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Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route

How armed conflict in
Libya shapes the Agadez
mobility economy

Peter Tinti



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Summary

- Since the Libyan revolution in 2011, the number of migrants passing through the country en route to Europe has grown significantly. Many of these migrants come from other parts of Africa, through the well-established transit hub of Agadez in neighbouring Niger. Just as insecurity in Libya has had a profound impact on the migration boom in the city of Agadez, the revenues generated by migrant smuggling in Niger have, in turn, influenced conflict dynamics along the Libya–Niger border and in southern Libya.
- In response to the increase in maritime arrivals from Libya, European policymakers saw Agadez as a ‘perfect target’ for policies that aimed to reduce migration to Europe by encouraging and implementing controls in transit states. A pivotal moment came in May 2015, when the government of Niger, under pressure from various international partners, criminalized the migration economy in Agadez.
- While it was hoped that criminalization would disrupt these migration flows, it in fact pushed migrant smuggling networks underground, displaced traditional itineraries, placed migrants at greater risk and accelerated a transition to other economic activities, including burgeoning gold mining and illegal activities in the region.
- Criminalization also led to the emergence of new transnational conflict dynamics in northern Niger, with actors from various Tebu, Tuareg and Arab communities operating across the Niger–Libya border and competing for control over different aspects of the gold economy, as well as other licit and illicit activities.
- A July 2023 coup d’état in Niger brought to power a military-led government that sought to reset relationships with many traditional security and development partners. In November 2023, the Nigerien junta announced the repeal of the anti-migrant smuggling law, which is likely to have a profound impact on the political economy of Agadez as migrant smuggling activity resumes within a geopolitical context that is markedly different from 2015.
- Although there is no evidence that the coup leaders were motivated by opposition to the country’s partnership with European states on migration control, the current government has demonstrated a clear hostility to this type of arrangement, instead seeking to deepen partnerships with like-minded neighbours in Burkina Faso and Mali, and with Russia.



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- To address issues of migrant smuggling and conflict, it is imperative that policymakers understand the ways in which various actors may insert themselves into a resurgent migration economy in northern Niger. A comprehensive systems analysis could achieve this goal. Conflict dynamics in the region have changed considerably since the criminalization of migration activities in 2015, and may impact security dynamics in Niger, southern Libya and, potentially, other states in the Sahel.

01

Introduction

A systems analysis that highlights the interplay between conflict dynamics and mobility economies in northern Niger and southern Libya should inform future policy decisions regarding conflict stabilization in the Sahel-Sahara region.

Armed conflict in Libya since 2011 has played a critical role in turning the city of Agadez,¹ in neighbouring Niger, into the preeminent transit hub for West African migrants trying to reach Libya and Europe.² The resulting migrant-smuggling revenues generated by certain communities, primarily the Tebu, have shaped conflict dynamics in southern Libya.³ While efforts by the Nigerien government and the international community in 2015 to criminalize the transportation of migrants in Niger succeeded in fracturing existing smuggling networks, the economic impact and second-order social and political effects have strained livelihoods, placed migrants in greater danger, and expanded existing social and political tensions in the region.

A gold rush in Niger and neighbouring Chad from the mid-2010s helped offset several of the negative economic consequences stemming from the disruption of the migrant smuggling industry in Agadez, while also reconfiguring transnational political economies and various conflict dynamics in Niger, Chad and southern

¹ The city of Agadez is the capital of Niger's largest region, also named Agadez. The region of Agadez, in northern Niger, borders both Libya and Algeria. Where necessary, this paper uses the terms 'city of Agadez' and the 'Agadez region' or 'region of Agadez' for clarity.

² Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are two distinct, though often overlapping crimes. Under international law, migrant smuggling is defined as 'the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident,' whereas human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. For more on these differences and distinctions, see, UN Office on Drugs and crime (undated), 'Migrant Smuggling FAQs', <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/migrant-smuggling/faqs.html#:~:text=These%20are%20two%20distinct%20but,from%20facilitating%20illegal%20border%20crossing>.

³ Micallef, M. and Bish, A. (2019), *After the storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*, report, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/after-the-storm>; Tinti, P. and Reitano, T. (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*, London: Hurst; Tubiana, J. and Gramizzi, C. (2018), *Lost in trans-nation: Tubu and other armed groups and smugglers along Libya's southern border*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey Report <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/lost-trans-nation-tubu-and-other-armed-groups-and-smugglers-along-libyas-southern-border>; Pellerin, M. (2018), *The Niger-Libya Border: Securing It without Stabilising It?*, Paris: IFRI, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_niger_libya_2018.pdf.

Libya.⁴ This interplay is just one example that underscores how – rather than being a discrete ‘criminal’ activity that takes place apart from or parallel to other formal and informal economies – the migration economy of the Agadez region is intimately enmeshed within numerous overlapping social, economic and political systems that transcend borders and communities throughout the region.⁵

This paper illustrates the socio-economic processes behind changes in the Agadez mobility economy. These underlying processes are highly complex and interconnected social phenomena, but for the purposes of this paper they have been simplified through a qualitative systems analysis.⁶ A systems analysis operates from the premise that such social processes are best understood as a social system that contains adaptive structures and evolutionary mechanisms.⁷ These processes, identified by the qualitative systems analysis, are part of a vast web of social dynamics.

For the purposes of this paper, the processes have been simplified as much as possible to allow for an analysis of areas where policy or programmatic interventions may be particularly effective. The systems analysis focuses on two types of connecting loops: causal loops, which identify causal relationships between the key social, political, security and economic factors that shape the interaction between the movement of people and wider social processes, and feedback cycles, which show the interplay between the causal loops.

The systems analysis in this paper shows how an economic feedback loop drove the expansion of the mobility economy in Agadez and subsequently how criminalization reconfigured the mobility economy, stimulating shifts towards more securitized processes and greater reliance on artisanal gold mining. These causal loops and feedback cycles represent a dynamic and non-linear system. The systems modelled here are extrapolated from data collected from research interviews and a political economy assessment of the region, as detailed in the methodology section. It should be noted that the systems created are social constructs that are defined by the researcher, and it is for the researcher to define the system and its boundaries.⁸

⁴ Raineri, L. (2020), ‘Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking’, *The International Spectator*, 55(4), pp. 100–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833475>; Pellerin, M. (2017), *Beyond the ‘Wild West’: The Gold Rush in Northern Niger*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-BP-Niger-Gold.pdf>; Micallef, M. et al. (2021), *Conflict, coping and covid: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GI-TOC-Changing-human-smuggling-and-trafficking-dynamics-in-North-Africa-and-the-Sahel-in-2019-and-2020.pdf>; Tinti, P. (2018), ‘Niger’s Gold Rush Has Turned Bandits into Barons’, *Vice*, 11 January 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9knzmv/nigers-gold-rush-has-turned-bandits-into-barons>.

⁵ Raineri, L. (2018), ‘Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(1), pp. 63–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X17000520>; Micallef and Bish (2019), *After the storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*; Micallef et al. (2021), *Conflict, coping and Covid*; Hoffmann, A., Meester, J. and Nabara, H. M. (2017), *Migration and markets in Agadez: Economic alternatives to the migration industry*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Migration_and_Markets_Agadez.pdf; Molenaar, F. (2018), ‘Migration Policies and Development: The Dilemma of Agadez’, *Focus on Migration: Moving backward, moving forward?*, 7(1), p. 23, https://ecdpm.org/application/files/9616/5570/9974/Great_Insights_vol_7_issue_1_Migration.pdf.

⁶ Gallo, G. (2012), ‘Conflict Theory, Complexity and Systems Approach’, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 30(2), pp. 156–75, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2132>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

This paper comes at a time when migrant smuggling in Niger and cooperation between the country and various traditional development and security partners are at the forefront of current domestic and international policy debates. On 26 July 2023, elements of the Nigerien military, led by Abdourahamane Tiani, placed then-president Mohamed Bazoum under house arrest and seized control of the government. At the time of writing, Bazoum is still being held by the coup leaders, and the junta have proposed a process of transitioning power that will not exceed three years.⁹

The coup and subsequent consolidation of power by its leaders were widely condemned by several of Niger’s prominent security and development partners, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the EU, France and the US,¹⁰ as well as key regional powers, most notably Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria.¹¹ Neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali – which are both led by transitional governments that seized power under similar circumstances and purported justifications – expressed support for the coup and have backed the new government.¹²

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Since the coup, geopolitical repercussions have continued to reverberate throughout the region. In September 2023, the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced the formation of a mutual defence pact dubbed the Alliance of Sahel States.¹³ Weeks later, in December 2023, Burkina Faso and Niger announced that they were following Mali in leaving the G5 Sahel, a security initiative largely funded by the EU, which sought to enhance security cooperation between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to combat terrorist groups operating in their territories.¹⁴ In January 2024, the military governments of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso also announced their intentions to leave ECOWAS.¹⁵

⁹ Donto, E. and Hoije, K. (2023), ‘Niger Junta Pledges Return to Democracy Within Three Years’, Bloomberg, 19 August 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-19/niger-allies-pool-forces-as-regional-bloc-vows-to-reverse-coup?leadSource=verify%20wall>.

¹⁰ Askar, M. and Balima, B. (2023), ‘Niger loses aid as Western countries condemn coup’, Reuters, 29 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-loses-aid-western-countries-condemn-coup-2023-07-29>.

¹¹ Lepidi, P., Barthet, M., Ngom, M. and Jeannin, M. (2023), ‘Niger coup: From North to West Africa, voices speak out against ECOWAS military operation’, *Le Monde*, 7 August 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/08/07/niger-coup-from-north-to-west-africa-voices-speak-out-against-ecowas-military-operation_6083415_124.html.

