stem the virus's spread.

On 19 March 2020, Niger closed its land borders, and public transportation within the country was effectively halted between 19 March and 15 May, following a government ban. This made crossing Niger's southern borders – and reaching key smuggling departure hubs in the country – considerably more challenging for West and Central African migrants, most of whom have also experienced border closures in their countries of origin.

More organized smuggling networks seem to have had greater capacity than independent passeurs *to continue business in the face of COVID-19 restrictions.*

Between April and December, the continued closure of Niger's southern borders, in addition to fewer incentives for migrants to travel (given the reduction in work opportunities in Algeria and Libya since the start of the pandemic), kept the pool of migrants looking for smuggling services from Niger at very low numbers, according to dozens of smugglers interviewed between March and December.

At Niger's northern borders, bolstered law-enforcement measures introduced at both the Libyan and Algerian borders in late March also targeted smuggler operations.

At the Libyan border, Nigerien security forces made regular interceptions of migrant smugglers transiting areas close to Toummo, Madama, Dao Timi and Chérifa between April and December 2020. Significantly, they also stopped the weekly Agadez–Dirkou trade convoy, which was used for the transport of mostly Nigerien migrants to Libya. This made northbound travel more difficult and dangerous for local Nigeriens.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Libyan Tebu militias patrolling the Nigerien border area also made interceptions of migrant convoys, fearing that continued migrant arrivals would spread the virus into Libya. In late March, for instance, the Tebu-dominated Um al-Aranib Martyrs Brigade intercepted two large convoys, transporting at least 309 migrants from eight West African countries, close to Qatrun.

Migrant-convoy interceptions by Libyan Tebu militias were not sustained in the months following, however. This was likely a result of militias' limited capacity to police the entirety of the Niger–Libya border, as well as the high level of embeddedness of

smugglers within the militias. For example, several smugglers interviewed in Agadez in 2019 and 2020 reported being current or former officers in Desert Shield, the Tebu militia that policed the Toummo crossing on the Niger–Libya border.

Algerian security forces also closed the Algeria–Niger border on 19 March 2020. Before this, the formal port of entry at In Guezzam was open twice a month, for a specified list of some 30 traders mostly transporting staple food and goods. Five kilometres from this formal crossing point, an informal border crossing was used by smugglers, which Algerian security forces knew about and tolerated as long as its use was limited to the daytime.[64] However, between 19 March 2020 and December 2020, both the formal and the informal border crossings were closed. To enforce this closure, Algerian authorities intensified border-security measures and surveillance, even deploying infrared cameras and drones to police movement. This acted as a strong deterrent for smugglers looking to cross the border.

Human-smuggling networks in Agadez were significantly affected by the situation. Agadez drivers waited long periods to collect enough passengers to make the journey to Libya, and were ready to pay higher prices to *coxeurs* who provide smugglers with migrants for transportation. In November 2020, Agadez drivers were paying between FCFA20 000 and FCFA70 000 (€30–€107) per migrant, compared to FCFA5 000 (€7.50) in 2015. With a high number of drivers ready to transport passengers, and the low number of migrants, smugglers are ready to reduce their profit margins to access migrants before other drivers.

More organized smuggling networks seem to have had greater capacity than independent *passeurs* to continue business in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. Since the start of the pandemic, drivers who worked for these more sophisticated networks were reported to be mostly transporting Nigerian women, who were often forced into sex work by human traffickers operating between Nigeria and Libya. The drivers explained that the high demand for the transport of Nigerian women was likely to be a consequence of the fact that demand for sex workers in Libya remained steady during the pandemic, whereas that for migrant workers declined because of the negative economic impact of the pandemic.

Achegour well in northern Niger, December 2020.

Travel restrictions related to COVID-19 also badly affected the business of transporting Nigerien migrants to which many smugglers had reconverted since 2018. Historically, Nigerien migrants openly travelled to Libya at the end of the harvesting season in October, as part of cyclical migration patterns. However, owing to COVID-19-related restrictions in 2020, much of the seasonal migration of Nigeriens largely turned to clandestine transport.

The maximum number of passengers allowed per vehicle travelling through Dao Timi, a key chokepoint on the route to Libya, was set at 10 in December, up from four in August. In Dao Timi, drivers transporting Nigerien migrants paid FCFA20 000 (€30) to the military against a receipt required in order to pass the next military checkpoint, in Madama, before travelling on to the Toummo crossing and into Libya.

However, few drivers were prepared to make the Agadez–Libya journey with only 10 passengers. This led many to take more remote and dangerous routes to avoid the checkpoints in Dao Timi and Madama. These routes often coincided with those used by traffickers of drugs or arms, and were therefore targeted by armed bandits.

Reduced demand since the start of the pandemic also increased risks; as one *passeur* explained: 'There is no convoy, so passengers are taking risks. There are very few vehicles on the road, so if yours breaks down or you have a problem, there is no one to help, and you and your passengers can die.' Between May and December 2020, at least three vehicle breakdowns in the desert were recorded. The breakdowns resulted in the deaths of at least 53 migrants, most of them Nigerien.

FIGURE 13 Human-smuggling routes on the Niger–Libya border, December 2020.
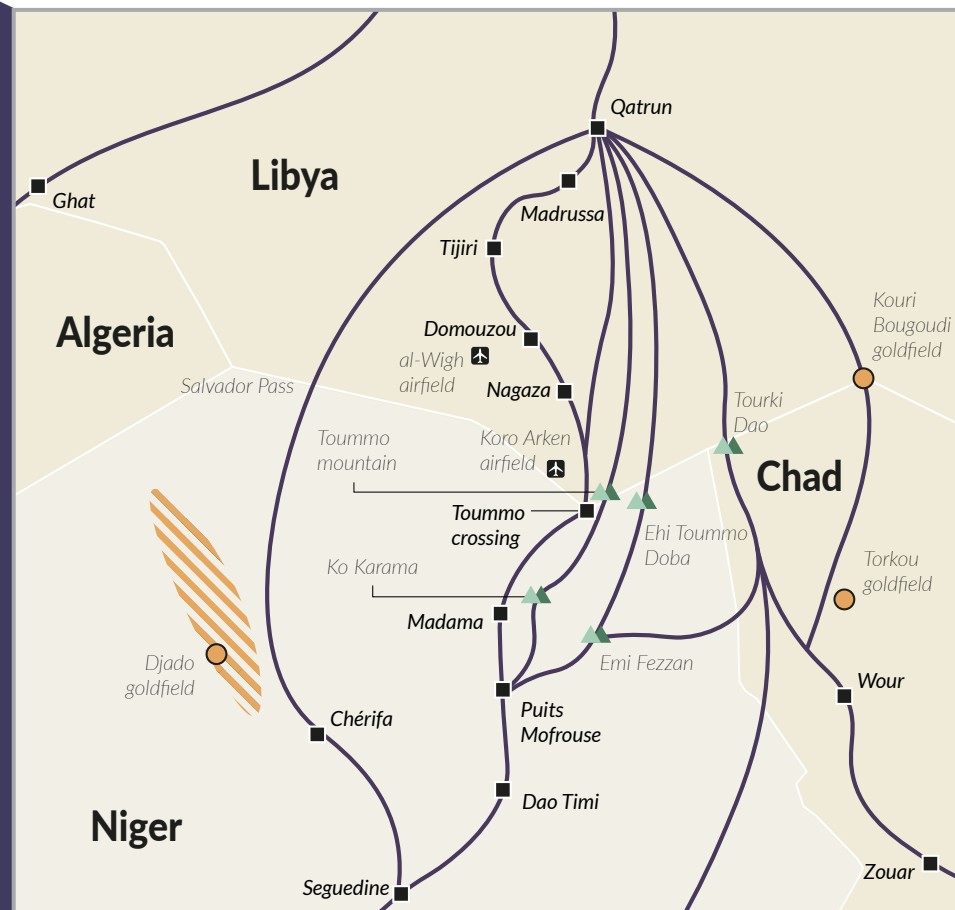
Despite the shift to clandestine routes, northbound human-smuggling activity remained modest into late 2020, primarily due to the dwindling demand by migrants as well as the increased risks on routes. This forced many drivers into other activities.

SMUGGLERS FIND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

With reduced prospects within the human-smuggling economy, many Agadez smugglers turned to other activities to compensate for revenue shortfalls. One key source of revenue was the gold economy in northern Niger.

As early as May 2020, *passeurs* in Agadez began shifting their activities to the Djado goldfield, profiting from the business of artisanal gold mining, which had revived over the course of 2019. The steady flow of workers – mostly Hausa, Darfuri, Mahamid Arab or Tebu – travelling to and from Djado via Tabelot ensured a relatively safe backup revenue for some *passeurs*. Some made money from the supply of smuggled fuel and goods brought from Libya to Djado, while others set up their own gold-mining sites. The demand for goods, food staples and fuel (to power the motorbikes and the machinery used by gold miners) soared in 2020.

As of late May, interviewees in Djado estimated the number of miners to be greater than 6 000, operating at around 60 gold-mining sites. The sites are spread over more than 2 500 square kilometres (an area about the size of Luxembourg), according to estimates based on geo-coordinates collected in May 2020.

Competition over the sale of fuel by *passeurs* arriving in Djado was so fierce that the price of 60-litre fuel drums declined from FCFA35 000 (€53) in late April to FCFA25 000 (€38) in mid-May. Smugglers were sometimes be forced to spend an entire week in Djado to find customers, having brought between 40 and 50 barrels in their vehicles from Libya.

