

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



NIGER

COUP REVERSES 2015 HUMAN
SMUGGLING BAN AMID MAJOR
POLITICAL AND SECURITY UPHEAVAL

Alice Fereday

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AES	Alliance des Etats du Sahel (Alliance of Sahel States)
CNSP	Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FCFA	West African franc
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims)
UNVP	Union des Nigériens pour la Vigilance et le Patriotisme (Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism)



INTRODUCTION

Niger's location at the crossroads of key trans-Saharan routes has positioned it at the heart of migratory flows for decades. The country's role as a transit hub for migrants heading north towards Libya with the aim of reaching Europe has also attracted the focus of extensive international efforts to curb irregular migration.

In 2023, however, it was the major political and security developments at national and regional levels that had the greatest impact on human smuggling in Niger. On 26 July, a military coup overthrew the president, Mohamed Bazoum, and transitional authorities were formed under the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland – CNSP). The military takeover resulted in the closure of the country's borders with Benin and Nigeria, further complicating movement into Niger, which was already severely affected by growing insecurity in Burkina Faso and south-west Niger. Rather than preventing movement, however, the border closures led to an increased demand for smuggling services, particularly at the Benin border, from both migrants and those transporting commodities. By March 2024, the Nigerian border had reopened, while the Benin border remained closed at the time of writing.

An even more significant change came in November, when the CNSP repealed the 2015 anti-smuggling law that had caused the collapse of the industry in northern Niger. This led to one of the most profound shifts in the dynamics of human smuggling since 2015. Since the repeal of the law, *passeurs* – the colloquial name in the Sahel for transporters involved in human smuggling – across the country have been able to transport foreign migrants legally. The effects were immediately felt in Agadez, which had been the main focus of anti-smuggling operations, resulting in the demise of its human smuggling economy in 2016. With the repeal of the law, departures to Libya have risen steadily since November, as have departures to Algeria.

Rather than a sharp spike in foreign movements, the repeal appears to have caused steady, though not exponential, growth since November. Some of the key factors that influenced human smuggling before the legislation change remain in place, such as a preference for routes to Algeria and persistent challenges on regional routes to reach Niger. As a result, the migration landscape in the country is unlikely to return to what it resembled pre-2015. In particular, the westbound displacement of routes, which led to the increased use of Algeria as a transit country to reach Tunisia and to a lesser extent Morocco, is now firmly established and unlikely to shift back. Insecurity linked to the expansion of violent extremist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso and south-west Niger also remains a major constraint on regional mobility, and could further deteriorate amid continued political and security upheaval in the Sahel.

This is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Niger. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued by the GI-TOC since 2019, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Niger, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.¹

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, gold miners, local authorities, NGO personnel, security personnel and others.

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

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Niger and the wider region.



DYNAMICS SHAPING THE MIGRATION CONTEXT IN NIGER

In 2023, the dynamics of human smuggling in Niger were strongly influenced by the political and security upheaval that followed the coup. On 26 July, the military made a televised statement claiming to have overthrown then-President Mohamed Bazoum.² They also announced the creation of transitional authorities, formed under the CNSP, the suspension of the Constitution and the closure of all land and air borders.

In response to the military takeover, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission imposed travel and economic sanctions on Niger, and threatened to take all necessary measures, including the use of force, to restore constitutional order.³ This triggered tensions between Niger and its neighbours, with some – such as Benin and Nigeria – supporting the ECOWAS sanctions and the threat of military intervention, and others – specifically Mali and Burkina Faso (themselves ruled by juntas) – supporting the military takeover.⁴ The CNSP subsequently reopened Niger’s borders with Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Libya and Chad in August, but the borders with Benin and Nigeria remained closed initially.⁵ Amid escalating regional tensions, several attempts at mediation were made, including by the US, Nigerian religious authorities and later Algeria.⁶ However, none succeeded.

In the early stages of the coup, it was unclear whether it would succeed, and the prospect of ECOWAS military intervention raised fears of conflict. By October, however, the threat of military action had receded, and the takeover appeared to have been consolidated, further crystallizing regional and international tensions.

Relations between the transitional authorities and Niger’s international partners, particularly France, then deteriorated. This culminated in the expulsion of the French ambassador, and the announcement by French President Emmanuel Macron that all French troops (approximately 1 400) would leave Niger by the end of the year.⁷ Most of these troops were stationed in the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua, where they had been engaged in counter-terrorism operations since 2014, and where levels of violence continue to rise. There has been an uptick in attacks on civilians in the country, which reportedly quadrupled in August compared to July, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).⁸ It is too early to draw a clear causal link between the increase in violence and the security developments following the coup. However, the suspension of foreign military assistance and the departure of French troops are likely to lead to the further expansion of violent extremist groups and could trigger a surge in their operations.

The coup also prompted the withdrawal of a significant amount of foreign aid. Several of Niger's key international partners, including the EU and France, immediately announced the suspension of development aid (excluding humanitarian aid).⁹ According to an October study by the World Bank and World Food Programme, the moratorium on aid meant that a total of around US\$1.17 billion (over €1 billion) would not be disbursed in 2023.¹⁰ This figure increased later that month when the US officially recognized the military takeover as a coup.¹¹ This decision had major policy implications, as it meant that the US had to halt most economic and security assistance to Niger. The US had suspended some aid, worth US\$200 million (over €186 million), immediately after the coup was announced. When the formal acknowledgement was made, a total of US\$500 million (over €465 million) was suspended.

In December, relations between the transitional authorities and the EU deteriorated further when the CNSP ended two key security and defence partnerships.¹² This decision followed closely on the heels of the repeal of the 2015 anti-smuggling law, which had been designed in close partnership with the EU. Indeed, the implementation of the law had been the fulcrum of the EU's strategy to curb irregular migration in the Sahel. The repeal has had a significant effect on mobility and smuggling dynamics in Niger since November, as explained below.

The ECOWAS sanctions posed a significant challenge for the transitional authorities, as Niger was already facing severe socio-economic challenges before July.¹³ The closure of the borders with Benin and Nigeria effectively shut down the country's main trade routes, causing the prices of basic commodities to soar. In Tahoua, for example, the price of a 25-kilogram bag of flour rose from FCFA7 000 to FCFA10 500 (€10.60 to €16).¹⁴ The World Bank and World Food Programme study cited above warned that the combined economic impact of sanctions and reduced international aid, if sustained, would push inflation up to 5.1% in 2023, as opposed to the projected 2.7%. According to the Central Bank of West African States, the inflation rate in Niger actually reached a peak of 7.8% in September 2023.¹⁵ The World Bank study also posited that food insecurity would increase dramatically, particularly for people whose livelihoods depended heavily on exports to Nigeria and Benin, and in urban areas vulnerable to food inflation.

The closure of the Benin and Nigeria borders caused tensions among local communities and trade actors on both sides. This became tangible in Benin in October, when several protests were organized in Malanville to demand the border's reopening.¹⁶ These demonstrations focused on the consequences of the blockade for commercial trucks, some of which had been stuck at the border since 27 July. In October, it was estimated that more than 1 000 trucks were blocked in Malanville and surrounding areas.¹⁷ This number later decreased, when some trucks turned back to travel through Togo and Burkina Faso in order to join the military convoys along the Dori-Téra route.

In response to the blockade, pirogue smugglers – many of whom now cater to the demand for clandestine crossings among bus passengers (see following sections) – began transporting goods from the stranded trucks across the river. The main products were staples such as rice, maize, millet, flour and oil. This particular use of these small boats was not new, but increased significantly after the border was closed.

