

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS  
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2025 SERIES



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# NIGER

DECRIMINALIZATION RESHAPES  
HUMAN SMUGGLING BUT SAHEL  
UPHEAVAL AND BORDER CLOSURES  
PREVENT RETURN TO PRE-2015 LEVELS

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NOVEMBER 2025

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|                |                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ACLED</b>   | Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project                                                                                                   |
| <b>AES</b>     | Alliance des Etats du Sahel (Alliance of Sahel States)                                                                                           |
| <b>CFLN</b>    | Coalition des Forces Libres du Niger (Coalition of Free Forces of Niger)                                                                         |
| <b>CNSP</b>    | Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland)                                            |
| <b>CSP-DPA</b> | Cadre Stratégique et Permanent pour la Défense du Peuple de l’Azawad (Strategic and Permanent Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad) |
| <b>ECOWAS</b>  | Economic Community of West African States                                                                                                        |
| <b>FCFA</b>    | West African franc                                                                                                                               |
| <b>FPL</b>     | Front Patriotique de Libération (Patriotic Liberation Front)                                                                                     |
| <b>FPJ</b>     | Front Patriotique pour la Justice (Patriotic Front for Justice)                                                                                  |
| <b>GI-TOC</b>  | Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime                                                                                          |
| <b>JNIM</b>    | Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims)                                                                          |
| <b>MPL</b>     | Mouvement Patriotique de Libération (Patriotic Liberation Movement)                                                                              |
| <b>UFPR</b>    | Union des Forces Patriotiques pour la Refondation de la République (Union of Patriotic Forces for the Refoundation of the Republic)              |
| <b>UNVP</b>    | Union des Nigériens pour la Vigilance et le Patriotisme (Union of Nigeriens for Vigilance and Patriotism)                                        |
| <b>UTTAN</b>   | Union des Travailleurs du Transport et Assimilés du Niger (Union of Transport Workers and Related Workers of Niger)                              |
| <b>VDP</b>     | Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland)                                                            |



# INTRODUCTION

In 2024, human smuggling dynamics in Niger underwent the most significant change since the crackdown on the industry, almost a decade earlier. Following the November 2023 repeal of Law 2015-36 – Niger’s controversial anti-human smuggling legislation – by the ruling military junta, the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland – CNSP), the transport of foreign migrants became legal. For the first time in eight years, smugglers (known locally as passeurs) were able to work in the open.

Before the criminalization of human smuggling, Niger’s migration industry was largely legal and supported a sizeable ancillary economy that had developed over several decades.<sup>1</sup> This was particularly evident in Agadez, the main departure point for Libya. However, when the Nigerien authorities began implementing the anti-smuggling law in the summer of 2016, the industry collapsed.<sup>2</sup> Although some smugglers adapted and developed clandestine operations, the sector never fully recovered. The law’s repeal in November 2023 was not only a major boon for smugglers, but also for those involved in secondary services within the migration industry, such as the provision of accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

Although the initial impact of the repeal was muted, departures to Algeria and, in particular, Libya began to rebound in January 2024, and remained high throughout the year. However, despite expectations that the legislative change would trigger a major surge in movements, especially on routes to Libya, the number of foreign migrants transiting the country did not return to pre-2015 levels.

The repeal also led to a shift in routes. *Passeurs* travelling to Libya could once again use main roads and travel under the protection of the weekly military convoy to Dirkou. This reduced the reliance on remote bypass routes, which were relatively high-risk in terms of accidents, breakdowns and attacks by bandit groups. However, many still chose to use routes that circumvented checks, as this allowed them to avoid paying the taxes and fees levied by Nigerien personnel, and sometimes offered faster travel times.

But even as travel restrictions within the country eased, the closure of the Benin border – shuttered since the July 2023 coup that brought the CNSP to power – persisted. This continued to be a major impediment to movement, given the border’s centrality to migrant flows, and was likely one of the main reasons for the absence of a spike in activity. In addition, between May and November 2024, the river crossings between Malanville and Gaya that had enabled cross-border travel to continue were banned by Beninese authorities, as a result of escalating tensions with Niger. This had a significant impact on arrivals in Niger. At the same time, the alternative entry point from West Africa through Burkina Faso remained highly dangerous due to an increase in attacks by violent extremist groups.

The impact of the post-coup political and legislative shifts on movements through Niger has been complex. While the changes to the legal landscape effectively facilitated mobility, other factors, such as border closures and regional insecurity, were pivotal in shaping human smuggling trends in 2024, and muted the expected impact of its decriminalization.

This is the latest monitoring report on human smuggling in Niger from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). It builds on the series of annual reports 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.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

This report is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2024 – 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 report 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.

## Key points

- In 2024, the dynamics of human smuggling in Niger underwent one of the most substantial shifts since 2015. Following the November 2023 repeal of Law 2015-36, the transport of foreign migrants was legalized, meaning that journeys that were once clandestine and relied on dangerous, remote routes, also became legal.
- Some *passeurs* continued to use routes originally developed to avoid detection, while others shifted their operations to new routes entirely, taking advantage of the lifting of restrictions to develop more efficient ways of moving migrants through Niger.
- The decriminalization of the human smuggling industry also resulted in a significant increase in the number of migrants travelling to Algeria and Libya, with activity rebounding in key Nigerien hubs such as Agadez and Tahoua.
- However, despite expectations that the legislative change would trigger a major surge in movements, especially on routes to Libya, the number of foreign migrants transiting the country did not return to pre-2015 levels. This is because key factors shaping movements in the region remain at play.
- One of the most salient factors is the ongoing challenges faced by migrants travelling from West Africa to Niger, including the deteriorating security landscape along routes to Niger, particularly in Burkina Faso. The ongoing closure of the Benin border also remains a major impediment to inbound flows of migrants.
- Overall, while the dynamics of human smuggling in Niger were profoundly reshaped by the repeal of the anti-smuggling law, the industry continues to be adversely affected by major political and security upheaval in the Sahel region.



## DYNAMICS SHAPING MIGRATION IN NIGER

In 2024, the CNSP further consolidated its power in Niger, maintaining firm pressure on civic space and political opposition. In April, it banned political party activities and dissolved all elected local councils, replacing them with centrally appointed special delegations, thus further entrenching executive military control over state institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The political situation remained largely stalled, with no concrete steps taken to implement the three-year transition to civilian rule announced by CNSP head General Abdourahamane Tchiani in 2023. In fact, this timeline effectively disappeared from official discourse in mid-2024, presaging an announcement in March 2025 of a new ‘flexible’ five-year transitional period ending in 2030. Civic space also contracted significantly in 2024, with independent journalists, opposition activists and civil society figures facing arbitrary arrest, intimidation or exile.<sup>6</sup> Despite international demands for his release, the ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, remained in detention throughout the year.<sup>7</sup>

In northern and eastern Niger, the CNSP faced ongoing threats from rebel groups, notably the Front Patriotique de Libération (Patriotic Liberation Front – FPL). The FPL was formed on 16 August 2023 by Mahamoud Salah, who was previously the president of the Union des Forces Patriotiques pour la Refondation de la République (Union of Patriotic Forces for the Refoundation of the Republic – UFPR). The UFPR was active between August 2020 and May 2023, when Salah agreed to lay down arms and return to the capital, Niamey, following negotiations with Bazoum.<sup>8</sup> Salah claimed the group had surrendered unconditionally, due to the government’s perceived efforts to tackle corruption. Following the coup and the detention of Bazoum, Salah then created the FPL with the reported aim of liberating the former president and restoring constitutional order.<sup>9</sup>

In February 2024, the FPL attacked a military convoy travelling from the Tchibarakatene goldfield, 540 kilometres north of Agadez, to Arlit. The convoy escorts vehicles transporting people, gold and goods to and from the goldfield each week. This was the first attack claimed by the FPL since its formation.<sup>10</sup>

In May, the FPL claimed responsibility for another attack near Seguedine, 630 kilometres north-east of Agadez. Although the group publicly stated that it was opposed to the regime rather than the military rank and file, Nigerien security forces were targeted in the incident.<sup>11</sup>

In June, the group carried out its most significant operation to date, targeting Niger’s oil infrastructure. FPL fighters sabotaged a section of the PetroChina-funded crude oil pipeline between Agadem and

the Beninese coast. This attack, which resulted in multiple casualties among Nigerien security forces, was intended to undermine a critical revenue stream for the CNSP while also drawing international attention to the group's criticism of the regime's resource-extraction practices in the Agadem region, where many FPL fighters originate.<sup>12</sup>

