

**Forum:** Advisory Panel on the Question of Northern Africa

**Issue:** Enhancing cross-border cooperation in combating organized crime and human trafficking with a focus on Algeria, Libya and Niger

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## Introduction

Organized crime and human trafficking are issues that are present all around the world, and especially in almost all countries in Northern Africa. North Africa and the Sahel (shown in the map on the right) are the two main parts of Northern Africa, more than half of them being covered by the Sahara Desert.



*Map of North Africa and Sahel<sup>1</sup>*

These regions have been and still are one of the most crime-prone regions in the world. This is due to many factors, such as weak border controls, political instability, economic desperation, and extensive trans-Saharan smuggling networks. It has also become a transit and destination point for illicit activities, as it's not only being used by terrorist organizations based in Northern Africa but also in the Middle East. The terrorist groups from the Middle East region include The Islamic State (IS), from Iraq and Syria, and al-Qaeda (AQ), from Afghanistan, two of the most active groups not just in the Middle East but all around the world. The region being covered by the Sahara and having the right political environment for exploitation makes the region a target for these crimes. Even though the United Nations has been involved with the region for many years with resolutions and missions, the magnitude of the issue, combined with the greatness of the area, is quite hard to manage. In this report, we

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<sup>1</sup> (Crone 65)



will examine these illicit activities in Northern Africa, with a focus on Algeria, Libya and Niger.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Organized Crime

It could be defined as illegal activities that take highly centralized enterprises established with the purpose of engaging in illicit activities. Offenses that are usually considered organized include cargo theft, fraud, robbery, and kidnapping. The income for these activities is the goods and services that are being demanded by the people, even if they are illegal, such as drugs, prostitution, and gambling ("Organized crime").

### Drug Cartels

A drug cartel is an illicit organization made up of several groups that control the global drug trade and seek to restrict competition. Most drug cartels are classified as "narco-terrorist organizations" and are linked to terrorist acts like bombings and assassinations. However, narcotics trafficking is also connected to terrorist organizations that have been recognized by the UN, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Zeynioğlu).

### Human Trafficking

It is the transportation, harbouring, or recruitment of people for the purpose of exploiting them for profit. Human trafficking can affect people from any background, age, and gender, as it takes place in almost every part of the world. Traffickers may use different methods, such as using violence or with fake promises of a job or education ("Human Trafficking"). Exploitation may take place in the victim's home country, during migration, or in a different country. It could also take many forms, such as being forcefully married or worked, sexual exploitation, etc. ("The crime").

### Hawala System

An unofficial method of transferring money, the hawala system is particularly prevalent in Afghanistan. Through intermediaries known as hawaladras, money can be transferred informally. The financial assets are sent in one currency to the



hawaladra, who may be in a different nation, and then in another currency to the recipient. As criminals started using the system to finance their illegal activities, its validity vanished due to its anonymity and lack of proof. Ignoring the formal financial system does not expose one to official regulation or oversight (Zeynioğlu).

### Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is the term used to describe the wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in the MENA region that began in 2010 and 2011. Though some of the protests were successful, like the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, most of these protests were the start of the wars that are currently happening in the region, such as the Syrian, Yemeni, and Libyan Civil Wars (Tatoğlu).

### Money Laundering

Criminals utilize money laundering to hide the illicit source of their financial riches. Digital tools like cryptocurrency on the darknet and underground banking networks allow transactions to be completed without being monitored by the government. It is estimated that between 715 and 1870 billion of the global gross domestic product is laundered annually. Criminal networks use legitimate companies to conceal their assets and finance their operations. Cash smuggling, hiring money mules to move illegal payments between accounts, using high-value goods, cryptocurrency, and legitimate enterprises are all examples of money laundering techniques (Zeynioğlu).

### Background Information

Understanding organized crime in Northern Africa requires knowledge of the political and social environment present in the region, which causes these illicit activities. These transnational threats are enabled by weak border governance, the presence of violent armed groups, prolonged political instability, chronic underdevelopment, and unemployment.