Opportunities were also pursued within Djado itself, notably in smuggling food and goods from the main market to the remote gold sites. In November 2020, 60-litre water containers that were bought at the Chérifa market of Djado for as little as FCFA250 (€0.38) were then being sold to gold miners on the sites for one gram of gold (equivalent to FCFA2 500 or €38). With 20 containers per vehicle, this can represent revenues

of up to €760 a day, less fuel costs for the two-to-eight-hour journey, depending on the distance to the gold sites.

Using the gold economy in Djado as a coping mechanism is not new for *passeurs*. Many had turned to Djado after the mid-2016 arrests that began after the enforcement of the anti-smuggling law. The goldfield, which hosted an estimated 50 000 artisanal miners at its peak, was eventually closed by the Nigerien government in February 2017, on grounds of security.[65] The government feared it would host and help fund foreign armed groups active in the region. The goldfield had also operated as a stop-over location for migrants travelling north – it is likely that this also influenced the closure decision, given Niamey's aim to reduce northbound human-smuggling flows.

Gold mining in Djado has largely been tolerated by local authorities since 2019. In May 2020 Djado's chef de canton explained that local expulsions of gold miners had stopped because their presence has helped to develop the economy and projects in the village of Chérifa.

A small number of interviewed Tebu *passeurs* were reportedly involved in smuggling weapons to Djado, amid increased demand. The weapons were sold to brokers in Djado, who then sold them to gold miners, as well as armed groups and bandits who had a strong presence in the region.

One *passeur* in Djado, who was also an arms trader, said that he was selling Libyan-sourced Kalashnikov- type weapons for roughly FCFA500 000 (€760) each and bullets for FCFA1 000 (€1.50) each. Some gold miners carry weapons, which explained the increasing demand for arms as goldfields become more populated. A Tebu gold miner in Djado explained: 'We buy weapons to defend ourselves in case of an attack by bandits. Other gold miners give the same reasons, but the truth is they are all involved in banditry. They attack each other in isolated areas [of the goldfield].'

Beyond the gold economy, several *passeurs* interviewed in Agadez also resorted to the more dangerous business of trafficking drugs, notably cocaine and tramadol, from Niger to Libya. To do so, they used the cover of transporting Nigerien migrants, to pass checkpoints inconspicuously. One driver, who reported once earning about €6 000 by transporting four kilograms of cocaine

Chimpanzee transported between Agadez and Sebha, Niger, December 2020. © *GI-TOC*

Burnt vehicle in northern Niger, December 2020. © *GI-TOC*

from Agadez to Sebha, noted: 'I'm not scared of the police – I'm just a driver; they don't know that I'm transporting drugs. Even if I get stopped by the security forces or by bandits, they will only see the migrants.'

Some *passeurs* also resorted to banditry, although this is reportedly rarer. A Libyan Tebu *passeur* based in Agadez, interviewed in June 2020, said that he had targeted gold miners on the Algerian border when particularly desperate for cash, which he said occurred in times of reduced demand for smuggling services. He explained:

> I work with two people, they are currently in Libya, but we steal cars when the work is low. We don't do it over here but far, in the Algerian Sahara. We've done it twice and we stole two [Land Cruiser] V6 vehicles the same day ... We target gold miners [there] ... We go straight to Libya and sell the vehicle on the black market ...

Finally, several smugglers interviewed in December 2019 and December 2020 said that they had resorted to the transport of animals to Libya, such as African grey parrots and chimpanzees from Central Africa, especially in the colder seasons to ensure the animals' survival.

The sale of parrots is considerably more lucrative than transporting Nigerien migrants. Upon sale in Libya, *passeurs* can make a profit of around FCFA90 000 (€137) per parrot. This is roughly the same as what can be earned by transporting Nigerien migrants; however, *passeurs* can transport many more parrots on a single journey – between 50 and 100 (although 5–10 usually die during the crossing). This can add up to around €12 330 per journey, as opposed to a maximum of around €1 650 made when transporting Nigerien labourers.

The coping mechanisms outlined above in part explain why smugglers did not translate their grievances over lost revenue into armed action or rebellion.[66]

On 20 August, a new Tebu rebel movement, the Union des forces patriotiques pour la refondation de la république (UFPR; Union of Patriotic Forces for the Rebuilding of the Republic), made its official debut in Murzuq, Libya, disseminating videos of the inauguration and a pamphlet on social media, which highlighted the unresolved grievances of the Tebu in northern Niger. The movement's pamphlet also denounced widespread corruption in Niger under President Mahamadou Issoufou's government and pledged to help create a more socially just, peaceful and prosperous republic.

According to leaders within the movement, the UFPR is based in Murzuq, and Mahamoud Sallah (also referred to as Mahmoud Sallah) serves as its president. The GI-TOC interviewed Sallah on several occasions in 2019 and 2020. He is linked to the traditional Tebu leadership in Agadem in northern Niger and was unhappy with the outcome of the rebellion by the Mouvement pour la justice et la réhabilitation du Niger (MJRN; Movement for Justice and the Rehabilitation of Niger).

The MJRN also sought to represent Tebu interests and help develop Tebu communities within Niger after it declared war against the Nigerien government in September 2016.[67] In February 2019, 140 MJRN fighters surrendered their weapons in Madama, as part of a planned disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process. The process never began, and according to members of the MJRN interviewed by the GI-TOC, the movement's leader, Mahamat Tournay, left the movement after being paid off by the Nigerien government. Dozens of former MJRN members now support the UFPR.

Sallah had a good profile with which to project himself as a resistance figure: in a 2019 interview, he underscored to the GI-TOC his arrest on sedition charges by Interior Minister Mohamed Bazoum. These charges were widely seen as unfair by the Nigerien Tebu community. Bazoum was running to be Niger's president in the 2020 elections, under the ruling party, PNDS-Tarayya.

However, Sallah was reportedly arrested between Sebha and Ubari on 7 September by Awlad Suleiman and Tuareg militiamen loyal to the LAAF. He was still reportedly being detained in Jufra in December 2020, preventing him from advancing his rebellion. His vehicle was intercepted after weapons and ammunition were found, with suspicions raised that he was heading towards the El Feel oilfield in southern Libya. UFPR contacts expressed suspicions that Bazoum, a Presidential frontrunner in the 2020 poll, had used his ties with the Awlad Suleiman to oppose Sallah's release.

NEW ROUTES TO LIBYA ENDANGER MIGRANTS

According to *passeurs* active on routes to Libya, contacted in Agadez and Dirkou, human-smuggling networks with higher degrees of organization pre-pandemic were less affected by the pandemic restrictions than smugglers who worked more independently, sourcing migrants via different brokers in Agadez.

The more organized networks transport migrants rapidly across Niger using a relay system, with predetermined meeting points along the way where the smugglers hand over migrants to counterparts who take them further north, before returning

Several smugglers interviewed in December 2019 and December 2020 said they had resorted to the transport of animals to Libya, such as African grey parrots and chimpanzees from central Africa.

to collect more migrants. This process is commonly referred to as *tabdil* (Arabic for 'exchange') within smuggler circles.

Although this system is standard in other parts of the region (such as at the Sudan–Libya crossing), in Niger, these relay networks are somewhat exclusive and difficult for new smugglers to join, as they usually involve close-knit groups, whose members share a bond of trust. They represent the gold standard for *passeurs*, since the steady flow of migrants they secure makes the work more efficient and profitable than do traditional methods, according to multiple *passeurs* interviewed between 2019 and 2020.

One such network was based in Kano, Nigeria, where brokers supplied drivers with a steady stream of migrants for transport to Libya. According to multiple contacts tapped over 2020, this network typically used three *tabdil* locations, involving three or four different groups of smugglers for the different legs of the journey: the first location was situated right after crossing into Niger from the Nigerian border, the second before the desert crossing in the Zinder region or in Kouri Katana, and the third a few kilometres south of the Toummo crossing before the last leg of the journey to Qatrun or Sebha.

Before the restrictions put in place by Libyan Tebu militias at the Niger–Libya border in late March and that of Nigerien authorities around Toummo, Madama and Dao Timi, most *passeurs* travelling to Libya would simply transit the Toummo crossing in order to travel on the faster and safer asphalted route to Qatrun. According to multiple contacts in northern Niger, in the second half of 2020 only those *passeurs* who were well connected or who had acquaintances with Desert Shield, the Tebu militia that controls Toummo, could pass through their checkpoints. Other *passeurs* also reportedly used the route, but they then circumvented checkpoints using desert routes, sometimes with the help of sources who informed them of eventual patrols.

Other *passeurs* avoided the border-crossing area altogether, taking remote routes that passed east of Toummo. The withdrawal of French troops from Madama in May 2019 also reportedly meant that *passeurs* were less worried about being stopped traversing this area.

The increased use of clandestine routes to enter Libya is worrying. The tracks are more prone to causing breakdowns than the asphalted routes transiting the Toummo crossing, and often coincide with routes used by traffickers of drugs and arms. The GI-TOC recorded three cases of migrant deaths since May 2020. In the latter part of May, the bodies of at least 20 Nigerien migrants returning from Libya were found close to Emi Fezzan, a butte located 70 kilometres south-east of Madama. In early June, at least three bodies were found close to Seguedine; and in late June, at least another 30 Nigerien migrants were found dead east of Madama. The deaths reportedly all occurred from dehydration, after the vehicles the migrants were travelling in broke down.

The deaths should be viewed as an indirect result of the COVID-19-related closure of the border and restrictions placed on the number of passengers allowed per vehicle, which pushed smugglers to take more remote routes. The precarious

MIGRANT JOURNEYS: SMUGGLING COSTS

Prices temporarily increased with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, then settled to pre-pandemic rates.

