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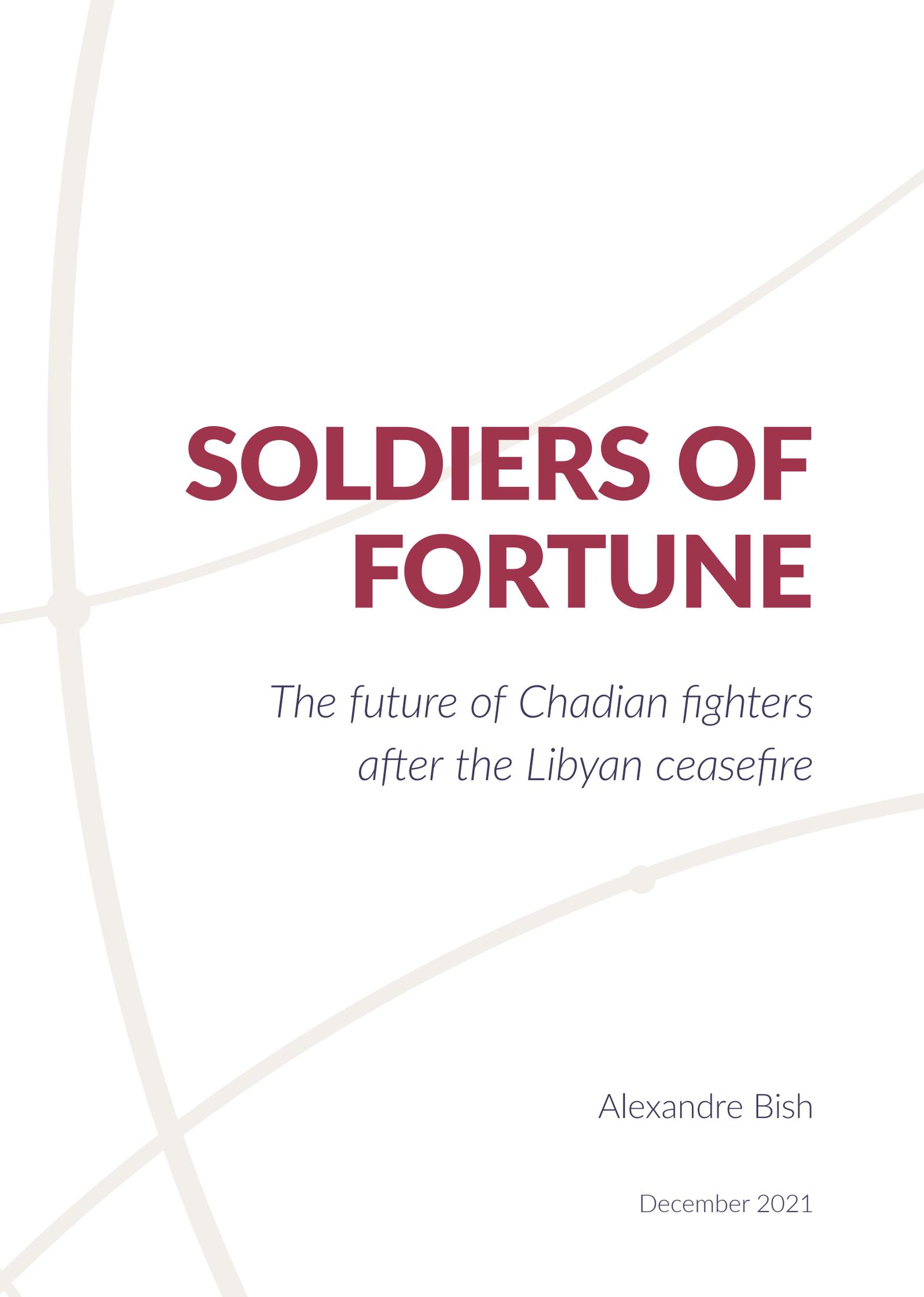
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE

The future of Chadian fighters
after the Libyan ceasefire

ALEXANDRE BISH

DECEMBER 2021



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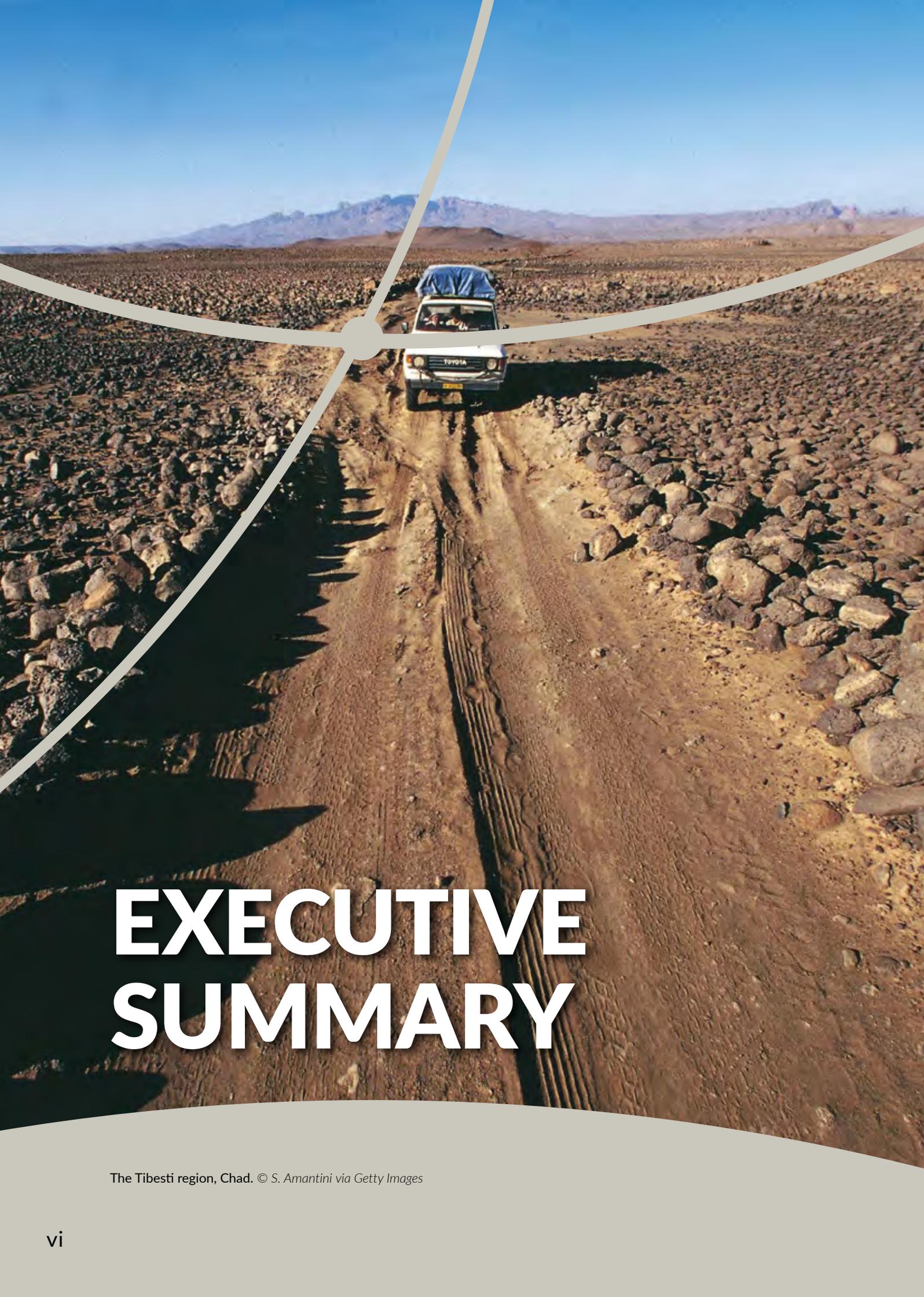
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Chadian army members during an operation against rebels in Ziguey, Chad, April 2021. © Abdoulaye Adoum Mahamat/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

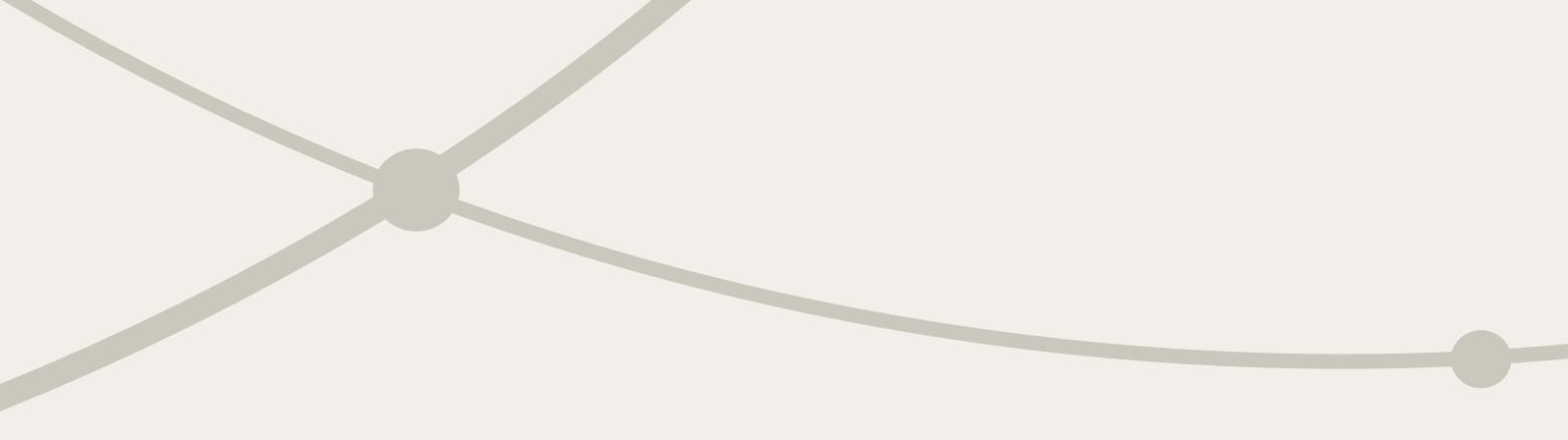
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANT	Armée nationale tchadienne (Chadian national army)
BDB	Benghazi Defence Brigades
CCMSR	Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la république (Council of military command for the salvation of the republic)
CDR	Conseil démocratique révolutionnaire (Democratic Revolutionary Council)
FACT	Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (Front for change and concord in Chad)
FNDJT	Front de la nation pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (Front of the nation for democracy and justice in Chad)
FUC	Front uni pour le changement (United Front for Democratic Change)
GNA	Government of National Accord
GSLF	The Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces, also known as Libyan National Army (LNA)
MDJT	Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad)
SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army – Minni Minnawi
SLA-TC	Sudanese Liberation Army – Transitional Council
TMC	Transitional Military Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UFDD	Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development)
UFDD-F	Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement-Fondamentale (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development–Fundamental)
UFR	Union des forces de la résistance (Union of resistance forces)
ZWPB	Zuwaya Ways of Peace Battalion



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tibesti region, Chad. © S. Amantini via Getty Images



In fragile states the world over, groups of armed individuals are often key to the growth of criminal economies, which, reciprocally, play a significant role in prolonging and deepening conflict. Some of the countries with the highest levels of organized criminality in the world have been, or still are, entangled in a cycle of instability and conflict – notably countries in the Middle East and Africa.¹ Conflict zones are key hubs in the global criminal economy, and nowhere is this correlation more evident than in the Sahel and central Sahara, where the proliferation of armed actors and their involvement in many of the subregion’s plethora of illicit markets have contributed to cyclical instability in the region.

Chadian fighters (we define who these actors are for the purpose of this report in the Introduction section) have long been key actors within this constellation of armed groups, but the October 2020 ceasefire agreement in Libya – and the ensuing drop in fighting – are reshaping the role played by these actors in regional illicit markets and stability dynamics. Chadian fighters first emerged as key actors challenging peace and security in Libya while fighting as mercenaries there after the fall of Qaddafi in 2011. However, the consolidation of their peacetime involvement in Sahelian illicit economies since mid-2020 poses a more enduring, widespread and unpredictable form of instability in the region.

On 23 October 2020, the ceasefire agreement between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) was signed, raising hopes that the end of Libya’s second civil war (which began in mid-2014 but had intensified since 2019 with the LAAF’s campaign on Tripoli) was in sight. One of the key features of the ceasefire agreement was – in the words of the acting head of the United Nations mission in Libya – the departure of ‘all mercenaries and foreign fighters from Libyan territory, air, land and seas’.² A year later, most of these mercenary forces have remained in the country.³ And while most of the international attention has focused on the departure of Russian- and Turkish-backed Syrian mercenary forces – seen as instrumental to achieving peace given their support for opposing Libyan factions in the war – little attention has been paid to the presence and destabilizing potential of Chadian fighters.⁴

Attacks by Chadian fighters on illicit networks in Niger and Chad have drastically increased since mid-2020.

Chadian fighters had become key actors engaging as mercenaries for both sides in Libya's second civil war, especially during the LAAF Tripoli campaign. They became valuable assets, presenting a relatively inexpensive yet experienced and expendable source of front line fighters. While acting as mercenaries, many had been involved, directly and indirectly, in a range of illicit economies in Libya and the Sahel.

Since the LAAF lost the strategic al-Wattiya airbase in May 2020 and the city of Tarhouna in June 2020, which paved the way to the October 2020 ceasefire in Libya, Chadian fighters seem to have consolidated their positions in Sahelian criminal economies in an apparent bid to find new revenue streams and solidify existing ones. As we explain below, they have done so by participating to varying degrees in the smuggling and trafficking of people, drugs and goods, and by preying on gold miners, migrant smugglers, car smugglers and armed traffickers conveying high-value drugs, such as cannabis resin and cocaine. As a result, attacks by Chadian fighters on pre-existing illicit networks in northern Niger and northern Chad have drastically increased since mid-2020. Nigerien and Chadian security forces have been unable to contain their threat in the Chad-Libya-Niger tri-border area, which has spurred the creation of local armed self-defence groups to protect the ability of such pre-existing groups' ability to participate in regional illicit economies. The Chadian fighters are perceived as a threat to their interests.