## Effects of Armed Groups and Extremism

One of the primary aspects to consider when it comes to illicit activities is the presence of armed groups in the region, specifically terrorist organizations. The expansion of al-Qaeda and the IS into Northern Africa started almost twenty years ago when AQ in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)



was established in Algeria in 2007 (Crone 69). Even before the establishment of AQIM, Algeria had many crises going on, such as the civil war, which took place throughout the 90s between several Islamist rebel groups, including Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), which would later lead to the formation of Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC). After the 2000s, GSPC expanded towards the Sahara, and its activities became greater. They would take foreign hostages and release them for excessive prices. Around 2006, GSPC fighters started to merge with the ranks of AQ, and by 2012, conquered northern Mali. However, with the French intervention in 2013, many AQIM officials were killed and the remaining militia had to withdraw to southern Libya. This withdrawal later caused hundreds of people to be taken hostage in Algeria by AQIM in the following days (Crone 70). Except for Algeria, AQIM's main areas of action also included Niger and southern Libya (Crone 71). In Libya, the fall of the Gaddafi regime has left the country in an unstable political environment. Unlike Algeria, the main terrorist group present in Libya wasn't AQ, it was the IS. IS decided to expand beyond Iraq and Syria after a Caliph was chosen and a decision was made in 2014 for the establishment of an IS province in Libya/Derna, namely "the Derna province". After the establishment of the first one, it was later revealed that two other provinces in North Africa were established; however, Libya was seen as a potential new front for the IS due to its fragile political situation after the death of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 (Crone 64). In 2015, though the IS was pushed out of Derna by local

*Nigerien migrants travelling to Libya in the military convoy, September 2023.<sup>2</sup>*

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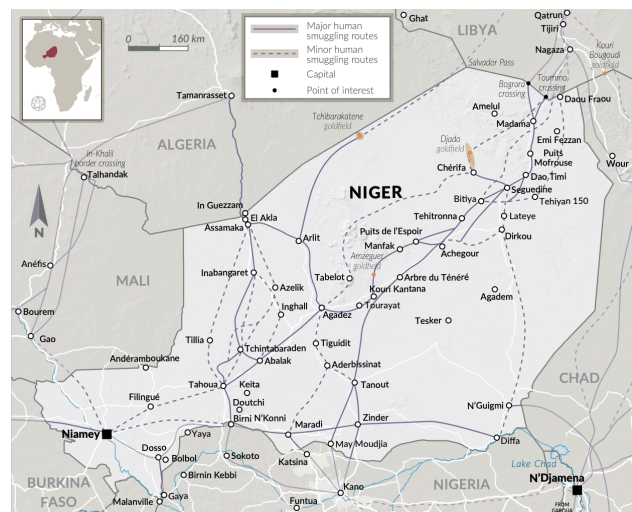
<sup>2</sup> (Fereday 8)



groups in relation to AQ (Crone 66). So, in 2015-16, the main base of the IS in Libya was the Sirte province, in which they soon gained control of radio, television, and other institutions. The IS presence in Libya attracted more fighters from all around Northern Africa, especially Tunisia (Crone 67).

The presence of both the AQ and the IS causes many conflicts in the region as well. Over the years, the IS has established its provinces in places where AQIM's presence wasn't yet rooted. One of the big helpers that the IS had was the Arab Spring, which caused many African and Arab countries to face political upheavals. However, in some countries, both the AQ and IS tried to gain power. For example, in Libya, when both of them tried to gain power, the IS executed some of the AQ leaders, and as a result, AQ forces present in the area had to join forces with the IS (Crone 71). However, the actual effect of the IS forces in the region was that it caused the AQ forces to stop having conflict with each other and join to fight the IS forces. The AQIM and AQ on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have released joint statements to condemn the IS for killing Muslims, which turned many Muslims against the IS (Crone 72).

In Niger however the situation is different. After 2014, with the help of international allies, counter-terrorism efforts in the region were improving, and later in 2015, the Anti-smuggling Law was implemented, deterring the smuggling and trafficking sector. However, on July 26th, 2023, the military junta National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP) took over. After this coup d'état, the anti-smuggling activities started to take a back turn. In September 2023, it was reported that in Tahoua, the security checks were the lowest in the last years, as



*Main human smuggling routes through Niger<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> (Fereday 9)



before the takeover, police would do patrols frequently to target smugglers and bus stations where migrants would be picked up from. Even if they were caught, it would be unlikely compared to the past for them to receive charges after the coup (Fereday 5-8).