Agadez–Tchibarakatene	FCFA50 000 (back) (€76) and FCFA80 000 (€122) (in the cabin)
Agadez–Djado	FCFA35 000 (back) (€53) and FCFA50 000 (€76) (in the cabin)
Agadez–Dirkou	FCFA30 000 (€46) (Nigerien migrant)
Agadez–Seguedine	FCFA30 000 (€46) (Nigerien migrant)
Agadez–Sebha	FCFA70 000–FCFA90 000 (€106–€137) (Nigerien migrant)
Agadez–Sebha	FCFA250 000–FCFA300 000 (€380–€456) (foreign migrant)
Zinder–Sebha	FCFA300 000–FCFA400 000 (€456–€608) (foreign migrant)
Dirkou–Djado	FCFA25 000 (€38)
Qatrun–Djado	FCFA65 000 (€99)
Djado market to goldfields	FCFA7 000–FCFA10 000 (€10.60–€15.20) (by motorcycle)
Agadez–Dirkou	FCFA20 000 (€30.40) on a truck
Agadez–Seguedine	FCFA25 000 (€38) on a truck
Dirkou–Djado	FCFA15 000 (€22.80) on a truck
Djado–Qatrun	FCFA75 000–FCFA100 000 (€114–€153)
Arlit–Tamanrasset	FCFA80 000 (€122) (Nigerien migrant)
Arlit–Tamanrasset	FCFA130 000 (€198) (foreign migrant)
Tahoua–Tamanrasset	FCFA150 000–FCFA200 000 (€228–€304) (foreign migrant)
Arlit–Tchibarakatene	FCFA40 000 (€61) (back of the truck) and FCFA60 000 (€91) (in the cabin)

Prices for public transportation remain steady, December 2020. These are the prices paid by migrants reaching key smuggling departure hubs via public transportation.

Niamey–Agadez	FCFA24 000 (€36.50)
Niamey–Arlit	FCFA27 500 (€42)
Niamey–Tahoua	FCFA9 500 (€14.50)
Niamey–Dosso	FCFA2 500 (€3.80)
Niamey–Birni N'Konni	FCFA7 500 (€11.40)
Dosso–Birni N'Konni	FCFA3 000 (€4.60)
Dosso–Tahoua	FCFA8 000 (€12.20)
Birni Konni–Tahoua	FCFA7 500 (€11.40)
Tahoua–Agadez	FCFA14 500 (€22)
Tahoua–Arlit	FCFA22 000 (€33.50)
Tahoua–Abalak	FCFA4 000 (€6)
Abalak–Agadez	FCFA11 000 (€16.70)
Abalak–Arlit	FCFA15 000 (€22.80)
Zinder–Agadez	FCFA12 000 (€18.20)
Zinder–Arlit	FCFA19 500 (€29.70)

situation was further compounded by the fact that smugglers were less inclined to report the location of abandoned migrants with local authorities in case of a vehicle breakdown, for fear of being arrested.

According to local contacts, many *passeurs* also took dangerous, remote routes when transporting Nigerien migrants back to Niger from Libya. Smugglers reported that this was done to avoid arrest by Nigerien authorities in Madama. According to interviewees, Nigerien security forces around Madama arrested *passeurs* for not respecting the maximum number of passengers permitted per vehicle. Some of the arrested drivers alleged to the GI-TOC that they were asked to pay between FCFA500 000 and FCFA1 million (€767–€1 534) to secure their release from jail.

Finally, another dangerous route departed from the Djado goldfield, which re-emerged in 2020 as a transit hub on routes to Libya. This route was locally called 'Braho–Salvador' ('Braho' is the Tebu name for Djado), since it continues until it reaches the area close to the Salvador Pass, which is an infamously dangerous drug- and arms-trafficking hub. From there, *passeurs* took desert routes directly to Tijiri, and Qatrun or Sebha.

DEVELOPING SMUGGLING HUBS COULD ACCOMMODATE RENEWED DEMAND FOR SMUGGLING SERVICES

While Agadez remained a key departure hub for northbound smuggling flows, as a result of its geographic and logistical advantages, over 2020 several new departure hubs emerged across the country, which could portend renewed migration once the borders open. These included Tahoua, Arlit and Zinder.

Tahoua, a town halfway between Niamey and Agadez, and its satellite villages (for example, Abalak and Tabalak) emerged as main departure points for migrants travelling to Algeria. As with Agadez, the Tahoua region has a natural geographical advantage, since it is a key logistical area before the empty expanses of land that extend towards the Algeria border.

As is the case in Agadez, many migrants departing from Tahoua travelled on commercial buses until they reached the rendezvous points pre-agreed with their *coxeur* or *passeur*, from where the smuggling services begin. This was especially the case for migrants from countries belonging to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), who benefitted from visa-free travel to Niger, and did not generally undergo as many checks by the Direction de surveillance territoriale (DST) if the final destination on their bus ticket was Tahoua (as opposed to Agadez).

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the GI-TOC identified five smuggling networks operating from Tahoua. The most active of these was run by an Algerian Tuareg smuggler, although migrants normally communicated with his Nigerien intermediary. Over the past two years six different groups of migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC had this intermediary's number when they arrived. Most of his clients are from the Central African Republic, Cameroon and Guinea.

Once they departed from the Tahoua region, smugglers operating on the route briefly ped in villages on the way to assess the presence of gendarmerie patrols and bandits on the route, before undertaking the next leg of the journey, according to a

FIGURE 14 Human-smuggling dynamics on the Niger–Algeria border, December 2020.

coxeur and a *passeur* operating in Tahoua. There were some small 'ghettos' in these villages, where migrants were sometimes accommodated for a few hours.

The alternative route to Algeria, which went from Arlit, either directly or via Assamaka, also saw increased use. Between January and October 2019, the IOM recorded 42 852 migrants moving to Algeria from the Arlit flow-monitoring point; double the number of migrants during the same period in the previous year. Figures for flows since the start COVID-19 crisis were not yet public at the time of writing.

There are notable differences in the structure of these dynamics in Arlit when compared to the better-known structures in Agadez. First, the smuggling system in Arlit was much more centralized and organized than it was in Agadez. According to multiple contacts in Arlit, consulted in mid-2020, al-Hadj Mohammed (not his real name) was a crucial actor in the human-smuggling business between Arlit and Algeria, and he overlapped the smuggling of goods and people across this border. Al-Hadj Mohammed owned a garage where Algerian Tuareg goods smugglers came to deliver some of the goods they transported from Algeria. These goods included subsidized food stuffs, for which prices had at least doubled – and in some cases, tripled – since the beginning of the pandemic, making the trade more profitable for Tuareg *passeurs*.

Migrants did not usually come to the garage. Instead, *coxeurs* visited al-Hadj Mohammed to inform him of the number of migrants or migrant workers who are ready to leave. Migrants were then picked up from an agreed location or from the coxeur's home. *Passeurs* and *coxeurs* of various ethnicities trusted al-Hadj Mohammed, who is Hausa, because of his social capital in Arlit. He was also trusted and respected by local authorities, including the police, and was described by one contact in Arlit as someone who had enough influence to help anyone in need.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the GI-TOC tracked the consolidation of smuggling operations in the south-eastern region of Zinder, on the border with Nigeria. In particular, the satellite villages of Tesker, Guidiguir, Bakaraouni (close to Dan Barto, Cameroon), Kelle, Termit, Dan Dilla and Baban Tabki were home to several migrant-holding locations and departure points for northbound desert journeys, mostly towards Libya. As is the case in Tahoua, contacts in Agadez and Zinder reported that smuggling networks in Zinder were very closed and got most of their referrals for passengers directly from Kano, Nigeria, instead of locally (an example of this was the Kano-based network mentioned earlier). This was mainly due to the perception that there was a particularly high rate of informants operating in the town, according to *passeurs* in Zinder.

Interviews with migrants and *passeurs* revealed that Kano was the key base for organizing journeys to Libya that transited the Zinder area. According to migrants interviewed in Zinder, and *passeurs* in Agadez,

networks in Kano held a reputation for delivering a reliable service. Several *passeurs* and migrants in Zinder reported that migrants from across West and Central Africa – especially those from Nigeria, Cameroon and the Central African Republic – would find 'full-package journeys' to Libya and Europe there.

In addition to being more profitable, local *passeurs* reported that the Zinder–Libya route was one of the safest for the organization and transportation of foreign migrants, because there were almost no patrols by security forces north of Zinder in the direction of Libya. This prompted some Agadez *passeurs* to seek to enter this more attractive closed market. The GI-TOC interviewed several drivers in 2019 and 2020 in Agadez who were attempting to gain the trust of Zinder-based *passeurs* who worked with Kano brokers, hoping they would relocate their operations there in the future.

There were several points of entry into Niger for migrants to reach smuggling departure hubs independently. Routes mostly entered Niger through the

FIGURE 15 Human-smuggling routes in the Zinder region, December 2020.

FIGURE 16 Human-smuggling dynamics at the Benin–Niger border, December 2020.

regions of Birni N'Konni, Maradi and Zinder on the border with Nigeria, or Gaya on the border with Benin. Travelling on main roads then became difficult because of the need to avoid security forces, and smuggling services were therefore employed at a much earlier stage of the journey (see below). In some instances, these services were arranged by the smuggler, who would organize the journey.

The closure of the border with Nigeria in the second half of 2019 did not deter movements into Niger because of the widespread development of smuggling services used by local cross-border populations. Most migrants interviewed in Zinder in October 2019 had hired a motorbike taxi ('moto-taxi') to cross the border. For a cost of FCFA2 000 (€3) – although they claimed to have seen some migrants pay up to FCFA10 000 (€15) – the motorbikes take migrants along rural trails

directly to the departure point of a 19-seater bus, which then took them to city of Zinder. The migrants reported that the border crossing was so short (less than three kilometres) that some fellow travellers opted to walk instead. This situation reportedly had not changed since the start of the pandemic, since the border was already officially closed.