¹² Voice of America (2023), ‘Mali, Burkina Faso Pledge Assistance to Niger Junta’, 25 August 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-burkina-faso-pledge-assistance-to-niger-junta-/7241666.html>.

¹³ Reuters (2023), ‘Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso sign Sahel security pact’, Reuters, 16 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16>.

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle (2023), ‘Burkina Faso, Niger pull out of regional G5 Sahel force’, Deutsche Welle, 2 December 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/burkina-faso-niger-pull-out-of-regional-g5-sahel-force/a-67617506>.

¹⁵ Reuters (2024), ‘Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso quit ECOWAS, testing regional unity’, Reuters, 28 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-mali-burkina-faso-quit-ecowas-testing-regional-unity-2024-01-28>.

France, which relocated many of its troops to Niger after being forced to leave both Burkina Faso and Mali by their respective new governments, subsequently removed its 1,450-strong force from Niger in response to calls by the Nigerien government for their immediate withdrawal.¹⁶ In early December 2023, Niger announced that it had decided to ‘withdraw the privileges and immunities granted’ under the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger as well as the EU Civilian Capacity-Building Mission (EUCAP), which had been in place since 2012.¹⁷ The US, which had more than 1,000 troops in the country and operated drones out of several locations, including a \$110 million airbase outside of Agadez since 2018, agreed in April 2024 to withdraw its troops from Niger after the Nigerien government declared the American military presence in the country ‘illegal’.¹⁸ The Nigerien government, like its counterparts in Mali and Burkina Faso, also took several steps in late 2023 and into 2024 to deepen its defence and military cooperation with Russia.¹⁹ Russian military trainers arrived in Niger in April 2024.²⁰

For the purposes of this paper, perhaps the most significant recent development is the 25 November 2023 decision by the Nigerien government to repeal the 2015 anti-smuggling and human trafficking law. As will be outlined in detail below, the controversial legislation effectively criminalized the migrant transport economy in Agadez, significantly altering a key element of the political economy during a period of financial precarity, increased insecurity and political uncertainty throughout much of the Sahel and North Africa.

Following these events, a range of international stakeholders have had no choice but to re-examine their policies towards Niger, a country that had been seen as a linchpin within international strategies to stabilize the Sahel region. International efforts to engage on the issue of migration management at the policy level must be recalibrated to the new geopolitical realities of the region. Assumptions on which previous policies were predicated need to be reconsidered. To that end, this paper concludes with an assessment of the policy implications and key lessons for stakeholders working in the areas of conflict stabilization,²¹ as Niger and the broader Sahel region enter a new period of political uncertainty amid enduring security challenges.

¹⁶ Asadu, C. (2023), ‘Niger’s junta revokes key security agreements with EU and turns to Russia for defense partnership’, Associated Press, 4 December 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/niger-junta-eu-russia-security-73e8ed801478fa65b01818dd53df0c0e>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hudson, J. (2024), ‘U.S. agrees to withdraw American troops from Niger’, *Washington Post*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/04/19/us-troops-niger>.

¹⁹ Agence France Presse (2023), ‘Russian Officials Visit Niger to Bolster Military Ties’, via Barron’s, 4 December 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/news/russian-officials-visit-niger-to-bolster-military-ties-1933bc3e>.

²⁰ Donati, J. (2024), ‘Russian military trainers arrive in Niger as relations deteriorate with the US’, Associated Press, 12 April 2024, [https://apnews.com/article/niger-russia-military-trainers-18d6435d00e7790de9ee53e24bfca7ba#:~:text=DAKAR%2C%20Senegal%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94,instead%20to%20Russia%20for%20security](https://apnews.com/article/niger-russia-military-trainers-18d6435d00e7790de9ee53e24bfca7ba#:~:text=DAKAR%2C%20Senegal%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94,instead%20to%20Russia%20for%20security); Schmitt, E. (2023), ‘U.S. Declares the Military Takeover in Niger a Coup’, *New York Times*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/us/politics/niger-coup-biden-declaration.html>.

²¹ While there is no internationally agreed definition of conflict stabilization, the UK government’s Stabilisation Unit published a guide for policymakers and practitioners on its approach to stabilization that states: ‘Stabilisation activity is undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence, where the capacity of local political structures and processes to manage conflict have broken down. The UK government’s objective in undertaking stabilisation interventions is to support local and regional partners in conflict-affected countries to reduce violence, ensure basic security and facilitate peaceful political deal-making, all of which should aim to provide a foundation for building long-term stability’. Department for International Development (2018), ‘Chapter 1: The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation’, *The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c7ff0ebe5274a39d4e4736d/Chapter_1_The_UK_Government_s_Approach_to_Stabilisation_incl_exec_sum_.pdf.

Methodology

In addition to a comprehensive review of the existing research literature, this analysis is informed by 19 unstructured and semi-structured interviews carried out by the author in partnership with a local researcher in Agadez in November 2022, building on multiple previous research trips to Agadez by the author since 2014. These interviews took place in individual and group settings and engaged with current and former migrant smugglers, migrants transiting through Agadez, as well as current and former local government officials and members of civil society organizations. They were conducted in French, except in circumstances in which the interviewees preferred to speak in either Hausa, Tebu or Arabic, in which case a local translator was used during the conversation.

A local researcher carried out 20 subsequent structured interviews, guided by a qualitative questionnaire, in Agadez in September 2023. The questionnaire was designed to better understand perceptions among citizens of Agadez, across a broad spectrum of demographics, of the impact of migrant smuggling and local and international attempts to curtail irregular migration. These interviews placed a particular emphasis on understanding the direct and indirect economic, political, social and security repercussions as observed by those living in Agadez.

The paper has drawn extensively on economic assessments, satellite data and mobility data commissioned for Chatham House through the XCEPT Research Fund. First, Satellite Application Catapult commissioned satellite data and data analysis from Copernicus Sentinel data, USGS Landsat Data, Environment Systems Limited, OpenStreetMaps contributors, Maxar Technologies, CNES and Distribution Airbus DS alongside their own data analysis. Together, this commissioned research contributed data on the movement of people across Niger, the agriculture and gold sector in Niger and the urban development of Agadez through nightlight analysis and other urban expansion measures. Second, Satellite Applications Catapult also commissioned research from EMDYN's Geospatial Intelligence Fusion Platform, which combines mobility data and commercial satellite imagery. Third, the XCEPT Research Fund directly commissioned XCEPT partner Emani to conduct economic assessments of Agadez.

About the paper

This research paper is one of three publications from the Human Smuggling and Trafficking through East and West Africa to Libya case study investigated by Chatham House for the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. Through the application of a qualitative systems analysis, the case study seeks to understand how the outbreak of violent conflict in Libya has conditioned the movement of people from Nigeria to Libya via Niger between 2011 and 2023. The series includes a recently published paper titled *Tracing the 'continuum of violence between Nigeria and Libya*, which focuses on human-smuggling and trafficking-in-persons from Edo State in southern Nigeria, and a forthcoming paper on the impact of human-smuggling and -trafficking on Libya's conflict economy.

02 Becoming a ‘migrant smuggling’ hub

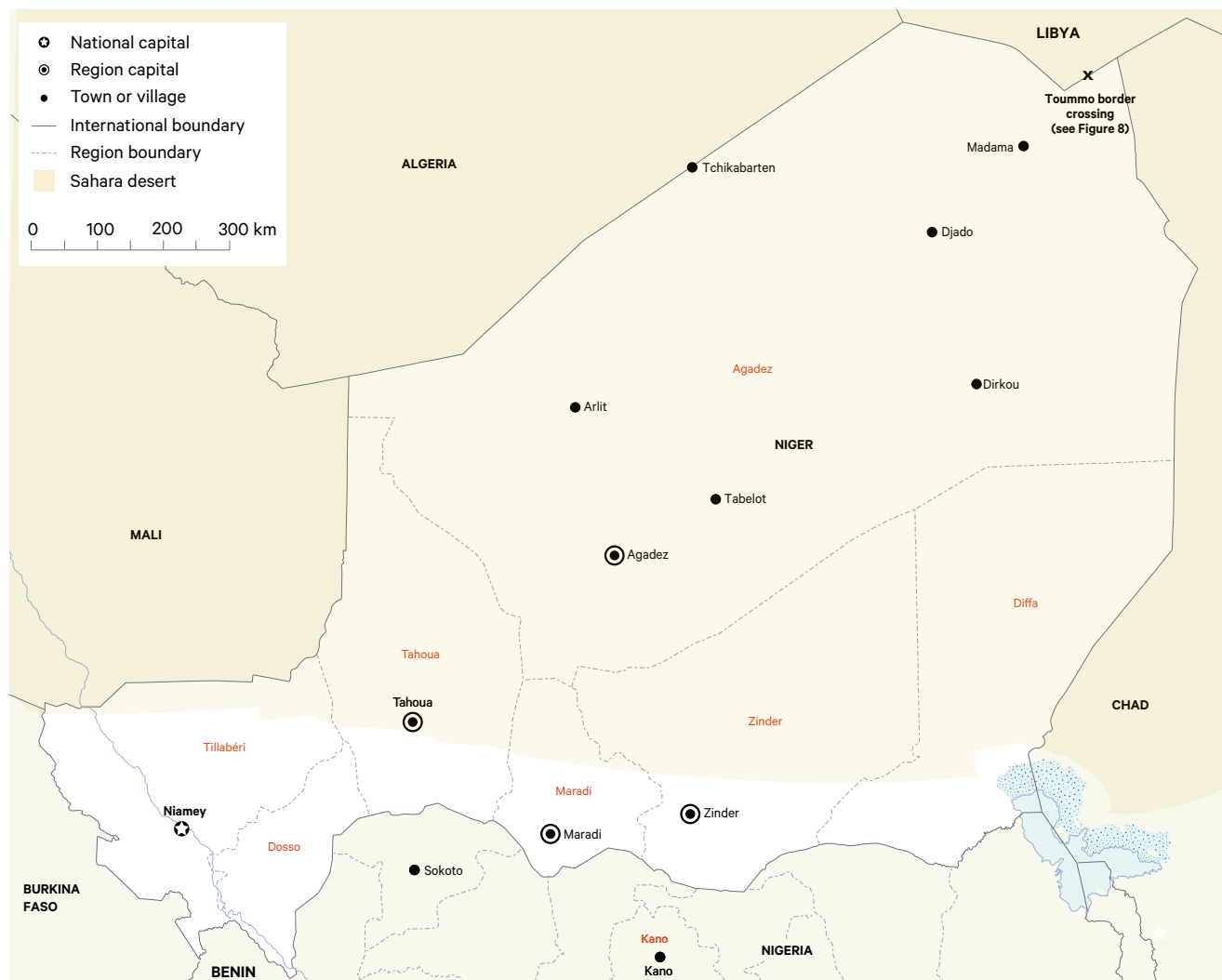
The mobility economy in Agadez rapidly expanded after the Libyan revolution. This booming economy went on to play a role in shaping conflict dynamics in southern Libya.