Chadian fighters, whether attached to political or non-politically motivated armed groups, are broadly perceived as 'bandits' by Libyans in the south. Libyan security forces, positioning themselves as legitimate actors, are likely to present themselves as security providers, and Libyan forces in the Fezzan have committed to ridding the area of Chadian 'bandits'. In the long term, this will push Chadian fighters to find new bases outside Libyan territory, in northern Niger and northern Chad, which have long had weak state presence and control, as illustrated by the April 2021 incursion into Chad by the Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (Front for change and concord in Chad, FACT), a Chadian rebel group founded in Libya in 2016.

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes in Chad have been mostly unsuccessful in the past, making DDR an unappealing option for Chadian fighters. When they have existed, processes have been either slow or high-handed. Most recently, Chadian fighters who had surrendered in March 2021 were still awaiting the DDR process to begin over six months later. The Chadian government's continued failure to reintegrate Chadian fighters means that the threat they pose to regional stability of the Sahel-Sahara, by fuelling illicit economies and increasing insecurity, is likely to persist in the medium term.

Chadian armed groups have gone through three key phases from a financing perspective. The first was between 2005 and 2010, when their main source of income was funding from Sudan. The second was in post-Qaddafi Libya, when key



Chadian rebels belonging to the Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la république, 2018. *Photo: Social media*

revenue streams came from the in-war economy there, particularly through their payments as mercenaries. The third, which started emerging in May 2020, saw the growing importance of revenues from the illicit economy of the Sahel region. Currently, we are at a key tipping point between these two latter phases, although this could change if there is a renewed demand for mercenaries in a conflict in the region.

This report describes the typologies of Chadian fighters active in Libya and the central Sahara, and their role as mercenaries and enablers in the transnational mercenary trade in Libya's second civil war. The Chadian government's failure to reintegrate rebels after the war is then analyzed before exploring how this has led to Chadian fighters consolidating their involvement in criminal economies. Finally, the risks of this involvement and, in particular, the menace that Chadian fighters pose to border security in the region are presented.

In order to mitigate these risks, and based on the findings of the report, it is recommended that a safe corridor for Chadian fighters to return to Chad be provided. In addition, it is necessary to regularize the artisanal gold-mining economy in the country, support communities that are particularly vulnerable to recruitment and build capacity for regional security forces.

Methodology

Drawing on fieldwork conducted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) between October 2019 and September 2021, this report is based on remote and in-person interviews with rebels and former rebels; traffickers and smugglers of people, drugs, arms and cars; gold-site 'owners'; security forces; and regional and international migrants in Chad, Libya and Niger. It also draws on secondary sources, including monthly field reporting conducted by the GI-TOC in North Africa and the Sahel, as well as social media monitoring between 2018 and 2021.



INTRODUCTION CHADIAN FIGHTERS IN LIBYA AND THE CENTRAL SAHARA

FACT rebels in Jufra, Libya, April 2017. © Taha Jawashi



Chadian fighters active in Libya and the central Sahara are primarily composed of veterans from the Chadian rebellion between 2005 and 2010, former Chadian army officers, and younger recruits who have travelled from Chad to join the armed groups or were recruited in northern Chad and southern Libya over the past decade.⁵

There are three ways in which Chadian fighters have engaged in violence in Libya and the central Sahara: as rebels opposed to the Chadian government; as armed actors in non-politically driven and non-identifiable armed groups engaged in either mercenary work or illicit activities; or as independent mercenaries joining pre-existing Libyan armed structures as soldiers in exchange for a salary.

The lines between these three groups are blurred and there have been several cases of fighters switching from rebel groups to non-political armed groups and back again. Many have alternated between fighting; trafficking people, drugs and goods, and escorting traffickers; armed banditry; and the gold-mining economy. Most have engaged in mercenary and illicit activities to fund themselves. Living conditions and the way funds are distributed within the groups are what constitute the main differences between them.

Chadian fighters' participation in the Libyan war was remunerated through wages and military equipment, including vehicles and weapons from both the LAAF and the GNA. Many also depended on looting battlefields. Outside of war, they have long been known to participate in or prey upon criminal economies in the region. Now, they have the experience of war as well as military equipment and funds to boost their illicit activities.

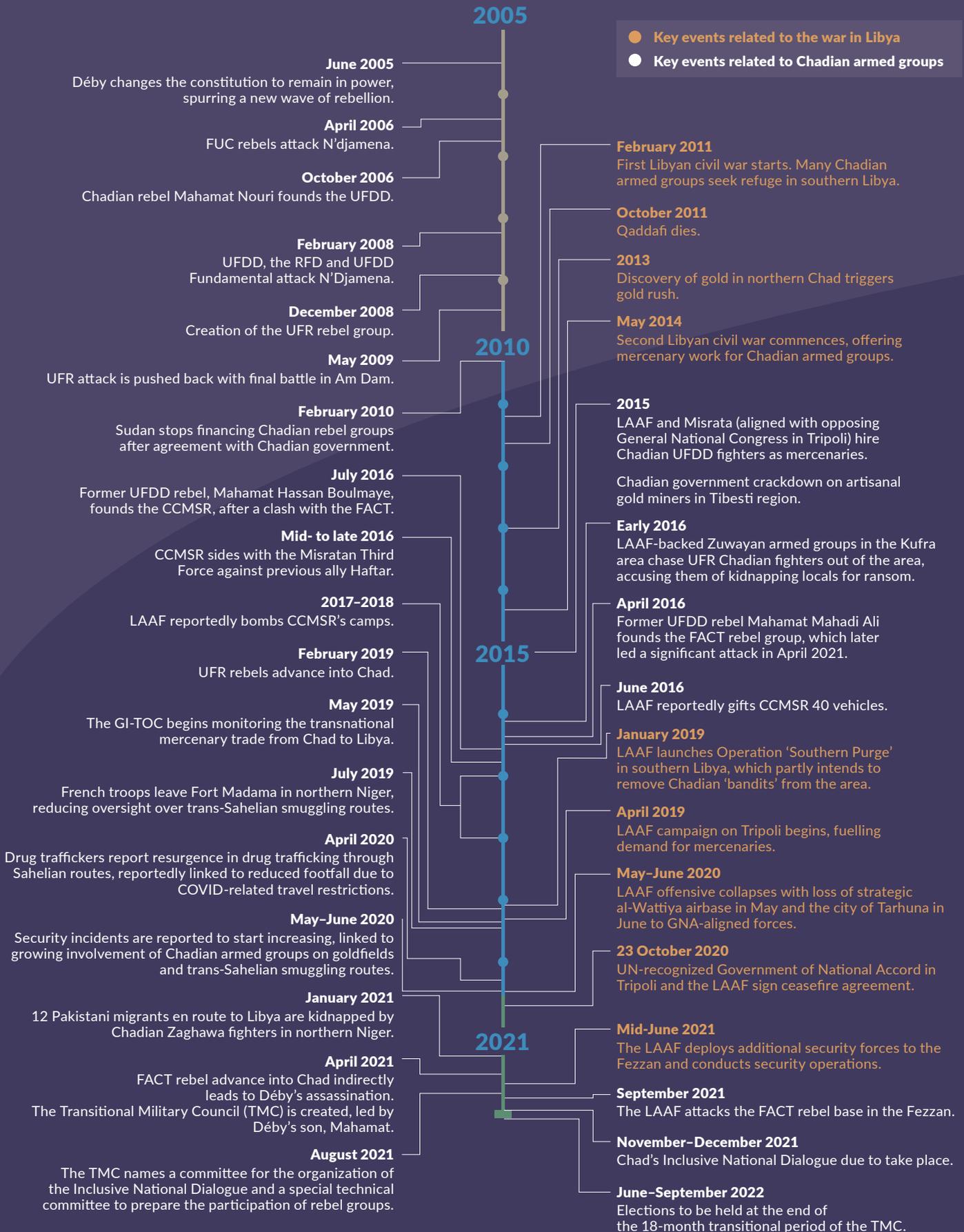
Most Chadian fighters active in Libya have engaged in mercenary and illicit activities to fund themselves.

Lack of economic opportunities at home and better prospects as fighters has meant that the number of Chadians, mostly youths, interested in being part of non-state armed groups has grown over the past decade. The number of Chadian fighters active in Libya and the central Sahara is difficult to estimate, as reported numbers vary constantly due to regular deaths and recruitment. However, the interviewees and stakeholders consulted during research for this report assessed the number to be around 7 000 fighters over the past three years, with the figure fluctuating considerably.

Interviews with Chadian fighters in Libya and the central Sahara have underlined the multi-faceted journeys of actors in what resembles a Sahelian criminal gig economy. Most fighters have very little or no formal education and have sought opportunities in mercenary or criminal work after failed experiences as gold miners or international migrants. Considering the high number of international migrants and gold miners in the region – up to 150 000 gold miners made their way up to the Tibesti in the years following the discovery of gold in 2012 and 2013 – the pool of potential Chadian fighters is substantial.⁶ Many former gold miners or migrants enrol in mercenary activities with the simple hope of acquiring a vehicle.⁷

In fewer cases, the reasons for joining have been more vindicative than economic, with interviewees reporting to have undergone experiences of ‘injustice’, during which they experienced victimization by the Chadian government or security forces.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS





FACT fighters in their base in Jufra, Libya. Photo: Social media

Chadian rebel groups

Chadian rebel groups have been politically motivated with the common goal of overthrowing the Chadian government. However, their prolonged stay in Libya and the need to find funding streams have driven many to profit from the illicit economy, blurring the lines between groups that are politically driven and those that are criminally inclined.

To avoid tarnishing their reputation internationally and to remain credible actors should they take power in their home country's capital, N'Djamena, organized Chadian rebel groups have often sought to avoid being associated with mercenary work or criminal activities in public statements.⁸ However, after sponsorship from the Sudanese government ended in 2009, Chadian rebel groups engaged in mercenary activities in post-Qaddafi Libya to fund the rebellion. Following declining demand for their services after the October 2020 Libya ceasefire, they appear to have consolidated their hold on trafficking economies as a source of revenue.

Although individual fighters do profit from some of the proceeds from the mercenary and criminal economies, much of the money is reinvested in the groups, managed by a treasurer. This has prompted some rebel commanders to leave the rebellion and form their own non-political armed groups to engage solely in either mercenary or criminal activities. A former FACT and Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la république (Council of Military Command for the Salvation of the Republic, CCMSR) rebel who escaped the rebellion in March 2018 described the harsh conditions within the movement:

After just a few months, I understood [that joining the rebellion was] the worst decision of my life, because I had no more freedom. I could not go out or travel in the city freely. We were eating the same food almost every day and we weren't given any money. [...] I wasn't allowed to change my mind, so my only possibility was to escape. I don't want to die like this, I was living in fear [...] I felt like a slave.⁹



FACT fighters training in Libya, circa 2017. Photo: Social media

Chadian rebel groups

The main Chadian armed groups that have been active in Libya are the FACT; CCMSR; the Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement (Union of forces for democracy and development, UFDD); the Front de la nation pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (Front of the nation for democracy and justice in Chad, FNDJT), and the Union des forces de la résistance (Union of resistance forces, UFR). Their divisions have mostly been driven by contestation over leadership, which have often followed ethnic lines.¹⁰ The UFR is mostly composed of Bideyat Zaghawa (eastern Chad); the FACT of Daza Goran; the CCMSR of Kreda Goran (northern Chad) and Arabs; and the UFDD mostly of Goran Anakaza.¹¹



FACT



CCMSR



UFDD



UFR

Non-political Chadian armed groups

Non-political Chadian armed groups have been formed mostly as a result of defecting rebel commanders who sought personal economic gain from mercenary work in Libya or the illicit economy. These groups have been more attractive than rebel groups to low-level recruits for several reasons. First, Chadian fighters in non-political groups report enjoying a share of the loot and living in better conditions than in rebel groups. For instance, fighters under Mahamat Haki Abdul Rahman, a former senior CCMSR commander known as Hakimi, were reportedly allowed to party – with alcohol and drugs – in their base in Sebha after Hakimi left the CCMSR in January 2020.

Secondly, non-political armed groups offer more flexibility for fighters than Chadian rebel groups. If a fighter decides to leave a rebel group, they must do so discreetly, since desertion is punishable by death.

In contrast, fighting in a non-political armed group offers mostly young men the possibility of working for a short period of time before returning home with their loot.

Lastly, Libya's conflicting parties are more attracted to non-political Chadian armed groups. This is because enlisting politically driven rebel groups could alienate the Chadian government, given the potential for reinvestment of funds acquired into the war against N'Djamena. Funding Chadian rebels would undermine the Libyan parties' goal of gaining status as a state, since it would pit the Chadian government against them. Support from the Chadian government could help to legitimize their cause. By making an enemy out of a potential ally, they may also redirect Chadian government support towards their opposition rather than themselves.

Individual Chadian mercenaries

Chadian mercenaries have also joined Libyan armed groups that recruit fighters on an individual basis. This has most often been as fighters in groups that are allied to the LAAF, such as the 116 and 128 Brigades. Fighters mostly receive a low monthly salary – equivalent to around €600 depending on their function – as well as other benefits, such as food and lodging.