By August, the CNSP had reportedly initiated discreet talks with FPL representatives.<sup>13</sup> Disagreements over the terms of these negotiations and their potential outcome were among the factors that reportedly caused internal divisions within the FPL. As a result of the talks, some members of the FPL surrendered in November, but Salah reportedly remained firmly opposed to any agreement with the CNSP that did not include the release of Bazoum and a return to constitutional order.<sup>14</sup>

Despite Salah's relocation to southern Libya, the FPL remained a considerable threat to the CNSP at the end of 2024. Furthermore, several splinter groups emerged from the FPL's mobilization, including the Mouvement Patriotique de Libération (Patriotic Liberation Movement – MPL) and the Front Patriotique pour la Justice (Patriotic Front for Justice – FPJ), which kidnapped the military prefect of Bilma in June 2024.<sup>15</sup> These factions formed the Coalition des Forces Libres du Niger (Coalition of Free Forces of Niger – CFLN) along with two other Nigerien rebel groups, including the Forces Armées Libres (Free Armed Forces) led by Rhissa Ag Boula, a Tuareg leader and former minister under Bazoum.<sup>16</sup>

The FPL also formed alliances outside of Niger. In late August 2024, it met with the Cadre Stratégique et Permanent pour la Défense du Peuple de l'Azawad (Strategic and Permanent Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad – CSP-DPA), a coalition of rebel groups in northern Mali. Meetings held between 25 and 29 August in Tinzouaouten, near the Algerian border, resulted in the two groups declaring their intention to coordinate their efforts in opposing the junta regimes in both countries.<sup>17</sup>

The FPL and other rebel groups do not pose an existential threat to the CNSP, nor do they have the capacity to claim territorial control in Niger. However, their ongoing mobilization and occasional operations represent a significant symbolic threat to the CNSP's authority in northern Niger. Attacks targeting gold and oil infrastructure also illustrate the persistent grievances about Niger's management of its extractive industry.

## **Junta breaks with former partners and fosters ties with Russia**

On 28 January 2024, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso issued a joint statement announcing their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). All three countries had already been suspended from the union and subjected to sanctions following the military coups that overthrew civilian rule in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in July 2023.<sup>18</sup> The sanctions imposed on Niger in August 2023 were followed by the threat of military intervention to restore constitutional order.<sup>19</sup> In response to the deterioration of relations with ECOWAS, the three countries created a defence pact – the Alliance des Etats du Sahel (Alliance of Sahel States – AES) – in September 2023.<sup>20</sup>

According to the ECOWAS Treaty, member states must give one year's notice to withdraw from the bloc, during which time they must abide by its provisions.<sup>21</sup> In their joint statement, the AES declared that their withdrawal would take effect immediately and that they would not honour the notice period.<sup>22</sup> However, no legal measures were taken to concretize the move in 2024.

Shortly after the announcement of the withdrawal, ECOWAS appeared to attempt to defuse tensions with Niger. On 24 February, the bloc lifted its sanctions on the country.<sup>23</sup> This meant that, in addition



Protestors in Niamey celebrate the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, expressing support for the Alliance of Sahel States defence pact in its place. © Boureima Hama/AFP via Getty Images

to the end of economic restrictions and the no-fly zone, Niger's borders with Nigeria and Benin could technically be reopened. ECOWAS justified the decision on humanitarian grounds, but it was also seen as an effort to improve strained relations with the AES.<sup>24</sup> Niger's border with Nigeria reopened in March, but the border with Benin remained closed, as Niger refused to authorize the action on its side due to growing bilateral tensions.<sup>25</sup>

The AES's formal withdrawal from the regional bloc came into effect on 29 January 2025, when the ECOWAS Commission issued a statement of confirmation.<sup>26</sup> The communication noted that the union would continue to maintain passports and identity cards belonging to citizens of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso bearing its emblem, recognize the rights of these citizens to visa-free movement, residence and establishment within ECOWAS countries, and allow the three countries to remain in the ECOWAS free-trade scheme. These measures are temporary, pending the establishment of permanent terms of cooperation. The AES had already announced that it would maintain visa-free entry and residency for ECOWAS citizens in a statement on 14 December 2024.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the situation did not result in any tangible changes for ECOWAS citizens in Niger. They could still enter the country without a visa and travel legally within it.

In May 2025, AES officials met with the ECOWAS Commission in Bamako to consult on upcoming negotiations for a permanent agreement to formalize relations between the two bodies. In a joint statement, the parties expressed their commitment to safeguarding free movement and trade in the region until such an agreement is reached, as well as their dedication to fostering effective cooperation in combating terrorism.<sup>28</sup> This thawing of relations suggests that both bodies may seek to secure permanent free movement and trade during future negotiations, although the outcome of such talks remains uncertain.

## Post-coup relations between Niger and Benin continue to deteriorate

Despite Niger's rapprochement with ECOWAS, relations with Benin remained icy in 2024. The situation had deteriorated sharply in mid-2023, when the CNSP refused to reopen the countries' common border amid ongoing concerns about potential military intervention by Benin.

This created significant tension between the two countries, partly because Benin relies heavily on trade and handling fees for Nigerien exports through Cotonou's port. Niger had diverted some of its trade through Burkina Faso, with military escorts providing protection to convoys through the cross-border area, and into Togo. Although this new route could not entirely absorb the volume of trade previously conducted through Benin, the state of affairs had a greater effect on Benin's economy than Niger's.

Hostilities came to a head on 6 May, when Benin's president, Patrice Talon, announced the decision to block Nigerien oil exports through Benin.<sup>29</sup> The Nigerien authorities had recently signed a deal worth US\$400 million with the China National Petroleum Corporation to begin exporting crude oil from the Agadem oilfield in south-eastern Niger, some 560 kilometres east of Agadez.<sup>30</sup> The oilfield is connected by a recently completed 2 000-kilometre pipeline to the port of Sémè-Kpodji in Benin, a few kilometres east of Cotonou. Talon said the blockade would remain in place until the CNSP reopened the border.<sup>31</sup>

Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine, prime minister of the CNSP, denounced the move as a violation of various international agreements between Niger, Benin and China, and defended the continued closure of the border on security grounds.<sup>32</sup> He accused Benin of secretly hosting five French military bases, housing French forces following their withdrawal from Niger in 2023.<sup>33</sup> He also claimed that the French military was training 'terrorists' at these bases with the aim of launching operations to destabilize Niger. The Beninese authorities denied these accusations.

The Nigerien prime minister requested mediation, leading to negotiations between the Nigerien and Beninese authorities, convened by the Chinese authorities and the China National Petroleum Corporation. By 15 May, Benin had authorized the temporary reopening of the pipeline,<sup>34</sup> allowing the first shipment of 1 million barrels of crude oil from Niger to be transported from Agadem to Sémè-Kpodji for export on 16 May.<sup>35</sup>

However, friction between the two countries continued to increase. On 5 June, three Nigeriens employed by the Chinese oil company Wapco Niger were arrested in Sémè-Kpodji while reportedly supervising a shipment of crude oil. They were accused of illegally entering the pipeline premises at the port by presenting false identification badges,<sup>36</sup> given suspended prison sentences and released. The CNSP described the arrests as 'kidnapping' and announced the total closure of the pipeline the following day.<sup>37</sup>

A relative détente ensued in the following months. Exports through the pipeline resumed in August,<sup>38</sup> and Benin reauthorized cross-border travel between Malanville in Benin and Gaya in Niger, having banned these movements in May. However, tensions reignited at the end of the year, when Niger's General Abdourahamane Tchiani reiterated accusations that Benin was attempting to destabilize Niger, thereby justifying the CNSP's decision to maintain the border closure. These claims were strongly rejected by Benin's foreign minister.<sup>39</sup> In 2025, despite the continued flow of oil through the Niger-Benin pipeline, relations between the two countries continue to be strained. Nigerien authorities have repeatedly accused French forces of using Benin as a base for launching operations into Niger, and the border remains closed at the time of writing.<sup>40</sup>

## US withdraws as Russian influence grows

In addition to the AES withdrawal from ECOWAS, the CNSP shifted its international affiliations in 2024, notably with the US and Russia. Relations between the CNSP and Niger's global partners soured in the months following the July 2023 coup, with international actors rescinding foreign aid and the junta revoking several key security and defence agreements.<sup>41</sup> The termination of Niger's military partnership with France, whom the transitional authorities accused of attempting to destabilize Niger, resulted in France withdrawing its 1 500 troops stationed in the country by December 2023.<sup>42</sup>

In 2024, relations with the US followed suit. Niger had been a key partner of the US in its counter-terrorism efforts, facilitating a substantial US military presence to support operations across the region. The US also provided Niger with high levels of foreign assistance.<sup>43</sup> Following the coup, however, a total of US\$500 million (over €465 million) in aid was suspended.<sup>44</sup>

On 12 March 2024, an official US delegation visited Niamey. Shortly afterwards, the CNSP announced the end of its military partnership with the US.<sup>45</sup> In April, the US reportedly attempted, without success, to reach an agreement with the CNSP that would allow it to maintain a presence in the country.<sup>46</sup> In May, troops began pulling out of the country, following a disengagement agreement in which the US committed to removing all personnel by 15 September.<sup>47</sup>

By August, the US had completed its withdrawal from both Air Base 101, a small drone base in Niamey, and Air Base 201, a facility near Agadez built by the US primarily for drone operations in support of counterterrorism missions in the Sahel and central Sahara. All remaining troops had left the country by September.<sup>48</sup> Around 650 US military personnel had been stationed at the two facilities. The withdrawal from Air Base 201 set back US counterterrorism efforts in the region and raised concerns about the future of the infrastructure, which cost over US\$100 million to build. The airbase is now controlled by the Nigerien military.