Agadez, a city located in northern Niger at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, has long served as a link between West Africa and North Africa.²² For many populations in the region, the movement of people and goods has created and reinforced transnational webs of cultural, political and economic interdependence that transcend the Sahel and the Sahara’s post-colonial political borders. For certain Tuareg, Tebu and Arab communities in particular, mobility has served as an essential resilience strategy during periods of economic and political marginalization, drought and conflict. These patterns of trade and mobility are integral to the identities of entire communities that are highly dispersed and mobile across thousands of kilometres of territory, and whose relationships and interconnectivity endure across borders and despite considerable distance.²³

²² Bensaâd, A. (2003), ‘Agadez, carrefour migratoire sahélo-maghrébin [Agadez, the migratory crossroads of the Sahel and the Maghreb]’, *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 19(1), pp. 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.336>.

²³ Brachet, J. (2012), ‘Movements of people and goods: Local impacts and dynamics of migration to and through the central Sahara’, in McDougall, J. and Scheele, J. (eds) (2012), *Saharan frontiers: Space and mobility in northwest Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press; Boyer, F., Harouna, M. and Boureima, A. (2009), *Le Niger, espace d’émigration et de transit vers le sud et le nord du Sahara: rôle et comportement des acteurs, recompositions spatiales et transformations socio-économiques [Niger, area of emigration and transit towards the south and the north of the Sahara: the role and behaviour of actors, spatial re-composition and socio-economic transformations]*, Niamey: Université Abdou Moumouni, <https://ird.hal.science/ird-01497790>; Boyer, F. and Mounkaila, H. (2010), ‘Partir pour aider ceux qui restent ou la dépendance face aux migrations: L’exemple des paysans sahéliens [Leaving to help those who stay or dependence on migration: The example of Sahel farmers]’, *Hommes & migrations*, 1286(7), pp. 212–20.

Figure 1: Regional map of Niger



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research; Nations online project (undated), ‘Map of Niger’, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/niger-political-map.htm>.

The current trajectory of trans-Saharan migration through Niger to North Africa can be traced to the mid-twentieth century, when large-scale development projects in North Africa created demand for labour that could not be met locally or nationally. Gaps in the labour market, combined with droughts in the Sahel that led to severe food shortages in the 1970s and 1980s, further accelerated migration from the Sahel and West Africa to Algeria and Libya. While these migrants often lived and worked in Algeria and Libya extralegally, they were not considered a problem by national authorities, nor did North African governments seek to control or regulate them (although there were sporadic mass expulsions in the 1970s and 1980s).²⁴

²⁴ Brachet, J. (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers: From irregular to clandestine mobility in the Sahara’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), pp. 16–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217744529>.

These trends in migration through Niger to North Africa continued into the 1990s and 2000s, and the city of Agadez in Niger emerged as a key transit hub linking migrants from West Africa to North Africa. The establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, and the subsequent Free Movement Protocol in 1979, meant nationals from most states in West Africa could travel to Niger – the only ECOWAS member that bordered both Algeria and Libya – with relative ease so long as they had a valid travel document. It was only upon reaching the borders with Algeria or Libya that nationals of ECOWAS member states would need to evade formal border crossings to enter either country without official paperwork.²⁵

Trends in migration through Niger to North Africa continued into the 1990s and 2000s, and the city of Agadez in Niger emerged as a key transit hub linking migrants from West Africa to North Africa.

Agadez also became a major transit hub for migration to North Africa due to the comparative ease of picking up transportation before migrants face the practical challenges of traversing the Sahara Desert. The city itself is easily accessible from the south by transport routes on mostly paved roads, but moving north of Agadez towards Libya requires crossing a vast stretch of desert with poor infrastructure and no regularly scheduled transport options. In Agadez, migrants can either hitch a ride on lorries moving goods to and from Niger and North Africa or hire a skilled driver who can navigate the desert.²⁶

A 1995 peace agreement that ended an armed rebellion in northern Niger resulted in a surplus of former combatants with detailed knowledge of the central Sahara, who had developed skills traversing the desert as transporters of goods and people. The government and local politicians were loath to deprive this population of meaningful economic opportunities, hence allowing them to open brokerage agencies, or *agences de courtage*, that specialized in the transportation of migrants.²⁷ Over time, a more robust migration economy emerged with an array of actors taking on various overlapping roles, including those of *coxeurs* (a local tout or recruiter), drivers, fixers and a range of brokers and intermediaries who helped regulate the economy.²⁸

As this system matured and specialization increased, so too did the predictability of the journey and the stability of prices.²⁹ By the mid-2000s, migrants could expect to find places on 4x4 trucks, which left in large convoys, primarily bound for the town of Dirkou, from where migrants would continue to the Libyan border.

²⁵ One notable exception here are Malian nationals, who do not need a visa to enter Algeria.

²⁶ Brachet (2018), 'Manufacturing smugglers'.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*.

The activity took place with the full knowledge of local authorities, as brokerage agencies collected taxes on behalf of the local government, and state security forces informally collected fees from vehicles that passed through their checkpoints.³⁰

While most of these border crossings were technically irregular in that they did not pass through formal legal channels and follow processes according to legislation, migrants and those transporting them moved relatively freely, travelling on main roads and passing through official checkpoints. The actors facilitating the movement of people were not considered migrant smugglers, and migration patterns from Agadez to Algeria and Libya, while often technically irregular, were not clandestine.³¹

Libyan aftershocks reverberate to the south

A key inflection point came in 2011, when an uprising against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi led to the outbreak of civil war in Libya and the overthrow of the government and its pervasive security apparatus.

Prior to his death, Gaddafi had proved a useful ally to European countries in limiting the number of migrants leaving the North African state for European soil.³² Yet the collapse of his regime and the ensuing and ongoing governance crisis led to the effective localization of governance. The resulting disruption and new security environment gave rise to the rapid expansion of migrant smuggling networks based in Libya and their facilitation of maritime passage to Europe.³³

Figure 2 depicts this new security context since 2011, in which governance disputes at the local level throughout Libya resulted in a decline in law and order. At the national level, the absence of both a coherent central government and effective reform of the security sector in Libya allowed local actors to maintain autonomy, use coercive force to influence the central government and obtain resources via patronage systems.³⁴ These interlocking local and national dynamics have entrenched the role of armed actors across the country.

The resulting proliferation of armed groups with direct influence in local economies created a competitive, securitized conflict economy.³⁵ This interplay exacerbated the governance crisis at local and national levels (Figure 2), and undermined attempts to re-establish coherent national governance structures. Furthermore, conflicts between rival armed factions over economic interests

³⁰ Tidjani Alou, M. (2002), 'La petite corruption au Niger' [Petty corruption in Niger], *Etudes et Travaux du Lasdel*, no. 3, pp. 1–55.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*.

³³ Micallef, M. (2019), *The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: Assessing the Collapse of the Human-Smuggling Industry in Libya and the Central Sahel*, *The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Global-Initiative-Human-Conveyor-Belt-Broken_March-2019.pdf.

³⁴ Eaton, T. (2018), *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/172588>.