Chadian mercenaries are attractive to LAAF-affiliated brigades for three main reasons: their experience makes them ideal front line fighters; if they die, families in Chad will not request financial compensation (which is usually paid for Libyan fighters); and they tend to accept lower salaries than their Libyan counterparts. A former Chadian soldier who went to Libya to work as a mercenary (see Figure 1) described how much money he earned from mercenary activities:

In 2016, I went to Libya wanting to work as a mercenary in Haftar's camp. [...] I was hired with

them, our salary was not much but we shared the [loot], which was huge. We did not have the right to recover loot [if we didn't fight]. A fifth of the loot collected after a fight was for Haftar and the rest was shared among those who took part in the fight. If a person killed an enemy, their personal effects belonged to him. We were fighting against the Islamists [...] in the neighbourhoods of Sirte. I succeeded in killing an Islamist leader and was given his car, his phone and US\$5 000.¹²

Chadian fighters engaged as mercenaries in Libyan groups do not have much chance to leave, however. As the same Chadian soldier added: 'If we learned that someone wanted to give up and leave, we could kill them and take their property. I sold the car and left quietly.'¹³ However, becoming a mercenary is still seen as a viable short-to-medium-term revenue stream.

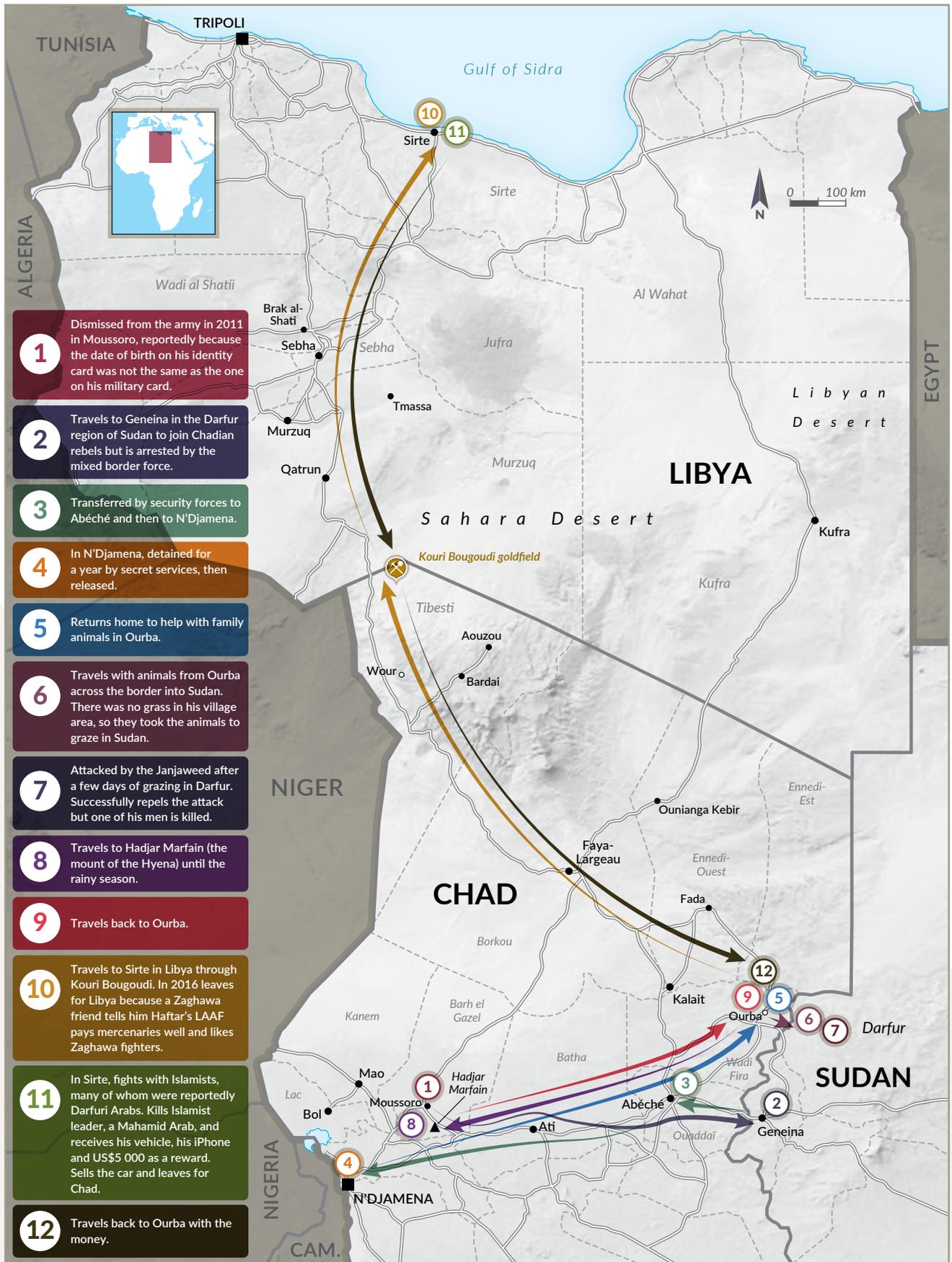


FIGURE 1 Journey of an ex-soldier and rebel turned mercenary in Libya.



DESTABILIZATION DURING THE LIBYAN WAR

A Libyan rebel displays Chadian necklaces as proof of Qaddafi's use of mercenaries, Bin Jawad, Libya.

© Benjamin Lowy via Getty Images

Fighting as mercenaries

Since the Chad–Sudan entente in 2010 and the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, Chadian rebels and other armed groups have profited from lawlessness in Libya and set up bases from which they would organize their opposition to then Chadian president Idriss Déby.¹⁴ Having lost their principal funding stream after Déby created an alliance with their primary financier, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, in 2010, Libya became a new panacea for rebels, offering both a safe haven and a new economic opportunity in the form of mercenary work.

During Libya's first civil war in 2011, the involvement of Chadian fighters as mercenary forces was limited. Many Libyan revolutionaries initially perceived Chadian fighters as Qaddafi supporters, mostly because the Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (Movement for democracy and justice in Chad, MDJT) had received support from Qaddafi in the past and he had called for their help at the beginning of the revolution.¹⁵ Libyan Tebu armed groups sought to recruit Chadian Tebu and Goran rebels into their own ranks or disarm those supporting Qaddafi, but with limited success, as many rebels refused to leave their established autonomous structures and fight within Libyan groups.¹⁶

As Libya's second civil war developed in 2014, however, Chadian fighters became increasingly important actors, perceived by conflicting parties as key war assets who could help win a battle if they fell under the opponent's hold. Chadian rebels strategically took advantage of their position as 'swing fighters' to increase their revenues.

In Benghazi in 2015, for instance, Haftar hired Chadian Goran fighters to fight against a Salafist militia, Ansar al-Sharia.¹⁷ Their success in the battlefield, as experienced yet expendable front line fighters, raised the profile of these mercenaries, prompting interest from Zintan and Misratan armed groups.¹⁸ Later in 2015, Misrata's Third Force, a pro-Tripoli militia, hired several hundred Chadian Goran fighters around Hun, the capital of the Jufra region. This was most likely both to prevent Haftar from recruiting the fighters and to attract a fighting force previously under his command, and use them against him.¹⁹ Many of these fighters reportedly identified as belonging to the UFDD.²⁰

In 2015, having accumulated enough weapons and vehicles to constitute a credible threat to N'Djamena (received in exchange for mercenary work for both the Misratans and Haftar), Mahamat Nouri, UFDD founder and an experienced Chadian politician, sought to reinstate himself as UFDD leader with the help of some loyal field commanders. Nouri, who had sought refuge in France after having fled to Qatar from Sudan in 2010, was seen as a preferred political leader by some loyalists on the ground. He was perceived by these loyalists to compensate for their lack of formal education or political experience in Chad, and therefore improve their chances both of gaining international credibility and taking power in N'Djamena. Several younger UFDD members, however, opposed Nouri's leadership. To them, Nouri had fled combat and did not deserve to reap the benefits of their hard-earned wealth in Libya.

The split over Nouri's role was an early warning sign over a growing rift within Chadian rebel groups between those who remained wedded to political medium-term goals for which they saw exiled leaders as key, and others who started prioritizing income generation over political aspirations and were disillusioned with exiled leaders who had not participated in the Libyan war.

Since their exile from Sudan, both Nouri and Timan Erdimi, leader of the UFR, have been following developments on the ground, not leading them.²¹ These exiled rebel leaders have acted as mascots and mediators for rebel armed groups, helping them preserve a political seat and thus retaining hopes of fulfilling greater ambitions of securing international support and political power in N'Djamena. Rebel communications teams, composed of mostly Chadian refugees based in Western countries, keep abreast of local developments through WhatsApp groups and satellite phone calls with foot soldiers. They then analyze and relay information coming from the field before publicizing it as official group statements on rebel groups' social media pages.²²

As such, by wearing two hats, Chadian rebel groups have strategically navigated the conflicting image of being ideologically motivated or mercenaries, adapting their discourse and profile to potential funders. Depoliticizing their identity may have facilitated Haftar's justification of hiring Tebu and Goran Chadian fighters during the revolution, while seeking to maintain good relations with Déby, for instance.²³ However, to many Chadian rebels the benefits acquired through mercenary work obscured and arguably came into conflict with the initial goal of taking control of N'Djamena.²⁴



CCMSR fighters (left and right) and FACT rebels (centre) in Libya, 2019. Photos: Social media

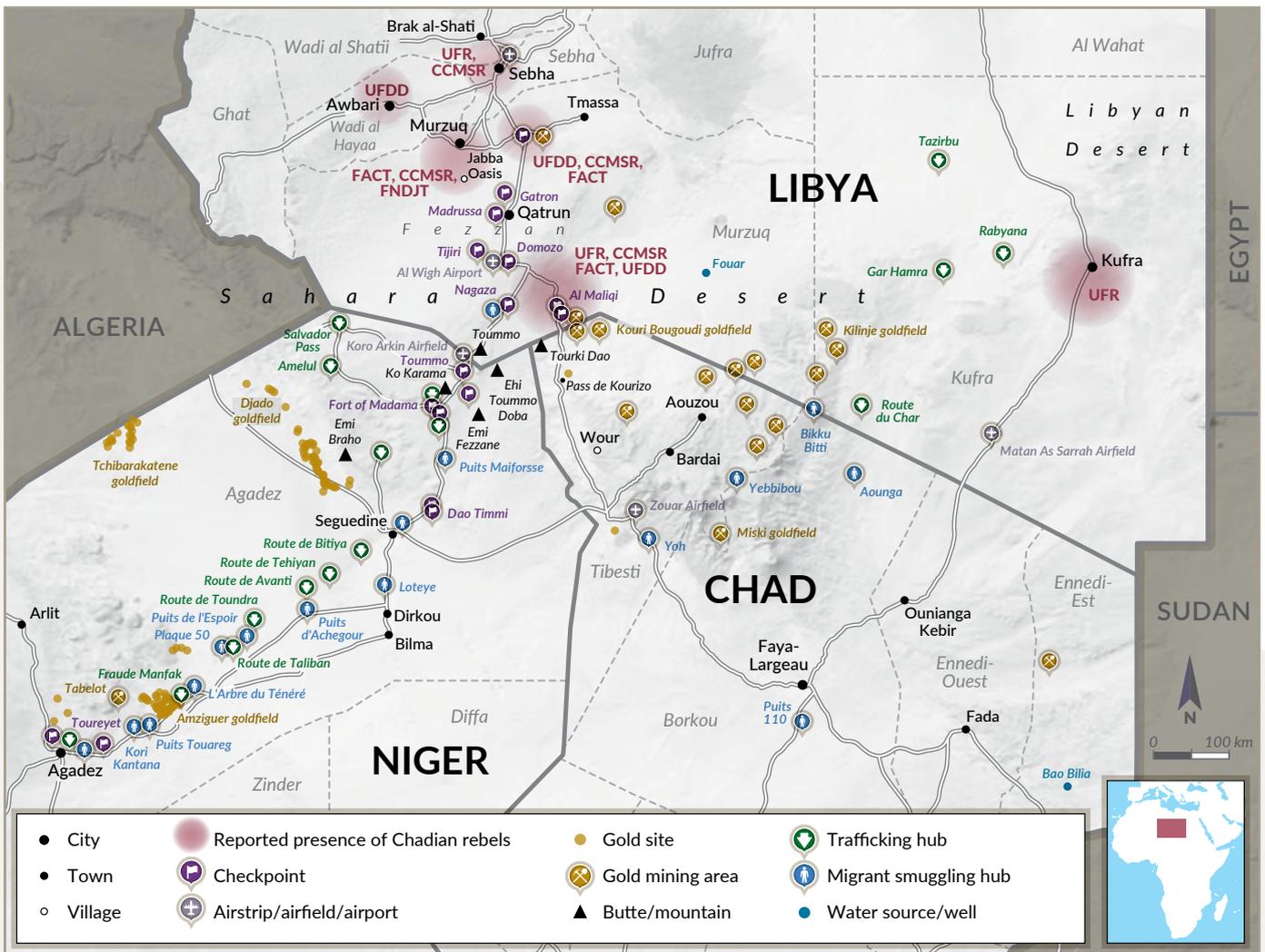


FIGURE 2 Chadian rebel presence in southern Libya, early 2019.

NOTE: Geocoordinates were collated by the GI-TOC between 2018 and 2021.

In Libya's second civil war, Chadian fighters were perceived as key assets.