Demonstrators protest against the presence of US troops in Niger in front of the National Assembly in Niamey, April 2024. © Balima Boureima/Anadolu via Getty Images

The CNSP justified this action on the grounds of its declared determination to restore sovereignty by expelling foreign troops. However, equally important was the perceived condescension of US officials during the 12 March meeting.<sup>49</sup> In particular, the CNSP condemned the pressure the US had reportedly tried to exert to dissuade Niger from developing relations with other foreign states, especially Russia.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, Niger's partnership with Russia had started to develop the previous year. In December 2023, the junta received a high-level Russian delegation, including the deputy defence minister, Colonel General Yunus-bek Yevkurov, after which it announced strengthened bilateral cooperation.<sup>51</sup> This was not the first time Russian officials had visited Niamey in recent years. Relations had been warming since 2019, when the two parties decided to reopen their corresponding embassies. Since then, several reciprocal visits have taken place, paving the way for small-scale military collaboration, including the training of Nigerien personnel.<sup>52</sup> However, this was the first Russian visit to Niamey since the July 2023 coup.

The December 2023 visit resulted in the signing of more substantial military cooperation agreements. Although the details were not made public, the bolstered partnership became apparent in April the following year, when military equipment and around 100 Russian military personnel arrived in Niamey to conduct air defence system training.<sup>53</sup> Over the course of 2024, several deliveries of equipment arrived in Niamey on cargo flights, with two initial shipments in April and another in November.<sup>54</sup>

On 4 May, Russian military personnel entered Air Base 101 in Niamey, where some US forces were still stationed. According to US officials, the Russian units were based in a separate compound and did not interact with US troops or have access to any US equipment.<sup>55</sup> The cohabitation was short-lived, however, as the United States Africa Command began withdrawing US forces from Niamey on 19 May, completing the process by July.<sup>56</sup>

Although there have been unconfirmed reports of a Russian military presence in Agadez, there is no hard evidence that these forces are occupying US Air Base 201. While the Agadez region is likely to be of interest to Russia due to its natural resources, particularly its gold mines, the question of Russian deployment in the north is reportedly a source of disagreement among CNSP leadership.<sup>57</sup> This is largely due to concerns that such activity could provoke a backlash from local actors in the region, given its history of successive rebellions and the negative perception of the Russian-backed Wagner group's operations in northern Mali.<sup>58</sup> Any foreign involvement in gold mining in northern Niger would almost certainly be met with strong opposition. Tensions already exist between local communities and the national authorities, who are accused of granting powerful political and economic actors access to gold sites at the expense of artisanal gold miners.<sup>59</sup> Nigerien authorities are also thought to be prioritizing a Russian presence in Niamey in order to protect and support the military regime.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to gold mining, major shifts in Niger's uranium sector since the coup could present Russia with a significant opportunity. As Niger's relationship with France deteriorated, the latter's involvement in uranium mining was also made increasingly difficult. Initially this was mainly due to challenges in exporting uranium using the usual route through Benin, due to the border closure. In June 2024, however, Orano – a French state-owned company formerly named Areva, which had been exploiting uranium in Niger since 1971 – had its operating licence for Imouraren, one of the world's largest uranium mines, revoked by the Nigerien authorities.<sup>61</sup> In December, the company announced that it had lost operational control of its Nigerien subsidiary Somaïr, in which it held a stake of over 60% (the remainder being owned by the Nigerien state).<sup>62</sup> The CNSP subsequently announced the nationalization of Somaïr in June 2025.<sup>63</sup>



With France effectively evicted from the Nigerien uranium sector, the CNSP sought to forge new partnerships, including with Russia. In November 2024, Ousmane Abarchi, Nigeria's mining minister, called for Russian investment in uranium mining and other natural resources in Niger.<sup>64</sup> Abarchi has since made several trips to Russia to develop cooperation in the extractive sector, although the precise details remain unclear.<sup>65</sup>

However, as with gold, the involvement of foreign firms in uranium mining also risks tension with local communities. For years, France's exploitation of Niger's uranium has been the subject of criticism, with accusations of a lack of transparency in mining company operations, social and environmental negligence – including the large-scale radioactive contamination of sites – and insufficient taxation and revenue benefits for Niger.<sup>66</sup> Russian investment in uranium mining in northern Niger could therefore face pushback from local communities.

Overall, Russia's role in post-coup Niger has been relatively modest compared to its large-scale deployment in Mali. Its military presence has remained limited to personnel stationed in Niamey to provide training and protection for the regime, and its economic cooperation has so far focused on strategic sectors such as uranium mining, rather than riskier ventures such as gold mining in northern Niger.

This is also salient because, thus far, Niger's rapprochement with Russia has not affected migration dynamics. These are still mainly influenced by local factors, such as the CNSP's repeal of the human smuggling law and its relations with its ECOWAS neighbours. The risk of Russia weaponizing migration in Niger remains largely speculative.<sup>67</sup>



## KEY TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN HUMAN SMUGGLING

**S**ubstantial shifts in Niger's political and security landscape in 2023 shaped the dynamics of human smuggling throughout 2024. As migrants and *passeurs* adapted to the decriminalization of the industry, activity rebounded at key hubs, and the use of certain bypass routes decreased in favour of formal, legal routes. Some *passeurs* continued to use routes originally developed to avoid detection, which are sometimes more cost-efficient and straightforward than transit through main hubs. Others shifted their operations to new routes entirely, taking advantage of the lifting of restrictions to develop more efficient ways of moving migrants through the country. Nevertheless, movements did not return to the levels seen before criminalization in 2015.

Key factors shaping movements in the region remain at play, regardless of changes to legislation. These include the ongoing challenges faced by migrants travelling from West Africa to Niger, particularly the deteriorating security landscape in Burkina Faso. The situation at Niger's southern borders, the main entry point for migrants, underwent several shifts in 2024 that significantly affected human smuggling patterns.

### Human smuggling rebounds in Agadez after decriminalization

In 2024, human smuggling and trafficking dynamics continued to change rapidly as a result of the repeal of the anti-smuggling law. The impact was most keenly felt in Agadez, a city that had been at the centre of anti-smuggling operations and had experienced a significant contraction in such activities following the post-2015 crackdown.

News of the law's repeal prompted some *passeurs* who had switched to other activities – such as gold mining, drug trafficking and, in some cases, armed banditry – to return to human smuggling. According to local sources, the number of *passeurs* operating in Agadez rose from 70 to 100 to between 100 and 130 by January 2024, and remained high throughout the year. There was also an increase in the number of foreign migrants in key locations used for human smuggling in the city, such as bus

stations, where migrants typically arrive, and departure points, where *passeurs* gather passengers for registration before their journeys.

One of the key outcomes was the decrease in prices for foreign migrants. The cost of the journey from Agadez to Libya fell from between FCFA150 000 and FCFA200 000 (€228 and €381) to between FCFA100 000 and FCFA120 000 (€152 and €182). This was due to various factors. First, the increase in the number of *passeurs* offering their services led to competition driving down prices. Second, as the transport of foreign migrants became legal, *passeurs* no longer faced the risk of arrest. Finally, *passeurs* could use legal channels to reach Libya, meaning they did not have to use circuitous bypass routes, which reduced their operational costs – though some still used bypass routes for part of the journey (more on this below).