To compensate for the closure of the Benin border, the Nigerien and Burkinabé authorities began providing military escorts for food convoys along the Ouagadougou–Dori–Téra–Niamey route.¹⁸ In fact, some migrants reported travelling in convoys of trucks to reach Niger (see the following sections). However, this route remains extremely dangerous and cannot cover the complete diversion of trade that previously passed through Benin and Nigeria. This pressure was, however, alleviated in March 2024, when trade resumed via Nigeria with the reopening of the border.

Of all the factors affecting the dynamics of human smuggling and trafficking in Niger in 2023, the most significant was the transitional authorities' repeal of the 2015 anti-smuggling law.



TRANSITIONAL AUTHORITIES REPEAL 2015 ANTI-SMUGGLING LAW

On 25 November, the CNSP issued a decree repealing Niger's Law 2015-36, which criminalized the transportation of migrants.¹⁹ The order, titled Ordinance No. 2023 16, also stated that all convictions under the law would be vacated retroactively.²⁰ In the northern city of Agadez, several people detained on charges of human smuggling had already been released by December.²¹

This was a major development for the dynamics of human smuggling in Niger and the wider region, as it made it possible for foreign migrants to be legally transported through the country to Libya and Algeria. As the GI-TOC has reported in the past, the implementation of the 2015 law dealt a severe blow to smuggling activity in Niger, particularly in Agadez, and to the movement of foreigners from there to Libya.²² Although a lot of adaptation occurred after the law was introduced, the sector never really fully recovered.

While there was no advance notice of the repeal from the CNSP, there had been signs in previous months that the transitional authorities were altering their approach to human smuggling and trafficking. This mainly involved a relaxation of anti-smuggling operations and policing in transit hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez.

According to information collected in September, anti-smuggling operations in Agadez and Tahoua had decreased since the coup. In Agadez, this was particularly evident in the reported decline in security checks at bus stations and on vehicles leaving the city. One *passeur* interviewed in September said: 'We are currently harassed less than before in the city of Agadez, and we say thank God. Let it continue like this forever.'²³

However, the number of foreign migrants travelling through Agadez remained low, mainly due to the broader redistribution of smuggling operations to more remote eastern routes. Furthermore, *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants through Agadez were still wary of the authorities, and the slight easing of restrictions had not resulted in any major shifts in human smuggling operations before the repeal of the 2015 law.



Nigerien migrants travelling to Libya in the military convoy between Agadez and Dirkou, September 2023. Photo: GI-TOC

The authorities' change in attitude towards smuggling had a more pronounced effect in Tahoua, a key transit hub for movements to Libya and Algeria. There, interviewees reported that security checks and patrols in and around the town appeared to have all but ceased. Although human smuggling activities in Tahoua were already less tightly controlled than in Agadez,²⁴ before the coup security forces had conducted occasional patrols and checks targeting smugglers and the bus stations where migrants were known to wait to be picked up by *passeurs*.

Before, there were occasional raids by security forces that targeted the activity of smugglers in our station, because when passengers arrive here they wait for the drivers to pick them up. During that time, police or gendarmes disguised as civilians would watch them to catch members of smuggling networks. But since the coup, there has not been a single raid, and the networks of drivers are gradually beginning to work again.

Interview with a station manager in Tahoua, September 2023

With less pressure from the security forces, *passeurs* and *coxeurs* (intermediaries) operating on the routes between Tahoua and Algeria faced lower risks.²⁵ The number of *coxeurs* active in Tahoua reportedly increased after the coup, in particular Burkinabés and Cameroonians, because of the high number of migrants from these countries who pass through the area towards Algeria. Although the number of active *coxeurs* is fluid and varies from week to week, a local contact estimated that the figure ranged from 25 to 30 before the coup, to around 40 after the coup, and reached about 100 after the repeal of the anti-smuggling law.²⁶

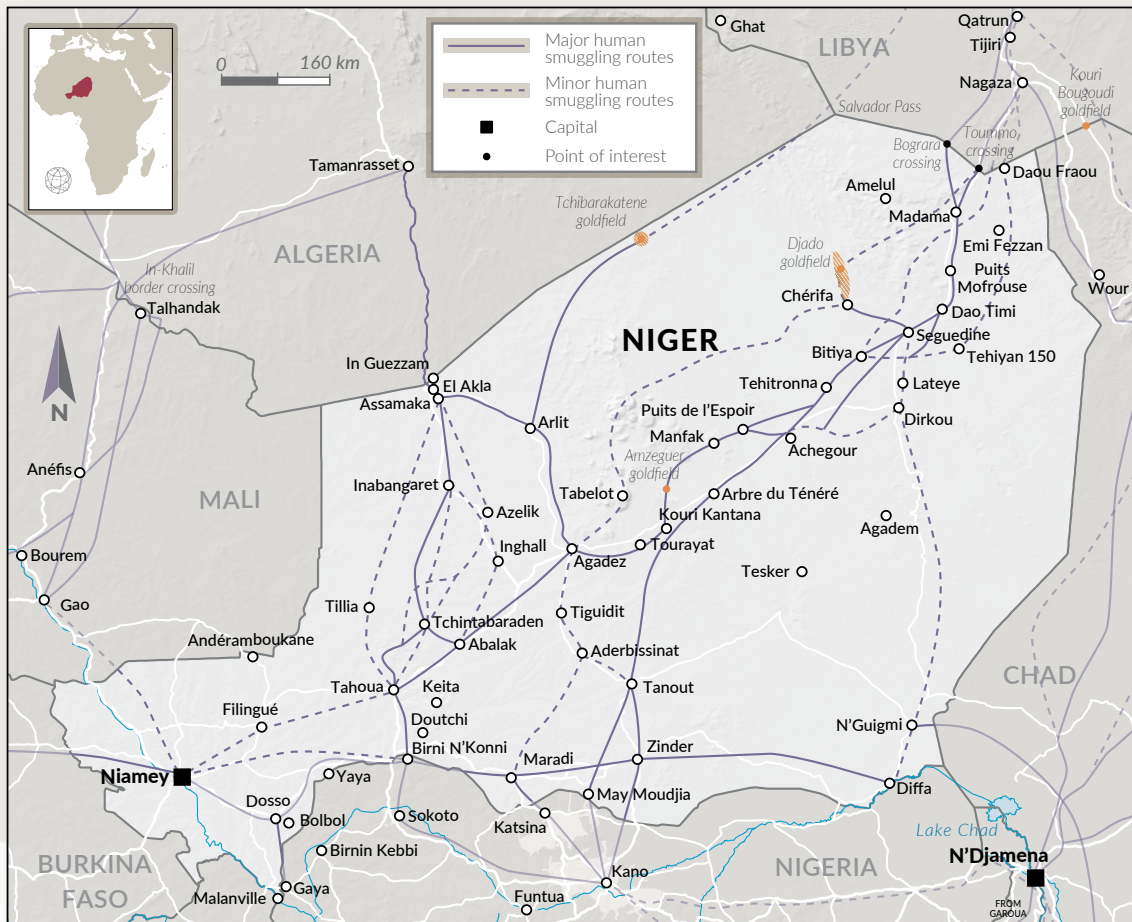


FIGURE 1 Main human smuggling routes through Niger.

Passeurs interviewed in September confirmed that law enforcement in Tahoua had eased, but emphasized that they continued to operate with caution.

We are careful, even if there are fewer restrictions or controls on us, because if we are caught, we will not pay less than FCFA500 000 [€762] for our release. The gendarmerie and police target us the most, and it has been happening for some time, for reasons of money, not for anything else. But since the arrival of the CNSP in power, we have not been troubled much, and this reassures us a little and allows us to continue our activities.