The terrorist groups in the region have been present since at least the 1990s, all against the French and Algerian counter-terrorism efforts (Crone 75). The presence of these organizations has caused and furthered the effects of the political upheavals already present in the region. They have also supported and caused the regulation of the organized crime control mechanisms to fail.

### Activities Taking Place in the Region

These networks simultaneously traffic drugs, arms, people, and illicit traffic of cultural heritage, using overlapping routes and infrastructure ("Overview of" 4). Libya, in particular, has become a major hub for criminal activity following the 2011 collapse of central authority. Cities like Sabha and Ubari serve as critical transit centers for arms, narcotics, and human smuggling, with weapons from Libyan stockpiles fueling conflicts in at least 12 other countries ("Overview of" 14). The Libyan coast is a popular point for migrant departures, where people smuggling operations reportedly generate up to USD 346 million per year and often involve cooperation between militias and criminal groups ("Overview of" 33). Libya is also seen as a transit and destination country for people subject to human trafficking ("Overview of" 22). Niger also plays an active role as a weapon and human smuggling corridor to Libya and Algeria. Smugglers usually operate on the northern side of the country, smuggling weapons, drugs, and people through the Sahara desert to then be transferred to other countries ("Overview of" 13). Lastly, Algeria is listed as having one of the highest cannabis herb seizures in North Africa, about 80% of them being intended for European shipment ("Overview of" 8).

### Major Countries and Organizations Involved

#### Algeria

AQIM's presence in Algeria causes the government to focus on counter-terrorism efforts instead of any other illicit activities. Algeria is one of the





oldest states where AQ has been present, except for its origins. Algeria is a destination, source, and transit country for migrants and trafficking victims. Reports indicate an uptick in migrant expulsions into the desert, especially from Tamanrasset to Niger's borders, a practice criticized by humanitarian agencies. Algeria has made efforts to strengthen border control and counterterrorism, but critics argue its migration policies can be overly securitized and inhumane (Fereday 3).

## Libya

Libya is the most prominent transit country for migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, despite a complex and fractured political landscape. The country's eastern and western territories operate semi-autonomously, with different actors overseeing migration routes. In 2023, approximately 77,470 migrants departed from Libya's coast, primarily through "hybrid smuggling systems", where state actors (like the Libyan Arab Armed Forces in the east) collaborate with or tolerate smugglers (Horsley 5). Key hubs include Benina Airport, where migrants often arrive legally before being transferred to coastal departure points such as Tobruk or Zuwara. The Zuwara coast in western Libya witnessed a significant spike in migrant departures in late 2023, demonstrating the resilience of smuggling networks despite shifting enforcement tactics (Horsley 3).

## Niger

Niger sits at the center of trans-Saharan migration and has long served as a transit hub for migrants traveling toward Libya and Algeria. Following pressure from the European Union, Niger criminalized human smuggling in 2015, shutting down major transit centers like Agadez. This initially disrupted regional flows, but also left many smugglers and communities economically devastated (Fereday 6). In July 2023, after a military coup, Niger's transitional authorities repealed the 2015 law, effectively legalizing the transport of migrants again. This policy reversal has led to a resurgence of smuggling activity and made Algeria an increasingly important route. Smugglers in Agadez and along the northern corridors now operate with near impunity (Fereday 5). Furthermore, insecurity in southwest Niger and border closures



with Benin and Nigeria in 2023–2024 pushed traffickers to adopt new paths through less monitored terrain (Fereday 3).

### African Union (AU)

The African Union recognizes Trafficking in Persons (TIP) as a widespread and evolving transnational crime deeply linked to conflict, poverty, irregular migration, and gender-based inequality. In 2021, the AU adopted the Policy on the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons in Africa in response to the limited impact of earlier frameworks like the 2006 Ouagadougou Action Plan. The policy identifies TIP as a form of modern slavery that disproportionately affects women and children, while also acknowledging emerging vulnerabilities among men and boys (“AU Policy”).

### Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

After the military takeover in Niger ECOWAS was one of the first organizations to recognize it as a coup and impose sanctions on Niger, supported by a threat of military intervention (Fereday 5). These actions of ECOWAS, followed by the borders of Benin and Nigeria being closed, affected the interim government significantly, as they were facing socio-economic problems before these sanctions were imposed (Fereday 6). In September 2023, after these events Niger, joined by Burkina Faso and Mali (the three countries forming the Alliance of Sahel States), released a joint statement and withdrew from the organization (Fereday 30). Later in February 2024, ECOWAS lifted the sanctions, which led to the reopening of the Nigerian border (Fereday 31).