While in Agadez, migrants are housed in informal accommodation known locally as 'ghettos'. These were common before the criminalization of human smuggling, but had gradually fallen into disuse since 2016 due to law enforcement pressure and the risk of raids. However, from November 2023 onwards, the number of ghettos in Agadez increased considerably. By June 2024, there were around 20, and by January 2025, this figure had risen to around 100. According to some *passeurs*, this exceeded the number of ghettos before 2015.

While *coxeurs* (intermediaries) are responsible for transporting migrants to the ghettos and organizing their departure, accommodation is rented and paid for by *passeurs*. A ghetto typically costs between FCFA30 000 and FCFA40 000 (€19 and €26) per month, which is considered affordable. By paying for the ghettos, *passeurs* ensure that all the migrants housed there will use their services.

If I pay for the ghetto, I have to make sure that I transport all the migrants housed in it. I can finance a ghetto for the accommodation of both Nigerien and foreign passengers while they wait for departure. We used to be afraid to pay for the ghettos, but now it's OK.

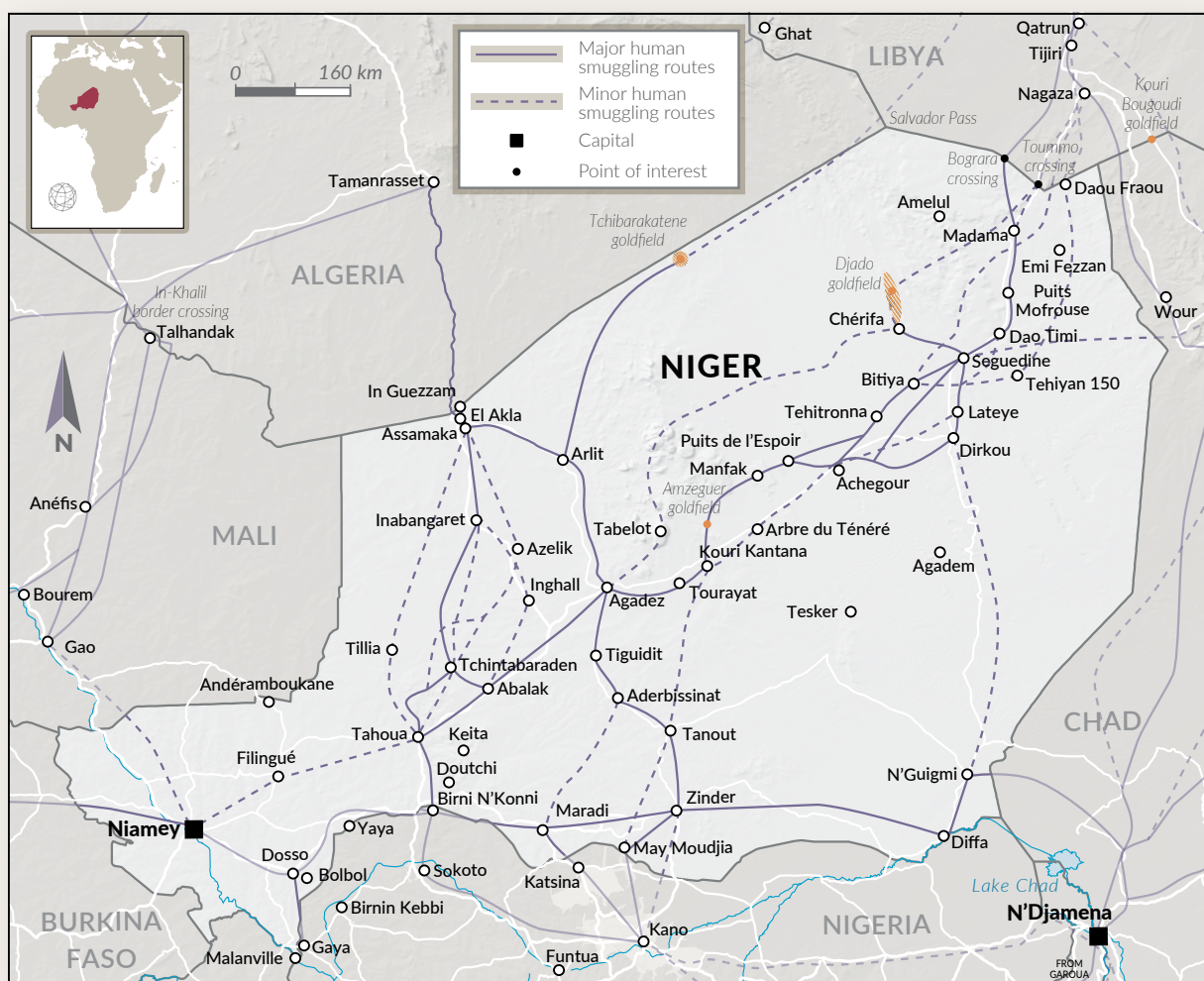
*Interview with a passeur in Agadez, December 2023*



Foreign migrants gather in front of their informal accommodation ('ghetto') in Agadez before their departure to Libya, December 2023. Photo: GI-TOC

There were also changes in the way *passeurs* operated. The most significant was the use of the military convoy that leaves Agadez for Dirkou every Tuesday. Although slow, this service is used by people transporting passengers or goods, as the risk of banditry attacks, accidents or breakdowns on routes to Libya is high and can be fatal. Before the repeal, *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants were not permitted to travel with the convoy and had to use alternative, clandestine routes. Between 35 and 55 vehicles had previously used the convoy each week, exclusively *passeurs* transporting Nigerien migrants. By January 2024, this number had increased to between 80 and 90, including *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants.

However, vehicle numbers decreased again towards the end of the year, reaching roughly 50 to 60 per week, transporting approximately 1 000 to 1 200 passengers. This is probably because some *passeurs* chose to use bypass routes to avoid paying fees at checkpoints or to travel more quickly.



**FIGURE 1** Niger, showing main human smuggling routes.



Migrants take a break during a stop at the Seguedine checkpoint, February 2024. Photo: GI-TOC

Throughout 2024, *passeurs* steadily consolidated their operations, adapting to the emergence of cheaper alternatives. Many opted to travel with the military convoy only as far as Bir Tawil, also known by the French name Puits de l'Espoir ('Well of Hope'), 220 kilometres west of Dirkou. From there, they took a shortcut along a north-easterly diagonal route to Seguedine through Tehitronna and Bitiya, before heading north to the border. This practice is not new; it was used by *passeurs* transporting Nigerien migrants in the convoy before the repeal of the anti-smuggling law. However, its use by *passeurs* transporting foreign migrants highlights the diversification of options available to them.

Other *passeurs* continued to travel without joining the convoy. In January 2025, around 30 vehicles reportedly departed from Agadez independently each week. One *passeur* stated that he often had not gathered enough passengers by the time of the weekly departure, and, not wanting to wait for the next one, he would organize his own trips. Some *passeurs* also preferred to travel to Libya using routes that bypassed Nigerien government checkpoints. Although all movement is now legal, *passeurs* still have to pay fees and bribes.

In addition to the bribes paid by passengers, *passeurs* pay up to FCFA122 000 (€186) at checkpoints between Agadez and the Libyan border. As the prices they can effectively charge foreign migrants have declined since the repeal of the anti-smuggling law, some may now be trying to reduce their overheads in order to maximize their profits, including by avoiding fees and bribes.

So far, we have no confidence in the main road and its checkpoints. Our friends who use the main road have never been bothered for transporting foreign migrants, but the exorbitant fees they are charged at the checkpoints mean they make no profit. The main road [is too long], meaning you consume too much fuel, but it is different for clandestine routes.

*Interview with a passeur in Agadez, June 2024*



Vehicles transporting migrants stop at the Madama checkpoint, February 2024. Photo: GI-TOC

Some alternative routes to Libya are faster than the official options, as they are more direct. Travelling independently also results in shorter travel times, as although the convoy provides protection, it is slow and often stays in towns overnight or stops for vehicle breakdowns. As one *passeur* stated: 'Instead of spending nights in the villages, it's better to use [bypass routes] and go and come back quickly. They are more efficient. A journey that takes you six days on the main road will take you just four days on these [bypass] routes.' However, the bypass routes remain dangerous. According to several *passeurs*, they come with a higher risk of bandit attacks and vehicle breakdowns, particularly in areas close to the Libyan border.

In January 2025, it was estimated that between 80 and 90 vehicles departed for Libya, transporting 1 600 to 1 800 people. Of these, around 300 to 350 were foreign migrants. This represents a significant increase from the 40 to 50 foreign migrants recorded before November 2023. However, determining precise numbers is difficult, as *passeurs* often transport both Nigerien and foreign nationals together in order to fill their vehicles for each journey.