Interview with a passeur in Tahoua, September 2023

Even when arrested, *passeurs* were reportedly more likely than before to avoid criminal charges. A local official in Tahoua told the GI-TOC that he believed the prosecution of human smuggling cases involving *passeurs* had decreased after the coup.

Before the CNSP came to power, legal measures were in place to prosecute those involved in transporting or facilitating the transport of migrants to Algeria, in accordance with cooperation agreements with the EU. But in the current context, I see that these measures have lost their effectiveness. Even when the police or gendarmerie arrest smugglers, the cases are often settled out of court. Since the coup, the processing of files related to migration issues has been visibly non-operational – at all levels.

Interview with a local official in Tahoua, September 2023



Members of the Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism meet with the justice minister, 22 September 2023. Photo: Nigerien Ministry of Justice Facebook page

In effect, well before the repeal of the anti-smuggling law, the coup had already triggered a major policy shift, and *passseurs* had high expectations that their livelihood would be decriminalized. In the run-up to the formal announcement of the repeal, the CNSP met publicly with actors seeking to amend the law. In September, the Union des Nigériens pour la Vigilance et le Patriotisme (Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism – UNVP), a civil society group from Agadez, met with Alio Daouda, the minister of justice and human rights, to ask for the law to be revised.²⁷ At a more informal level, a *coxeur* in Agadez involved with the UNVP reported that talks had been held with local authorities, such as regional councillors, in the hope that the message would be passed on to the newly appointed governor.

The intentions behind the timing of the CNSP's decision to repeal the law were unclear. The announcement came amid a deterioration in relations between the junta and Niger's international partners, including the EU. There were reports that the move was a response to the EU's condemnation of the coup, its support for the ECOWAS sanctions, and its calls for a return to constitutional order through the release and reinstatement of ousted president Mohamed Bazoum. But while there was undeniably an international element, it is likely that the decision was heavily influenced by domestic political considerations and pressure from the CNSP's northern constituencies.

As the UNVP pressure campaign highlighted, the anti-smuggling law was deeply unpopular in the Agadez region. The resulting crackdown on human smuggling, which began in 2016, caused significant tensions in communities in the north that relied heavily on this activity. It led to a drastic increase in unemployment and the collapse of an important economic sector geared towards providing services to irregular migrants passing through the region.²⁸ Insecurity and criminality increased, partly because of the suppression of smuggling, but also because of a rise in banditry.²⁹ As the years progressed, Agadez did not manage to regain its role as a key smuggling hub. Instead, most foreign migrant traffic was diverted through Tahoua to Algeria or along the eastern bypass route to Libya.³⁰

With the repeal of the law, the CNSP is likely to benefit from an increase in popularity among northern communities who have few available job prospects other than smuggling and illicit livelihoods. This is particularly important because although the CNSP is militarily strong and enjoys broad support

on key issues – such as its aim to strengthen Niger’s sovereignty and independence from foreign intervention – it remains a relatively new political player. It is still in the process of developing local infrastructure and formal support networks, such as its sponsorship of entities like the UNVP.

In addition, some key actors in the Agadez region have opposed the CNSP, including Rhissa Ag Boula, former minister of state and former Tuareg rebel leader, who formed a resistance group in August with the intention of restoring Bazoum to power.³¹ No significant action has been taken since this group was created, and it is unlikely to pose a serious threat to the CNSP in the short term. However, the existence of such opposition under the banner of a highly influential figure like Ag Boula undermines the CNSP’s claim of enjoying full support throughout the country. It also underscores the need to address the specific challenges and interests of the Agadez region, which has long been the theatre of rebellion and where large swathes of territory remain beyond the reach of national authorities. The abolition of the anti-smuggling law can therefore be seen as a relatively cheap and quick way to deliver tangible benefits to northern communities, providing them with a vested interest in supporting CNSP rule.

Finally, the repeal is in line with the CNSP’s broader political discourse, which is centred on asserting Niger’s sovereignty, and its interest in distancing itself from Bazoum’s policies, as the ousted president is seen as having facilitated the crackdown on human smuggling when he was interior minister.



Vehicle transporting foreign migrants from Agadez to Libya using a military convoy, 28 November 2023.

Photo: GI-TOC



DEPARTURES TO LIBYA AND ALGERIA RISE AS TRANSPORT OF FOREIGN MIGRANTS LEGALIZED

While the political benefits of the repeal of the anti-smuggling law are likely to accrue quickly for the CNSP – it was promptly publicly welcomed by the Agadez Regional Council on 26 November³² – its effect on migratory flows was initially muted. In the weeks following the announcement, the number of foreign migrants transiting Niger remained low, and since November there has been a steady increase rather than an exponential spike.

As the lifting of the law was applied only recently, there are a few foreigners, but not many. They are combined with Nigeriens to complete the number of passengers for departure. For example, last week I had six foreign passengers and 16 Nigerien passengers. In December, I started to reactivate my network of foreign passengers with my *coxeurs*, but I have friends who had networks operational before the law was lifted, and they are gaining more foreign passengers than we are now.

Interview with a passeur in Agadez, December 2023

However, the repeal triggered an immediate reaction among *passeurs* keen to capitalize on the opportunity to transport foreign migrants – a more lucrative activity than transporting Nigeriens. In the days following the announcement, a number of *passeurs* told the GI-TOC that they had already begun contacting former *coxeurs* in order to reactivate these operations. While the human smuggling economy in Agadez virtually dried up after 2015, the infrastructure – including *coxeurs*, *passeurs*, so-called ghettos (places where migrants are housed during transit) and auxiliary services – is easily revived.

Furthermore, *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants were able to join the weekly military convoy from Agadez to Dirkou. Before the repeal of the law, only those transporting Nigerien migrants – an activity not covered by the ban – could travel openly under the convoy's protection.

The first convoy since the repeal departed from Agadez on 28 November. According to *passeurs* who travelled with the group, around five out of the 55 to 60 vehicles were carrying foreign migrants. In total, there were an estimated 90 to 100 foreign migrants, most of them Nigerians. Some *passeurs* transported a combination of Nigerien and foreign migrants, while two vehicles carried foreigners exclusively. *Passeurs* transporting foreigners were not distinguished from those transporting locals, and were permitted to join the convoy and pass through the official checkpoints leading to the Libyan border without incident.

While the military convoy runs from Agadez to Dirkou, *passeurs* usually separate from it at Puits de l'Espoir or Achegour, where they turn north towards Seguedine. From there, they pass through several checkpoints, including Seguedine, Dao Timi and Madama. Foreign migrants are required to pay FCFA10 000 (€15) at Seguedine and FCFA5 000 (€7.60) at Madama, while Nigerien passengers pay FCFA2 000 (€3) at Seguedine and possibly the same at Madama, especially if they do not have valid identity documents. Drivers reportedly pay a lump sum of FCFA12 000 (€18) at Dao Timi. At Seguedine, *passeurs* receive a document they must present at Dao Timi and Madama to prove they passed through Seguedine legally and paid the necessary fees. One *passeur* reported that this rule was strictly applied when he travelled on 28 November.

I bypassed Seguedine transporting six foreign passengers and 18 Nigeriens. When I arrived in Dao Timi, the military refused me entry because I had not passed through Seguedine. They forced me to leave the 18 Nigerien migrants in Dao Timi and return to Seguedine so that the six foreign migrants could be checked by the police, and I could get the supporting document. I went back to Seguedine to pass through the checkpoint legally. The six migrants were checked, and I went back to Dao Timi and they allowed me to pass through.