Smuggling activities on the Niger–Benin border also developed in 2019 as a result of high demand locally. Border-security measures had already enabled the growth of a human-smuggling business, mostly using pirogues along the Niger River between Malanville in Benin and Gaya in Niger, to cater for irregular migrants rejected at the official border crossing. However, starting in March 2020, the activity grew to cater to the demand for smugglers by local migrants from Niger and Benin because of the closure of the Niger–Benin

Tebu gold miners looking for gold at mine 26 in Djado, May 2020.

border. This led to a rapid increase in smuggler investments in transportation capacity. Notably, it involved adding engines to pirogues to reduce transit times and enable the transport of more passengers.

Nonetheless, between March and December 2020, the number of international migrants travelling through this border was been limited, owing to the closure of regional borders and the consequent limitations on international-migrant arrivals in Benin. However, the increase in smuggling activities along the Niger River during the period, catering to local demand, highlighted the fact that local smugglers are able to readily adapt to changing demand, conduct activities discreetly and in an organized manner, and secure the complicity of local security forces to ensure smooth and sustained operations despite nominal border closures. Should the number of international migrants increase, the system would easily adapt again to cater to new demand, making the Benin–Niger border crossing an attractive, safe and easy-to-use entry point into Niger.

OUTLOOK

The uptick experienced with the transformation of northern Niger's smuggling economy since early 2019, has largely been undermined by the impact of travel restrictions related to COVID-19. These measures imposed across the region, reduced demand for migration and undermined the business of *passeurs*.

The situation, in 2020, compounded the adverse economic effects of Niger's law-enforcement campaign on human smuggling. The economic downturn suffered since mid-2016 in northern Niger correlated with consistent reports of a rise armed banditry and low-level drug trafficking, which has attracted some former actors in the human-smuggling industry.

In the past two years, however, there have been tentative signs by Niamey, indicating that the government was moving to alleviate some of the economic and social grievances in the north. Allowing the artisanal gold-mining economy in Djado to resume, albeit at low levels, and with a degree of oversight from local traditional authorities and the military, is a prime example of this strategy. Nigerien authorities have also loosened pressure on *passeurs*' operations, with reduced prosecution rates and security scrutiny

in Agadez. An unwelcome effect of this gear shift was the release of Agadez's most prominent smugglers from prison in Niamey in late October 2019.

With the relaxation of law enforcement being gradual, and coming after the decisive shrinking of the industry, these moves do not appear to have had any significant impact on the modus operandi of smugglers in Agadez. Drivers are still inclined to dodge security forces to avoid having to pay them off, which means that security-force presence still acts as a deterrent. Moreover, demand for smuggling services has remained low as a result of stringent checks on migrants south of Agadez.

Nonetheless, this new paradigm has opened the door for more organized smuggling networks able to compete in this difficult environment since they have improved the reliability of their operations over the past two years. This has, in turn, improved the attractiveness of northbound passage for those who can afford it. This has taken place while the withdrawal of French troops from Madama in May 2019 has meant that some *passeurs* are less worried about being caught on routes traversing the Toummo area.

However, the smuggling infrastructure in Agadez has been dealt profound blows with the criminalization of smuggling and the pandemic, and it is unlikely to return to pre-2016 conditions. The criminalization of human smuggling in Niger has stopped several low-level drivers from operating while pushing others into alternative illicit markets. This has created a space for more professional smugglers and traffickers, which has ultimately raised the law-enforcement challenge.

It is likely that 2021 will witness the further development and burgeoning of new departure hubs, as with Tahoua and Zinder, where increasingly sophisticated smuggling services are being offered. Demand for travel to Algeria to also likely to increase. The journey to Tamanrasset from Tahoua or Arlit has been proving popular as it is shorter than travel to Libya, and routes to Algeria are considered to be a little less scrutinized by Nigerien authorities than those to Libya, given that smuggling operations have often departed from less-visible, emerging hubs. However, the continued presence of Algerian security forces at the border, which increased since the start of the pandemic, is likely to continue to hold back this flow in the medium term.

Amzeguer goldfield in Niger, December 2020.

CHAD

Kouri 17 gold site at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield on the Chad–Libya border, January 2021.

Gold mining and mercenaries keep smuggling industry in business

Between 2017 and 2020, Chad's location, coupled with a decline in established migratory routes in neighbouring Niger and Sudan, and the attraction of a gold rush in the northern border areas, have led to the country gaining more importance as a transit country for migrants and asylum seekers, especially Darfuris, making their way north to Libya.[68]

In spite of this shift, migratory flows during this period remained modest compared to the numbers of migrants transiting both Niger and Sudan. Nonetheless, Chad's role as a transit country has steadily increased since 2016, when simultaneous anti-smuggling campaigns were launched in Niger and Sudan, displacing some of the northbound flows through the country.[69]

Parallel to this, gold discoveries made in northern Chad since 2012 increased the country's attractiveness both as a destination and as a transit country, particularly for poor migrants aiming to make money on their journey north. Thousands of labourers and migrants – most of them Chadian and Sudanese – made their way to the north-western region of the Tibesti, where the country's two largest goldfields, Kouri Bougoudi and Miski, acted as stopover locations for migrants from across the country, but also from Central and East Africa. At its peak, Kouri Bougoudi, which is around twice the size of London, hosted an estimated 40 000 migrants.[70]

Many migrants worked in the mines for several months, sometimes years, before journeying back to their home communities or, in other cases, moving north to Libya or, more rarely, directly to Europe.

This movement pattern helped develop human-smuggling networks linked to the northern goldfields across the country, with N'Djamena acting as an important collection point, along with hubs on the eastern border with Sudan, such as the towns of Abeche and Tiné. The pool of migrants demanding smuggling services continuously increased. Chad hosted a high and growing number of refugees and asylum seekers who have fled conflict in neighbouring Darfur, currently estimated at around 365 000 people, most of whom were hosted in eastern Chad. Alongside them, young Chadian men were increasingly tempted by economic opportunities on northern goldfields and in Libya, with a deteriorating economic crisis affecting Chad since 2014.[71]

Throughout 2019, this gradual expansion of human-smuggling activity was disrupted by a securitization campaign on the Tibesti region, which began to intensify in September 2018. N'Djamena sought to close down and secure artisanal gold mines, both to pave the way for government-led industrial gold extraction but also to stop Chadian rebel groups, such as the Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR), from benefiting from the extraction and sale of gold. This trend was reinforced with clampdowns in eastern Chad, which mostly targeted rebel support and arms possession following a February 2019 incursion by the rebel Union of Resistance Forces, but which had disruptive effects on human-smuggling flows.

N'DJAMENA FAILS TO SUSTAIN WAR ON ILLICIT GOLD MINING AND SMUGGLING

Throughout late 2018 and most of 2019, these clampdowns displaced thousands of artisanal miners and locals, who had to find work in southern Libya or return to their home communities across Chad, resorting to the use of smugglers for their transport, in the process. The campaign also made the goldfields less reliable for long-term gold mining, which contributed to reducing human-smuggling activities during periods of intense securitization.

Although in state media the government mainly emphasized the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield as the target of its crackdowns, one of N'Djamena's key objectives in the Tibesti was to gain control over the Miski goldfield. Miski is believed to have the largest deposits of gold in Chad, and is not as heavily populated as

Kouri Bougoudi. Amid dwindling state revenues, the Chadian government was trying to begin industrial gold extraction in the town.

However, N'Djamena's attempts to control the Miski goldfield were met with armed opposition by locals united under an armed 'self-defence committee' (Comité populaire d'autodéfense Miski-Tibesti-Tchad), which took advantage of the local knowledge of Miski's mountainous terrain to counter attempts by the Chadian military to control the area.

Despite repeated airstrikes on the town and an embargo in place since November 2018, which aimed to limit supplies and force local fighters out of their entrenched positions, the Chadian army failed to gain ground. At the same time, the embargo also had significant humanitarian consequences for locals. Contacts in Miski reported that women and children had to flee to Libya when the supply of foodstuffs and other essential goods to the town was cut off in the past by the army's blockade on the area.

The military offensives on Miski, and the ensuing securitization of routes leading through the Tibesti region to the town, significantly affected movement through the region in 2019, with regular interceptions of migrants and their smugglers taking place between Faya-Largeau, a key migration hub used as logistical hub by the military in the north of the country, all the way to Wour, where the Chadian army and a G5 Sahel command post have a base.

After a final failed military push in early October 2019, which involved intense clashes that lasted for weeks, a ceasefire agreement was eventually reached on 30 October 2019, paving the way for negotiations over a preliminary peace agreement, which was reached between President Idriss Déby and the self-defence committee's delegation on 2 November. The agreement was, however, conditional on the Chadian government fulfilling 12 requests in exchange for being allowed to begin industrial gold extraction.

After the agreement, the military withdrew from positions held around the area, putting an end to the military siege, which had contributed to limiting movements to and from the goldfield and within the region. On 11 November 2019, the self-defence committee laid down their weapons – albeit only small and easily

replaceable arms – and allowed the military to enter parts of Miski.

The effect of this easing of tensions on the human-smuggling economy around Miski was almost immediate. Human-smuggling activity surged in December 2019 and continued at high levels throughout the first quarter of 2020; thousands of artisanal miners arrived in Miski, transported from across eastern and northern Chad, making the goldfield more popular than the region's main contender, Kouri Bougoudi.