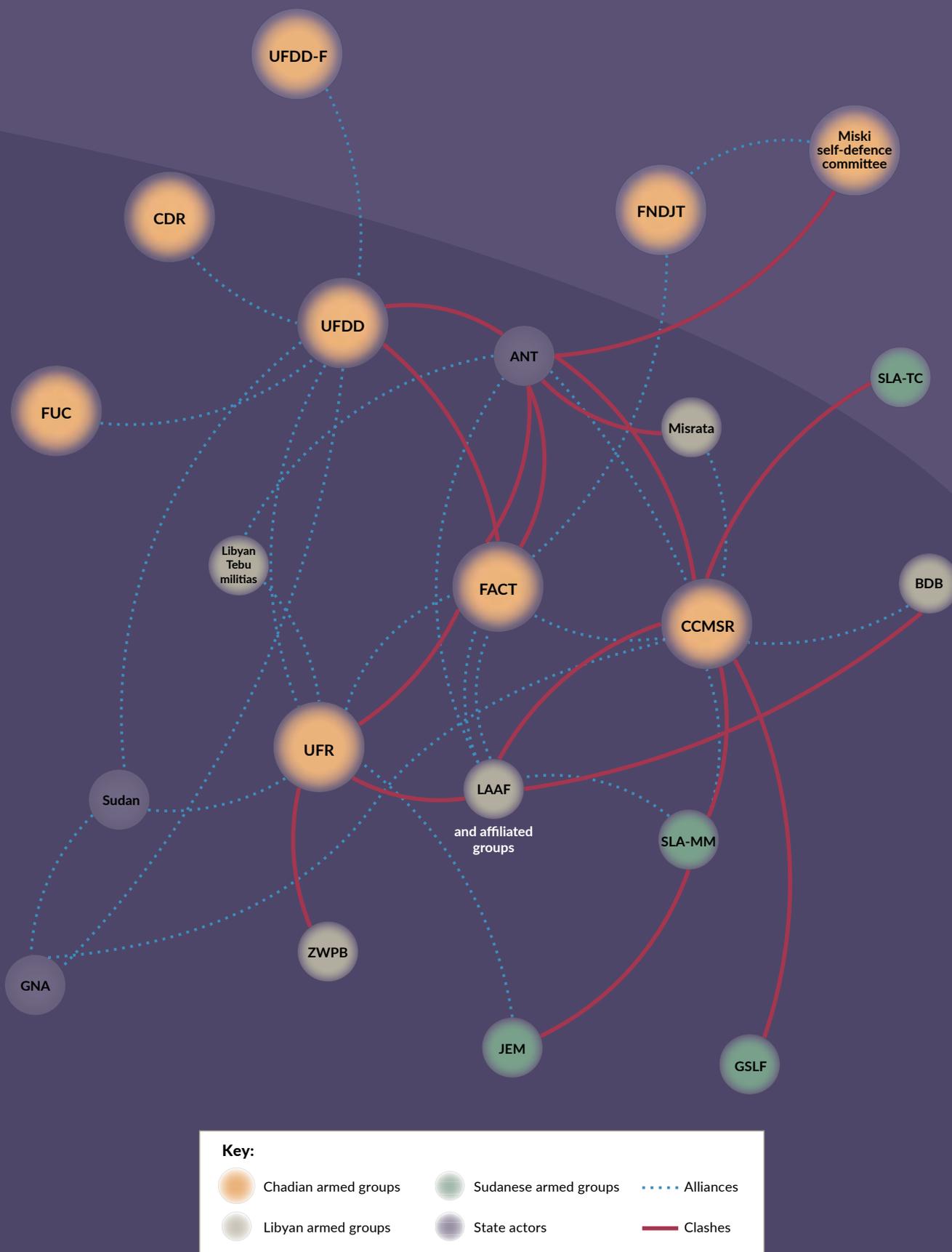
The shift from politically partisan to more purely focused on income generation was perhaps best reflected in Chadian rebel groups' ever-changing alliances in Libya, which were mostly driven by financial rather than political considerations (see 'Network of alliances and clashes of Chadian rebel armed groups in Libya' below). While initially keen to seek alliances with the enemies of Déby's allies, between 2016 and 2017 Chadian armed groups aligned themselves with the highest bidder.²⁵

Many Chadian fighters who were aligned with Haftar later sided with his avowed enemies, the Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB) and the Misratan Third Force.²⁶ For example, the newly formed Chadian rebel group, the CCMSR, under Mahamat Boulmaye, received 40 vehicles from Haftar in June 2016 and, later, reportedly many more from the opposing BDB, which led them to hand over parts of the Oil Crescent to Misratan forces. Some of Boulmaye's fighters later reportedly fought against Haftar at the Tamanhint and Brak al Shati airfields between April and May 2017.²⁷

The dynamic nature of alliances was also illustrated by the FACT's relationship with Haftar's LAAF. Before siding with the LAAF, Mahmat Mahadi Ali, a veteran from the MDJT rebel group and the founder of the FACT, had sided with Misrata, although the relationship became strained from mid-2017, coinciding with the departure of the Misratan Third Force and the arrival of the LAAF in Jufra. The FACT then maintained a neutral role by avoiding confrontation (except with the Islamic State) and controlled areas in Jufra between 2017 and 2018.²⁸ However, this neutrality ended in March 2021 when the FACT's relationship with the Haftar-aligned 128th Brigade became strained over fuel-smuggling revenues. Following this confrontation, the FACT relocated close to the Chad-Libya border area. Later, in September 2021, the LAAF attacked the FACT's based in Tarbou.

The presence of Chadian fighters in Libya became more pronounced in 2019 as the conflict intensified. Their role in supporting both sides in the Oil Crescent in particular showed how they could have a direct impact on both the economy and stability in the country.²⁹ For instance, FACT rebels actively participated in the Tripoli campaign that began in April 2019, siding with the LAAF. CCMSR fighters – who had a force of at least 100 vehicles and 500 men in 2020 – were also active in the intensified conflict post-2019, mostly supporting GNA allied forces.³⁰ The UFDD, with at least 100 fighters, supported both sides in the conflict.³¹

NETWORK OF ALLIANCES AND CLASHES OF CHADIAN REBEL ARMED GROUPS IN LIBYA



NOTE: This mapping is based on incidents reported in the grey literature and therefore may not be representative of all alliances and rifts, which may change. Some alliances and clashes may be missing. A key to the full name of each of the armed groups is set out in the abbreviations and acronyms section.

Trafficking mercenaries

A key dynamic that the GI-TOC monitored during the intensification of the Libyan war in 2019 was the trafficking of migrants – mostly Arabs, and some as young as 13 – recruited across the Sahel region to work as fighters and child soldiers in armed groups active in the wars in Libya and Yemen. The use of child soldiers in Chadian armed groups is not new and had already been the object of an in-depth report by Amnesty International in 2011 and several United Nations Security Council reports in the years that followed.³² Although the deployment of child soldiers in Chadian armed groups seems to have reduced, a decade later it has not stopped. In fact, it has become an important income stream for the armed groups.

Beyond using young men and boys for mercenary work, some Chadian and Libyan armed groups have sought to profit from the transfer of newly recruited fighters in what can be coined a 'transnational mercenary trade'. Faced with the high number of young men looking to join armed groups, some Chadian armed groups in Libya have found transferring new recruits to other armed groups for a fee – especially those from external tribes – to be more profitable than using them as fighters within their ranks, as keeping them would involve more logistical costs tied to feeding, training and lodging fighters.³³



Screenshot taken from a news bulletin showing Chadian Arab migrants intercepted by a Chadian mixed border force along the Chad-Libya border, posted on YouTube on 5 May 2019. *Portail de la Renaissance du Tchad HD, Télé-Tchad*

Chadian armed groups have tended to favour keeping recruits from their own clan or ethnicity within their ranks. Hence the groups are divided along ethnic lines. The CCMSR recruit among Kreda Goran; the FACT among Daza Goran; the UFDD mostly Goran Anakaza, and the UFR mostly recruit among Bideyat Zaghawa.³⁴ As such, selling off surplus fighters to other armed groups, who became increasingly valuable commodities when the Libyan conflict intensified, became more profitable than keeping them as fighters.

The reported involvement of high-ranking rebels in trading fighters has highlighted the importance of this trade within Chadian armed-group revenue streams from the illicit economy. In January 2018, a three-day meeting with high-level members of the CCMSR led to the forced resignation of Mahamat Tahir Acheick, then secretary general of the movement, after members condemned his and Hakimi's apparent involvement in the trade of young Chadian Arabs who sought to join the CCMSR as fighters to other military forces and foreign governments in Libya and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), more of which below.³⁵

The disagreement highlights how some CCMSR fighters have seen mercenary trafficking as immoral, emphasizing the abovementioned rift between ideological and more profit-focused members. Senior commanders in the CCMSR have reportedly directly encouraged the systemic conveying of Arabs from across Chad to southern Libya through regional human smuggling networks in order to profit from the trade.³⁶ They did so by communicating to Arab brokers that there was a high demand for fighters within their ranks. Many recruits were reportedly led to believe that they would join the rebellion but were then transferred to other groups.³⁷

Once the recruits are acquired by the Chadian armed groups, they are then sold to other Libyan armed groups, mostly affiliated to the LAAF. One source claimed that the Libyan 116 Brigade, led by Massoud Jeddi, has reportedly paid for recruits from Chadian armed groups for between 2 000 to 3 000 Libyan dinars (LYD), or €1 280–€1 900, per fighter.³⁸ The source said they then received up to three times more money from the LAAF in Tripolitania for the recruits – between LYD5 000–LYD8 000 (€3 190–€5 110) – when the LAAF were especially in dire need of new recruits for the war.³⁹

Chadian and Libyan armed groups profit from the transfer of newly recruited fighters in a transnational mercenary trade.

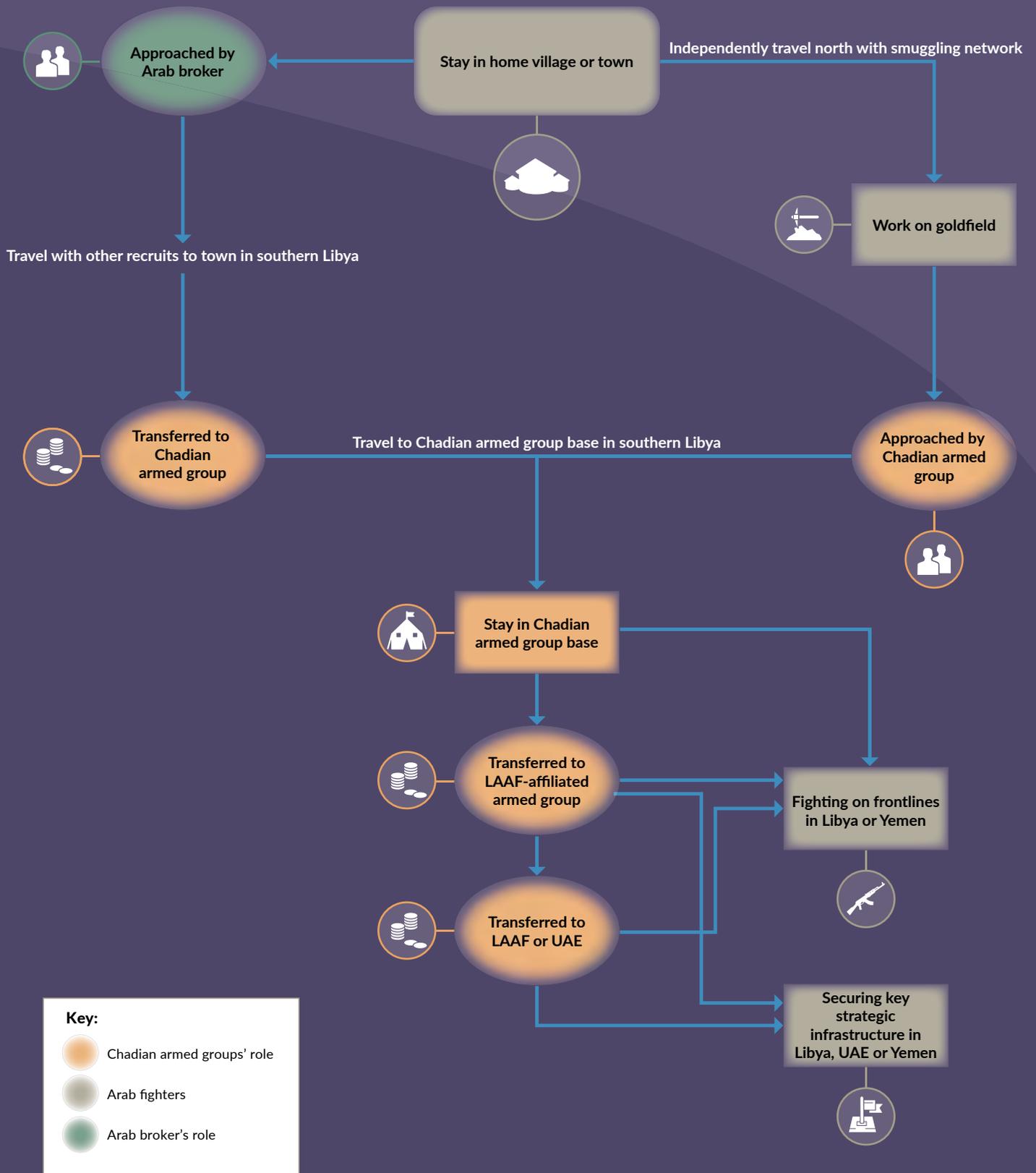
Supplying front line fighters for the UAE in Yemen

While many recruiters have reportedly stemmed from LAAF-affiliated groups, Emirati envoys in Libya are reported to have paid large amounts for mercenaries to fight on behalf of proxies in the war in Yemen.⁴⁰ Prices usually varied between LYD5 000 and LYD8 000 (€3 190–€5 110) but were never higher than LYD10 000 (€6 390) per fighter.⁴¹