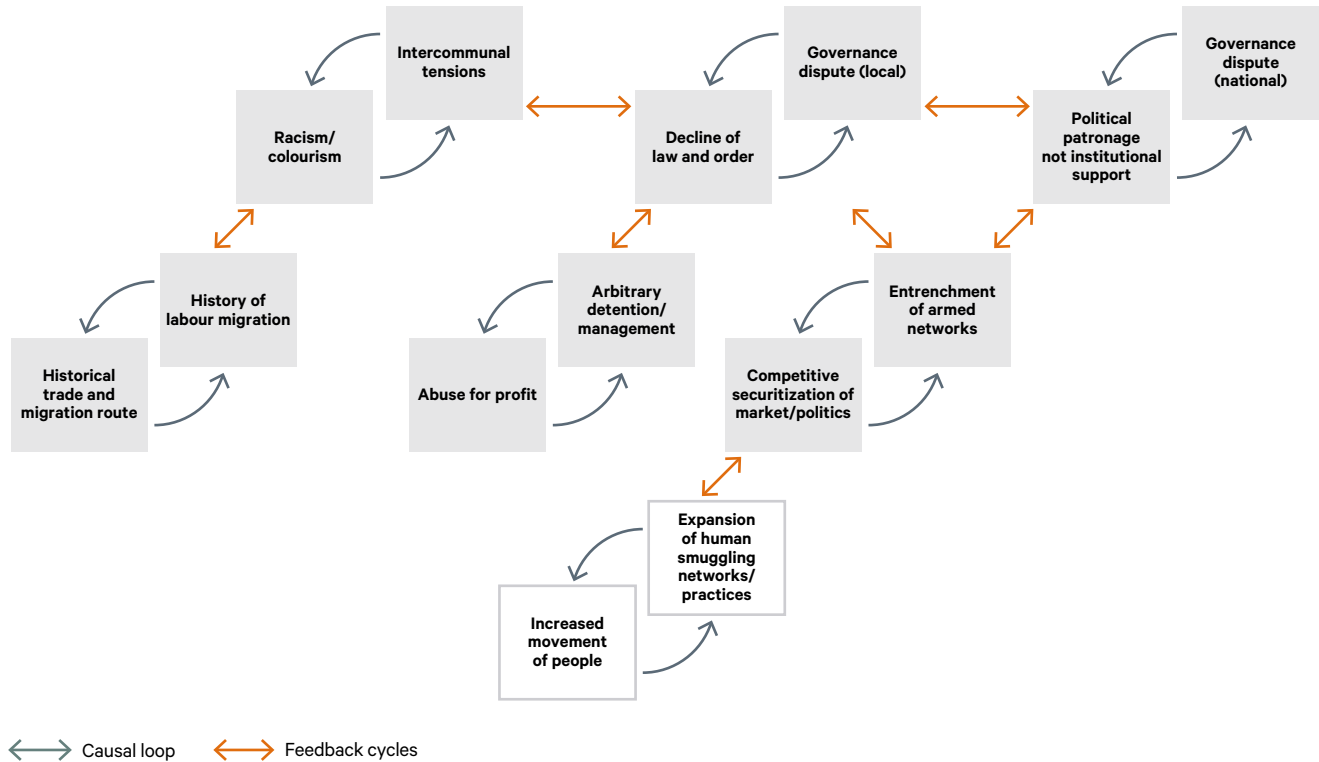
³⁵ Eaton et al. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/development-libyan-armed-groups-2014>.

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became an enduring feature of conflict in Libya.³⁶ Examples include battles over strategic transport routes, the capture of economically valuable infrastructure and indirect influence over state institutions.

Figure 2. The securitization of Libya’s market after 2011



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research.

The routes through which people were transported to Libya and beyond existed well before the uprisings in 2011. They facilitated trade in the precolonial era,³⁷ and were further entrenched by European colonialism’s transatlantic slave trade³⁸ and the closely connected ‘white slave traffic’.³⁹ More recently, these routes were used by people seeking employment opportunities in North Africa and Europe, including the migration of low-skilled agricultural workers and, subsequently, sex workers to Italy (including those trafficked).⁴⁰

The pre-existing transport infrastructure and connections to Libya were scaled up significantly after 2011. Instability in Libya, particularly local antagonisms over land ownership and governance, created a hostile environment for foreign

³⁶ Lacher, W. (2023), ‘Libya’s New Order’, Sidecar blog, 26 January 2023, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/libyas-new-order>.

³⁷ Remarks shared during an interview, under the condition of anonymity, on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance.

³⁸ Ellis, S. (2016), *This present darkness: a history of Nigerian organized crime*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁹ The term ‘white slave traffic’ was prominently used in the early to mid-19th century to refer to forced sex work and sexual slavery. In using the word ‘white’, the term is not referring to the race of the people being trafficked.

⁴⁰ Carling, J. (2005), ‘Trafficking in women from Nigeria to Europe’, Migration Policy Institute, 1 July 2005, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trafficking-women-nigeria-europe/>; Federal Migration Centre (MYRIA) (2018), *Trafficking and smuggling of human beings: Minors at major risk*, Saint-Gilles (Brussels): Federal Migration Centre, <https://www.myria.be/files/RATEH-EN-2018-DEF.pdf>.

nationals and laid the groundwork for systematic abuses of those migrating. The large numbers of migrants visibly present in Libyan towns and cities, for example, has exacerbated longstanding racial prejudices.⁴¹

By 2013, there was a noticeable influx of nationals from throughout West Africa coming to Agadez to reach Libya, a large proportion of which did so with the primary purpose of onward travel to Europe.

It is against this complex backdrop that the exploitation of and violence against migrants became a defining feature of Libya’s post-2011 conflict economy.⁴² As a result, migration economies and the exploitation of migrants became an important source of revenue for local armed groups. A previous Chatham House research paper estimated that human smuggling and trafficking generated \$978 million in revenues in Libya at the height of irregular migration in 2016.⁴³ The rapid expansion of smuggling activities led to concerted efforts by European policymakers to restrict the flows of migrants across the Mediterranean.⁴⁴

The above-mentioned dynamics in Libya had reverberations across the southern border in Niger. Yet, as Figure 3 illustrates, the expansion of Agadez’s mobility economy was not the result of a breakdown of law and order in neighbouring Libya or increased competition between Libyan security actors. Competition for income derived from the mobility economy and route displacement emerged later in Niger, partly in response to European brokered efforts to criminalize migration activities in Niger and partly as a result of Libya’s security actors expanding into Nigerien territory.

By 2013, there was a noticeable influx of nationals from throughout West Africa coming to Agadez to reach Libya, a large proportion of which did so with the primary purpose of onward travel to Europe. These were different cohorts from those who traditionally sought to go to Libya for employment opportunities and who engaged in seasonal or circular migration. The trend accelerated through 2014 and 2015, with thousands of migrants departing Agadez for Libya every week, and this explosion in activity was a boon for the economy of Agadez.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Yousef, L. and Eaton, T. (2023), ‘The Dual Face of Migrant Smuggling in Libya’, *The New Arab*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/dual-face-migrant-smuggling-libya>.

⁴² Micallef, M. (2017), *The Human Conveyor Belt: trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, March 2017, <http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global-initiativehuman-conveyor-belt-human-smuggling-in-libya-march-2017.pdf>.

⁴³ Eaton (2018), *Libya’s War Economy*.

⁴⁴ Micallef, M. (2019), *The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: Assessing the Collapse of the Human-Smuggling Industry in Libya and the Central Sahel*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Global-Initiative-Human-Conveyor-Belt-Broken_March-2019.pdf.

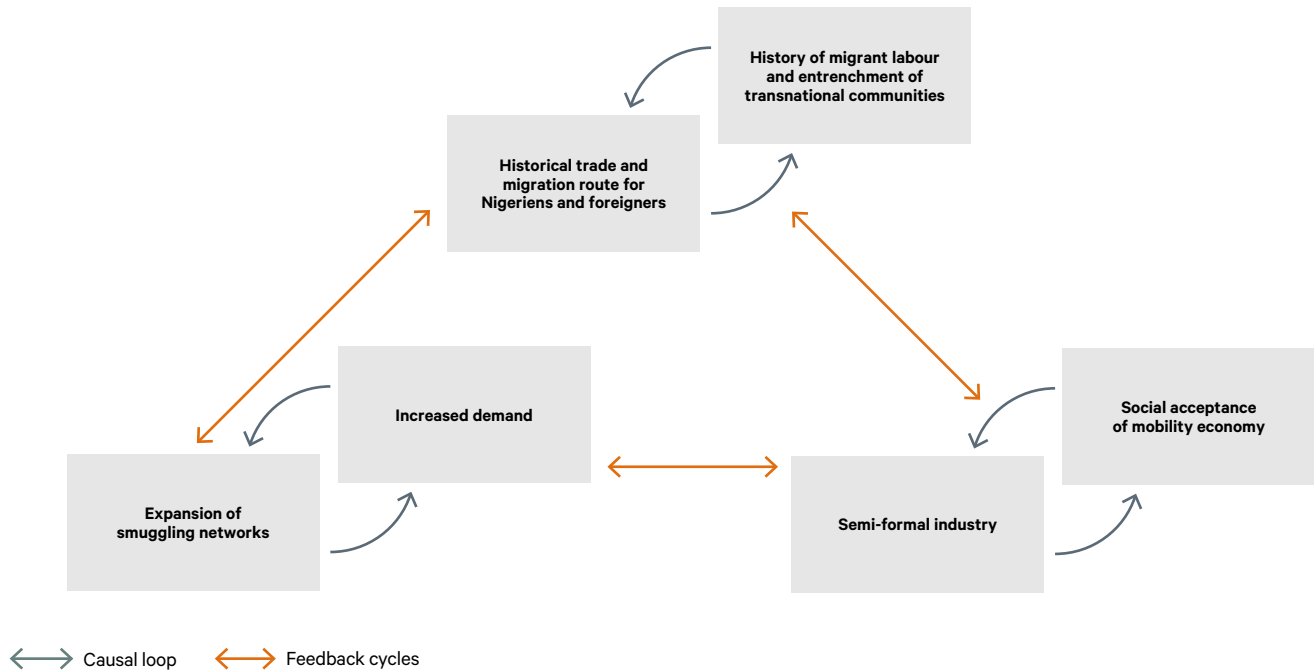
⁴⁵ Hall, S. (2016), *Selling sand in the Desert: The economic impact of migration in Agadez*, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfe2c8927234e0001688343/t/5e99500b11e67507d005d251/1587105841599/IOM-The-economic-impact-of-migration-in-Agadez.pdf>.

Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route

How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy

As a transit hub in a volatile region, the Nigerien government had few incentives to crack down on revenue-generating activities that trickled down to large portions of the community.⁴⁶

Figure 3. The expansion of Agadez’s mobility economy



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research.