Interview with a passeur in Seguedine, November 2023

This *passeur* had bypassed Seguedine in the hope of avoiding the fees. Although it is usually the passengers themselves who pay, they often do not have sufficient funds with them. In this case, the *passeur* has to cover the cost, and it is understood that he will be reimbursed on arrival in Libya.

From Madama, according to reports, *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants continue on to Libya along the same routes they use when transporting Nigeriens. In Libya, there is no distinction between non-Nigerien and Nigerien migrants in terms of the security checks. *Passeurs* either bypass known checkpoints between the Nigerien border and Qatrun, or pass through them if they have contacts in the armed groups manning them. In some cases, they have been allowed to cross by paying bribes. However, *passeurs* now generally only go as far as Qatrun, rather than Sebha. This is due to the ongoing crackdown in Sebha and surrounding areas. From Qatrun, *passeurs* organize migrants' journeys to Sebha using local *passeurs*, trucks or taxis.

The revival of foreign migrant departures from Agadez affected activity on the bypass routes that had developed to circumvent the area. According to local *passeurs*, the transport of migrants on the route between the Nigerian border, Kouri Kantana and Libya decreased during the week of 4 December, because some *passeurs* and *coxeurs* reorganized their trips to leave from Agadez. Migrants travelling from Nigeria are now instructed to enter Niger clandestinely at May Moudjia (see following sections) and use public transport to Agadez through Zinder. This means *passeurs* no longer need to use local drivers to transport migrants from May Moudjia to Kouri Kantana, and can collect them in Agadez. However, some networks are reportedly still using the Kouri Kantana route, as their operations there are well established, and it remains the quickest option between the Nigerian and Libyan borders.

The legal routes from Agadez are much safer for migrants travelling from Niger to Libya. In the past, dozens of deaths occurred on bypass routes in Niger, due to accidents and breakdowns in the desert, and in recent years they have been increasingly targeted by bandits.³³ The journeys have also become cheaper. The cost of transport for foreign migrants between Agadez and Libya has fallen from between FCFA150 000 and FCFA200 000 (€228 and €381) to between FCFA100 000 and FCFA120 000 (€152 and €182).



Coxeurs in Agadez have also reported that they are once again able to house migrants in the so-called ghettos while they await departure to Libya. Before the criminalization of human smuggling, ghettos were an important part of the smuggling industry in Agadez, as most migrants needed accommodation. When human smuggling was banned, housing migrants became risky and demand fell as the number of migrants transiting Agadez declined. The reopening of the ghettos is a significant development and an indication of the revival of smuggling infrastructure. It will also generate income for people renting out the accommodation.

My former *coxeur* called me to say that he is in the process of bringing foreigners [to Agadez], but that he does not have the means to rent a ghetto to house them. He asked me to rent one for him so that he can house the foreigners when they arrive. I accepted his proposal and we are looking for a ghetto to rent.

Interview with a passeur operating between Agadez and Libya, December 2023

By January 2024, the pool of foreign migrants in Agadez had already increased. This was particularly evident every Tuesday, when the weekly convoy, escorted by the military, departed the city for Dirkou. Before the repeal, between 35 and 55 vehicles used the convoy each week, and it was restricted to *passeurs* transporting Nigerien migrants. In November, *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants, who had previously operated on bypass routes, began to join the convoy, and by January the total number of vehicles had increased to between 80 and 90. It was reported that around 20 to 25 of these carried foreign migrants, transporting a total of around 300 to 400 migrants per week (an increase from the 40 to 50 recorded before November).³⁴ Estimating the number of foreigners is complicated by the tendency of *passeurs* to transport both Nigerien and foreign migrants together, in order to buttress the number of passengers they carry per departure, but it is notable that even higher estimates put the number of foreigners at around a quarter of the current migrant movement out of Agadez.

Despite these developments, it is unlikely that migrant numbers in Agadez will return to 2015 levels in the foreseeable future, or that movements to Libya will resemble what they did before the introduction of the anti-smuggling law. This is due to several factors. First, travel to Niger is arguably much more difficult now than it was in 2015. Increased violent extremist activity in Burkina Faso has severely affected commercial bus services between West Africa and Niger. While some migrant movement from Ouagadougou to Niamey continues, thanks to the rerouting of bus itineraries through Benin (see the following section), the closure of the Benin border has complicated movement into Niger. While the closure of the border with Benin did not halt migration completely, with river smugglers still shuttling people across the border, it is unclear to what extent such operations could accommodate a surge in popularity. However, the reopening of the Nigerian border in March, and the likelihood that the Benin border will also be reopened in 2024, will ease these challenges and facilitate movements to Niger. Second, while the number of migrants transiting Niger might increase, many may opt to travel to Algeria, which has overtaken Libya in popularity as a destination in recent years.³⁵

Departures to Algeria have also risen since the repeal. Most migrants leave from Tahoua, strategically located halfway between Niamey and Agadez, around 500 kilometres south of the Algerian border. Although anti-smuggling operations in the town were typically less intense than those in Agadez in recent years, and decreased further after the coup, *passeurs* were still extremely cautious. Since the repeal, however, they are reported to be operating openly.

Tahoua is a popular transit hub due to its proximity to the Algerian border and the fact it is well connected to Niger's transport system. Bus companies such as Rimbo and Sonef run regular trips connecting Tahoua to major towns and cities in Niger and West Africa, making Tahoua easily accessible to most migrants without the need for a *passeur*.

Migrants can now be collected by smugglers directly at the bus station on arrival in Tahoua, and their waiting times are much shorter, due to smugglers' freedom to arrange more regular departures. Before the repeal, smugglers would avoid meeting their passengers directly at the bus station and would instead arrange for migrants to take taxis or moto-taxis to more discreet areas outside of the town to avoid detection. Departures are thus much more straightforward and quicker to organize.

Since Niger abolished the law, the number of foreign passengers arriving in the city of Tahoua using our transport agency and several others has gradually increased. Since January, several foreign passengers arrive every day, especially from Dosso, Birni N'Konni and Niamey. From here, passengers are picked up by transport networks that run between Tahoua and Tamanrasset. Before, when foreign passengers arrived at our station in Tahoua, they would wait several hours, even two or three days. But now, as soon as they arrive, they leave.

Interview with a bus station manager, Tahoua, February 2024

According to local contacts, between 35 and 42 vehicles leave Tahoua each week, each carrying 15 to 30 migrants, depending on how many are ready to depart on a given day. This brings the estimated number of migrants travelling to Algeria to between 500 and 1 000 weekly. *Passeurs* may choose to leave with fewer passengers rather than wait for more, in order to move more quickly.

Even if I have just 15 passengers, I can earn FCFA1.2 million [€1 829] and I am ready to travel the same day. No need to wait for more passengers. If I stay, I lose a day or two, and that's not going to help me.

Interview with a passeur, Tahoua, February 2024

Before the repeal of the human smuggling law, it was estimated that between 400 and 500 migrants departed Algeria each week. There has therefore been a significant increase, although exact figures are difficult to obtain.

The repeal has also led to a fall in prices. In 2023, the journey from Tahoua to Tamanrasset cost between FCFA120 000 and FCFA130 000 (€183 to €198), while it is now reported to cost between FCFA80 000 and FCFA90 000 (€122 to €137). This is because *passeurs* have taken into account the lower risk of arrest and the reduction in associated bribes, and because of the higher number of *passeurs* competing for business. Contacts reported that there were around 100 *passeurs* active in Tahoua in February, compared with 40 to 50 before to the repeal of the law.