Most recruits were flown out directly to the UAE. The airport predominantly used for departures is Kharouba, which is also used as a drone base by the UAE, close to Benghazi, in eastern Libya. The airbase controlled by the 116 Brigade in Tamanhint (near Sebha) has also reportedly been used as both a key gathering and departure point for mercenaries being transported to the UAE. Recruits are also said to be flown out of the many small airstrips in the deserts of central or eastern Libya, such as the Jufra airbase. In other reported cases, some were transported in trucks to Egypt, then onwards to the UAE.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's recruitment of mercenaries in the Sahel is nothing new and has taken place as part of bilateral government agreements both with Chad and Sudan.⁴² In early 2019, a temporary recruitment office was reportedly opened in Nyala, Sudan, for two months by General Mohamed Hamad Dagolo (better known as 'Hemmeti'), who headed the Arab-dominated Rapid Support Forces.⁴³ Some but not all of the recruits were then reportedly sent to Yemen.⁴⁴

RECRUITMENT PROCESS OF ARAB FIGHTERS AND THE ROLE OF CHADIAN ARMED GROUPS



The prices paid by recruiters vary depending on the role of the recruit. Those who man checkpoints or barracks are cheaper and receive less money than those with more combat experience, who would go straight to fight in Tripoli at the height of the war.⁴⁵ The latter often move in groups and can even be provided with an armed vehicle. Some Chadian Arabs, two sources claimed, are also recruited into militias for criminal activities, including for hijacking convoys.⁴⁶ Each vehicle (occupied by four to five people) is reportedly paid around LYD5 000 (€3 190) per job. Others have reportedly only been provided housing and food but can keep part of the loot from attacks. A Darfurian Arab mercenary based in Jufra described his experience:

All migrants are recruited by smugglers from their own country. They take their time to convince them and then they recruit them. You're asked whether you have any experience with a weapon. You get paid LYD2 000 for 15 days if you know how to use a [Kalashnikov]. If there is a battle, they will take you with them. Those who shoot heavy weapons get LYD4 000 (€760) for 15 days.⁴⁷

The degree of agency held by recruits once they have been transferred to groups reportedly varies, with some suggesting it can be difficult to leave once they have joined, seeing themselves forced to take an active role in criminal activities.⁴⁸

Arab young men and boys are particularly vulnerable to recruitment

Chief among mercenary recruits have been Sahelian Arab men and boys, stemming from all over Chad – including Biltine, Abeche, Moundou, Bahr El Gazel and Ati – but also eastern Niger and the Darfur region in Sudan. In early April 2019, a video circulated on social media showing the detention of 180 Sahelian Arabs in Um al-Aranib, Libya, by the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade in cooperation with the Waw Brigade for Border Protection.⁴⁹ Sahelian Arabs in Libyan National Army uniforms were also spotted in a video shared on social media in the first week of May 2019.⁵⁰ The fighters were reportedly fighting in the war in Tripoli.

Since the 1980s, mostly because of a hostile Chadian government under former president Hissène Habré, large numbers of Chadian Arabs left the country, forming important communities in eastern Niger (especially around N'Guigmi), and in large cities of southern Libya – in particular Sebha, Brak al-Shati and Jufra. The fall of Qaddafi in 2011 helped grow the number of Chadian Arabs

in southern Libya, attracted by the prospects of an easy acquisition of Libyan citizenship.

Arab miners⁵¹ have also been in high numbers on the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, straddling the Chad–Libya border. The Tebu and Arabs have maintained cooperative ties in southern Libya – including marrying between communities, which is rare among the tribes in southern Libya.⁵²

As a result, Libyan Mahamid Arabs have benefited from facilitated access through Tebu checkpoints between Qatrun and the south of Murzuq, which are unavoidable routes to access Chad's northern goldfields. The privileged status that Libyan Arabs enjoyed became attractive to other tribes who entertained difficult relations with the Tebu but wanted to invest in artisanal gold mining in northern Chad. Libyan Arabs thus acted as gold miners and transporters for several groups with interests in Kouri Bougoudi, including the Awlad Suleiman, the Gaddadfa, the Magarhas, the Misrati and the Zliten.⁵³

As gold mining became an increasingly unreliable venture since 2018, with the Armée nationale tchadienne (Chadian national army, ANT) interventions to close sites, many Sahelian Arabs have travelled to Libya in search of mercenary work.⁵⁴ Indeed, LAAF-affiliated and Arab-dominated armed groups active in Libya have been looking to recruit from the specific tribe for three main reasons.

First, some Sahelian Arabs have the same skin colour as Libyan Arabs – ideal for concealing the deployment of

mercenary forces within Arab-dominated military forces, such as the LAAF. Secondly, their knowledge of Arabic aids cooperation and coordination on the ground, and makes them easier to train. Third, they make ideal front line fighters because they receive lower salaries than Libyan soldiers, and families in Chad will not be able to demand financial compensation in case of death.

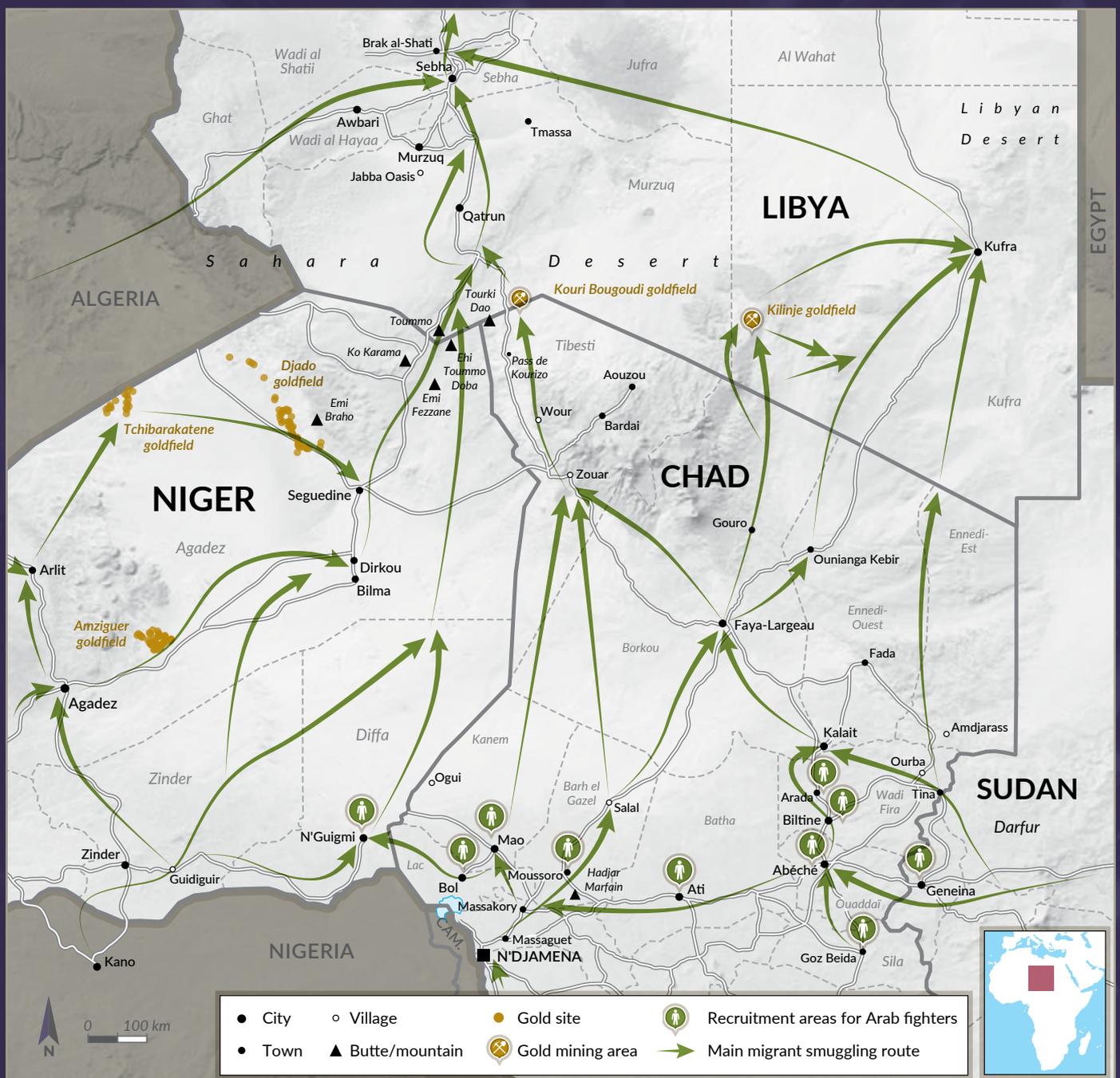


FIGURE 3 Smuggling journeys and recruitment areas for Sahelian Arabs.

Recruitment and smuggling modalities

When smuggling (and in some cases, trafficking) Sahelian Arabs, recruiting brokers – often Libyan Mahamid Arabs based in Sebha or Um al-Aranib – use their family, social and tribal ties in Chad, Niger and Sudan to convince young men and boys to make their way to southern Libya.⁵⁵ Most recruits are aged between 14 and 18 but can go from 13 to 35 years old.⁵⁶

Young men and boys from rural areas make ideal recruits because they are easily deceived and because poor families are inclined to send their children abroad to bring back money. Young men are reportedly often misled during recruitment: some are promised foreign citizenship and documents if they are transferred to an Emirati or Saudi envoy, and others are promised a regular job and citizenship either in Libya or another country.⁵⁷ It is at a later stage when the new recruits realize that they are being sent to battlefields in Yemen or Tripoli.

Once they are recruited, the young men and boys are placed in smuggler vehicles until they reach Libya. They typically travel through regular human smuggling routes that are used by gold miners, as the flow of artisanal gold miners has been often tolerated by security forces manning checkpoints in both Niger and Chad but they have actively sought to stop the flow of mercenaries.⁵⁸ The fact that routes for smuggling or trafficking mercenaries overlay those used by prospective gold miners makes it easier for the convoys to avoid suspicion and harder for security forces to detect them.

In May 2019, a Chadian mixed border force positioned close to the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield intercepted 90 migrants travelling in such a smuggling convoy – most of them young Chadian Arabs – who were making their journey north to Libya.⁵⁹

The Darfurian armed groups Sudan Liberation Army–Minni Minnawi and Justice and Equality Movement have also reportedly recruited in villages and refugee camps in eastern Chad before gathering recruits in Tiné and using human smuggling networks to transport new recruits into Sudan.⁶⁰



PEACETIME DESTABILIZATION

View of the Kouri 17 gold site in Libya. The 2012 gold discovery in the north-west of the country stimulated further migration from Chad to the area. *Photo: GI-TOC*

Post-ceasefire failure to reintegrate rebels

The Chadian government's poor record in reintegrating rebels, together with conflicting statements issued after the 2020 ceasefire in Libya, has undermined trust in DDR processes, as mentioned, with the result that many rebels have maintained their role as criminal and mercenary actors in the region.

During his three decades in power and until his death in April 2021, Déby never agreed to significant resolutions towards reintegrating Chadian fighters in Libya.⁶¹ On 29 August 2021, his son, Mahamat Déby, who currently leads the country as president of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), said Chadian fighters 'should not be allowed to leave the Libyan territory'.⁶² In other messages, however, he reported that rebels who turn themselves in would be welcomed.⁶³

These mixed signals contribute to rebels discrediting any significant attempt at rallying them under the government's wing, including the intra-rebel talks mediated by the Togolese government in Lomé. The talks, which began in April 2021, have involved representatives from the UFR, the CCMSR, the FACT and the FNDJT. At the time of writing, the position of both the rebels and the Chadian government seemed irreconcilable. The representatives of the rebels have been calling for a full amnesty, the release of war and political prisoners, and have refused to recognize the TMC. Interviewed rebels have expressed doubts as to the control of the groups' representatives over fighters on the ground.⁶⁴

The TMC had announced it would rule Chad for 18 months, renewable once, during which they would organize a 'national dialogue', scheduled for December, following which elections would take place. Some rebels have been invited to participate in the dialogue, raising hope that at least some Chadian fighters will be able to return to Chad.⁶⁵ In a significant positive step, 296 rebels and political dissidents who had been sentenced by the government were decreed amnesty on 29 November 2021.⁶⁶

The flaws of the Chadian government's past and ongoing attempts to reintegrate fighters who have surrendered is likely to dissuade many from attempting reintegration. At best, fighters have been reintegrated in low-level ranks within the ANT. Many did not undergo the reintegration process after months of waiting, while others are suspected of having been executed.

The government's reputation has been tarnished by broken promises. After the failure of one of the biggest Chadian rebel incursions in 2008, and the Chad–Sudan entente, many rebel foot soldiers and field commanders stayed in the region in search of new opportunities. Thousands of rebels turned themselves in following government calls for them to join the ranks of the Chadian military, when they were promised 400 000 Central African CFA francs (FCFA), or €610, for each defector and FCFA11 000 000 (€16 750) per vehicle.⁶⁷ In addition to this financial incentive, the July 2010 expulsion



Captured rebels from the FACT (left) and an abandoned UFDD vehicle (right). Flawed reintegration attempts have dissuaded fighters from surrendering to government forces. © Djimet Wiche/AFP via Getty Images; Sonia Rolley via Getty Images

of the UFDD and UFR leaders from Khartoum to Qatar accelerated the surrendering of troops.⁶⁸ By October 2010, some 2 000 UFR rebels had been voluntarily disarmed in al-Fashir, Darfur, surrendering hundreds of vehicles and arms.⁶⁹ Twice as many surrendered the following month.⁷⁰

However, their integration into the ranks of the army did not go as planned. Most surrendering rebels were given a small cash sum to take up civilian life and only a few hundred were incorporated into the army, mostly as low-ranking soldiers regardless of their previous rank or experience.⁷¹ More recently, a former UFR rebel and current gold miner who participated in the UFR's February 2019 incursion into Chad and escaped instead of turning himself in reported that those who surrendered were imprisoned:

Our leaders made the decision to surrender to the government forces. I understood that if we surrendered, things wouldn't go well. That's why I fled. [...] [Those who stayed] were deceived by the government. They had been guaranteed freedom, but upon surrendering, were imprisoned in N'Djamena. To this day, I haven't heard from them.⁷²

Similar dynamics to the situation a decade earlier have been reported following the 2021 surrenders. On 9 March 2021, a month before the FACT's attempted

power grab, a group of Chadian rebels led by Hakimi turned in 90 vehicles and weapons at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield.⁷³ Pursuant to the DDR approach adopted by the Chadian government, the defecting fighters should have joined ANT ranks. However, four Chadian Tebu and Gorane Kreda fighters who were among the men said that this had not occurred. Further, while their leaders had reportedly received large sums to facilitate their surrender, foot soldiers had been left with very little.⁷⁴ According to them, around 800 men, most of them former rebels, are currently in the Berdoba ANT training centre (near the Sudanese border). They have been waiting in the area for three months for their ANT training to begin. Some have reportedly left, because of the precarious conditions, complaining of being poorly fed.⁷⁵ Some civil society organizations in Chad have also reported that they suspected that four FACT rebel commanders, who surrendered after their failed attack on N'Djamena in April 2021, were later executed in detention.⁷⁶

Overall, these failed experiences of reintegration, which are readily shared on social media, have discouraged Chadian fighters from surrendering to government forces and has prompted many to maintain and consolidate their role as actors in the criminal economy of the central Sahara.