Government officials in Agadez openly celebrated the prosperity associated with the migration economy, as everyone from drivers, fixers, landlords, shop owners, currency dealers, mechanics and restaurant owners benefited from the industry. In 2015, for example, Ahmed Koussa, an assistant to the mayor of Agadez at the time, told the *New York Times* that ‘many are eating off these migrants’.⁴⁷ Similarly, in the same year, Abdourahamane Moussa, deputy-secretary general for the regional government in Agadez, told the *Wall Street Journal*, ‘Migrants are buying things, consuming our goods and animating our economy.’⁴⁸

There is evidence that Agadez experienced considerable commercial development at this time. Satellite imagery analysis of urban density and agricultural land use confirms that this period saw significant urban expansion and growth in urban density, in the form of increased construction and electrification in Agadez

⁴⁶ Reitano, T. (2016), ‘What incentives does Niger have for cracking down on migrant smuggling? Not many’, London School of Economics Blog, 13 January 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2016/01/13/what-incentives-does-niger-have-for-cracking-down-on-migrant-smuggling-not-many>.

⁴⁷ Nossiter, A. (2015), ‘Crackdown in Niger fails to deter migrant smugglers’, *New York Times*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/africa/migrant-smuggling-business-is-booming-in-niger-despite-crackdown.html>.

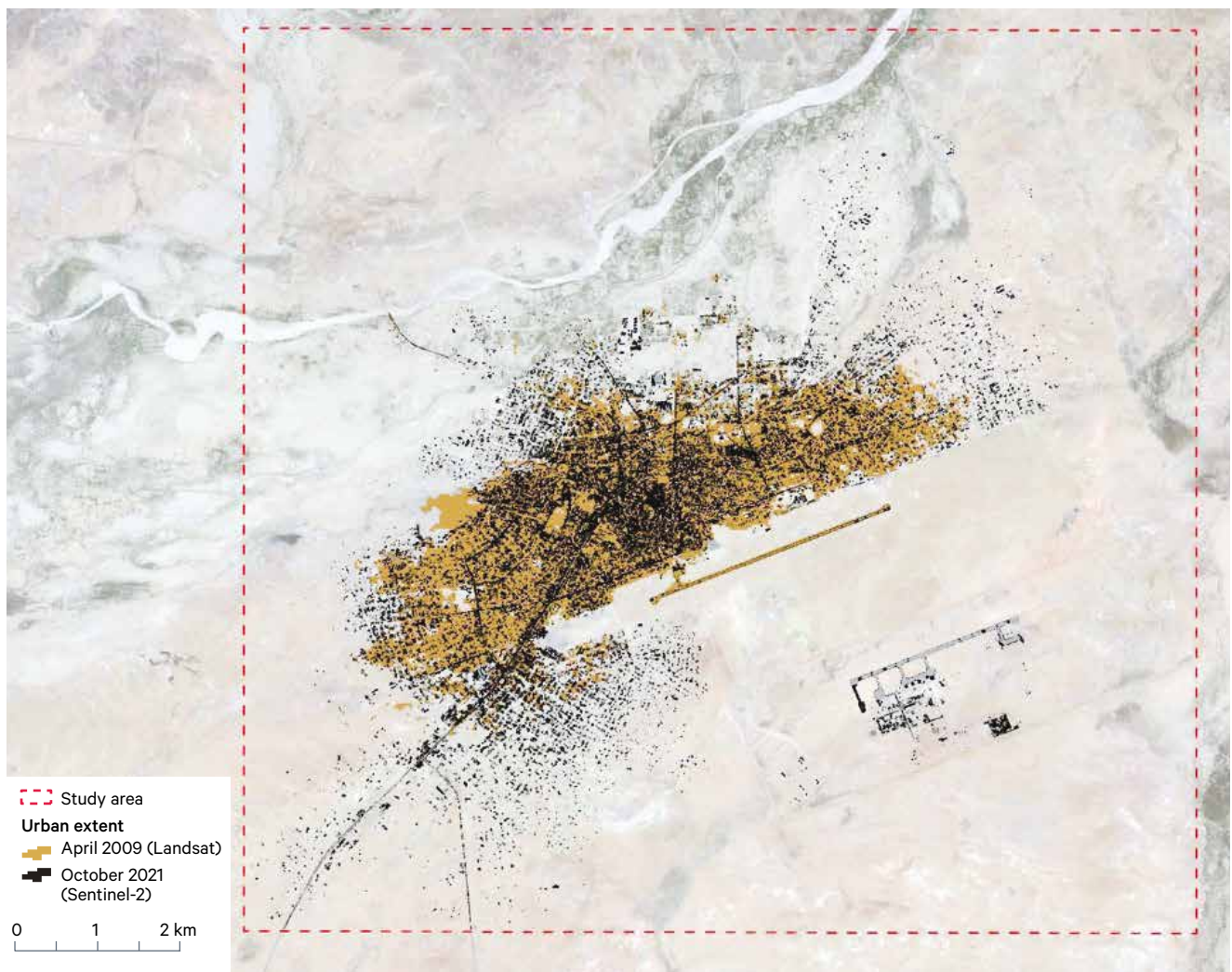
⁴⁸ Hinshaw, D. and Parkinson, J. (2015), ‘Agadez traffickers profit from movement through Niger to Libya’, *Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/agadez-traffickers-profit-from-movement-through-niger-to-libya-1437002559#:~:text=Traffickers%20in%20Agadez%20profit%20from%20Africans%20moving%20through,hope%20of%20eventually%20reaching%20the%20shores%20of%20Europe>.

Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route

How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy

(see figures 4 and 5).⁴⁹ Although these trends cannot be directly attributed to migrant-smuggling revenues,⁵⁰ they do coincide with this period, which interviewees described as a time of economic opportunity.⁵¹ Anecdotal testimony indicates that the population of Agadez may have doubled or tripled in this period, though there are no reliable statistics to substantiate such a claim.⁵²

Figure 4. The urban expansion of Agadez



Sources: Satellite images © modified Copernicus Sentinel 2 data (2022) and USGS landsat data (2022).

⁴⁹ Chatham House conducted this analysis of satellite imagery based on satellite data commissioned for Chatham House by the XCEPT Research Fund with Satellite Applications Catapult. The satellite images were commissioned from Copernicus Sentinel data (2022) and USGS Landsat Data (2022) for Figure 4 and from Environment Systems Ltd for Figure 5.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that some elements of urban development can be demonstrated to not be directly related to the smuggling economy: most notably the development of a US airbase constructed between 2016 and 2019.

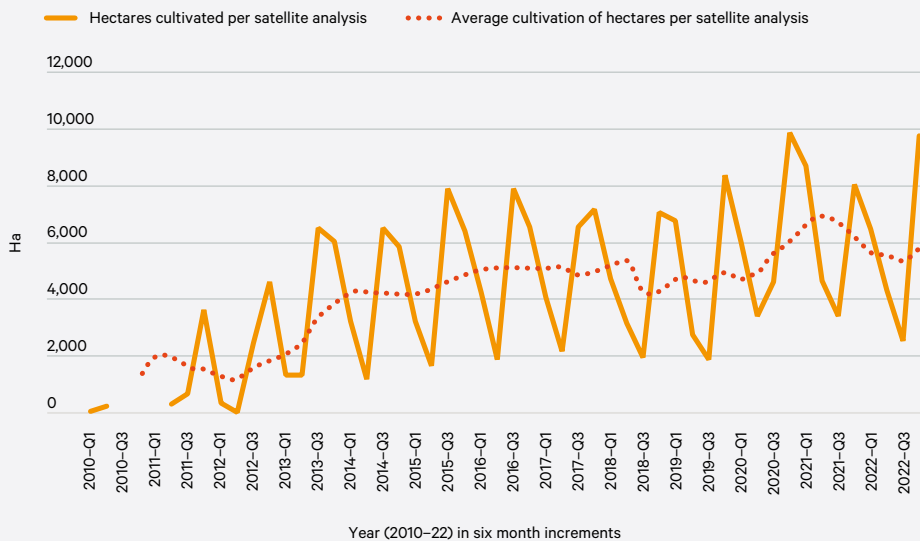
⁵¹ Helyx Commercial (2022), *WP3: Urban land use in Agadez, Niger*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House through Satellite Applications Catapult in March 2022 through the XCEPT Research Fund. Reference number: Helyx 03-1142-5-0001-2-0-U-AgadezReport.

⁵² Reidy, E. (2018), 'Destination Europe: Desperation', *The New Humanitarian*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2018/07/03/destination-europe-desperation>.

Box 1. The importance of people smuggling to local livelihoods in Agadez

Only 20 per cent of Nigerien citizens responding to a Chatham House field survey, commissioned through the XCEPT Research Fund in May 2022, reported holding salaried positions in Agadez, most were self-employed or worked as day labourers.⁵³ While employment in the agricultural sector is significant – accounting for 73 per cent of the active population in 2019 – the incomes are modest, and work in agriculture is essentially a subsistence activity.⁵⁴ Moreover, while the wider region is a major source of uranium mining, these incomes were not reported to significantly benefit the local population.⁵⁵ While the migration economy brought significant economic benefits, there is little indication that engagement in people smuggling and human trafficking replaced agricultural activity. In fact, satellite imagery analysis found that the number of hectares cultivated for agricultural use increased from 2010 to 2022.

Figure 5. Number of hectares cultivated in the Agadez region, 2010–22



Source: Satellite images © Environment Systems Ltd.

Locals described the migration sector as a ‘godsend’ that reduced unemployment and allowed ‘children to come of age’ so that they could help their parents financially. ‘In every family in Agadez, there have been or are people who have benefited from migration’, explained one resident during interviews carried out by Chatham House. ‘When tourism died out in Agadez, migration took its place’, she continued, referring to the tourism industry that collapsed when North

⁵³ Emani (2022), *Economic Assessment of Agadez in Niger*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in May 2022 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

American and European embassies began formally discouraging travel to northern Niger in the early 2010s. ‘When migrants passed through Agadez, all our children found an occupation’.⁵⁶

During peak months in which as many as 10,000 migrants passed through Agadez, estimated total pay-outs to smugglers would be in the range of €2–3 million, and this does not necessarily include revenues generated in proximity to the mobility economy, which included goods consumed by migrants and increased trade with Libya via transporters bringing goods back to Agadez.⁵⁷ In contrast, the export of onions from Agadez – one of the region’s main agricultural exports – generates \$1.6 million per year.⁵⁸ ‘I made a lot of money in my restaurant with the migrants’, said one woman who owned a small restaurant. ‘It’s a pity they banned it [migration activities]. If it had continued, I wouldn’t have closed my restaurant’.⁵⁹

During peak months in which as many as 10,000 migrants passed through Agadez, estimated total pay-outs to smugglers would be in the range of €2–3 million, and this does not necessarily include revenues generated in proximity to the mobility economy.