Parallel to the easing of tensions in Miski, Kouri Bougoudi became increasingly unsafe for gold miners, with a spike in violence in February 2020, which further diverted migrating gold miners to Miski, as well as the continued fear of military crackdowns on gold sites.

After March 2020, however, this dynamic was reversed, and Kouri Bougoudi regained its status over Miski as the most attractive stopover location for migrants and prospective gold miners travelling to the Tibesti region. This was a consequence of tensions increasing in Miski when peace talks failed after President Déby visited the Miski area on 2 March, and also the threat of possible resumption of war.

What should have been a culmination of the rapprochement between N'Djamena and Miski since November 2019, turned into a souring of relations as Déby's proposals were deemed unacceptable by locals in Miski. The peace talks reportedly failed over three main points: Déby's refusal to reinstate the department of Emi Koussi (in which Miski is situated) into the Tibesti region, instead of its current incorporation into Borkou; the inclusion of locals in the gold-exploitation process; and the return of dozens of vehicles that were taken from locals and the payment of compensation to their owners.

A few weeks after Déby's visit, the self-defence committee started expelling gold miners from the area, and more expulsions were reported in late June 2020. Locals reportedly viewed foreign gold miners as polluting the land (because of the widespread use of mercury in gold extraction), stealing their gold, and potentially bringing insecurity into Miski, which would further justify stronger interventions from the government. According to a former miner in Miski, who left the goldfield in late June, the committee forced miners and traders to relocate to the neighbouring village of Mochowor and to

Faya-Largeau, before many of them eventually travelled on to other goldfields, such as Kouri Bougoudi.

As tensions mounted in Miski, the Kouri Bougoudi gold-field became attractive again for miners and migrant workers seeking a stopover location. This was in part due to a reduction in government clampdowns at the goldfield in 2020, especially compared to late 2018 and 2019. N'Djamena's change in stance is still not fully understood; however, the shift was at least partly the result of the government's changing priorities, with the war against Boko Haram requiring a reprioritization of resources. Concurrently, the government had been seeking to avoid getting mired in costly and destabilizing wars in the north, after a relatively intense engagement throughout much of 2018 and 2019, which failed to bring the change desired.

Ultimately, the Chadian government failed to crack down on Tibesti gold sites between 2018 and 2020, which affected the credibility of its renewed impetus to fight illicit gold mining. It is likely that in the future, government action will continue to be constrained by multiple factors. First, budgetary challenges faced by the Chadian government, compounded by the COVID-19 crisis and the war against Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province in the Lake Chad region, in which the militants inflicted significant casualties against Chadian military in 2020 These dynamics limit the military's capacity to intervene in the north.

Second, the terrain and remoteness of the gold fields, as well as the presence of armed groups there (as seen with the case in Miski), makes the maintenance of control over these sites extremely difficult. An army officer interviewed in Faya-Largeau explained the operational complexity of attempting to clamp down on the mines:

> It's impossible for gold mining to stop in Miski or in Kouri, because the government is unable to control all the access routes to the sites. There are grottos and routes with landmines that only the indigenous know … These local populations will not leave mines they consider their traditional place of residence … Previous attempts by the government to move gold miners has been met by resistance from self-defence groups. So gold mining and other activities will continue, regardless of any measures taken by the government.[72]

A final factor impeding the Chadian government's efforts to counter illicit gold mining remains the discrepancy between N'Djamena's policies and their implementation by the military on the ground; the military has often been accused of corruption and occasionally direct involvement in the mining business.

A contact who runs a small business in Kouri Bougoudi noted that with the exception of mining spots that are very remote, gold-site owners generally have paid the military about FCFA10 000 (€15) per day to allow their operations. Military personnel also profited from human smuggling through the placement of checkpoints where smugglers were required to pay FCFA1 000 (€1.50) per migrant or a FCFA5 000 (€7.50) fee, depending on the checkpoint's location and the negotiations undertaken by the driver. As a result, the sustenance of smuggling flows has been in the interest of local armed forces, which ultimately hindered and continues to hinder N'Djamena's attempts to control both illicit gold mining and irregular migration.
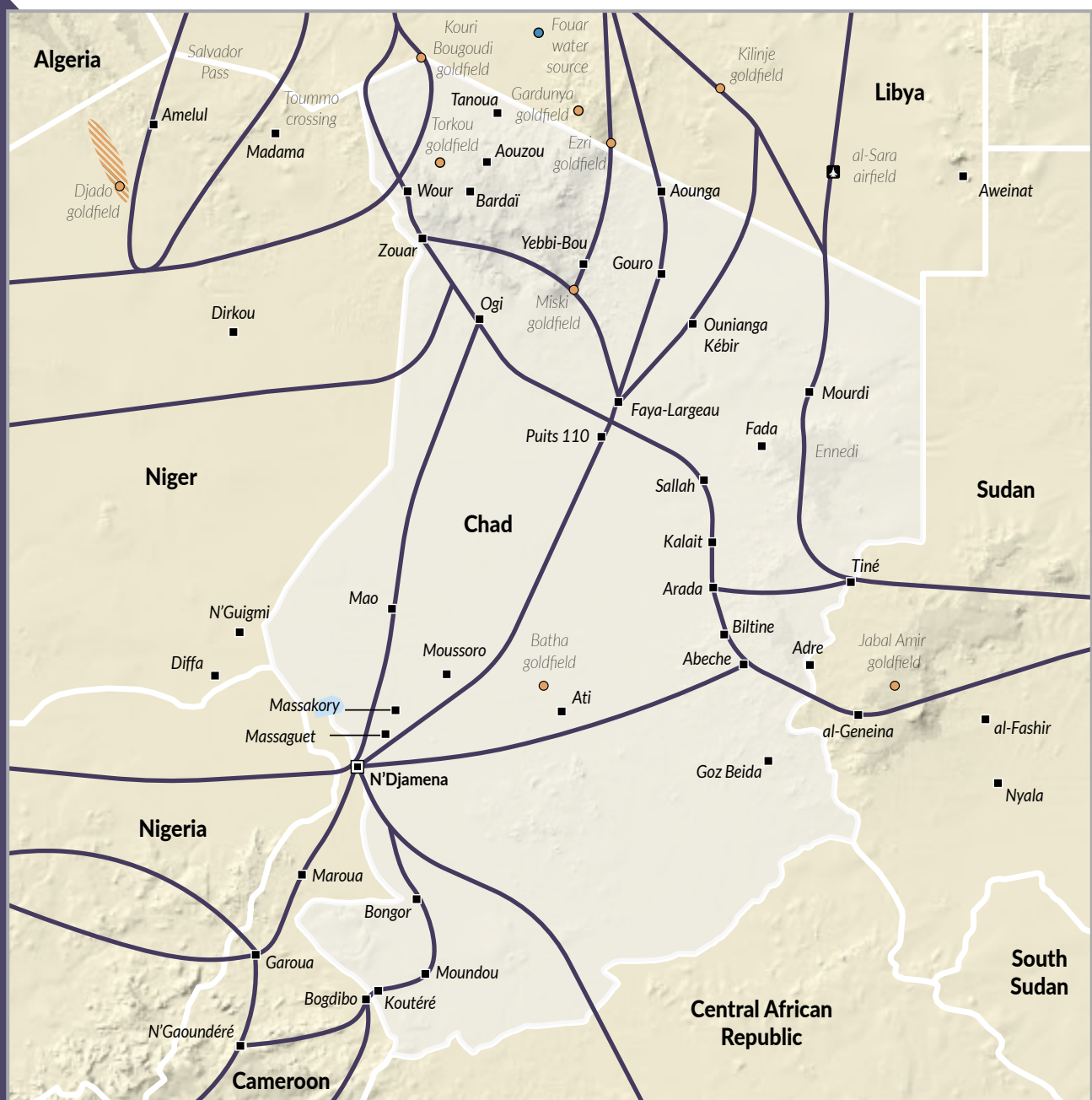

FIGURE 17 Human-smuggling routes in Chad, December 2020.

RETURNING MERCENARIES FUEL HUMAN SMUGGLING TO GOLDFIELDS DESPITE COVID-RELATED TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Beyond the reduced government clampdowns, the re-emergence of Kouri Bougoudi was accelerated by unfolding events in Libya. Between April and June 2020, dozens of Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries, previously engaged in the Libyan war, returned to northern Chad and set up operations at the goldfield.

Many of the fighters are so-called 'Toroboro', mostly Zaghawa mercenaries who are often ex-Sudanese rebels from groups such as the Sudanese Liberation Movement of Minni Mannawi and the Justice and Equality Movement. In one reported case in May 2020, LAAF-aligned Toroboros left Jufra with 200 stolen LAAF vehicles and headed south.

Kouri Bougoudi offered an ideal base where these armed groups could carve out for themselves lucrative dig sites, generating substantial idle revenue by monetizing on the muscle gained during their stint in Libya in 2019 and other conflicts before that. At the same time, Kouri Bougoudi's geographic position at a crossroads with Niger, Chad and Libya, also allowed the groups to prey on or participate in trans-Sahelian criminal activities.[73] Unfortunately, the pattern that unfolded in 2020 is familiar from past Libyan conflicts, especially around 2014-2015.

In addition to increasing insecurity in Kouri Bougoudi, the impact of these armed groups on human-smuggling activity was immediate, as their establishment in the goldfield increased demand for migrant workers, attracting smugglers (especially those working on routes bringing migrants from eastern Chad) to cater to this new draw.