The levels of movement in 2024 did not resemble the massive surge that European officials had initially feared when the anti-smuggling law was repealed.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Agadez did not revert to its pre-2015 state, when its role as the fulcrum of northbound migration attracted significant international attention. This is partly because the repeal also facilitated movement through other hubs and along routes to Algeria, but also because migration through Niger continued to be shaped by other factors, particularly the difficulty of reaching Niger from West Africa.

## Dynamics shift along eastern Niger routes

The repeal of the human smuggling law had a significant impact on the eastern bypass routes between Nigeria and Libya. These emerged around 2018, in response to the criminalization of human smuggling, and enabled *passeurs* to travel directly from the Nigerian border to Libya without transiting Agadez, which was the focus of law enforcement operations.<sup>69</sup> The most popular of these routes connects May Moudjia, a border crossing between Nigeria and Niger, to the Libyan border through Kouri Kantana, an exchange point around 130 kilometres east of Agadez. Smuggling networks typically hire local drivers to transport migrants from May Moudjia to Kouri Kantana, where *passeurs* collect them for onward travel to Libya.<sup>70</sup>

Before the repeal, most migrants entering Niger at May Moudjia would continue along this clandestine route to Libya. In November 2023, however, some *passeurs* began organizing departures from Agadez. This is a much more straightforward option, as passengers can travel to the city independently using public transport, negating the need for local drivers and a pick-up service in Kouri Kantana. In addition, *passeurs* can combine passengers from multiple entry points in Agadez, which facilitates the organization of departures.

Around 12 *passeurs* operated on the Kouri Kantana route before the repeal, a number that decreased to around six in 2024. Similarly, the number of migrants travelling to Libya through Kouri Kantana fell from around 150 per week before November 2023 to between 100 and 120 in 2024.

*Passeurs* continuing to use the Kouri Kantana route do so because it is shorter and faster than operating out of Agadez. It also guarantees a regular pool of passengers, as *passeurs* are able to work directly with *coxeurs* in Nigeria. Some *passeurs* also fear the loss of control associated with public transport, as their passengers could then come across other *passeurs* willing to transport them to Libya. Furthermore, as *passeurs* no longer have to avoid towns or checkpoints, the risks associated with more remote bypass routes have been reduced.

The *passeurs* who shifted their operations to Agadez transport their passengers from the Nigerian border to the city using public transport or 19-seater minibuses. A key transit hub for these journeys is Zinder, 100 kilometres north of the border. This is a major crossroads for migrants arriving from Nigeria or Chad through Diffa, a town about 400 kilometres to the east, and has seen increasing footfall since the repeal.



Migrants travelling on the Kouri Kantana route, March 2024. Photo: GI-TOC

Zinder has good public transport links to other major towns in Niger. From there, migrants can travel to Tahoua or Agadez by bus, informal shared transport or by using *passeurs*. Those with valid identification documents usually travel on commercial buses, while those without are typically advised to use informal minibuss transport or *passeurs*.

Some *passeurs* prefer to outsource some transport, for example from Zinder to Agadez, to avoid having to travel themselves. They typically rely on *coxeurs* in Zinder, who organize the arrival of passengers from the Nigerian border or other Nigerien towns, and arrange onward transport to Agadez. Zinder's bus station plays an important logistical role, as most migrants sleep there until they continue their journeys.

Because of Zinder's role as a major crossroads, and the wide range of passenger profiles, it is difficult to assess the patterns of migrants transiting the city. Many of those travelling through or from Zinder are Nigeriens, as many local people from the south migrate to find seasonal work in Libya or Algeria. Foreign nationals include Nigerians, Chadians, Sudanese, Cameroonians, Central Africans and Beninese. According to a bus company station manager, around 350 to 400 people travel from Zinder to Agadez by bus each day. Of these, an estimated 100 are foreign migrants. Direct travel to Libya from Zinder is rare, as smugglers operating on these routes typically collect their passengers at the border, at May Moudjia or in Kouri Kantana.

## Algeria-bound flows increase

Although the repeal of the anti-smuggling law had the most immediate and significant impact in Agadez and on routes to Libya, departures to Algeria also increased. Since around 2019, these routes have grown in importance, partly due to the crackdown on movement through Agadez from 2015. The preference for Algeria is also driven by the perception that it is a safer transit country than Libya, where reports of exploitation, abuse and racial violence have raised concerns among prospective migrants. Another important factor in this westward shift has been Tunisia's growing prominence as a transit point for Europe. Although enforcement in Agadez has now ceased, the other two factors driving movement to Algeria remain significant.

Most migrants travelling to Algeria depart from Tahoua, a town strategically located halfway between Niamey and Agadez, some 500 kilometres south of the border. Bus companies run regular services between Tahoua and major cities in Niger and across West Africa, making it easily accessible for most migrants without the need for smugglers.

Although anti-smuggling operations in Tahoua were less pronounced than in Agadez in recent years, *passeurs* still operated with caution. They generally avoided picking up their passengers at the bus station, instead using taxis or motorcycles to move them discreetly to locations outside of town. After November 2023, however, *passeurs* began operating more openly. Migrants were met directly at the bus station upon arrival, and their wait times for onward travel decreased significantly, as smugglers were able to organize more frequent trips.

According to local sources, around 35 to 42 vehicles left Tahoua each week in the first half of 2024, each carrying between 15 and 30 migrants. This indicates that between 500 and 1 000 migrants were travelling to Algeria each week. These figures represent a significant increase compared to the period before the repeal, when it was estimated that 400 to 500 migrants departed for Algeria each week.

Prices also decreased. In 2023, the journey from Tahoua to Tamanrasset, the closest major city in Algeria, cost between FCFA120 000 and FCFA130 000 (€183–€198). Now, smugglers charge between FCFA80 000 and FCFA90 000 (€122–€137). This is due to the lower risk of arrest and associated bribes, as well as increased competition. According to contacts, around 100 *passeurs* were active in Tahoua in February 2024, compared with 40 to 50 before the repeal.

Although migrant movements within Niger are now legal, crossing the Algerian border, which is marked by a sand berm, and travelling to Tamanrasset (a distance of around 370 kilometres) remains illegal. Consequently, the routes between Tahoua and Tamanrasset have not changed, and smugglers continue to use the same transport methods. Some *passeurs* drive migrants across the border. However, many instruct their passengers to climb over the berm on foot. On the Algerian side, another *passeur* transports the migrants to Tamanrasset. Sometimes, however, the passengers cannot find the second *passeur* and have to continue on their own. This is extremely dangerous, as they risk becoming stranded in the desert or being discovered by Algerian military patrols along the border.<sup>71</sup>

Once they reach Algeria, migrants face being forcibly returned to Niger. The expulsion of third-country nationals and official convoys carrying Nigeriens continues on a large scale, with the figure increasing from around 30 000 people in 2023 to over 38 000 in 2024.<sup>72</sup>

A prolonged uptick in the number of migrants arriving in Algeria could lead to heightened security measures and expulsions. Given the potential for human rights violations during these operations, including the threat to migrants who are expelled into the desert and forced to walk to the nearest town in Niger, this situation must be monitored closely going forward.

## Escalating tensions with Benin affect movements into Niger

In the first half of 2024, the escalation of tensions between Benin and Niger had a significant effect on migrant movements. The situation reached a critical point in early May, when the Beninese authorities took measures to prevent informal crossings between the two countries over the Niger River. Although extra-legal, this activity had been tolerated by both countries since the closure of the border in July 2023.<sup>73</sup> Following the Nigerien military's blockade of the bridge between Malanville and Gaya, pirogue smuggling operations transporting people and goods across the river had expanded sharply.

Movements across the river were essential for maintaining the crucial regional routes between West Africa and Niger. Demand for smuggling was particularly high due to the diversion of bus services between Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, and Niamey. In the first quarter of 2023, bus companies halted operations on the route between the two capitals, which passed through Dori in Burkina Faso and Téra in Niger, due to rising insecurity linked to violent extremist activity in the border region. The new route ran through Togo and Benin, and, until the border closure, had entered Niger over the Malanville–Gaya bridge.<sup>74</sup> After the closure, buses bound for Niger began dropping passengers off in Malanville, from where they made the clandestine crossing using the services of pirogue smugglers.

According to local sources, the number of passengers arriving at Malanville remained relatively stable between December 2023 and May 2024, with numbers ranging from 600 to 900 per day. Around 90% crossed the border by pirogue. They included local Beninese and Nigeriens, mainly traders and



Pirogue smugglers are forced to cease operations between Malanville and Gaya, 22 May 2024. Photo: GI-TOC

students, as well as West African migrants seeking to reach Niger's departure hubs for Algeria and Libya. Most foreign migrants arriving in Niger from Benin intend to travel to Algeria and then Tunisia to attempt a crossing to Europe.