The economic benefits of migration also supplemented the public sector, beyond tax revenues, particularly local security structures. A 2013 report by Niger’s anti-corruption agency found that payments to security forces and local authorities totalled \$450 per vehicle and \$30 per non-Nigerien migrant travelling between Agadez and the Libyan border.⁶⁰ The same report found that bribes paid by migrants were essential to keep security forces functioning as funds earmarked to buy diesel for vehicles, spare parts and food rarely reached those stationed in northern Niger. ‘The security forces recognize that they take money but they have no choice. That money they use to do their jobs’, the head of the anti-corruption agency told Reuters.⁶¹

‘For me, migration represents abundance and wealth. Migration changed our lives’, explained a 40-year-old mechanic who was able to support his 16 children with the money he made during the migration boom. ‘It eased our difficulties, really. We didn’t lack for anything’.⁶²

⁵⁶ Interview with 36-year-old housewife with four children, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

⁵⁷ Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*.

⁵⁸ Emani (2022), *Economic Assessment of Agadez in Niger*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in May 2022 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

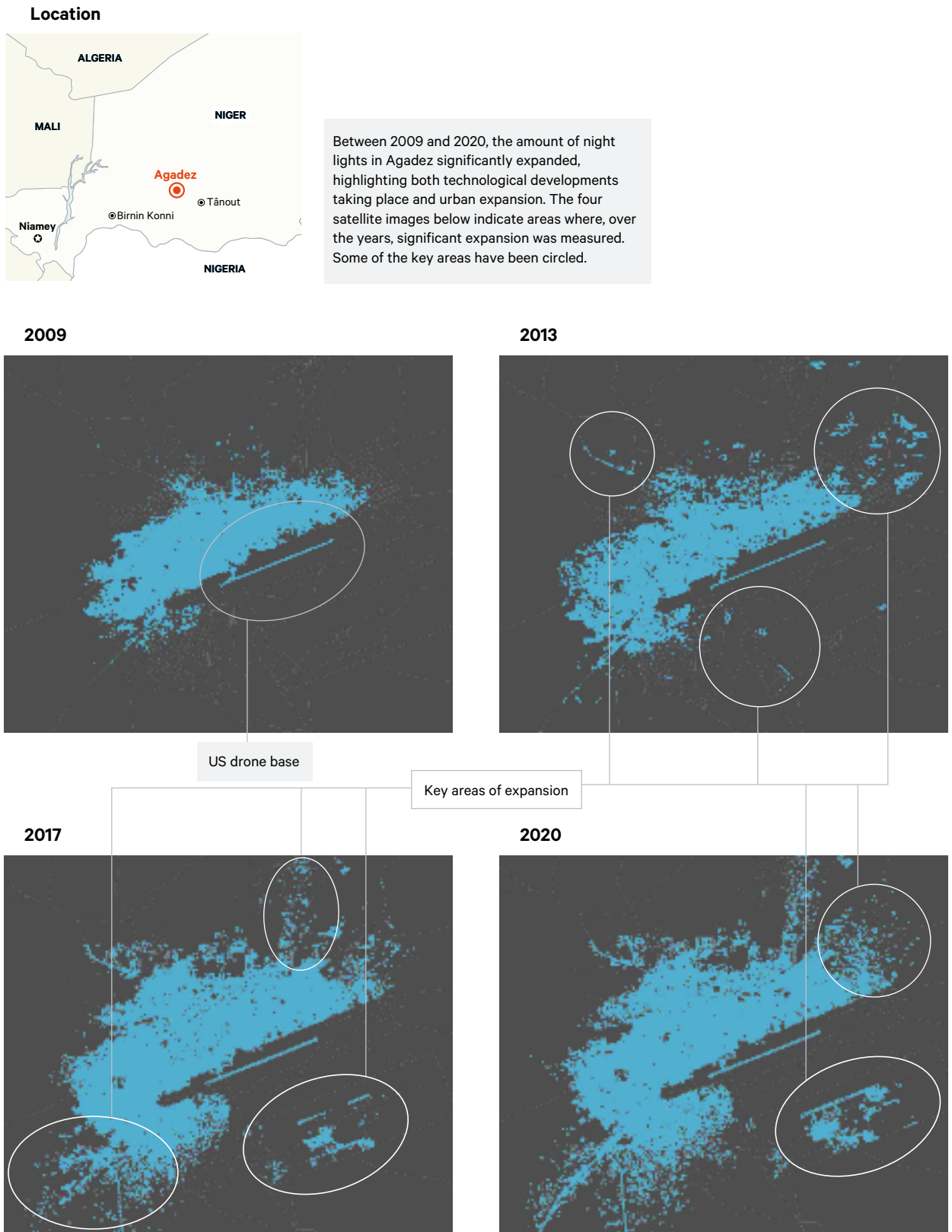
⁵⁹ Interviews with former restaurant owner, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

⁶⁰ Flynn, D. (2015), ‘Insight: Graft stalls Niger’s bid to end migrant route to Europe’, Reuters, 19 June 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/insight-graft-stalls-nigers-bid-to-end-migrant-route-to-europe-idUSKBN0OZ0EZ>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Research interview with mechanic, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

Figure 6. Expansion of urban area in Agadez, Niger, between 2009 and 2020



Source: Satellite images © modified Copernicus Sentinel 2 data (2022).

Migrant smuggling revenues influence conflict dynamics in southern Libya

Just as conflict dynamics in Libya had a profound impact on the migration boom in Agadez, the revenues generated by migrant smuggling influenced conflict dynamics along the Libya–Niger border and in southern Libya. Prior to the 2010s, levels of conflict in the migration economy in Niger and Libya were particularly low, as the industry was marked by fairly high levels of organization and state complicity on both sides of the border. Competition over key transit hubs and routes was minimal. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, however, criminal networks that smuggled people to Europe via maritime routes proliferated in Libya. As a result, the migration economy and associated profits in both Libya and Niger grew dramatically. This in turn created greater competition among various actors based in southern Libya, most notably armed groups associated with various Tebu, Tuareg and Arab communities.⁶³

When migrant smuggling linking Agadez to Libya reached its apex in the years spanning 2014 to 2016, competition between Tebu and Tuareg or Arab networks increased considerably.⁶⁴ During this period, Tebu from outside the city of Agadez, often referred to as ‘Chadians’ or ‘Libyans’ by local non-Tebu, became increasingly visible in Agadez, where most of the population are ethnic Tuareg and Hausa. Conspicuous displays of newfound wealth by Tebu individuals and their more prominent presence in the city, for example, were a source of animosity for communities who considered them foreigners.⁶⁵

Crucially, the revenues generated by Tebu smuggling networks operating in Agadez translated into greater economic, political and military power in southern Libya, where violent confrontations among rival ethnic-based militias were widespread as they vied for control over various transportation routes and associated licit and illicit economic activities.⁶⁶

Local and international interventions to control migration

From the late 1990s onwards, irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa became an increasingly salient political issue in Europe. The EU and individual member states first began partnering with Sahelian states on issues of migration in the early and mid-2000s. The expansion of the US-led War on Terror into Africa in the 2000s,⁶⁷ combined with concerns over the potential for ‘mass migration’ from Africa to Europe in the mid to late 2000s,⁶⁸ pushed the Sahel higher

⁶³ Micallef (2017), *The Human Conveyor Belt: Trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya*; Horsley, R. (2023), *Libya: Sophisticated Smugglers Thrive as Libyan Governance Stagnates*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rupert-Horsley-Libya-Sophisticated-smugglers-thrive-as-Libyan-governance-stagnates-GI-TOC-September-2023.pdf>; Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*.

⁶⁴ Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in trans-nation*; Pellerin (2018), *The Niger-Libya Border: Securing It without Stabilising It?*; Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, refugee, smuggler, savior*.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.; Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in trans-nation*; Pellerin (2018), *The Niger-Libya Border: Securing It without Stabilising It?*

⁶⁷ Mills, G. and Herbst, J. (2007), ‘Africa, terrorism and AFRICOM’, *The RUSI Journal*, 152(2), pp. 40–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840701349968>.

⁶⁸ de Haas, H. (2009), ‘The Myth of Invasion: The inconvenient realities of African migration to Europe’, *Third World Quarterly*, 29(7), pp. 1305–322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802386435>.

up the EU agenda and caused a shift in EU and EU member state engagement in the region. Increasingly, the issue of migration was reframed within the context of national and international security policy.⁶⁹

The clearest expression of this conceptual shift came in September 2011, with the publication of the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. Focusing on Mauritania, Mali and Niger, the document asserts that ‘security and development in the Sahel cannot be separated’ and calls for more robust EU engagement in tackling nascent security challenges in the region to facilitate longer term outcomes such as economic growth, poverty reduction and the development of state capacity.⁷⁰

The 2012 conflict in neighbouring Mali, combined with the surge of migrants transiting through the Sahel to North Africa, further entrenched the prevailing security-development paradigm that informed EU policy towards Niger.