### European Union (EU)

The EU has many projects in the region that are being funded by the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa). For instance, in Libya, their focus is on supporting the migration and asylum systems to keep them up with international standards and human rights. Other than the fund EU also has many other projects present all around Africa to strengthen border controls and combat illicit activities (“Libya”).

## Timeline of Events





Date	Description of event
15 November 2000	Resolution passed on the establishment of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
January 2007	AQIM was officially founded in Algeria
20th of October 2011	The Libyan Gaddafi regime falls
October 2014	The first official IS province outside of Iraq and Syria is established in Libya
2015	The Anti-smuggling Law is implemented in Niger
26 July 2023	Military coup d'état in Niger

### Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents

- A/RES/55/25 (United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime), 15 November 2000
  - [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_55\\_25.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_55_25.pdf)
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000)
  - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf>
- S/RES/2322 (Security Council resolution on terrorism and trafficking), 12 December 2016
  - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n16/433/54/pdf/n1643354.pdf?OpenElement>
- A/RES/71/167 (Trafficking in women and girls), 19 December 2016



- [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_71\\_167.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_71_167.pdf)
- S/RES/2331 (Security Council resolution on terrorism and trafficking), 20 December 2016
  - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n16/451/58/pdf/n1645158.pdf?OpenElement>
- S/RES/2482 (Security Council resolution on organized crime), 19 July 2019
  - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n19/224/98/pdf/n1922498.pdf?OpenElement>
- A/RES/78/267 (Crime prevention and criminal justice), 21 March 2024
  - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/087/95/pdf/n2408795.pdf>
- Resolution 10/3 (Effective implementation of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime)
  - [https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/COP/SESSION\\_10/Resolutions/Resolution\\_10\\_3\\_-\\_English.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/COP/SESSION_10/Resolutions/Resolution_10_3_-_English.pdf)
- A/RES/77/194 (Trafficking in women and girls), 15 December 2022
  - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/759/64/pdf/n2275964.pdf>

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Over the years, many attempts have been made in order to tackle the issue, including the resolutions and the documents listed above; however, most of them have not had lasting results due to the political environment of the countries in the region. For instance in 2014 France sent troops to Niger to support the counter-terrorism efforts, indirectly influencing the issue at hand, however after the coup d'état in Niger their relations with their international partners, including France deteriorated causing the troops to be withdrawn and therefore regressed the efforts



to tackle organized crime and human trafficking. Later ECOWAS's sanctions on Niger were being effective as they were putting the government in a hard spot, however they were then lifted and couldn't have the full effects. The borders being closed between Niger and; Benin and Nigeria also was also effective until protests started happening, asking the governments to open the border back up, which resulted in the Nigeria border to be opening right after the sanctions were lifted. The 2015 Anti-Smuggling Law in Niger was one of the most effective solutions that were implemented. It was a major deterioration in the smuggling and trafficking sectors as it helped migrants to be transported legally to Libya and Algeria, the two main countries that the migrants were migrating to. Over the years, the sector tried to adapt to the new circumstances, however, it never fully recovered. Although, as stated before in the report, this law worked before the coup d'état, after 2023, the new government started to lessen the measures taken to combat the smuggling.

## Possible Solutions

In order to address the issue, a holistic approach is necessary. Given the transnational nature of trafficking networks, cross-border security should be maximized by cooperation between the states. This could be done through already existing regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) or the efforts of the states. The migration problem should also be addressed in order to reduce the number of people relying on smugglers and offer them legal alternatives by increasing humanitarian visas or labor mobility agreements. The financial roots of these operations should also be under target. States or international organizations must enhance financial investigations and asset seizure mechanisms to disrupt trafficking profits. Anti-money laundering tools should be integrated with anti-trafficking efforts. In addition to the financial sides of the issue, the trafficking trends, routes, and victim profiles should also be better investigated. Anti-corruption systems' implementation should also be prioritized in the states in the region to break the cycle of terrorist organizations being involved with the government or the security of the borders. While writing clauses, Experts should keep in mind that the



region is currently facing many conflicts that directly or indirectly have an impact on the issue at hand.

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