Meanwhile, travel restrictions introduced by the Chadian government to contain the spread of COVID-19 had little impact on these movements, beyond an initial short-term shock effect. Restrictions included the official closure of the country's land borders with Cameroon and Nigeria on 11 March, the closure of all remaining international borders on 18 March, and a travel ban across the country instituted on 21 March. On 23 March, the Chadian government eventually confirmed its first two cases of COVID-19. Although the travel ban ended on 25 June, curfews introduced in late March continued to be enforced in populated southern states through to August 2020.

In practice, travel restrictions were mainly enforced in the capital, N'Djamena. There, public transportation was officially banned throughout most of the period since the introduction of restrictions.

As a result, human-smuggling activities in Chad have been only slightly affected by COVID-19 and the movement restrictions. Even in N'Djamena, reduced northbound flows continued, organized by 4x4 drivers who transported migrants to the key migratory hubs of Moussoro, Massaguet and Massakory, for onward travel to either Mao or Faya-Largeau.

Nonetheless, although the restrictions did not affect irregular movement, they did have were some impact on prices, particularly resulting from restrictions instated in N'Djamena in late March. Some drivers increased their fares to up to three times pre-pandemic prices. From N'Djamena, the cost for journeys to Massaguet went

Human-smuggling activities in Chad have been only slightly affected by COVID-19.

from FCFA1 000 to FCFA3 000 (€1.50 to €4.50), from FCFA2 000 to FCFA6 000 (€3 to €9) for travel to Massakory and from FCFA15 000 to FCFA20 000 (€23 to €30) for trips to Moussoro. Interviews with drivers in N'Djamena and Faya-Largeau suggest that these prices remained inflated because travel restrictions remained in place in N'Djamena.

The increase in prices for this segment of the journey did not have a substantial impact on northbound flows, however. This is because prices on routes north of N'Djamena, from Massaguet and Mao to Faya- Largeau and Zouar, remained stable. Contacts reported that this was a consequence of a different enforcement of the travel ban in the capital. Prices fluctuated between FCFA120 000 and FCFA150 000 (€183–€228) in August 2020 for trips from Mao and Mossoro to Qatrun, according to contacts in Zouar and Faya-Largeau.

Human-smuggling activities were largely unaffected in the rest of the country, most notably on routes from Chad's eastern border with Sudan to the Tibesti region and Libya, which were the most active in the country. One of the main reasons behind this is that most human-smuggling activities, especially on these trajectories, were already clandestine, using remote routes and discreet stopover locations. Furthermore, the incentive and capacity of local security forces in the north and the east was low, owing to low salaries – and this facilitated corruption, according to local contacts.

According to smugglers, migrants and security officials interviewed between March and December 2020, smugglers operating from the eastern hub of Abeche were not affected by N'Djamena's directives to reduce movements to stem the spread of the virus, as travel restrictions were mostly only enforced inside the city of Abeche. To mitigate greater security scrutiny within the city, smugglers reportedly increasingly began departing at night and used satellite villages around the city to organize their operations.

To travel from Abeche to Faya-Largeau in the northwest, the main smuggling hub in the Borkou region, where migrants were typically then transferred to different drivers for onward travel to the Tibesti, smugglers usually used either clandestine desert routes or the quick asphalted routes that transit Malanga, Arada, Biltine and Kalait.

On asphalted routes, smugglers reportedly bribed security forces at checkpoints on the way – paying roughly FCFA5 000 (€7.60) per checkpoint. This, despite irregular migration to Libya and travel to Tibesti goldfields being illegal in Chad. Passengers were also sometimes asked to pay bribes of between FCFA500 and FCFA1 000 (€0.75–€1.50). Drivers occasionally used desert routes to circumvent known checkpoints, but this remained risker: interception by patrols could translate into jail time or result in drivers having to pay much higher bribes to ensure their release.

The majority of migrants travelling on routes from eastern Chad to the Tibesti region travelled on credit. Migrants were typically recruited in their local villages all across Chad; they then travelled in groups to Abeche, before connecting with a smuggler there. Drivers then transported migrants to goldfields, where site owners purchased migrants' debts from smugglers.

Drivers were typically paid between 4 and 5 grams of gold per migrant (FCFA120 000–FCFA150 00 or €182–€228), according to a smuggler in Kouri Bougoudi interviewed in August 2020. Migrants then owed a debt to the gold-site owner, typically about 10 grams of gold (equivalent to around FCFA300 000 or €458), which they repaid through work. Gold-site owners in the Tibesti region also collected migrants directly from Faya-Largeau to avoid paying fees to smugglers.

This system often subjected migrants to potential abuse by gold-site owners. This took the form of physical abuse and indentured labour, in which migrants entered slavery-like arrangements, working in very difficult conditions against no pay, sometimes for years.

Migrants looking to travel rapidly to Libya paid before the journey to mitigate these risks and avoided being tied to indentured labour. Typically, they paid between FCFA150 000 and FCFA200 000 (€228–€305) to travel to the Tibesti region or Libya after connecting with smugglers in either Abeche or Tiné. However, to do this, migrants had to pay in full or at least cover a substantial part of the cost before travelling, which meant that only relatively affluent migrants could afford this option. Given that migrants travelling on these routes tended to be very poor, coming from Chad or Darfur, this form of payment was less common.

OUTLOOK

The return of mercenaries to goldfields, which has fuelled human-smuggling flows, is a worrying development since it could increase the instability of the region.[74] Furthermore, the presence of mercenaries poses a significant challenge for policy action in the area. Gold mines, and the Kouri Bougoudi sites especially, are a source of funding for poly-criminal armed groups operating in the wider region, and thus hold significant dangers for migrants working there – in the form of general insecurity, physical abuse (including torture) and forced labour.

At the same time, the waning of the government's campaign on artisanal gold mining in the area is a positive development, as it allows local Tebu communities, including *passeurs* previously active on Agadez– Libya routes, to draw revenue from the gold economy. In this way, the gold mines contribute to mitigating potential instability and more serious criminal activity triggered by the lack of economic opportunity.

For now, however, the lack of a holistic plan to secure gold mines while at the same time allowing local communities to benefit from them economically in a legitimate way, continues to sustain the status of these sites as a potential threat to the region and the migrants who travel through them.

There are also several takeaways from the GI-TOC's observations of the implementation of the COVID-19 travel restrictions introduced since March. First, they have revealed the limited government capacity to enforce restrictions beyond the capital. This is both a result of the limited capacity and reach of security forces outside of cities and because of widespread corruption at the grassroots level, which facilitates smuggling activities.

Second, in Chad's largest cities – notably in the key migration hubs of N'Djamena and Abeche, where measures were more properly enforced – the experience of the past few months has underlined the capacity of smugglers to adapt to interdiction. In Abeche, for instance, smugglers used satellite villages to organize their activities and departed at night. In N'Djamena, 4x4 drivers quickly took over transportation services otherwise provided by minibuses.

All in all, this poses fundamental questions regarding Chad's capacity to effectively police human-smuggling activity, should the country's role as a transit country increase. With growing insecurity in north-western and northern-central Nigeria, routes through Chad could be seen as comparatively safer for northbound migrants.

Kouri Bougoudi goldfield on the Chad–Libya border, January 2021.

MALI

Police and Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the President of Mali's presidential security, drive in convoy in Gao, Mali, on 7 November 2019. © *Souleymane Ag Anara/AFP via Getty Images*

Smuggling networks return to pre-pandemic trends

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic saw human-smuggling activities grind to a halt across Mali. Bamako confirmed its first two cases of COVID-19 on 25 March, and on 4 April, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali reported the first confirmed case among its personnel. The French government also announced on 4 April that four officers deployed to the Sahel as part of the region-wide Operation Barkhane tested positive for COVID-19.

In order to combat the spread of the virus, Mali implemented border closures with all seven of its neighbours, including fellow ECOWAS members – Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Niger – and non-ECOWAS neighbours Mauritania and Algeria. In addition to the closure of all overland borders, the Malian government cancelled all commercial air travel into the country. These measures were coupled with restrictions on internal movement, implemented both by the Malian government and, to varying degrees, armed groups in northern Mali, particularly the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA).

ECOWAS border closures had a profound impact on human-smuggling networks in Mali, given that Mali's role as a key transit state for irregular migration is predicated on the fact that West African nationals from ECOWAS states can travel to Mali without a visa. Once in Mali, migrants typically link up with smugglers who can transport them irregularly into Algeria, and to a lesser extent, Mauritania. The restrictions on movement severely curtailed the number of prospective migrants entering Mali.

In addition to the restrictions affecting migrants journeying into Mali, smuggling networks were dealt a further blow by the shutting of the Algerian border; the target for most irregular migrants transiting Mali.

An IOM agent distributes an economic subsidy for migrants recently repatriated from Niger to Bamako, July 2020. *© Michele Cattani/ AFP via Getty Images*

Prior to the COVID-19 border closures, smugglers would facilitate irregular migration into Algeria through a range of methods; these included camouflaging irregular migrants within legal flows (often with the use of fake or fraudulent documents), bribing Algerian border officials, or avoiding formal border crossings altogether. Yet with the closure of Mali's border with Algeria, this movement ground to a halt. On top of the border closure, Algerian security forces increased their monitoring of the border, severely increasing the burden of risk for both smugglers and migrants.

In addition to the border closures and the restrictions placed on mobility throughout the region, mobility restrictions and economic downturns in destination countries in Europe and North Africa were widely cited in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak as providing a disincentive for prospective irregular migrants.