The 2012 conflict in neighbouring Mali, combined with the surge of migrants transiting through the Sahel to North Africa, further entrenched the prevailing security-development paradigm that informed EU policy towards Niger.⁷¹ By some estimates, three-quarters of all migrants arriving in Italy transited through Agadez in the years that followed.⁷² Without a viable partner in Libya to prevent boat departures from the Mediterranean coast, European policymakers sought to stop the movement of people further down the supply chain and turned to the government of Niger.⁷³ Under the presidency of Mahamadou Issoufou, Niger had proved a willing partner on matters of counterterrorism, notably with France and the US, and represented a relative pillar of stability in a region beset with political crises and insurgencies.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Stambøl, E. M. (2019), ‘The Rise of Crimefare Europe: fighting Migrant Smuggling in West Africa’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 24(3), pp. 287–308, <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2019026>; Lebovich, A. (2018), ‘Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21633.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A48b6d48a4c5faa5940215220df8cf5fe&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

⁷⁰ European Union (2011), ‘Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel’, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategy_for_security_and_development_in_the_sahel_en_0.pdf.

⁷¹ Boyer, F. (2019), ‘Sécurité, développement, protection. Le triptyque de l’externalisation des politiques migratoires au Niger [Security, development, protection: The triptych of externalization migration policies in Niger]’, *Hérodote*, 172(1), pp. 171–91, https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_HER_172_0171--security-development-protection-the.htm; Stambøl (2019), ‘The Rise of Crimefare Europe: fighting Migrant Smuggling in West Africa’; Lebovich (2018), ‘Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel’; Boås, M. (2021), ‘EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), pp. 52–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002>.

⁷² Howden, D. and Zandonini, G. (2018), ‘Niger: Europe’s Migration Laboratory’, *The New Humanitarian*, 22 May 2018, <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/articles/2018/05/22/niger-europes-migration-laboratory>.

⁷³ Boyer, F. and Chappart, P. (2018), ‘Les frontières européennes au Niger [The European borders in Niger]’, *Vacarme*, 2(83), pp. 92–98, <https://doi.org/10.3917/vaca.083.0092>; Tchilouta, R. A. (2023), ‘Les stratégies de gestion des frontières du Niger à l’ère de l’externalisation des politiques migratoires de l’UE: vers des frontières itinérantes? [Niger’s border management strategies in the era of outsourcing EU migration policies: towards mobile borders]’, *L’Espace Politique*, 1(46), <https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.10840>.

⁷⁴ Tinti and Reitano (2016), *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour*.

While much of the narrative surrounding ‘irregular migration’ and ‘criminal networks’ at this time was heavily shaped by European priorities, Issoufou did face some domestic pressure to better control the movement of Nigerien women and children. After a 2013 tragedy in which the bodies of 92 Nigerien migrants were found near the Algerian border, for example, senior ministers in the Nigerien government called for action against the ‘tragedy of clandestine migration’ that was ‘driven by networks of traffickers of all kinds’.⁷⁵ The government responded by making several arrests and temporarily closing a number of migrant ghettos in Agadez, although these actions were not sustained and Agadez continued to grow as a hub of migrant smuggling activity.

In 2012, the EU launched a capacity-building mission called EUCAP Sahel, which initially focused on strengthening Niger’s ability to combat terrorism. However, the mandate was later expanded in 2015 to include surveillance and border control, with a permanent presence in Agadez starting in 2016. EU documents state that the mission was conceived as an effort to better control and fight irregular migration and associated criminal activity in partnership with the central and local authorities in Niger, as well as with Nigerien security forces.⁷⁶

Amid an increase in migrants reaching European shores via North Africa, the EU announced the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa in 2015, in which Niger featured heavily. Of the €2.2 billion allocated to the Sahel and Lake Chad region, Niger has received €294 million as of December 2022, making it the largest recipient within the region.⁷⁷ The EU also launched the Partnership Framework with Third Countries, which conditioned aid and the prospect of trade deals for transit states like Niger in exchange for cooperation with the EU on reducing migration. The same programme also references the possibility of penalties for those that do not cooperate in curbing irregular migration.⁷⁸

All told, Agadez – a small city of roughly 120,000 people, separated from North Africa by the Sahara Desert and situated roughly 1,800 km from the Mediterranean coast – came to be seen by EU policymakers as a ‘perfect target’ for policies that aimed to reduce migration to Europe by implementing controls in transit states.⁷⁹

Law 2015-36

A pivotal moment for the migration economy in Agadez came in May 2015, when the government of Niger, in consultation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and with technical and financial support from the EU and individual EU member states, passed Law 2015-36.⁸⁰ The legislation outlines clear consequences for those engaged in human trafficking, with punishments of up to 10 years and

⁷⁵ Tchilouta, R. A. et al. (2023), *Mission accomplished? The deadly effects of border control in Niger*, Geneva: Border Forensics, <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/niger-investigation>.

⁷⁶ Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

⁷⁷ Altai Consulting (2022), *EUTF Monitoring and Learning System SLC: Yearly 2022 Report - Annexes: Covering until 31 December 2022*, London: Altai Consulting, https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/bd1423df-b318-450f-a64b-163706e6152d_en?filename=2022%20Yearly%20Monitoring%20Report%20for%20the%20Sahel%20and%20Lake%20Chad%20Region%20-%20Annexes.pdf&prefLang=fr.

⁷⁸ D Diallo, I. M. (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’, *The New Humanitarian*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2017/02/02/eu-strategy-stems-migrant-flow-niger-what-cost>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

finances of up to 5 million CFA (€7,600) for ‘any person who intentionally and for the purpose of deriving, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, procures the unlawful entry into or exit from Niger of any person who is not a national or permanent resident of Niger’.⁸¹

The circumstances under which Law 2015-36 was passed and its actual content were highly controversial, both domestically as well as within humanitarian circles. Critics warned of the economic repercussions of restricting irregular migration and argued that the law effectively criminalized providing transportation or accommodation to foreign nationals anywhere north of Agadez, in contravention of the rights of ECOWAS citizens. Another likely impact, critics noted, was that the law would push migrants – even those who were in Niger legally – to take more dangerous, circuitous paths through the desert to avoid detection by the Nigerien authorities. Commentators also warned that the economic fallout could destabilize northern Niger’s tenuous security equilibrium.⁸²

In 2016, under considerable pressure from European leaders, the Nigerien authorities carried out mass arrests in Agadez, arresting over 100 people and confiscating hundreds of vehicles.⁸³ Following the mass detentions and confiscation of vehicles, the number of migrant departures from Agadez plummeted.⁸⁴ With long-established methods of migration through Agadez no longer feasible, actors involved in migrant smuggling either chose to leave the sector altogether or change their tactics.⁸⁵ As could have been expected, much of the sector was driven underground, with smugglers now operating in a more clandestine manner as new patterns of mobility and methods of transport have emerged, many of which circumnavigate Agadez.⁸⁶

⁸¹ République du Niger (2015), ‘Loi No. 2015-36 du 26 mai 2015 relative au Trafic Illicite de Migrants [Law No 2015-36 of 26 May 2015 relating to Smuggling of Migrants]’, 26 May 2015, https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/ner/2015/loi_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migrants_html/Loi_N2015-36_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migrants.pdf.

⁸² Tinti, P. (2017), ‘In Niger, anti-smuggling risk trading one crisis for another’, African Arguments, 13 January 2017, <https://africanarguments.org/2017/01/in-niger-anti-smuggling-efforts-risk-trading-one-crisis-for-another>; Tinti, P. (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’, The Atlantic, 11 February 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/niger-europe-migrants-jihad-africa/553019>; Diallo (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’; Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

⁸³ Diallo (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’.

⁸⁴ Yuen, L. (2020), ‘Overview of migration trends and patterns in the Republic of the Niger, 2016-2019’, in, Fargues, F., Rango, M., Börgnas, E. and Schöfberger, I. (2020) (eds), *Migration trends in West Africa and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: Trends, risks development and government*, Grand-Saconnex: International Organization for Migration, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-west-and-north-africa-and-across-mediterranean>; Tinti (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’; Diallo (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’.

⁸⁵ Interviews with multiple current and former migrant smugglers, as well as local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

⁸⁶ Tinti (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’; Diallo (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’.

03

Repercussions of criminalization

International and local efforts to criminalize migrant transportation disrupted smuggling networks in Agadez, while also exacerbating longstanding socio-political tensions and forcing migrants to take riskier journeys.

The criminalization of the mobility economy in Niger was in effect an effort by the EU to sidestep the policy quagmire it faced in Libya. That is, absent a reliable partner to bargain with such as the late Muammar Gaddafi, Europe turned its focus to the transit state through which most migrants passed en route to Libya: Niger. The ensuing policy intervention had deep consequences in Agadez, pushing the mobility economy underground, restricting it to a smaller set of actors and disrupting routes, all of which made journeys more dangerous for those migrating.

While European policymakers viewed migration management through criminalization and border control as a mutually beneficial capacity-building project, local populations understood this partnership as inherently transactional. The idea that the Nigerien government was placing European priorities above those of its citizens became a source of grievance, particularly as promised economic support for the country proved insufficient. However, the impact on the local population was ameliorated to a degree by the expansion of artisanal gold mining – small-scale mining without mechanization – in the region. Though, with the ongoing overspill of the Libyan conflict, mining in Niger is developing the characteristics of a conflict economy, whereby local armed actors exert increasing control over local economic activity.

When legislation to criminalize people smuggling was introduced, the migration economy was estimated to provide direct employment for more than 6,565 people⁸⁷ and indirect incomes to more than half of all households in Agadez.⁸⁸ Yet the large-scale disruption of an important part of the economy had repercussions that extended far beyond the migration sector, and local and international efforts to curb migration through criminalization have had numerous second-order social and political impacts that exacerbated conflict dynamics in the region. The following section outlines several of these impacts, emphasizing the evidence available from existing research and academic literature, as well as recent fieldwork and interviews by Chatham House.