On 22 May, these crossings were brought to a halt.<sup>75</sup> Benin's Republican Police were deployed to embarkation points on the Beninese side of the river, and pirogue smugglers were ordered to cease operations immediately. The decision reportedly came as a surprise to the smugglers as well as to the bus drivers, who typically provided instructions to their passengers on how to cross the border by boat.

On Wednesday, 22 May, Beninese police officers on duty at the joint control post [the border post at Malanville formerly operated by Benin and Niger] informed us that the river was strictly closed. Having heard the news, we informed the hierarchy. We had arrived in Malanville with passengers on Wednesday morning and they were not allowed to cross the river.

*Interview with bus driver in Malanville, 22 May 2024*

The closure of the river has a direct impact on our business. After the news, the chiefs instructed us to temporarily close the station. If passengers cannot cross the river, there is no point in taking them to Malanville, and vice versa. Therefore, our services in Malanville are suspended until further notice. There are no departures or arrivals of passengers at our Malanville station. We have closed our station. [Other bus companies] have also closed their stations in Malanville. On the other hand, our station in Gaya is open, but [we] only offer trips to Gaya from other regions in Niger.

*Interview with a station manager in Malanville, 22 May 2024*

In addition, bus company personnel reported that buses registered in Niger were being prevented from entering or leaving Benin by Beninese authorities at the Benin-Togo border. Regional bus companies use vehicles registered in several countries, including Benin, Togo and Niger, regardless of the company's nationality. The Beninese authorities also issued a ban on bus travel in the Malanville department, effectively blocking any commercial transport to the town.

Only buses with Nigerien registrations are being blocked at the Togo–Benin border, and they have made U-turns back towards our various other stations. Buses with Beninese, Togolese and Ghanaian registrations were able to cross the border. We have received orders to respect the procedures of the Beninese authorities. We have suspended all our services to or from Malanville, and we no longer transport passengers to or from Malanville on international routes. We have also been ordered not to run our buses that have Nigerien registrations in the meantime. Currently, we do not have any other routes to transport passengers to Niger, which is why we have suspended our services between Niger and international destinations.

*Interview with an STM station manager in Togo, 22 May 2024*

However, because of the importance of the Malanville–Gaya transit point for regional mobility, human smuggling systems rapidly adapted. With bus services now ending in Kandi, a city in Benin located about 100 kilometres south of Malanville, taxi drivers began catering to the increased demand for transport to Malanville, and experienced a significant surge in custom from the end of May. To avoid police checks, pirogue smugglers started operating at crossings further from the Malanville–Gaya bridge, and the number of unofficial departure points along the Niger River and its tributaries, such as the Sota and Alibori rivers, grew. These crossings were usually coordinated by motorcycle taxi drivers and pirogue operators, often at night. As the risk of interception increased, the price of pirogue trips rose sharply, from FCFA1 500– FCFA2 000 (€2.30–3.00) to FCFA3 000–FCFA5 000 (€4.50–7.50).

In July, the Beninese authorities reversed the ban on commercial transport to Malanville, and bus companies were able to resume operations. Clandestine crossings between Malanville and Gaya increased progressively in the second half of 2024, with local contacts reporting the daily arrival of commercial buses.

I have an average of four buses arriving every day from [West Africa] to Malanville. I am supposed to take all the passengers to Gaya across the river so that they can board the other buses that are waiting for them there. I oversee their crossings at the river. I think it's the same for all the other station masters.

*Interview with a station manager in Malanville, August 2024*

In November, the situation changed drastically once again, when the Beninese authorities authorized the resumption of river crossings. Most pirogue operations returned to the official crossing points, and movements increased. In December, local contacts reported that between 200 and 250 people were arriving in Niger each day, and around 400 to 450 were crossing into Benin. However, activity did not return to the levels seen before the May ban. Prices also remained elevated. According to local contacts interviewed in December, this was due to high water levels making travel more difficult and dangerous in the winter. By April 2025, the number of daily crossings into Niger had risen again, reaching 500 to 600 per day.

Despite the ban on pirogue crossings being lifted, the continued closure of the Benin border remains a key challenge for those travelling to Niger. It is also one of the factors preventing human smuggling in Niger from returning to pre-2015 levels despite the repeal of the anti-smuggling law.



## Benin border closure temporarily reduces migrant numbers in Agadez and Tahoua

Following the closure of the Benin border in May, the number of migrants entering Niger fell dramatically. This was not only a direct result of the ban on unofficial crossings, but also of the suspension of international bus routes from West Africa to Niger. Public transport is an important means of travel for West African migrants heading to Niger. International bus companies offer multi-day trips between most capitals and major towns at competitive prices. West African migrants typically use these routes to reach transit hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez. During the border closure, bus companies continued to offer journeys to Niger, providing buses as far as Malanville. There, passengers were instructed to use pirogue smugglers to cross the river before boarding another bus at Gaya. However, when pirogue crossings were banned, the companies suspended all routes to Niger.

Typically, hundreds of passengers arrive at the bus stations in Tahoua and Agadez every day, with many seeking onward travel to Algeria or Libya. However, these numbers dwindled between May and August 2024. Most of those arriving by bus during this period were Nigerien or Nigerian nationals, or migrants from Cameroon, Chad or the Central African Republic who had travelled through Nigeria.

The reduction in movement affected smuggling activities in northern Niger. *Passeurs* interviewed in Tahoua and Agadez in June reported that their businesses were suffering. The impact was most evident in Tahoua, as the Benin border is a key entry point for francophone West African migrants, who usually travel through Tahoua to Algeria rather than through Agadez to Libya.

In Agadez, the number of foreign migrants seeking transport to Libya had fallen slightly by June, with around 100 departures per week compared with 300 to 400 between January and May. While these figures suggest a significant decrease, accurate data is difficult to obtain, and it is challenging to estimate the number of foreign migrants, as *passeurs* combine foreign and Nigerien passengers on journeys to Libya. According to local *passeurs*, the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, before and during which many people traditionally stay at home to celebrate, may also have contributed to the low levels of movement. Most travellers at this time were reportedly Nigerian.

I've been organizing a departure every week for the last five months. In that time, I have been getting 22, 24 or 30 passengers every week. But from May to today, I have only made two trips.

*Interview with a passeur in Agadez, June 2024*

Several *passeurs* interviewed in Agadez in June also reported having fewer passengers since the closure of the Benin border, and that most of those they did transport arrived from Nigeria or Mali. This suggests that some migrants, possibly from Mali, Guinea or Senegal, may have passed through Mali instead of Benin to reach Niger. They would have travelled to Bamako and then on to Gao (located 950 kilometres north-east of Bamako and 380 kilometres north-west of Niamey). These routes are highly dangerous due to the presence of violent extremist groups in Mali and on the route between Gao and Niamey.

In Tahoua, the impact of the closure in the first few months was drastic. According to *passeurs* interviewed, there were as few as three departures each week in June, transporting between 50 and 100 foreign migrants. This is a huge drop from the previous weekly average of 500 to 1 000.

The business is not what it used to be. Benin has blocked everything and it's a shame. For activity to get back to normal, we will have to wait until the reopening of the Benin–Niger border. Otherwise, it's not going well.

*Interview with a passeur in Tahoua, June 2024*

As demand for travel to Algeria dried up, some *passeurs* and *coxeurs* reportedly left Tahoua to seek alternative business opportunities, such as gold mining, or to engage in other forms of smuggling or drug trafficking.

In August, as bus services to Malanville resumed and pirogue smugglers adapted to offer clandestine crossings, the number of migrants arriving in Tahoua and Agadez picked up again. Between August and December, these figures reportedly returned to levels seen before the closure of the Benin border. In Agadez, departures of foreign migrants for Libya rose to around 350 per week by January 2025, similar to the numbers recorded between January and May 2024. In Tahoua, departures also began to climb in the second half of the year, reportedly growing to levels seen before May 2024 – around 500 to 1 000 per week. However, these numbers were stunted again by various factors at the end of 2024.

In December 2024, *passeurs* in Tahoua reported that only 150 to 200 departures were taking place each week. This was said to be due to a seasonal lull, as migrants typically avoid travelling during the end-of-year holidays.

Foreign migrants prefer to celebrate the holidays in their countries of origin before embarking on their migratory adventure. This phenomenon is not unusual. At the end of each year, there is a decrease in departures in December, followed by an increase in the first months of the following year.