However, the softening of border restrictions in September and October 2020, and subsequent reopening of borders in November, led human-smuggling activities to resume in Mali by December 2020. As will be discussed in greater detail below, human-smuggling networks in Timbuktu rebounded, reverting to the same modalities that had emerged before travel restrictions were put in place. GI-TOC contacts in northern Mali noted that by the end of the year, the number of migrants passing through Timbuktu was trending towards pre-pandemic levels. The human-smuggling hub of Gao, however, remained largely dormant as of the writing of this report.

PRE-PANDEMIC ROUTES, MODALITIES AND PRICES

Mali serves as a key transit state for irregular migration patterns linking West Africa to North Africa, owing to its political geography.[75] Mali's status as a member of ECOWAS allows for West African nationals from other ECOWAS states to travel to Mali without a visa. Thus, prospective migrants can travel to Mali either overland, by taking public or private transport, or by flying into Bamako. Once in Mali, migrants take public and private transport to reach key smuggling hubs in northern Mali, from where they seek the services of smugglers to transport them irregularly to Algeria.

Some citizens of non-ECOWAS countries also travel through Mali in order to reach Algeria, including both Syrian refugees and Bangladeshi migrants. In the case of Syrians, humanitarian organizations first identified the trend of Syrians travelling by air to Nouakchott in Mauritania for onward transit through Mali into Algeria in 2015.

Yet the arrival of Syrians into Malian territory for the purposes of migration had largely dissipated by 2020. More stringent visa requirements in Mauritania, combined with a concerted effort by the Algerian government to monitor crossings by non-Africans at its southern border, had the dual impact of reducing the arrival of Syrians in Mali. These stringent measures by the Algerian government at the border also disincentivized the smuggling of non-African migrants, with smugglers telling the GI-TOC that they feared harsh penalties should they be caught smuggling 'foreigners'.

Similarly, limited numbers of Bangladeshis and possibly other south Asians transited Mali in 2019 and 2020, according to interviews conducted by the GI-TOC, flying first to Bamako and then travelling to Algeria via Timbuktu. Contacts in Bamako indicated that these migrants were likely to have been part of a specific cohort who had been living and working in Bamako and then decided to seek smuggler services to travel to Algeria. During the last three quarters of 2020, there was no evidence of an active 'pipeline' bringing Bangladeshis to Mali for the purpose of human smuggling.

The northern cities of Gao and Timbuktu served as the key human-smuggling hubs throughout 2019 and in the beginning of 2020, with the vast majority of migrants being citizens of ECOWAS states. Traditionally, migrants travelling to Algeria through Gao would reach the city via one of two main itineraries. Migrants would either take public or private transport from Bamako to Gao or else they would enter Mali through Niger, usually via public transport from Niamey. Once in Gao, migrants would link up with well-established human-smuggling networks, which would charge clients between FCFA50 000 and FCFA80 000 (€76–€122) for transport to Algeria via the border town of In-Khalil.

Migrants travelling to Algeria via Timbuktu generally travelled to Timbuktu by taking public transport from Bamako. Upon arriving in Timbuktu, migrants would seek the services of smugglers who transported migrants to Algeria, also via In-Khalil, for prices of between FCFA200 000 and FCFA400 000 (€305–€610).

Armed groups in northern Mali during this period, from 2019 into early 2020, had limited involvement in human smuggling. In the city of Gao, for example, some transporters may have had loose affiliations with the CMA or its rival Plateforme des mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger (Plateforme). However, transporting migrants from Gao to the Algerian border required relationships with a range of actors,

including those affiliated with the CMA and Plateforme. Transporters would pay armed groups at various checkpoints, but armed groups did not view human smuggling as an important source of revenue.

Throughout much of 2019, human smuggling from Timbuktu was often carried out by Arab traders, who, upon delivering goods from Algeria to Timbuktu, would instruct drivers to bring passengers (both Malians and other migrants) back to Algeria. Yet in late 2019 and into 2020, this activity gradually became more organized, with actors affiliated with the CMA becoming more directly involved.

In addition to transporters, other key actors in the human-smuggling economies of both Gao and Timbuktu are *coxeurs*. These are typically non-Malian West Africans who, as in Niger, act as liaisons between migrants and migrant smugglers, leveraging social-media networks, specifically Facebook and WhatsApp,
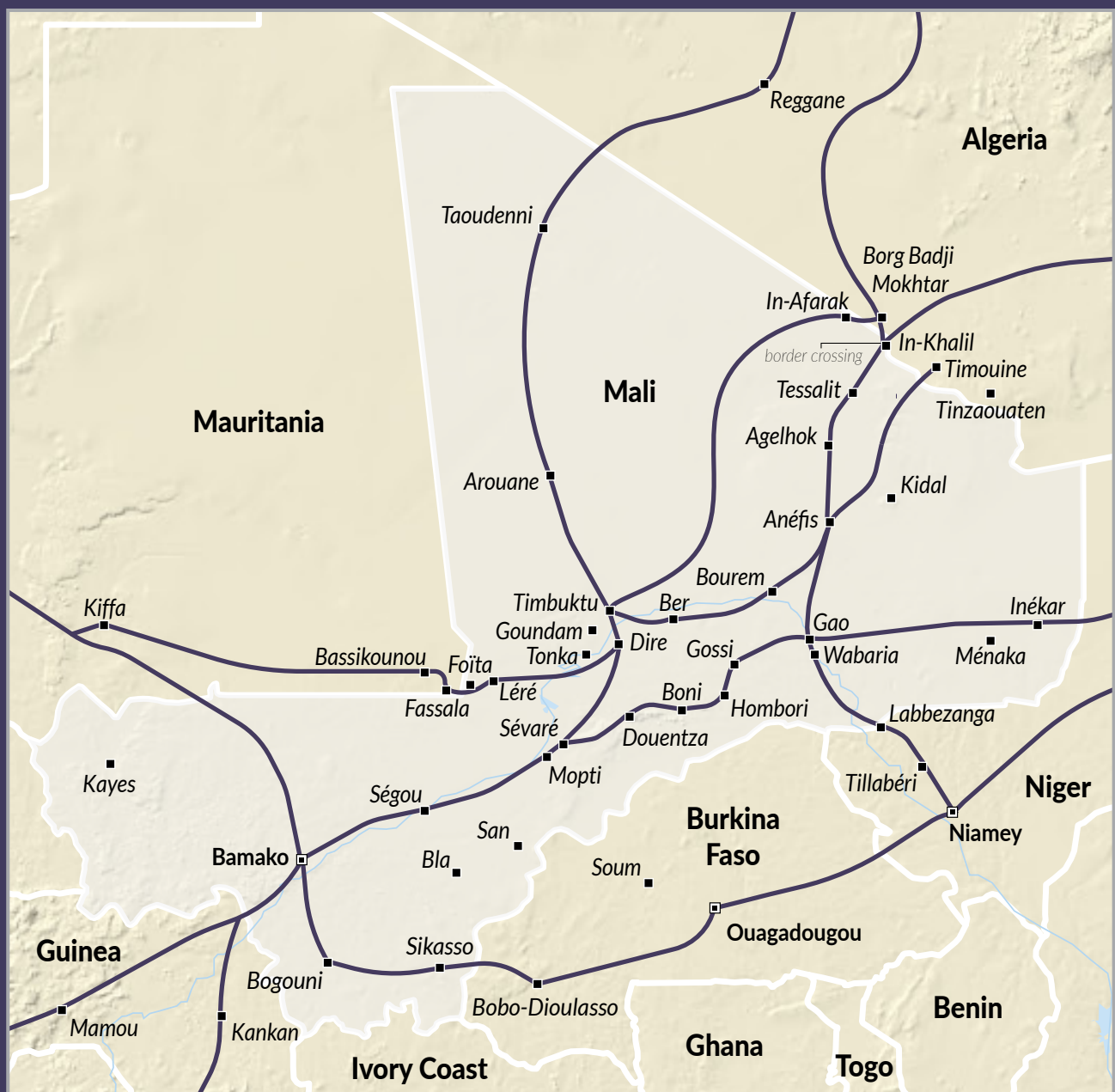

FIGURE 18 Human-smuggling routes in Mali, December 2020.

to provide logistical advice to migrants trying to reach the north of the country using public transport. Once migrants have reached either Gao or Timbuktu, *coxeurs* are often their first point of contact, facilitating lodging and providing meals for migrants until smugglers have arranged their departure for Algeria.

Malian citizens, who do not need a visa to enter Algeria, may also travel to the Algerian border using the same method. The fact that Malian citizens do not need a visa to enter Algeria also creates a natural black market for fake and fraudulent documents for West African migrants seeking employment opportunities in Algeria, as well as those seeking to travel through Algeria to reach other countries in North Africa or Europe.

Bamako has long served as a hub for fake and fraudulent documents, but Gao also emerged as a secondary market in 2012 when large quantities of blank documents disappeared as the city was ransacked by rebels. A transition to biometric identification cards was supposed to, in theory, make it more difficult for non-Malians to procure authentic documents, yet interviews by the GI-TOC in 2019 and 2020 indicated that there is an active transnational network of criminal actors who can obtain biometric passports and national ID cards for non-Malians.

According to one actor directly involved in the procurement of these documents, several networks based in Algiers recruit West African citizens for informal employment in Algeria. Prospective migrants from throughout West Africa were instructed to travel to Mali, from where they went through the process of obtaining an authentic Numéro d'Identification National (NINA), an ID card issued by the Malian state, which citizens use to vote, but which also doubles as a national ID card for travel within Mali and the ECOWAS zone.

One facilitator interviewed by the GI-TOC explained that he acquired NINAs for clients by using contacts in various government offices around the country to obtain fraudulent papers, such as birth certificates, and went to specific mayor's offices to begin the application process. According to this contact, on the rare occasion that the official examining the documents doubted the authenticity of the document, he paid a small bribe of FCFA20 000 (€30) and there was 'no problem'.