INSECURITY DISPLACES ROUTES FROM BURKINA FASO TO NIGER

The closure of the borders with Benin and Nigeria following the coup in July had a significant impact on regional mobility, as these were the two main entry points for West African migrants aiming to transit through Niger. The effect was felt most acutely at the Benin border, where movements had surged since April 2023 due to the rerouting of bus routes connecting Burkina Faso and Niger.

The Ouagadougou–Niamey route is a key link between western and coastal African countries and Niger, and is therefore crucial to regional migration. Northbound movements on this route involve migrants from Burkina Faso and other West African countries, namely Gambia, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.³⁶

Most migrants use public transport from their country of origin to reach Ouagadougou, as regional routes are well serviced by commercial bus companies such as Rimbo, 3STV, Al Izza and Sonef. Effectively, the city serves as a major regional transport hub because of its location between West Africa and the Sahel.

However, the feasibility of the route between Ouagadougou and Niamey has been increasingly affected by insecurity in northern Burkina Faso and Niger.³⁷ Since 2016, several violent extremist groups, including Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM), have gained control of increasing swathes of territory in the Liptako-Gourma region, either side of the borders of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.³⁸

The growing presence of extremist groups has led to an increase in violence, including against civilians. In early 2022, a spate of attacks targeted buses travelling in both directions between Ouagadougou and Niamey, with several deadly assaults taking place between March and May 2022.³⁹ The situation appeared to improve in the second half of 2022, with no incidents reported between May 2022 and the end of 2023.⁴⁰ This was reportedly the result of negotiations between bus companies and violent extremist groups, resulting in a strict set of rules and so-called taxes being imposed by the armed groups to guarantee safe passage.⁴¹ However, in early 2023, the ongoing violence, insecurity and extortion pushed bus companies to change routes altogether.

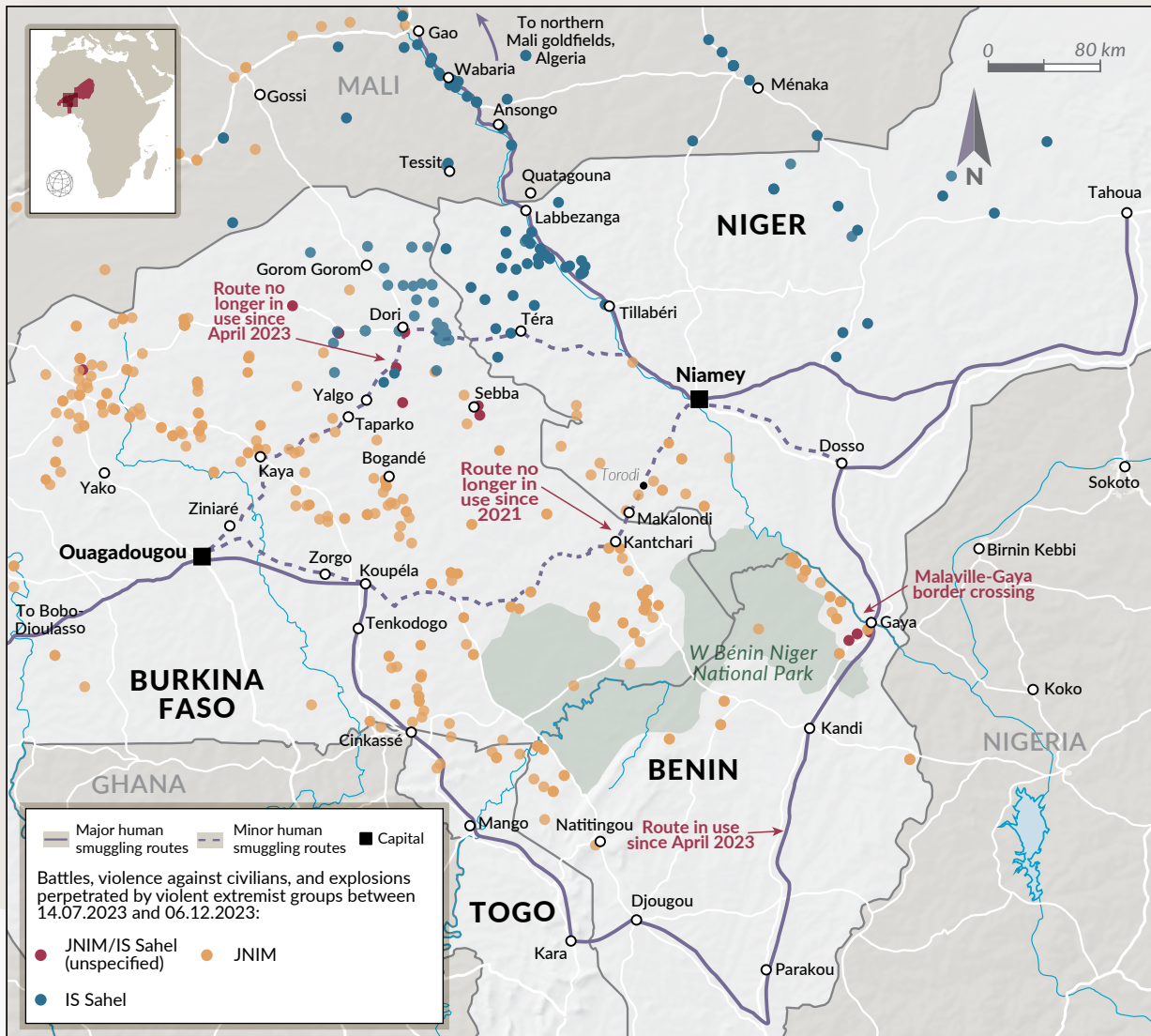


FIGURE 2 Insecurity along routes used by bus companies between Ouagadougou and Niamey, July to December 2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data and GI-TOC monitoring

In April 2023, bus companies began using an alternative route through Togo and Benin to reach Niger.⁴² Buses began running from Ouagadougou to the Togolese border through Cinkassé, then through Kara in Togo and Djougou and Parakou in Benin, before crossing into Niger through Malanville (Benin) and Gaya (Niger), and continuing on to Dosso and Niamey.

The new arrangement was considerably longer and more expensive. The new route covered a total of 1 350 kilometres and took over 24 hours, compared with 514 kilometres and 11 hours for the old Dori–Téra route. A driver working for Rimbo bus company explained: ‘The buses leave Ouagadougou every day at 4 a.m. and arrive in Niamey the next day around 12 noon, the same also in the opposite direction. That is to say, the trip takes a whole day, a whole night and another half day.’ The price of the journey increased from FCFA11 000 (€16.80) to FCFA32 000 (€48.80).

We changed the route for Ouaga–Niamey because things were not going well. There were too many problems, such as terrorism, threats related to taxes, and so on, and we could not bear all that. We do not have much economic profitability if we have to pay the taxes imposed [by armed groups]. So, faced with all these problems, we decided to close the Téra–Dori route. But we inquired about a new route that passes through Benin and Togo, and it is here that we are currently working to ensure the Ouaga–Niamey line continues. We did not know this route before, we were the first to use it in April, and then Sonef followed. Passengers who want to travel between Ouagadougou and Niamey have no choice but to accept the price we have proposed, even if it is too expensive.