Consolidating engagement in regional criminal economies

Chadian armed groups have exploited several key revenue streams to help them financially sustain their rebellion. These include mercenary work in Libya for both the LAAF and the GNA, ad hoc funding from the Chadian diaspora and involvement in illicit markets. According to interviews conducted by the GI-TOC, these include drug trafficking, cars and arms smuggling, human smuggling and illicit gold extraction in northern Chad.⁷⁷ Involvement has been both direct – by undertaking smuggling or trafficking activities themselves – or indirect, by preying upon or escorting actors involved in these illicit economies transiting the Chad–Niger–Libya triangle.



Chadian rebel fighters believed to be from the FACT.

Photo: Social media

Since May 2020, when the LAAF lost the strategic al-Wattiya airbase and the fall of the city of Tarhouna in June 2020, which led to the October 2020 ceasefire, the number of security incidents in northern Niger and Chad, mostly involving armed clashes over smuggling convoys, has considerably increased, with perpetrators holding the profile of Chadian fighters.⁷⁸ Although it is difficult to accurately count these incidents, dozens of interviewees

from the region have reported the increase. Several attributed it to the return of Chadian and Sudanese armed groups to bases in the Fezzan after the war, and their increased presence at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield.⁷⁹ These bases are very close to the trans-Saharan smuggling routes of drugs, cars and people.

Between 2015 and 2020, increased insecurity on Sahelian routes made them less attractive to drug trafficking networks.⁸⁰ Sahelian routes are known to have played a diminished role in the West African cocaine trade during this period, both because of increased security presence and attacks by armed bandits on drug convoys, making the trade riskier for traffickers.⁸¹ Other well-established smuggling economies, such as human smuggling, have also been affected by the presence of Chadian fighters, making them more dangerous for local populations, international migrants and gold miners travelling through them.

On 13 January 2021, 12 Pakistani migrants were kidnapped by Chadian Zaghawa fighters while travelling from Nigeria to Libya through Niger.⁸² This was the first reported kidnapping incident by Chadian fighters in over two years of GI-TOC monitoring of migration and human smuggling patterns through the country and is an example of the capacity for Chadian fighters to intervene in areas relatively far from the Tibesti region and southern Libya. The Chadian fighters ambushed the vehicle transporting the migrants near the Arbret du Ténéré, 240 kilometres east of Agadez, on a remote route used by smugglers operating between Nigeria and Libya through Niger.

The smuggler and two migrants were killed while the remaining 10 migrants were taken hostage by the armed group, which subsequently contacted

the migrants' *coxeur* (broker) in Agadez asking for a ransom of FCFA10 million (€15 245) per migrant for their release. The bandits eventually abandoned the remaining 10 migrants, who were found in Chad on 13 April by the ANT, stranded in the deserted mountain Emir Goukouni on the Chad–Niger border.⁸³ This episode highlights the geographic reach of Chadian fighters, operating 860 kilometres into Nigerien territory, and is just one example of how the groups can become increasingly opportunistic in their diversification of criminal revenue streams.

Illicit economic activity is likely to grow following the pattern observed over the past 18 months. On the one hand, Chadian fighters are more likely to get involved directly or indirectly in smuggling and trafficking opportunities and, on the other, they are also positioned to increasingly disrupt the involvement

of other illicit actors operating in the region through predatory attacks. The continued lack of state presence in the Niger–Chad–Libya tri-border area further enables this dynamic.

The ability of Chadian armed groups to draw on revenues from mercenary activities and illicit markets, and reinvest these in weapons and vehicles, has enabled them to bounce back from defeats and attempts to disband them. It has enabled them to entrench themselves in the political economy of the Niger–Chad–Libya tri-border area, fuelling the growth of illicit markets and posing a threat to the medium- and long-term stability and governability there. Given the economic and sociopolitical interconnectedness of the region, the implications of Chadian armed groups' entrenchment in this area emanate far beyond it, affecting the development of the central Sahel more broadly.

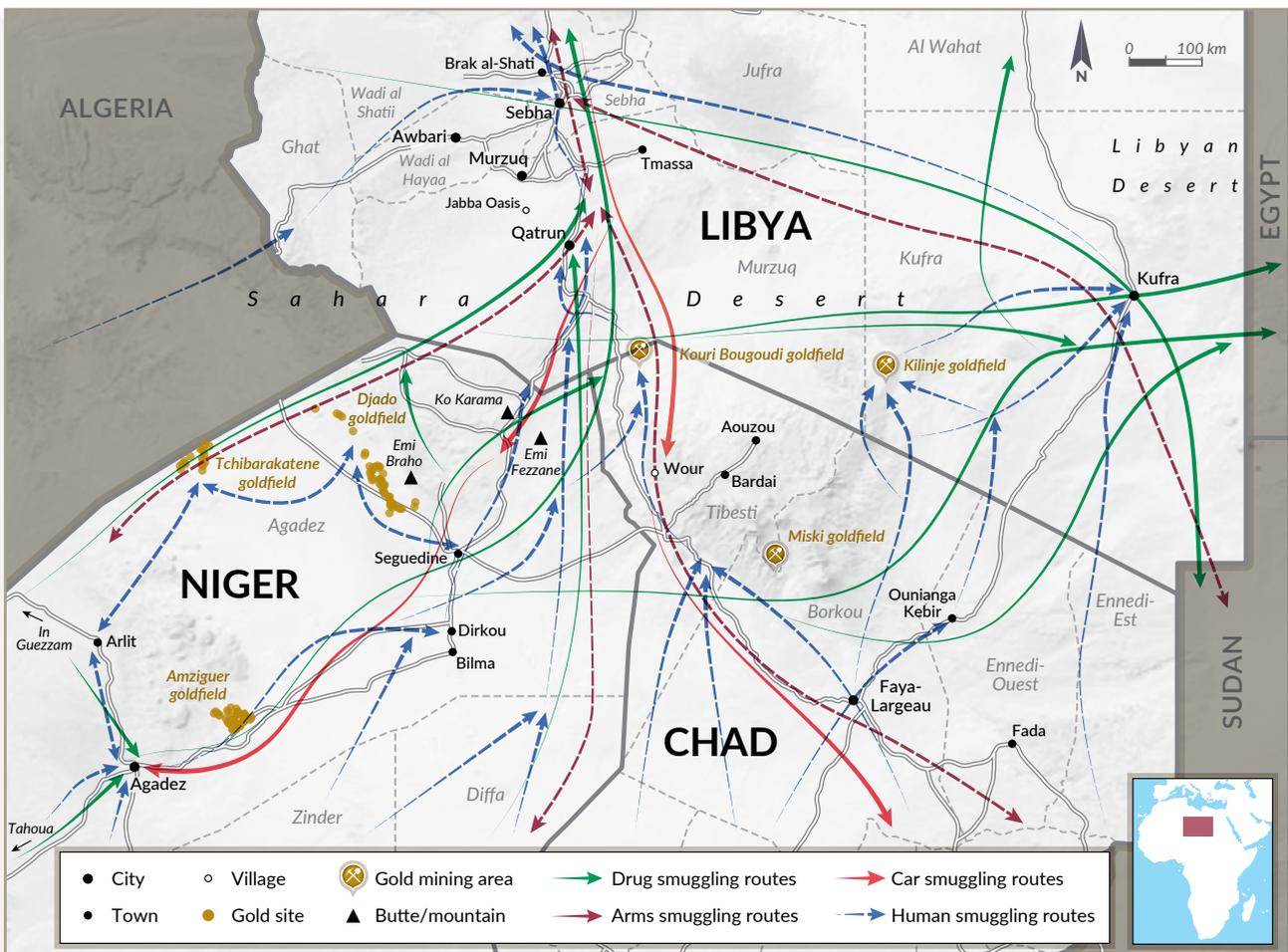


FIGURE 4 Smuggling flows in the Chad–Niger–Libya triangle, August 2021.

Illicit gold mining

The perceived lifestyle of rebels, including their apparent access to easy money, vehicles and weapons, which came with mercenary work in Libya, has been a key factor in driving migration and stimulating recruitment into Chadian armed groups since 2013.⁸⁴ On social media, pictures of modern vehicles and houses in southern Libya's largest towns stimulated an emigration of youths from Chad.⁸⁵ This, in turn, fuelled the human smuggling economies between Chad and Libya. In addition, in 2012 gold was discovered in the north-west of the country in the goldfields of Miski and Kouri Bougoudi, which, compounded by the increasing price of gold, stimulated further migration from across Chad to the area.⁸⁶

Many young Chadians sold their belongings or sought support from friends and family to fund their journey north and invest into gold-mining equipment. A significant proportion of these failed to make a return on their investment, given the unpredictability of gold yields. This further motivated them to find alternative economic opportunities.

Several Chadian rebel armed groups, such as the FACT and the CCMSR, capitalized on this opportunity to generate funds from actors involved in gold mining, and draft recruits from among failed and disappointed miners. Both groups adopted a system of *lajna* ('committee' in Arabic), typically 12-man groups tasked with collecting funds gained from illicit gold mining and recruiting new fighters at gold sites. The committee is usually made up of civilians who tend to be more educated and enjoy a high rank, usually reporting back directly to field commanders.⁸⁷

Lajna members visit specific goldfields on a bi-weekly or monthly basis to collect contributions from key gold-site owners and businessmen who sponsor the rebellion. These contributions are recorded by the *lajna* to incentivize donations, as donors hope that they will be given beneficial contracts should the group gain political power in N'Djamena.⁸⁸



Left and above, the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, January 2021. Photo: GI-TOC



A hospital tent in Kouri Bougoudi. Photo: GI-TOC

Lajna committee members are also tasked with recruiting young men on goldfields to join the rebellion. Committee members tend to travel separately to goldfields across the Sahel-Sahara where there is a Chadian presence, including as far as Tchibarakatene and Djado in Niger. During their travel, they are typically accompanied by a young Chadian ‘officer’ in the relevant rebel group, dressed in civilian attire, who acts as an ambassador and answers the questions of potential recruits.

These trips are usually informed by contacts in the goldfields, either gold-site owners or shop owners, who scout potential recruits and gauge interest locally. Once there are enough interested recruits, the *lajna* member will make a trip to the goldfield and hold informal interviews with potential recruits. They then transport enrolled members (usually 5 to 10 young men) back to southern Libya (typically Sebha or Jufra), free of charge, where recruits undergo basic training that usually lasts between 45 days to three months.⁸⁹ An ex-Sudan Liberation Army rebel from Darfur, who is currently a restaurant owner in Tina, explained how he believed gold mining contained insecurity in the area:

I have always wondered what would have happened if not for the discovery of gold. I think that without the discovery of mines all over the Sahara, there would be no activity that could contain the rebels. Because today [most] rebels live from gold, either directly or indirectly, by transporting gold miners or selling products in the gold mining area, just like me. If gold mining did not exist, I think many would have become bandits. This does not mean that there are currently no bandits. Some rebels have become bandits, traffickers of drugs, weapons, vehicles, fuel, transporters of migrants, etc. There are also those who have become migrants among the rebels.⁹⁰

Instead of curtailing rebel revenue streams, the Chadian government’s approaches have centred on waging a war against illicit gold mining. This has paradoxically fuelled recruitment into armed groups, as disgruntled gold miners seek opportunities elsewhere. Despite repeated crackdowns on the Kouri Bougoudi and Miski goldfields, the ANT has failed to make any progress in securing and controlling the goldfields.⁹¹

Testimonies of former gold miners turned rebels

'I left N'Djamena in 2016, borrowing money from my uncle to travel and buy a metal detector [...]. [I left] to help my parents financially and to pay off my debts. I worked for two years in several gold sites in Kouri Bougoudi and sometimes found a few grams of gold – just enough to survive, nothing more. When I was [there] I made friends who had shops in the markets, I would tell them my problems and that I was interested in joining the groups in Libya, without knowing much about them. They put me in touch with two young men from Libya with links to armed groups. They took me for free to Libya [...] and I stayed in their house in Sebha for a few days before I joined a group. We were in an old, abandoned house close to the military airport in Sebha. I was with other youth like me, and we were taught how to handle weapons and to shoot. [...] Then we joined different commands where we were part of internal combats, with no knowledge of why we were fighting, and when we came back, we received money and some free time under supervision. After some time [...] I was moved from one group to the other, like others. Some found themselves in other Libyan cities with the Arabs, and others, like me, were in the rebellion. I was first with the FACT and then with the CCMSR before I had a chance to escape in February 2020. [...] I'm in Murzuq now, I'm an accountant in a gas station.'