This particular network charged clients FCFA100 000 (€152) in order to procure a NINA, but for clients who want an authentic Malian passport, there is no need to wait for the NINA card to be processed and delivered. According to one actor directly involved in these networks, so long as the client had their *fiche individuelle*, which the mayor's office provides to NINA applicants in the interim, clients could immediately apply for a passport. In some cases, passports were procured in as little as 10 days. According to several interviewees, the price for obtaining an authentic biometric passport via these criminal networks was approximately FCFA500 000 (€762), which included the NINA application and the requisite fake documents.

Some networks that obtained authentic Malian passports for non-Malian citizens also helped clients, both Malian and non-Malian, obtain visas for various European countries via connections with embassies and consulates both in Bamako and Algiers. According to one particular contact, his network charged between FCFA4 million (€6 097) for Malians seeking European visas and FCFA5 million (€7 621) for non-Malians. These numbers were confirmed by a second contact familiar with how these networks operate. It is unclear how many networks were actively engaged in this activity, but the information outlined above indicates that actors involved constitute a transnational network that exceeds the sophistication of the more common fraudsters who sell fake or doctored ID cards on the black market to non-Malian migrants travelling overland into Algeria.

ONGOING INSECURITY IN NORTHERN AND CENTRAL MALI AMID PANDEMIC

While smuggling networks and their modus operandi remained relatively stable during 2019 despite ongoing insecurity throughout central and northern Mali, beginning in late 2019 and into 2020, certain local and regional security dynamics led to shifts in activity.

Until late 2019, Gao had been the larger of the two main human-smuggling hubs in northern Mali. The city had long functioned as a crossroads linking southern and central Mali to Niger and Algeria, and vice versa. Yet the steady deterioration in security in central Mali since 2015 – in which civilians have been deliberately targeted by jihadist groups, local militias, and the Malian military – gradually made Gao less attractive and accessible to migrants starting their journeys in Bamako.

By 2018, with transport links between Bamako often delayed or disrupted, migrants and Malians travelling to Gao increasingly sought to bypass central Mali altogether, opting instead to go through Burkina Faso and Niger in order to access Gao. Yet even these itineraries were subsequently disrupted by violence and insecurity in Burkina Faso, which led the Burkinabe government to declare a state of emergency in December 2018.

This increased isolation of Gao due to insecurity in central Mali and Burkina Faso coincided with the emergence and consolidation of a new human-smuggling route linking Timbuktu to Algeria in early 2020. This route, in which smugglers transported migrants taken to Algeria via the town of In-Afarak, saw smugglers charging migrants between FCFA150 000 and FCFA200 000 (€229–€305) for places on the back of pick-up trucks, with actors affiliated with the CMA providing armed escorts. Just as this route was consolidating and becoming the most prominent itinerary in northern Mali, however, regional border closures due to COVID-19 caused it to go dormant.

Smuggling networks went completely dormant from April 2020 until September 2020, however, there were several key political and security developments in Mali during this period that shaped the current political economy of migrant smuggling in Mali.

Although clashes between Mali's two main jihadist coalitions, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM; Group to Support Islam and Muslims), had been taking place sporadically in Mali and Burkina Faso since the summer of 2019, it was in March 2020 that the two groups were definitively in open conflict with each other.[76] Fighting between the two groups intensified in April and May, and the resultant insecurity left the smuggling hub of Gao even more cut off than it was before the COVID-19 border closures. The Liptako-Gourma area, which encompasses the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, is now the epicentre of conflict between the ISGS and the JNIM, as well as a main stage for clashes between both jihadist groups and local militaries and international counterterrorism and peacekeeping forces.[77]

These dynamics were further complicated on 18 August, when officers within the Malian military carried out a coup d'état, forcing then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to resign and dissolve the Malian government.[78] In response to the coup, ECOWAS member states closed all land and air borders. The imposed border closures came just as regional borders were scheduled to reopen, thus extending the disruption of smuggling activity until the ruling junta had sufficiently met ECOWAS demands to set up a civilian-led transitional government. Sanctions against Mali were lifted and borders reopened on 6 October.

TIMBUKTU REBOUNDS; GAO STAYS QUIET INTO DECEMBER

After the reopening of borders in October, there was a gradual reactivation of the In-Afarak human-smuggling route linking Timbuktu to Algeria. In December contacts in northern Mali noted to the GI-TOC that departures of two or three 4X4 pickup trucks carrying between 20 and 25 passengers were leaving Timbuktu each week. Contacts in Timbuktu also indicated that there had been a noticeable increase in the number of migrants arriving in Timbuktu since mid-November, a trend suggesting

that human-smuggling activity in Timbuktu was returning to levels seen before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prices also returned to pre-pandemic levels, with migrants paying between FCFA 150 000 and FCFA 200 000 (€229–€305), which is roughly half the cost reported during the September and October 2020. This reduction in price was attributed to a 'return to normal' in which regional borders are open, enabling migrants from ECOWAS states to travel to Timbuktu without restrictions, as well as to fuel smuggled from Algeria (where it is subsidized) being once again available in significant quantities in Kidal, Taoudenni and Timbuktu.

Similar to before the border closures in April, the In-Afarak route is now largely operated by actors affiliated with the CMA. These armed-group affiliates provide armed escorts between Timbuktu and the Algerian border. However, the GI-TOC assesses that migrant smuggling is still not a key source of revenue for the CMA, and that CMA leadership does not oversee such smuggling. Actors directly involved in human smuggling between Timbuktu and Algeria may have de facto affiliations with the CMA, but these links are not believed to extend beyond personal relationships with key CMA figures.

A migrant repatriated from Algeria travels back to his village in Mali by bus on 9 July 2020. *© Michele Cattani/ AFP via Getty Images*

Opposition supporters hold a rally to welcome the resignation of Mali's ousted president after military officers seized power, Bamako, August 2020. *© Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

Migrants travel to Timbuktu along three main trajectories. The first, which became increasingly popular after October, when the end of rainy season enabled better road conditions, saw migrants taking busses from Bamako to Timbuktu via Léré. These vehicles left Bamako on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 6 a.m., and typically arrived in Timbuktu the next day in the late morning. Tickets cost FCFA20 000 (€30.50).

Migrants also travel to Timbuktu via pinasse (motorized boats) from Mopti; this was a particularly feasible itinerary starting in late August, when water levels are at their highest due to the rainy season. These boats generally departed every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, leaving Mopti at 3 p.m. and arriving in Timbuktu at around 8 p.m. the next day. Passengers paid between FCFA10 000 and FCFA15 000 (€15–€23), with between 80 and 100 passengers on each vessel.

A third itinerary, which is less popular than the two detailed above saw migrants travel to Timbuktu overland in private vehicles, usually 4x4s or vans, which departed from Sévaré. Ongoing insecurity and the disruption of transportation in central Mali, particularly along the Sévaré–Douentza axis on this route, rendered this option the riskiest of the three.

While human-smuggling activity in Timbuktu was returning to its pre-pandemic status quo by December, smuggling networks in Gao remained dormant, due in large part to widespread insecurity in the Liptako-Gourma region outlined in the previous section. Gao was ostensibly cut off from southern Mali and the capital city of Bamako, and despite the reopening of Mali's border with Niger, transport links between Niamey and Gao remained disrupted and unpredictable at the end of 2020.

Contacts in the Gao region told the GI-TOC that some mobility patterns were returning to normal, but migrants seeking onward travel to Algeria were still not arriving in discernible numbers. During the previous reporting period, domestic airline Sky Mali began offering flights from Bamako to Gao, priced at FCFA100 000 (€152) for a one-way ticket. There were no indications at the time of this report, however, that migrants were using these flights to travel to Gao for onward travel to Algeria or Niger, but this could change.

Outlook

With regional borders now fully open and confinement measures largely lifted, current trends indicate that human smuggling in northern Mali is likely to continue to increase. Timbuktu is likely to remain the main human-smuggling hub in northern Mali, especially given that the security situation in central Mali and the Liptako-Gourma region precludes a full reactivation of smuggling networks in Gao.

Nevertheless, conflict dynamics in northern Mali can change rapidly, and the security equilibrium in Timbuktu and Kidal regions, which has enabled migrant smugglers to carry out their activities with a degree of predictability since the reopening of borders, can easily be knocked out of balance.[79] A key grievance cited by the coup leaders in August, for example, was Keïta's handling of the security situation in central and northern Mali. It remains to be seen whether the new Malian government will pursue a more aggressive security approach in those areas, particularly in northern Mali, where the CMA have achieved de facto independence in the Kidal region, as well as other parts of northern Mali.

Some armed groups in the north, particularly the CMA, may ultimately decide that it is in their interests to push beyond de facto autonomy. At the time of writing, however, it is the assessment of the GI-TOC that the status quo throughout much of northern Mali is acceptable, if not preferable, to elites on all sides of peace process.

Similarly, human-smuggling networks in Gao could reactivate should transport networks linking Niger to Gao become more feasible and other routes, including via domestic air travel, become more prominent. There is no indication, however, that the security situation in either central Mali or the Liptako-Gourma region is likely to improve in the near or medium term, with most indicators suggesting that the situation will instead continue to deteriorate.

A range of external factors will also continue to shape the human-smuggling economy in Mali. Should labour markets in North Africa and Europe rebound, more migrants from the sub-region may feel compelled to travel through Mali amid ongoing economic hardship throughout West Africa. Should the number of migrants transiting through Timbuktu region increase dramatically, elements within the CMA may decide to take a more direct role in human smuggling in an effort to fully control the market.

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