Interview with a bus station manager in Dosso, July 2023

These changes demonstrate the resilience of migration in West Africa and the Sahel, where itineraries are continually adapted to evolving security challenges, resulting in the creation of new movement patterns, as demand for regional mobility remains high. Indeed, this is not the first time bus companies have been compelled to change the route from Ouagadougou to Niamey. Until 2021, most commercial buses travelling from Ouagadougou passed through Fada N’Gourma and Matiakoali to reach the Burkinabé border post at Kantchari, about 30 kilometres south-west of the Nigerien border. After crossing into Niger, they passed through the Nigerien border post at Makalondi, some 90 kilometres south of the capital Niamey. However, poor road conditions, increasing insecurity and attacks on civilians prompted transport companies to use the Dori–Téra route from mid-2021.⁴³

If the situation on the Dori–Téra route improves, the bus companies may return to it, given the considerable extra cost and time involved in the new route. However, this is unlikely to occur in the short to medium term, as attacks and violent incidents in the border area between Niger and Burkina Faso continue to rise.



BORDER CLOSURE TRIGGERS SURGE IN HUMAN SMUGGLING AT BENIN CROSSING

As a result of the revised route, the number of buses entering Niger from Benin through the Malanville–Gaya crossing, the only official entry point between the two countries, increased sharply from April 2023. According to Nigerien border police personnel, around 30 buses were using the crossing every day before the border closure, each transporting around 40 passengers. This route is particularly important for regional movements between Niger and the rest of West Africa, and there is consistently high demand for travel in both directions.

We work here at this post day and night, non-stop, because the border is open 24/7. The buses arrive at any time, and we are supposed to check them as soon as they arrive. They are very numerous, because all Nigerien transport companies have several departures every day between Niger and other countries in the region, and they all pass through here. So, we estimate that more than 30 buses enter here through the *poste de contrôle juxtaposé* [joint border post] every 24 hours, not counting the other buses that leave there.

Interview with a Nigerien border police officer, July 2023

Following the official closure of land borders on 27 July, enforcement at the Benin border was intermittent. However, on 11 August, Nigerien military units arrived in Gaya to enforce a total closure, and within a day had halted all movements. They placed a shipping container on the bridge that connects Gaya to Malanville, Benin, over the Niger River, which serves as a natural border between the two countries.

As a result, smugglers using motorized pirogues began to offer an alternative to those wishing to cross the border. These operations first surged in response to the COVID 19-related border closures between March 2020 and June 2021, when local smugglers – often former or current fishermen who had invested in engines for the purpose – responded to the similar sudden interest in clandestine crossings from both migrants and local people.⁴⁴ Demand for these crossings dried up after the pandemic restrictions were lifted in June 2021.

This business was given a new lease of life with the total border closure in August 2023. Although precise figures were impossible to obtain, local contacts with visibility over these activities estimated that there were as many as 100 smugglers operating across the river, transporting over 500 passengers a day. Each pirogue can carry up to 15 passengers per crossing, although this number varies. Smugglers reportedly agreed on a fixed price per crossing, the same as during the COVID 19-related closures, to prevent prices being driven down by competition. A trip by motorized pirogue initially cost FCFA5 000 (€7.60) per passenger. However, on 13 October, Beninese and Nigerien authorities in Malanville and Gaya respectively instructed *paqueurs* to reduce their price to FCFA1 500 (€2.29). This decision was the result of pressure from commercial transport companies, whose passengers relied on these clandestine river crossings to traverse the border.

Bus passengers travelling from Benin to Niger are given instructions by drivers on how to reach the riverbank, cross the river and locate Gaya bus station. From there, those with a valid international ticket to Dosso, Niamey or further afield in Niger can reportedly use it to board any bus belonging to the same company. However, they are required to bear the cost of the clandestine crossing, including any bribes, themselves, in addition to the price of the bus ticket. A Sonof bus driver interviewed on 29 August explained:

I left Ouagadougou with 60 passengers, including two women, all from Burkina Faso. All my passengers have Abalak [in Niger] as their main destination. We were on a stopover yesterday in Parakou [Benin] and arrived in Malanville today at around 2 a.m. This morning, the passengers went to the river to take the pirogues and cross the border. A special bus has been made available to them at our Gaya station that will take them directly to Abalak. I will go back to Ouagadougou or Lomé with other passengers who will come today from Niamey.



Shipping container placed on a bridge in Gaya by the Nigerien military to block the border crossing to Benin, August 2023. Photo: GI-TOC

From the Malanville bus station, passengers take a moto-taxi to reach the riverbank, which costs between FCFA1 500 and FCFA2 000 (€2.30 to €3). They must also each pay a bribe of FCFA1 500 (€2.30) to the Beninese police stationed at the landing point, and to the river gendarmerie who patrol on speedboats. There are several embarkation points on the Beninese side of the river. After the pirogue crossing, a moto-taxi to the Gaya bus station costs between FCFA1 000 and FCFA1 500 (€1.50 to €2.30). There is only one disembarkation point on the Nigerien side of the river, where Nigerien police officers usually wait to collect bribes, which range from FCFA1 000 to FCFA5 000 (€1.50 to €7.60), depending on the passenger's nationality and situation. In total, a clandestine border crossing can cost up to FCFA16 500 (€25). This is a significant extra expense, but most people appear willing to pay it in the absence of any alternatives.

Based on the number of commercial buses serving Malanville, between 600 and 950 passengers arrived in the town each day in December. Of these, local contacts report that 90% make the clandestine journey across the river to Gaya. It is therefore estimated that between 550 and 850 people cross the border each day by pirogue. This is a significant increase from August, when an estimated 500 people crossed daily.



Left: Migrants prepare to cross the river in a pirogue. Right: A security force patrols on the Niger River. Photos: GI-TOC

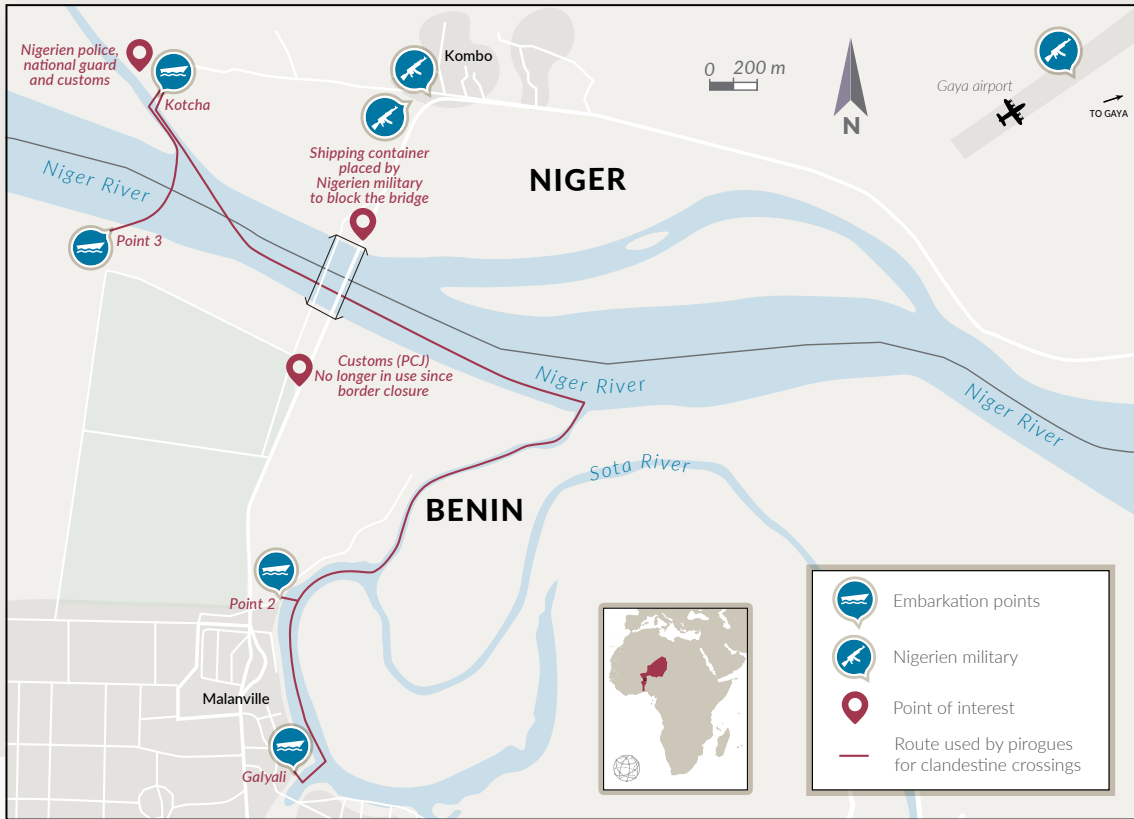


FIGURE 3 Pirogue crossings between Malanville, Benin, and Gaya, Niger, October 2023.