*Interview with a bus station manager in Tahoua, December 2024*

By mid-2025, departures to Algeria had increased to between 400 and 600 people per week. *Passeurs* indicated that their activities had increased in April, after the Ramadan period, when movements generally decline.

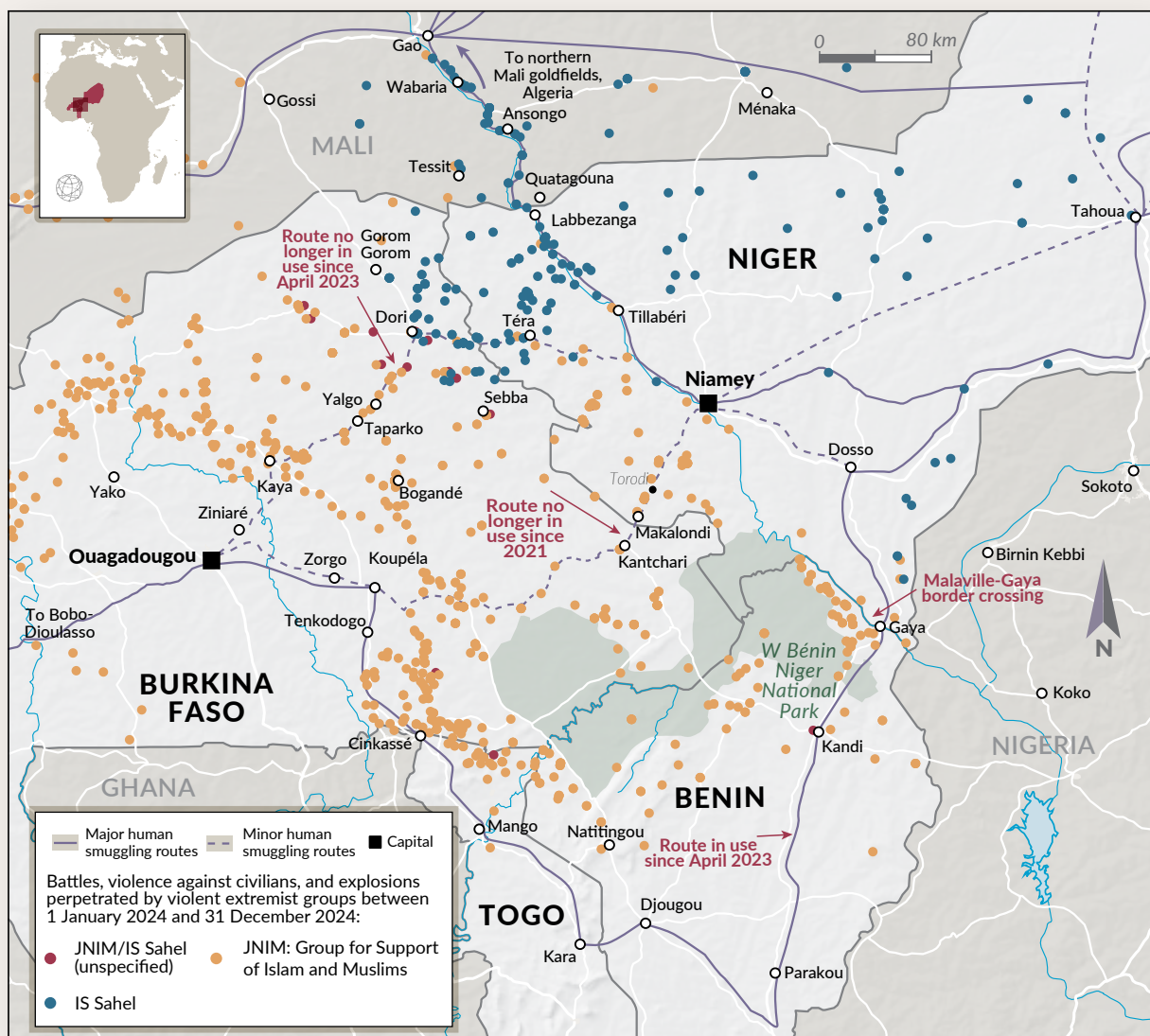
## **Violent extremist groups continue to pose deadly threat on routes to Niger**

From May to November 2024, the ban on border crossings at Malanville led to an increase in the use of the direct route between Ouagadougou and Niamey. Despite the closure of the Benin border, most commercial bus companies had continued to use the Benin–Togo route to reach Niger since 2023, making use of pirogue crossings at Malanville. However, transport trucks found it more difficult to organize the passage of large quantities of goods. Consequently, even before the ban on pirogue crossings came into effect, some transport companies had reverted to using the Dori–Téra route, travelling under the protection of military convoys. However, the ban on pirogue crossings completely suspended movement through Malanville for large goods consignments, leaving transporters with no choice but to use this route.

This increased the risk of attacks by violent extremist groups operating in Burkina Faso. On 31 October 2024, an armed group attacked a goods truck convoy near Pétèlkolé. Several trucks were set on fire and there was an exchange of gunfire between the attackers and the Nigerien military escort.<sup>76</sup> The attack reportedly resulted in several casualties, but no official count was released. A number of other attacks on truck convoys followed, prompting the Union des Travailleurs du Transport et Assimilés

du Niger (Union of Transport Workers and Related Workers of Niger – UTTAN) to issue a statement denouncing the security risks faced by truck drivers forced to use the route, as well as the ongoing closure of the Benin border.<sup>77</sup> On 5 December, 21 civilians were killed in an attack on a convoy of trucks travelling north from Téra, likely destined for Niamey.<sup>78</sup>

In 2024, the total number of fatalities resulting from political violence in the Tillabéri region was over 1 300, up from around 700 in 2023.<sup>79</sup> This escalation highlights the risks faced by travellers along the Dori-Téra route and emphasizes the importance of resuming regular movement through Malanville.



**FIGURE 2** Violent incidents along routes between Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Niger, January to December 2024.

Source: ACLED<sup>80</sup>

However, bus services to Niger through Benin and Togo have also been increasingly affected by insecurity linked to violent extremist groups operating in the cross-border area between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. Moreover, this activity is expanding into coastal West African states such as Togo and Benin.

There are two distinct points of heightened risk for migrants travelling by bus to Niger. The first is the Centre-Est region of Burkina Faso, which runs along half of the border with Togo, through which buses running from Ouagadougou to Togo must pass. According to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), fighting in this area involving Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM) reached the highest level on record for the year in April 2024, with the group's offensives and counter-offensives by security forces and the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland – VDP) more than doubling compared to March.<sup>80</sup> The number of violent events linked to JNIM increased further in May, before dropping again in the remaining months of the year.

The wave of violence does not yet appear to have affected bus services in the Centre-Est region. However, if the unrest continues to escalate, buses travelling from Ouagadougou to Togo will face increased risks. In the absence of safer alternatives for reaching Togo and Benin, buses are likely to continue using the same routes.

The second point of elevated violence affecting regional bus services to Niger is in northern Benin. There has been an increase in extremist attacks and political unrest in this region, including in towns along the bus route. In April, JNIM targeted a customs station in Monkassa, a small village some 8 kilometres south of Malanville, killing two civilians and one soldier.<sup>81</sup> In September 2024, two members of the Beninese security forces were killed in an attack on the main road between Malanville and Kandi, about 100 kilometres south of Malanville.<sup>82</sup>

In addition, several deadly attacks have taken place in Niger's Dosso region, which borders Benin. These targeted several localities near Gaya, such as Tenda (20 kilometres north-east of Gaya) and Yelou (40 kilometres north of Gaya), and involved violence against civilians and clashes between armed groups (JNIM and unidentified actors, according to ACLED data) and Nigerien security forces.<sup>83</sup>

The growing risk of violence along the route used by commercial buses has not yet had a significant impact on their operations or passengers. Furthermore, despite the heightened insecurity, this route remains much safer than the alternative through Burkina Faso.

Overall, movement from West Africa to Niger has been severely disrupted in recent years due to rising insecurity and the expansion of violent extremist activity. This has often resulted in commercial bus services being diverted. In 2023, the border closures that followed the coup further hindered travel, triggering high demand for human smuggling at the Benin–Niger border. The crackdown on unofficial pirogue crossings at Malanville was another significant setback for regional mobility, again highlighting the importance of this route for regional movement.

The status of the Benin–Niger border will depend on the development of bilateral relations. While both countries have an interest in fully reopening the border and resuming direct trade, and there were some signs of rapprochement and appeasement in 2024, the border remains closed at the time of writing. The situation at the Nigerian border has been less conflictual, however, with the partial reopening in 2024 allowing for increased legal travel.