Chadian Goran, former FACT and CCMSR rebel

'Since 2016, I have been working in Kouri Bougoudi, in the gold mines. I was not a simple worker because I had a car, a metal detector and some people who worked for me. [...] The Chadian government does not let us work as we want. They're making our lives tough. In their attempts to empty the place of gold miners, they regularly seize metal detectors and vehicles. This is how I fell victim to the government in 2018. On a visit to Tina, the soldiers seized my car and my [detector]. They took everything I had collected for years, under the pretext that gold mining is prohibited, and I was left with nothing. So I decided to join the rebellion against the Chadian government.'

Chadian Zaghawa, UFR rebel and former gold miner



Chadian fighters are directly involved in the central Sahara's migrant-smuggling trade. © Torsten Pursche via Shutterstock

Human smuggling and trafficking

Chadian armed groups have engaged with the human smuggling economy in the Sahel-Saharan in two main ways. The first is through their involvement in the systematic conveying of new fighters to southern Libya by encouraging new fighters to join and spreading the message that new recruits are needed. The second is through the direct involvement of current and former Chadian fighters as drivers of trucks transporting migrants and as migrant-smuggling brokers. Chadian fighters are particularly well placed for the function, as it is very dangerous given the predatory nature of certain armed groups in the region.

While it is difficult to quantify, interviewees report that there have been an increasing number of former

Chadian fighters involved in the human smuggling economy both in northern and in eastern Chad since 2020.⁹² Notably, the trade was not affected by COVID-19-related travel restrictions.⁹³

Being well developed in the central Sahara, the human smuggling and trafficking economies offer one of the most viable sources of revenue for fighters looking for alternative income streams, which Chadian fighters can easily leverage, given their access to vehicles and weapons acquired as mercenaries in Libya. Given their easy access to weapons and war-time experiences, there is a risk that the influx of Chadian fighters will bring increasing violence.

In most cases, migrants who engage the services of smugglers are brought to their destination and can work on gold sites where they are paid a fee for the gold they produce. Once they have made enough money, they either continue their journey to Libya or return to their communities.⁹⁴ The cost of the journey from Abeche to Libya or Kouri Bougoudi typically ranges between FCFA75 000 and FCFA150 000 (€114–€230) but can increase in times of government crackdowns.⁹⁵ This is payable in full at the beginning of the journey, or half at the beginning and upon arrival.

If migrants decide to travel on credit, however, their debt is bought by a gold-site owner who then pays the migrant smuggler for the journey. This debt can range from FCFA2 million to FCFA5 million (€3 050–€7 620).⁹⁶ Migrants who travel with a 'guarantee' – either friends or family who live on the goldfield – have a lower chance of being further exploited after repaying their debt through mining work. Zaghawa, Tebu and Goran groups are more likely to have acquaintances on the mines, making miners from these communities less subject to exploitation. However, communities with a smaller presence on goldfields, such as East Africans, especially from Ethiopia or Eritrea, and Chadians from the Tama, Mimi, Hadjaray or Nouba Sudanese communities are particularly vulnerable.⁹⁷



Migrants transiting northern Chad. Photo: Social media

The lines between human smuggling and trafficking in the gold-mining sector of the Tibesti are blurred, as explained by a Chadian Zaghawa migrant smuggler on the Tiné–Kouri Bougoudi axis who was a member of three different rebel groups:

There are rogue transporters who sell migrants to Libyans or to owners of wells in gold mines, who force the migrants to work against their will. But the terms ‘sell’, ‘buy’ or ‘slave’ are not used. We say, ‘employees of such’, or ‘workers of’, etc. [...] In the beginning, the migrant is willing, as he does not have the money to finance his trip. The smuggler tells him that he has a brother in the gold mine of such and such or in Libya, and offers to bring

him there for free and work with the brother. The migrant accepts and is sold to the brother, and [starts working to pay off his money’s worth]. But after a while, he asks his employer that now he has worked enough, whether he can get his salary to continue on the journey. [The employer] answers that his work does not even cover the food and water that he consumes, because he is the one responsible for the migrant’s basic needs. So the migrant always works to pay for that and he cannot leave, because he has a debt owed to his employer who, in fact, becomes his owner. Even if he allows him to leave, he can’t go anywhere without money and someone to protect him. He will even be captured by other people who will sell him back.⁹⁸

Beyond the risks linked to exploitation upon arrival at the goldfield, migrants travelling on routes to Libya incur considerable risks on the journey, due to potential vehicle breakdowns and attacks by bandits and traffickers. Although traffickers tend to travel from west to east while migrant smugglers move from south to north,⁹⁹ journeys can cross, especially when migrant smugglers decide to take more remote routes, taken by drug traffickers, to avoid security forces.¹⁰⁰ Although some migrant smugglers can become drug traffickers, both groups usually entertain links of mistrust, and can even arm themselves to ensure their protection, as a Chadian Zaghawa migrant smuggler and ex-rebel explained:

All smugglers have weapons. Sometimes we bury our weapons and take GPS coordinates when approaching a checkpoint and then we bypass to unearth our weapons. Even if we suddenly come across a patrol of [security forces], we will have time to hide our weapons. [...] While the driver is talking with them, trying to waste time, the [passengers] will pretend to [go urinate] and at the same time hide the weapons. Usually there is always an assistant driver [apprentice] who takes care of this.¹⁰¹



A Tebu nomad in the Ehi Atroun sand flats, Chad.

© Franz Aberham

Escorting, intercepting and trafficking drugs

One of the most lucrative criminal economies that Chadian fighters have been involved in is drug trafficking, mostly of cannabis resin – and, to a lesser extent, cocaine. Although a dip in use of trans-Saharan routes from Mali to Libya through northern Niger by drug traffickers was observed between 2015 and 2020, stakeholders engaged in the trade have reported a degree of resurgence since the first quarter of 2020.¹⁰² This resurgence was attributed by stakeholders to the decreased footfall on Sahelian routes due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, which reportedly made the area more navigable for traffickers.¹⁰³ With fewer migrant smugglers operating, the risk of being spotted – and intercepted – reportedly decreases. Further, the July 2019 withdrawal of the French Barkhane forward base in the Fort of Madama has reportedly also facilitated drug trafficking through the Niger–Libya corridor, especially around the Salvador Pass (a day's drive from the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield) and routes circumventing the Toummo crossing (about half a day's drive from the

goldfield),¹⁰⁴ French troops had been posted in Madama since late 2014, and although their primary concern was to fight jihadist networks they had also targeted arms and drug convoys, though prioritizing those they suspected of having ties to jihadists.¹⁰⁵

Although Chadian fighters can transport the drugs themselves, escorting drug traffickers through northern Niger, northern Chad and southern Libya can earn fighters up to around €5 000 per journey, and hijacking them can earn up to six times that through sale of the seized goods.¹⁰⁶ Traffickers tend to buy new vehicles for journeys to reduce the risks of breakdown and adopt routes that have low footfall to avoid altercations with other convoys.¹⁰⁷

The locations of the bases of Chadian fighters in the desert south of Murzuq and close to the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield have made them ideal for preying upon high-value drug convoys running through the Salvador Pass and east of the Toummo crossing. Chadian fighters will leave their base for weeks at a time to follow the tracks of drug traffickers or monitor a given location following a tip-off. A Chadian Zaghawa fighter who is a former rebel and current drug trafficker and bandit described the methods that were generally used to intercept high-value drug convoys:

There are accomplices among the convoy who give information to the *coupeurs de route* [bandits]. You can't just stay in the desert hoping to run into the [drug] convoy. [They] change route almost every trip. You [need] an informant either with them or with those who collaborate with them, such as those who sell them fuel. [...] Those who work blindly are amateurs and they have little chance of coming across the traffickers. Even if they meet the traffickers, it is very difficult for them to get their goods because they have not been prepared properly and the traffickers are professionals too.¹⁰⁸

An example of these dynamics occurred in June 2020, when at least 13 Chadian Zaghawa fighters travelling in a six-vehicle convoy reportedly died after being attacked by Libyan Tebu armed bandits close to the Salvador Pass.¹⁰⁹ Demonstrating cyclical changes in roles adopted by Chadian youth, most of the fighters had travelled to Libya in December 2019 to fight as mercenaries in LAAF-affiliated groups, before returning

to Kouri Bougoudi in April 2020 where they began gold-mining operations. They used the gold sites as a base to become engaged in drug trafficking activities.

Another recent example occurred on 6 November 2021, when two drug trafficking groups clashed around the Salvador Pass. Chadian Goran Anakaza traffickers based in Qatron were transporting cannabis resin that they had picked up in Amelul before they were attacked by Chadian Zaghawa traffickers in the Salvador Pass. The Goran traffickers reportedly repelled the attack, losing four men, while their opponents reportedly lost at least a dozen.¹¹⁰

The UFR has also reportedly been involved in trafficking drugs and attacking drug traffickers in the Kufra region. In early 2015, the UFR sold drugs from a convoy they had hijacked for US\$11 million with which they bought 15 armed vehicles in Libya and Sudan.¹¹¹

Smuggling vehicles

Chadian rebels, and former rebels, play a pivotal role transporting stolen vehicles to markets in Kouri Bougoudi and eastern Chad. A Chadian Zaghawa car smuggler who sells Libyan cars in eastern Chad interviewed in July 2021 explained that after hiring Tebu drivers to transport his vehicles through checkpoints guarded by Tebu militias between Murzuq, in southern Libya, and Kouri Bougoudi, he then hired Zaghawa drivers, especially former Chadian fighters, to conduct the rest of the journey from Kouri Bougoudi to eastern Chad. He added: '[Former Chadian fighters] are not difficult to find in the area because rebel movements are crumbling and the Chadian government does not pay the military like they should, and they are starting to defect and do other activities that gain more money.'¹¹²



Smuggled cars for sale close to Kouri Bougoudi, 2021. The rebel's face has been blurred for anonymity. *Photo: GI-TOC*

Violence underpins the car smuggling trade, making Chadian fighters and former fighters a good fit for the business. Another Zaghawa car smuggler confirmed that many car smugglers and drivers on routes between Kouri Bougoudi and Libya were Tebu or Goran ex-rebels:

To [smuggle cars], you need to be armed and know how to defend yourself in case you are attacked, because the route between Libya and Kouri Bougoudi is very dangerous. Rebels or former rebels are best placed to have weapons and know how to defend themselves. [...] In this business, you always need to be careful, because you can be sold a car and then you get it stolen through force. [...] Once, we were three car traders who had 10 cars between us and we were ambushed. We believe that the ambush was organized by one of the clients who sold us the cars. Thankfully, we were prepared and could repel the attack.¹¹³

The price of smuggled vehicles in Kouri Bougoudi reportedly depends more on the danger associated with the vehicle than on its make.¹¹⁴ Sellers classify vehicles as legitimately bought or stolen – *kiri* in Zaghawa language. Most vehicles in Kouri Bougoudi tend to be *kiri*, and their price is set according to several criteria. Firstly, the distance of the location of the theft (with farther distances selling for higher prices). Secondly, the time that has lapsed since the theft (with longer times reaching higher prices). 'Cold' vehicles were stolen a long time ago, whereas 'hot' vehicles were stolen more recently. Finally, the same qualifiers are used to describe the profile of the stolen vehicle's owner. Vehicles stolen from Tebu and Zaghawa owners are considered 'hot' while those owned by Tama, 'cold'. Vehicles from people who have just arrived at the goldfield are 'cold', while those belonging to a known trafficker would be 'very hot'. Stolen vehicles for which the owner was killed tend to be more expensive, as the risk of retribution is lower.

Many car smugglers use the vehicles to transport other contraband, especially small arms and light weapons (pistols, Kalashnikov-type weapons and ammunition) from Libya to Chad and Darfur.¹¹⁵ On the way back from Darfur to Libya, heavy machine guns such as the DShK (often referred to as Dushka or Doska) tend to be smuggled.¹¹⁶ Transporting such commodities is very dangerous if caught by Chadian security forces while transiting northern Chad, making Chadian ex-fighters ideally placed and key actors in this trade.

Chadian rebels play a pivotal role transporting stolen vehicles to markets in Kouri Bougoudi and eastern Chad.

Engaging in Sahelian conflict

Although Chadian fighters were key components as mercenaries within the Libyan war, they were ultimately disposable, which is also why they were so attractive as a mercenary force.¹¹⁷ In southern Libyan cities, Chadian fighters (who are mostly dark-skinned and recognizably foreign) are all perceived as the same by locals, most often under the label 'bandit', whether they are part of politically driven groups or not. Hunting armed bandits has been a way for Libyan militias to gain legitimacy with local Libyan populations by taking up 'policing' roles and securing areas. Removing the force would therefore be a political quick win for both the GNA and the LAAF, seeking to gain legitimacy and control in the south of Libya.

The Tebu- and Arab-dominated Khalid Bin Walid Brigade came into prominence in October 2018 when locals in Um al-Aranib, which had become one of the epicentres of crime in post-Qaddafi southern Libya, had grown tired of the insecurity caused by Chadian and Sudanese fighters in their town. The brigade, alongside other Tebu-dominated militia groups, engaged in a hunt for 'foreign', 'criminal' armed groups who had temporarily fled to neighbouring Chad and Niger.¹¹⁸ Another instance of anti-Chadian sentiment occurred in January 2019, when the Libyan office of the attorney general issued an arrest warrant for 22 Chadians, citing their involvement in robberies, kidnappings and killings in 2018 targeting Libyans in the south. Many of the names in the list were Chadian rebel leaders.¹¹⁹



The Tibesti region, Chad. Increasing pressure from Libya has incited incursions into the country by Chadian armed groups. © Franc Aberham

Eyeing N'Djamena: Incursion risks

Growing awareness that Libya will not be a safe haven in the long term has prompted incursions into Chad by Chadian armed groups, both for political reasons but also because of growing pressure in Libya. Two incursions into Chad – in February 2019 by the UFR and April 2021 by the FACT – illustrate this dynamic.