Pirogue transporting passengers under the Gaya bridge, August 2023. Photo: GI-TOC



DEMAND FOR CLANDESTINE MOTO-TAXI CROSSINGS RISES AT THE NIGERIAN BORDER

During the eight-month closure of the Nigerian border between July 2023 and March 2024, movements were less affected than those at the Benin border. This is because the Nigerian border had already been partially closed since August 2019, as a result of the Nigerian government's attempts to crack down on smuggling, particularly of goods.

Four of Nigeria's border crossings, including two with Niger, were partially reopened in 2020, with light vehicles and pedestrians being permitted to pass through. Of the two that were reopened, one is particularly salient to human smuggling: the Illela–Birni N'Konni border crossing.⁴⁵

This crossing is located on the main route connecting Sokoto in Nigeria (83 kilometres south of the Nigerian border) to Birni N'Konni in Niger. Birni N'Konni lies on the main highway between Niamey and Tahoua, providing easy access to both the capital and to key human smuggling hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez. This route is used by local Nigerien and Nigerian seasonal workers and traders, as well as Nigerians, Cameroonians and Central Africans travelling to Tahoua and Agadez to reach Algeria and Libya. These travellers mainly use shared and public transport to reach departure hubs in Niger, with the exception of the border crossing, where many use *passeurs* to enter Niger clandestinely.

The Illela–Birni N'Konni border crossing was partially reopened in 2020, but closed again after the July coup. However, the previous restrictions had created a clandestine ecosystem and many local and foreign migrants were able to circumvent the closure.

Before the closure, to cross the border legally from Illela in Nigeria (3.7 kilometres south of the border) to Birni N'Konni (5 kilometres north of the border), each passenger – usually travelling in private vehicles or shared taxis at a cost of FCFA1 000 (€1.50) per person – would pay between FCFA2 000 and FCFA6 000 (€3 to €9) in bribes, depending on their nationality and whether they had valid identification. To avoid this, most people who did not have identification used moto-taxis to bypass the crossing.

After reaching Illela, usually by shared taxi from Sokoto, passengers would use moto-taxis to reach Birni N’Konni, at a cost of between FCFA1 500 and FCFA2 000 (€2.30 to €3). They would also have to pay a small bribe – between 500 and 1 000 Nigerian naira (€0.60 to €1.20) – to a Nigerian police officer stationed along the clandestine route, about 2.6 kilometres east of the official crossing. This was a much cheaper alternative, and human smuggling was therefore commonplace. However, the price increased significantly after the total border closure in July 2023, when both the official crossing and the main road between Illela and Birni N’Konni were shut down, and demand for clandestine moto-taxi crossings soared.

A moto-taxi driver told the GI-TOC in August:

Many of us have been working on this crossing since they closed the border. Now all travellers cross the border by moto-taxi, but before the border closed, people crossed on the national highway in six-seater cars and paid FCFA1 000 [€1.50]. Currently, as the border is closed, we offer [the crossing for] between FCFA2 000 and FCFA3 000 [€3 to €4.60] per person, depending on the negotiation. I currently get seven to 10 passengers per day since they closed the border, whereas before I only got between three and four per day.

After the border closure, the number of people entering Niger through Birni N’Konni initially fell slightly, from around 200 to around 80 per day. In September, however, the dynamic changed again, reportedly because of a relaxation of enforcement. According to several local contacts interviewed in November, transport companies were offering direct services between Sokoto and Birni N’Konni, as they did before the closure.

When the border was first closed, we stopped offering direct travel from Sokoto to Birni N’Konni. But, from the end of September 2023 to today, we have resumed this service, because we have understood over time that there is no threat to our activity even if the border is still closed.

*Interview with a member of the National Union of Road Transport Workers in Sokoto,
Nigeria, November 2023*



Moto-taxis crossing the Nigerian border clandestinely in Araba, August 2023. Photo: GI-TOC

According to local contacts, about 20 nine-seater vehicles were leaving Sokoto's main bus station for Birni N'Konni every day in December, carrying an estimated total of between 120 and 180 people. In addition to this, there were also passengers who crossed both borders using motorcycles or taxis. This suggests that movements along this route were returning to levels seen before the border closed, at around 1 400 per week.

The other major border crossing between Nigeria and Niger used by migrants is at May Moudjia, on the main route that connects Kano in northern Nigeria to Zinder in southern Niger. This option is used by sophisticated human smuggling networks that transport migrants from Nigeria to Libya using remote bypass routes through eastern Niger.

Unlike Illela, the May Moudjia border crossing was not among those partially reopened in 2020, and has remained closed on the Nigerian side since 2019. Migrants have therefore relied almost exclusively on smuggling operations, and the coup has not had a significant impact on this dynamic. The main difference is that people were no longer allowed to cross the border on foot. However, this did not affect movement, as migrants used moto-taxis to cross illegally. A trip by moto-taxi cost FCFA1 000 (€1.52), which includes the payment of a bribe to the Nigerian security forces stationed in the border village. Moto-taxi crossings developed during the COVID-19-related border closure, and the system was easily reactivated. As a result, the number of people entering Niger through May Moudjia decreased only slightly, from approximately 2 000–2 500 per week before the closure to around 1 500–2 000 per week afterwards.

Ultimately, the principal effect of the closure of Niger's land borders – an increase in smuggling operations to bypass the restrictions – was felt mainly in the first few months after the coup, primarily at the Illela–Birni N'Konni border crossing, which had been partially open. This situation was similar to that which existed during the COVID 19-related restrictions. However, the key difference is that those restrictions involved border closures as well as affecting the movement of migrants from their countries of origin to the Nigerian border. As the coup-related closure only involved Niger's borders, only one aspect of movement was hampered, and migrants did not face restrictions further upstream. As a result, the demand for smuggling services to enter Niger clandestinely was high.

Once in Niger, many migrants now prefer to travel to Algeria rather than Libya. Although the lifting of the human smuggling ban will lead to a surge in departures to Libya, some of the main factors that caused this westward shift remain relevant.



LIBEREZ L'AFRIQUE

 **Ça Suffit (63 ans)** 

.Vive les libérateurs

.Non à l'invasion du NIGER

TOUS UNIS POUR UN NIGER LIBRE



WESTBOUND DISPLACEMENT OF HUMAN SMUGGLING FIRMLY ESTABLISHED

In 2023, until the repeal of the 2015 anti-smuggling law, human smuggling dynamics were largely characterized by the consolidation of trends that had been underway since 2016. Following the collapse of the migrant smuggling economy in Agadez, systems had adapted and shifted in response to evolving constraints and demand for travel.