## Partial reopening of the Nigerian border facilitates movement to Niger

The Nigeria–Niger border was partially closed by the Nigerian authorities in 2019 in an attempt to reduce the smuggling of goods. The full closure following Niger's coup thus only had a muted effect on movement from Nigeria.<sup>84</sup> In response to the partial closure, human smuggling operations had developed to meet the demand for travel to Niger among Nigerian and other West African migrants, as well as local people travelling for work or personal reasons. One such example is May Moudjia, located 100 kilometres south-west of Zinder. This was a key entry point for *passeurs* operating on the Kouri Kantana route. When it was closed by Nigerian authorities in 2019, human smuggling networks developed effective ways to bypass it in order to ensure the continuity of their operations transporting migrants from Nigeria to Libya.<sup>85</sup>

However, several main entry points to Niger were open before 2023, including Birni N'Konni (120 kilometres south of Tahoua) and Dan Issa (45 kilometres south of Maradi). Birni N'Konni is particularly salient to regional migration dynamics as it connects Sokoto in Nigeria (83 kilometres south of the Nigerian border) to Niger. Situated on the main highway between Niamey and Tahoua, the town provides easy access to the capital and key human smuggling hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez.

When the border was closed completely in July 2023, the impact on movements depended on the existing status of each crossing. At points that had been closed in 2019, the effect was limited. At May Moudjia, for instance, migrants had already come to rely almost exclusively on smuggling operations. The coup did not significantly alter this situation; the main difference was that people were no longer permitted to traverse the border on foot, instead having to hire moto-taxis for illegal crossings. Consequently, the number of people entering Niger through May Moudjia decreased only slightly, from around 2 000–2 500 to around 1 500–2 000 per week.<sup>86</sup>

At Birni N'Konni and other entry points that had previously been open, the July 2023 closure had a more significant impact. Most people taking these routes had been crossing the border independently, without the help of smuggling networks, and using public transport to reach either Tahoua, for travel to Algeria, or Agadez, for travel to Libya. It was only once they reached these departure hubs that they hired *passeurs*. Although these movements did not cease entirely, they became clandestine in 2023, often involving bypass routes and higher bribes.<sup>87</sup>

However, on 22 March 2024, the situation changed again when the Nigerian authorities announced the reopening of the border with Nigeria.<sup>88</sup> ECOWAS had lifted its sanctions against Niger that February, including border closures, and Nigeria had subsequently announced the reopening of its land and air borders with Niger.<sup>89</sup> As with Benin, however, the border initially remained closed on the Nigerian side. This was consistent with the CNSP's general attitude of suspicion and defiance towards ECOWAS and its southern neighbours. Nevertheless, while the Benin border remained closed, in March trade and travel resumed at key entry points between Nigeria and Niger, including Birni N'Konni, Dan Issa, Maigatari (120 kilometres south of Zinder) and Tinkim (105 kilometres south of Zinder).

At Birni N'Konni, movement quickly resumed at the official border post, with buses travelling in both directions. Passengers had to present documentation at both the Nigerian and Nigerian checkpoints, and pay fees ranging from FCFA1 000 to FCFA3 000 (€1.50 to €4.80), depending on their nationality and whether they had valid documentation. Travellers wishing to avoid these costs could bypass the border by using moto-taxis.

According to local contacts, between 60 and 70 vehicles were crossing the border daily in April, carrying between 360 and 420 people. This was an increase on the 120 to 180 people crossing daily before the reopening. These levels of movement remained stable throughout 2024. However, these figures include not only migrants travelling to Libya or Algeria, but also people travelling for business, study, family visits and other reasons. Most migrants using this crossing were Nigerian, with smaller numbers of Ghanaians, Burkinabés, Malians, Central Africans and Cameroonians. Contacts estimated that between 120 and 210 migrants, mainly men, used the crossing daily. This was similar to the situation at Dan Issa, where it was estimated that between 600 and 900 people, mostly Nigerian nationals, crossed the border daily in 2024.

At May Moudjia, movement increased in the days following the reopening, as passengers – including migrants en route to Libya and local people making journeys in both directions – were able to travel without having to use clandestine routes.

Even before the border reopened, our business was developing quite well. We were transporting passengers across the border illegally. But there are people who don't like to travel in this way. Now, with the reopening of the border, the number of passengers we are getting has increased. I make two to three round trips a day, whereas before I only made one. The reopening of the border is good news for our business.

*Interview with a passeur operating between Nigeria and Niger at May Moudjia, April 2024*

In early April 2024, it was reported that around 50 vehicles carrying some 450 people were crossing into Niger daily. This was an increase on the estimated 280 people crossing daily before the border reopening.

However, at the end of April, the crossing was closed again. According to a local customs official: 'The reopening in March 2024 was a joint favour initiated by the local administrative authorities to allow the brief passage of a few trucks that had been blocked for a long time between the two borders, but it was not officially reopened during this time.'

The crossing remained closed for the rest of 2024. Nevertheless, May Moudjia continued to experience relatively high levels of movement, with an estimated 400 to 500 people entering Niger daily. This was due to well-established human smuggling networks, low levels of enforcement and high demand for travel. The repeal of the anti-human smuggling law also benefited smuggling networks operating on this route, leading to increased capacity to transport passengers arriving in the town.

In Agadez, the reopening of the Nigerian border in March 2024 also affected migrant movement. *Passeurs* reported an increase in travellers in April 2024, particularly Nigerian nationals. Tahoua experienced less of an impact, as most migrants arriving from Nigeria intend to reach Libya through Agadez or on the Kouri Kantana route, rather than Algeria through Tahoua.



## CONCLUSION

**T**he landscape of human smuggling in Niger underwent significant changes in 2024. The November 2023 repeal of Law 2015-36 caused the most significant shift in this context since 2015, leading to a substantial rise in the number of foreign migrants passing through the country. Although definitive data is impossible to obtain, estimates from Tahoua, Agadez and eastern Niger bypass routes suggest that the combined number of foreign migrants travelling to Libya and Algeria increased from around 600–700 per week in 2023 to 1 000–1 500 per week in 2024.

Journeys that were once clandestine and relied on dangerous, remote routes, became legal and could make use of main roads, as well as receiving military protection for part of the route to Libya. Travel also became cheaper for migrants, with the cost of trips to Libya and Algeria decreasing due to reduced risks and an increase in the number of *passeurs* offering their services. Despite these lower fees, *passeurs* also benefited from the repeal, receiving more custom from foreign nationals and enjoying simpler, safer logistics.

The legalization of transporting foreign migrants also had an impact on the eastern routes between Nigeria and Libya. These options declined in popularity, as *passeurs* no longer needed to avoid large cities. It also led to Zinder becoming an increasingly important transit hub for migrants arriving from Nigeria and Chad.

But despite the surge in movement, human smuggling in Niger did not snap back to pre-2015 levels. This was due to a number of factors, the most salient of which were the ongoing challenges associated with travelling to the country. Regional insecurity and the closure of the Benin border had significantly hindered movement since 2023, and these difficulties were amplified in 2024 by the ban on river crossings between Benin and Niger from May to November. The impact of this restriction on departure points such as Tahoua and Agadez highlighted the importance of the Malanville–Gaya crossing for West African migrants attempting to enter Niger. The status of the Niger–Benin border remains one of the most decisive influences on mobility through Niger and will determine the outlook for human smuggling in 2025.

Overall, while the dynamics of human smuggling in Niger were profoundly reshaped by the repeal of the anti-smuggling law, the industry continues to be adversely affected by major political and security upheaval in the Sahel region. In 2025, these factors have remained at play and were further compounded by fraught dynamics at the Libyan border. In February, clashes broke out in southern Libya between the Libyan Arab Armed Forces and an armed group formerly affiliated with them. This, as well as a broader crackdown on migrants and *passeurs*, caused departures from Niger to cease altogether for several weeks. The situation continues to impede the activity of *passeurs* at the time of writing. This episode illustrates how, despite an improved legislative framework, human smuggling in Niger remains dependent on a certain degree of stability in neighbouring states.

Moreover, the resumption of large-scale expulsions from Libya in early 2025 exposed both Nigerien and foreign nationals to a high risk of abuse and human rights violations.<sup>90</sup> Finally, from January, the movement of foreign migrants through Niger, particularly to Agadez, was affected by the enforcement of new legislation requiring valid travel documentation.<sup>91</sup> These factors have further complicated mobility dynamics through Niger and contributed to the muted effect of the anti-smuggling law repeal.



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