The February 2019 incursion by the UFR was reportedly partly prompted by the fear that the rebels would have to fight Haftar's LAAF, which was expanding its presence

in southern Libya.¹²⁰ Timane Erdimi, the UFR's leader, explained why UFR forces made the incursion:

Haftar is Déby's ally; if he decides to wipe out the south, he will wipe us out too. We cannot afford to fight Déby in Chad and Haftar in Libya, so we need to focus on Déby. [...] The logic of a rebellion is to intervene. A movement should not stay confined to [the war of another country] [...] or a territory, to receive more material; we have enough material.¹²¹

The incursion was eventually stopped by French aircraft bombings between 3 and 6 February 2019. About half of the rebel convoy were reportedly killed in these bombings, according to a statement issued by the French Ministry for Armed Forces.¹²² The Direction générale de service de sécurité des institutions de l'État, Déby's praetorian guard, was then sent to surround rebel fighters on the ground, some of whom surrendered on 5 February.¹²³ Others, who had sheltered from the bombings in a cave, surrendered a few days later. The Chadian government claimed to have captured 250 rebels, but the number is more likely 170.¹²⁴ This represented significant damage to the UFR, which, before the incursion, had an estimated 200 to 500 fighters, supported by about 70 vehicles.¹²⁵

In the April 2021 incursion, at least 1 000 FACT fighters based in southern Libya entered Chad by the Kourzo Pass in their first incursion into the country since the group's creation in 2016.¹²⁶ The offensive was timed to coincide with presidential elections, which saw

Déby re-elected with 80% of the votes to a sixth term, a foregone conclusion before the polls had started.¹²⁷ However, the political context in Libya and the growing awareness that post-war Libya would cease to be a safe haven for Chadian groups were likely key factors in prompting the decision to lead an incursion into Chadian territory.¹²⁸ This was the most serious rebel challenge to Chad's government since February 2008 and indirectly led to Déby's death in the field, although his true cause of death remains disputed.¹²⁹ The rebels were pushed back by the ANT in Kanem and retreated to southern Libya a week later.¹³⁰

These two incursions suggest that the increasing presence of a governing force in southern Libya may translate into more cross-border incursions by Chadian armed groups. The strong political nature of some Chadian armed groups could prompt attempts to seize power or attack government targets in Chad.

Since June 2021, the LAAF has been deploying additional security forces to the Fezzan and conducting an unusually high number of security operations, including against armed bandits.¹³¹ On 14 September 2021, airstrikes claimed by the LAAF hit the FACT base in Tarbou (55 kilometres east of Um al-Aranib), called Jabba.¹³² At least five FACT commanders were killed in the attack. Ground forces of Zaghawa Chadian and Sudanese fighters also reportedly attacked the base following the airstrikes.¹³³



- ▲ UFR vehicles, undated. *Photo: Social media*
- ◀ Chadian army members during an operation against rebels in Ziguey, Chad, April 2021. © Abdoulaye Adoum Mahamat/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Faced with growing pressure from Libya, Chadian fighters could be forced to seek new bases elsewhere, in northern Niger and Chad, which both the Chadian and Nigerien governments have struggled to govern in the past. The difficult terrain of the north-western region of the Tibesti in particular, and its positioning at a crossroads of the key trafficking routes that transit the Sahel, could make the region attractive for rebel groups to set up base and risks making the region a persistent grey area outside of state control, which could be used as a projection platform for armed groups operating there.

The failure of the Chadian military to control the Miski area since 2018, said to have the most gold in the Tibesti, is a good indicator of how challenging removing Chadian fighters from the Tibesti could be.¹³⁴ A 'self-defence committee' in Miski composed of veteran rebels resisted Chadian ground and air offenses for almost two years, as they opposed government-led industrial extraction of gold from their area. The rebel group MDJT also made the Tibesti their stronghold in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹³⁵ As such, the Tibesti's role as an epicentre of crime and instability looks set to grow further should rebels relocate their bases to the region. As seen in Mali, where conflict has spread regionally from the north of the country, localized regional instability can lead to the destabilization of a whole state and region.¹³⁶

Fuelling local armed responses

Spreading insecurity from the Tibesti towards the active migrant routes in northern Niger means there is a risk smugglers will self-arm to counter the new challenges they face. This raises the likelihood of an arms race in the central Sahara, given the security void left by Nigerien and Chadian security forces' lack of control over the area.

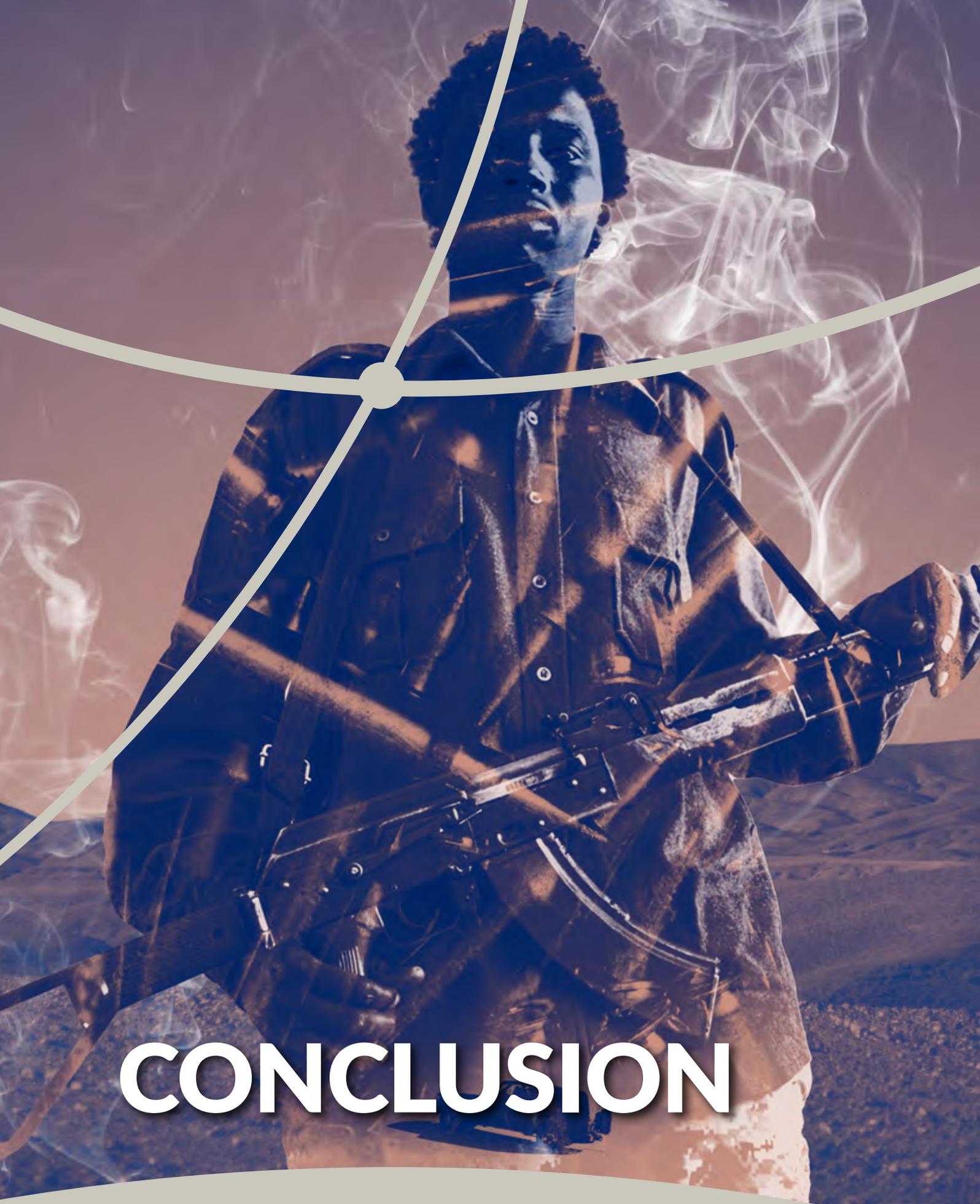
The Nigerien army has been reluctant to patrol beyond established checkpoints or to pursue groups of Chadian Zaghawa bandits following attacks on Tebu smugglers. The army is constrained by deficient vehicles, equipment and personnel, with some officers complaining that the Chadian fighters had better

equipment and more war experience than Nigerien soldiers posted in the area.¹³⁷ For example, in April 2021, two Tebu smugglers travelling between Agadez and Libya were shot and killed by Zaghawa bandits in a presumed vehicle theft attempt.¹³⁸ Tebu armed men seeking to pursue the perpetrators asked for support from the Nigerien military, which was refused. They therefore proceeded to form a ten-vehicle pursuit convoy with no state support.

As demonstrated in this incident, the security void created by the Nigerien army's reluctance to engage the growing threat from Chadian groups has encouraged local militias to mobilize as 'self-defence' vigilante groups. In July 2021, in response to growing insecurity in the region,¹³⁹ a group of Nigerien, Chadian and Libyan Tebu armed men announced that they would mobilize to protect travellers transiting the desert regions of Niger, Chad and Libya.¹⁴⁰ They said they had observed for some time repeated attacks against Tebu transiting the tri-border area and accused the Zaghawa-dominated ANT and Nigerien security forces of failing to provide safety for locals transiting the region, accusing them of being accomplices to the bandits.

Many of the attacks by Chadian bandits on smuggling convoys in northern Niger and Chad have taken place along ethnic lines, as seen in other ethnically divided practices by the Chadian groups. A former Zaghawa rebel in the Kreda Goran-dominated CCMSR rebel group said that the CCMSR fighters regularly made raids on the Kouri Bougoudi goldfields to steal vehicles belonging to gold miners.¹⁴¹ During such incidents, they would ensure that the owner of the vehicle was not from their own ethnic Goran, and reportedly favoured stealing those from Zaghawa gold miners.¹⁴² These incidents regularly catalyze tit-for-tat ethnic reprisals in the Kouri Bougoudi goldfields.¹⁴³

With the increased involvement of Chadian armed groups in criminal economies in the region, this propensity towards such tactics risks fuelling increased conflict along ethnic lines, driving larger-scale violence and retaliatory attacks, as has already been seen in the goldfields straddling the Chad–Libya border.¹⁴⁴



CONCLUSION



Since the October 2020 ceasefire agreement in Libya, Chadian fighters have entrenched themselves further in the illicit economies of the central Sahara, with clear consequences for deteriorating regional stability. Regional insecurity, in the form of armed banditry, has substantially increased and has provoked armed mobilization by local communities who have failed to gain support from official state armed forces. Risks of incursions by Chadian armed groups based in southern Libya into Chadian territory are also increasing, as Chadian fighters are under growing pressure from Libya to leave.

As long as DDR in Chad remains an unattractive option for Chadian fighters, given the Chadian government's mixed messages and poor track record in the process, they are likely to continue to pose a threat in this liminal space in the deserts of the Chad-Libya-Niger tri-border area in the medium to long term, which may further increase insecurity and long-term lawlessness in the area. Although some Chadian fighters may have started out as gold miners seeking a livelihood, they are increasingly specializing in violence as a means of generating income. As former members of Chadian armed groups consolidate their hold over Sahelian illicit markets, there is a risk that they will become increasingly violent. This risks further destabilizing northern Chad and Niger, which are already key transit points and hotspots for the criminal economies in Libya and the wider central Sahara region.

Although there have been some tentative moves, such as the September 2021 LAAF attack on the FACT, Libyan armed groups have not yet started expelling Chadian fighters from Libya in earnest. However, if the Libyan ceasefire agreement continues to hold, Chadians' revenue stream from work as mercenaries will increasingly dry up. Given the lack of viable income alternatives, Chadian fighters are likely to become increasingly reliant on their other funding streams, principally illicit activities, and will remain available as guns-for-hire in regional conflicts.

Recommendations

In order to stifle the risk of increased violence in the Chad–Libya–Niger tri-border area and prevent further destabilization of the Sahel region, the following actions are recommended based on the findings of this report:

- **Provide a safe corridor for Chadian fighters to return to Chad.** Slow, unattractive, or in some cases non-existent, DDR processes have discouraged Chadian fighters from returning to Chad, prompting many to maintain and consolidate their status as actors in the criminal economy of the Sahel region in post-war Libya. This needs to change. The amnesty decreed for 296 rebels on 29 November 2021 is a good first step in this direction.
- **Prevent recruitment into armed groups.** Scripting the various pathways along which Chadians choose to join armed groups and mapping the geographies of recruitment could help target communities in Chad that are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, such as failed gold miners, and reduce the capacity for armed groups to recruit new members.
- **Regularize the artisanal gold-mining economy.** Although a range of illicit economies have emerged across the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sites, goldfields are one of the only viable economic opportunities for Sahelian youths amid worsening economic conditions across the region.¹⁴⁴ Instead of clamping down on goldfields, which fuels recruitment into armed groups, the Chadian government should facilitate the gold extraction process by regulating it. This means securing key goldfields and trade routes, eventually recruiting reintegrated and trained Chadian fighters, but also investing in the creation of wells and key infrastructure to increase government presence and legitimacy in gold sites.
- **Build capacity and training for regional security forces.** Building capacity and providing training for security forces to deal with civilian populations is key to restoring – or in some cases creating – the social contract between local Sahelian populations and their state capitals, which have remained culturally, geographically and socio-economically distant. Support should not focus merely on enhancing the weaponry and equipment of state security forces, but on safeguarding local communities. Risks of human rights abuses by state armed forces need to be mitigated, since they drive disenfranchisement and propensity towards recruitment by non-state armed groups.

NOTES

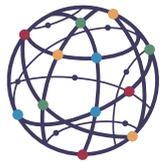
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