Following the 2016 crackdown on foreign migrancy, networks in Agadez reorganized to meet the high demand from Nigerien seasonal workers for transport to Libya, and many *passeurs* switched to activities related to gold mining. What remained of the transport of foreign migrants to Libya shifted to new, remote bypass routes to the east of Agadez. This meant that foreign migrants' journeys to Libya became drastically more expensive and dangerous, as bypass routes carry a higher risk of fatal accidents, breakdowns and banditry attacks.⁴⁶

While Nigerian migrants continue to use routes to Libya through eastern Niger, most francophone West Africans and those from countries further west than Nigeria now typically travel to Algeria. This is a well-trodden path. Tahoua, located 370 kilometres east of Niamey, halfway between Niamey and the city of Agadez, first emerged as a significant transit hub in 2019. However, the shift became clearly apparent following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in 2021. While the human smuggling economy in Agadez struggled to rebound when Niger's borders reopened, movements through Tahoua soared, quickly surpassing pre-COVID levels.⁴⁷

Tahoua's human smuggling networks operating routes to Algeria are now well established, and migrants can easily make contact with intermediaries, or *coxeurs*, through former migrants who have previously used the route. This appears to be a major factor in determining which option migrants choose. In most interviews conducted by the GI-TOC, migrants explained that they had opted for a specific route because someone they knew had used it before, and had given them instructions and put them in contact with smugglers. This is particularly important on routes that involve a significant amount of independent travel using public transport, such as the routes through Tahoua. In order to reach the town, migrants are often given instructions on the best route to take on commercial buses.

As the number of people travelling through Tahoua to Algeria, rather than Agadez to Libya, continued to increase, new migrants were encouraged to do the same.

At the same time, migrants' accounts of Libya also contributed to this shift. Many of those with experience of travelling through Niger and Algeria explained that they had avoided Libya because of the risk of exploitation, abuse and racial violence.

Since 2019, the increasing popularity of routes to Algeria also appears to have coincided with the growth in departures from Tunisia. The majority of migrants interviewed in Tahoua in November 2023 told the GI-TOC that they were travelling to Algeria in order to reach Tunisia. Most said that their *coxeur* had organized their journey from Niger to Algeria, but some had had their trip arranged all the way to Tunisia.

Some migrants – including francophone migrants from Guinea, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire – were travelling to Libya through Agadez. Of these, most indicated that they had chosen this option because they did not know the routes through Algeria well, and because it was easier to cross into Europe from Libya. Some cited expulsions from Algeria as the main reason for avoiding the country.

The repeal of the 2015 anti-smuggling law is expected to have some impact on the choice of routes used by migrants transiting Niger, as one of the factors contributing to the westward shift was the lower level of scrutiny on routes to Algeria compared to Libya. However, the crackdown on human smuggling from Agadez to Libya was not the only driver of this change, and the other factors, such as the perceived higher risks of travelling to Libya and the preference for Tunisia as an embarkation point for sea crossings, may persist. In addition, the routes from Tahoua to Algeria, while less affected by the crackdown, have also benefited from the repeal of the 2015 law, which has already led to an increase in movement. It is therefore likely that while departures from Agadez to Libya will increase, they will not replace departures from Tahoua to Algeria.



CONCLUSION

As Niger's human smuggling economy adapts to the new opportunities offered by the repeal of the anti-smuggling law, departures to Libya and Algeria are likely to continue to increase in 2024.

For migrants, these journeys are now not only cheaper, but also generally safer. As *passeurs* no longer have to use remote bypass routes, accidents, breakdowns and banditry attacks, which can be fatal for migrants, can be expected to decrease. For *passeurs*, the transport of foreign migrants will bring renewed options for licit livelihoods, which had been increasingly contracted in recent years. As the flow of foreign migrants through transit hubs such as Agadez evolves, so too will the economic activities servicing the migration economy, providing opportunities beyond transport itself.

However, these shifts are taking place in the context of regional tensions and political upheaval following the July coup, the effects of which have had an impact on human smuggling. ECOWAS sanctions imposed on Niger, which resulted in border closures, somewhat muted the effects of the repeal, as they impeded migratory movements. By early 2024, however, tensions between ECOWAS and Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – which had formed the Alliance des Etats du Sahel (Alliance of Sahel States – AES) in September 2023 – reached breaking point. On 28 January, the three countries issued a joint statement announcing their withdrawal from the regional body 'without delay'⁴⁸ – meaning they would not honour the one-year notice period required by the ECOWAS treaty.

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is likely to have a number of implications for human smuggling, particularly around movement patterns. Currently, many of the foreign migrants passing through Niger are from ECOWAS states, and are able to enter visa free and move legally within the country, per the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. If the withdrawal of the three states from ECOWAS also leads to the end of visa-free travel between the current and now former members of the bloc, the impact on the movement of migrants could be significant, with a shift towards clandestine approaches. In part, this would increase the reliance on smugglers for movement into Niger. To a degree, this would be a continuation of the dynamic since the coup, where ECOWAS sanctions and border closures pushed migrants towards smugglers for direct border crossings, after which they switched back to commercial transport.

Furthermore, in the event of new visa requirements, undocumented migrants may find it more difficult or risky to travel through Niger using commercial buses. This could lead to an increase in the use of *passeurs* from the country's southern borders north, either to hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez, or directly on to Algeria and Libya.

It is important to underscore, however, that there is little clarity at present about what will happen regarding mobility, and in what timeframe. A negotiated compromise may yet emerge between Niger and its fellow AES members and ECOWAS, either on mobility or more broadly.

There are indications that states in the region are attempting to defuse tensions, potentially creating the opportunity for a rapprochement. On 24 February, ECOWAS announced the lifting of sanctions on Niger.⁴⁹ Initially, both the Nigerian and Benin borders remained closed as the CNSP maintained the closure on the Nigerien side. This was reportedly due to fears that the reopening could present a security threat to Niger. However, although the Benin border remained closed at the time of writing, the Nigerian border was reopened on 22 March. Trade and travel have resumed at the main crossings between the two countries, including certain border crossings that had been closed since 2019, such as May Moudjia. It is likely that the Benin border will also reopen eventually, although tensions between the two countries have since further escalated.

Should the lifting of sanctions and the reopening of borders succeed in lowering tensions and paving the way for a negotiated solution to the ECOWAS crisis, regional mobility would benefit not only from the reopening of Niger's borders but also from the prospect of visa-free travel being upheld between Niger and its neighbours. However, the regional political context remains tense.

The CNSP also appears to be hardening its stance towards foreign partners, including the US, even further. On 16 March, following the visit of an official US delegation to Niamey, the CNSP announced the revocation of its military agreements with the US, dealing a significant blow to US military presence in the Sahel. This could have a significant impact on counterterrorism operations in the Sahel.⁵⁰ This also came shortly after the CNSP revoked several key security agreements with the EU, putting an end to the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger, among other programmes.⁵¹

Migration dynamics in Niger will remain in flux in the short to medium term, as the industry adapts to rapidly evolving regional geopolitical and security developments and Niger's domestic situation. Security in Burkina Faso, Mali and other West African states, the status of Niger's borders with Benin and Nigeria, as well as relations between Niger and ECOWAS in the wake of the withdrawal will all play a part. Bilateral relations between Niger and the other ECOWAS states will determine the extent to which regional mobility will be affected by Niger's withdrawal. The response of Niger's northern neighbours, Libya and Algeria, to the increased arrival of foreign migrants from Niger should also be considered. This could result in an uptick in law enforcement and crackdowns in Libya and Algeria, a rise in the already high level of expulsions from Algeria, or even a resumption of expulsions from Libya, which in turn would limit the impact of the legalization of migratory movement in Niger.



NOTES

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