Displaced routes, increased costs and new modalities

One undeniable impact of the crackdown on the migration economy in Agadez has been the disruption of traditional migration routes to Libya and Algeria.⁸⁹ At the time of writing, there were several discernible itineraries used by smugglers to transport migrants through Niger, although it should be noted that itineraries are highly subject to change depending on a variety of factors outlined below. As such, one should not consider these itineraries or migration methods as fixed, so much as examples of the dynamics that shape them post-criminalization.

With the ongoing overflow of the Libyan conflict, mining in Niger is developing the characteristics of a conflict economy, whereby local armed actors exert increasing control over local economic activity.

Migrants transiting through Niger via Agadez still primarily use buses to reach the city. Prior to 2016, migrants travelling to Algeria would then continue, via public transport, to the town of Arlit. From there, migrants would seek the services of smugglers to transport them over the border. After criminalization, however, migrants trying to reach Algeria increasingly chose to avoid Agadez and Arlit altogether – due to increased measures to prevent migrant smuggling activity – opting instead to depart for Algeria directly from the city of Tahoua,

⁸⁷ Molenaar, F., Tubiana, J. and Warin, C. (2018), *Caught in the middle: A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/70624>.

⁸⁸ Molenaar, F., Ursu, A. and Tinni, B. A. (2017), *Local governance opportunities for sustainable migration management in Agadez*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Local_governance_opportunities_for_sustainable_migration_management_Agadez.pdf.

⁸⁹ Tubiana, J., Warin, C. and Saeneen, G. M. (2018), *Multilateral damage: The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/multilateral-damage.pdf>; Tchilouta et al. (2023), *Mission accomplished?*

in southwest Niger.⁹⁰ Smugglers operating along this itinerary took migrants directly from Tahoua to areas near Assamaka, the last major town before the Algerian border.⁹¹

Migrants using this itinerary were instructed to do so by *coxeurs* based in Niger or Algeria, who could provide directions and organize itineraries linking the areas near Assamaka to Tamanrasset in Algeria.⁹² Migrants were generally able to travel on the roads leading to Tahoua, although were often required to pay security forces at checkpoints, a practice that reportedly increased after March 2020, when Niger's land borders were technically closed and more internal controls were imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹³ The ways in which the Nigerien authorities imposed internal controls, both in terms of methods and locations, constantly evolved,⁹⁴ and required both migrants and those facilitating their journeys to adapt accordingly.⁹⁵

Some migrants travelling to Algeria after the crackdown continued to transit through Agadez. In certain cases, these migrants may have been instructed to do so either by the people they were consulting (often other migrants who have already made the trip), or smugglers based in Agadez and its environs who had economic interests in encouraging this itinerary. Similarly, many migrants made key decisions regarding their itinerary as they travelled from one major transportation hub to the next. Migrants who arrived in Agadez with plans to go to Libya, for example, often received new information about increased insecurity or dangers in Libya that impelled them to go to Algeria instead.⁹⁶

The ambivalent posture of Algerian security forces towards irregular migrants required drivers to avoid formal border crossings, often leaving migrants near the border and instructing them to walk 15 kilometres to In Guezzam, on the Algerian side of the border. From there, migrants could link up with drivers who would transport them the remaining 400 kilometres to Tamanrasset.⁹⁷ In other cases, drivers departing from either Arlit or Assamaka may drive migrants directly across the border, bypassing all formal checkpoints to enter Algeria.⁹⁸

⁹⁰ Fereday, A. (2022), *Niger: Routes shift amid post-covid increase in human smuggling*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-NIGER.pdf>.

⁹¹ For a more detailed map of the routes linking Tahoua to Assamaka, see: Fereday (2022), *Niger*.

⁹² Interviews with current migrant transporters, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez and Niamey, Niger, December 2022.

⁹³ Fereday (2022), *Niger*.

⁹⁴ Tchilouta, R. A. (2023), 'Les stratégies de gestion des frontières du Niger à l'ère de l'externalisation des politiques migratoires de l'UE: vers des frontières itinérantes? [Niger's border management strategies in the era of outsourcing EU migration policies: towards mobile borders]', *L'Espace Politique*, 1(46), <https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.10840>.

⁹⁵ Interviews with current and former migrant smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, December 2022.

⁹⁶ Interviews with migrants, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

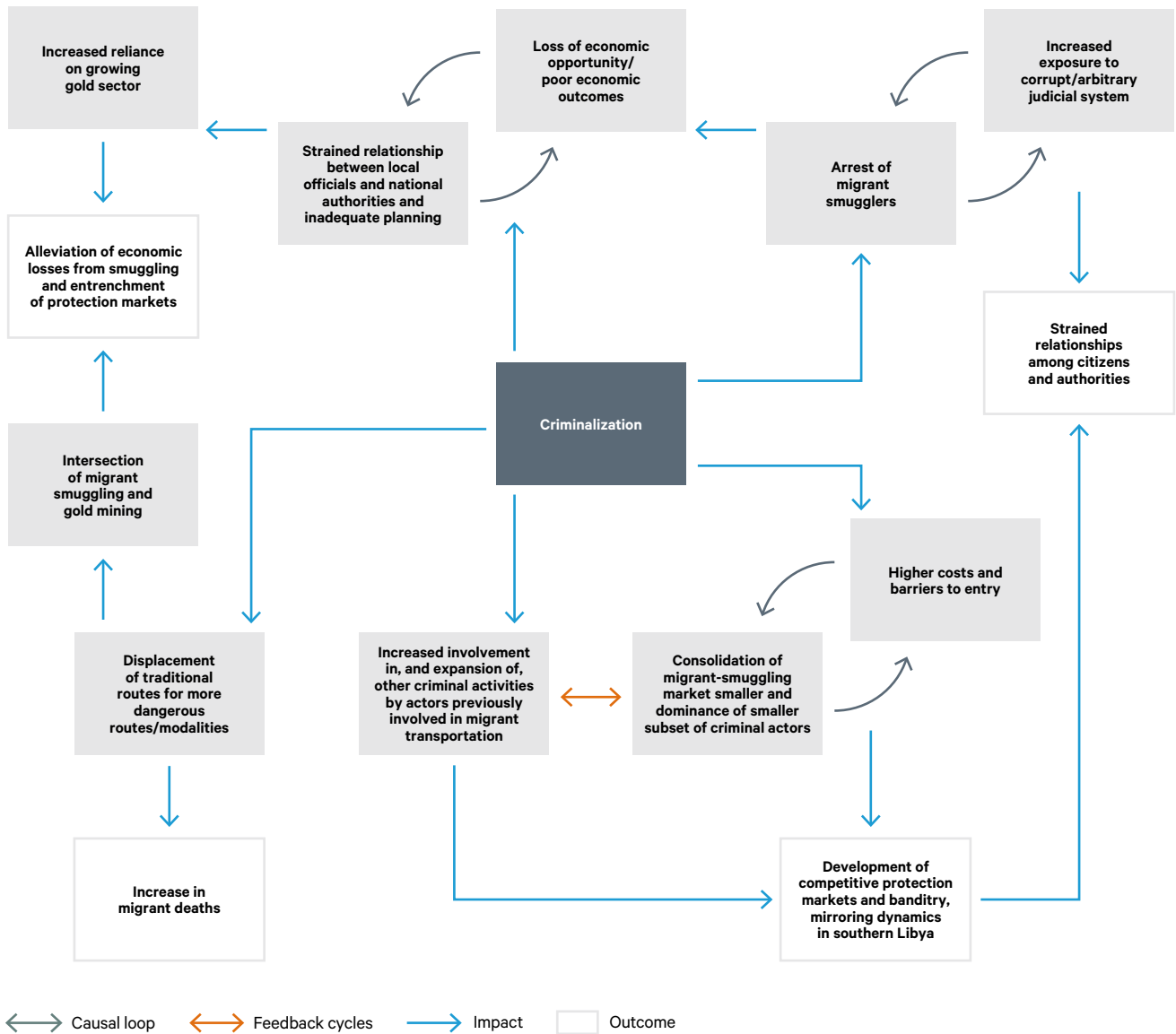
⁹⁸ Interviews with current migrant smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, December 2022.

Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route

How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy

Smuggling itineraries through Niger to Libya also changed considerably during the period after criminalization.⁹⁹ While military escorts still left Agadez for Dirkou each week, sometimes with as many as 80 vehicles, the civilians travelling with them were mostly Nigerien nationals, many of whom were travelling to goldmining sites in northern Niger.¹⁰⁰

Figure 7. The Impact of criminalization on the mobility economy of Agadez



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research.

One of the most popular itineraries used by smugglers based in Agadez and its surrounding areas at this time moved primarily Nigerian migrants from the Niger–Nigeria border to southern Libya. These itineraries bypassed Agadez altogether. Smugglers collected migrants in areas between the cities of Maradi

⁹⁹ Tchilouta et al. (2023), *Mission accomplished?*

¹⁰⁰ Interviews with current and former migrant smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022; Fereday (2022), *Niger*.

and Zinder.¹⁰¹ Within these new itineraries, specific locales that have traditionally served as hubs for black market fuel and other goods procured in Libya or Nigeria have become key nodes in migrant smuggling activities.¹⁰² In some cases, one driver would take migrants from the Nigerian border to these areas, while another operated along the second leg to the Libyan border. It was also common for a driver based in Agadez to be provided with the coordinates near the Nigerian border where the migrants had been prepared for pick-up, and the driver would move them from southern Niger to Libya, bypassing all state controls during the entire journey.¹⁰³

‘You can go the whole route until you get to the Libyan border without seeing anyone. But it’s complicated and dangerous. 2016 [the mass arrests] messed everything up’, explained one smuggler who has driven the entire route several times.¹⁰⁴

One of the most popular itineraries used by smugglers based in Agadez and its surrounding areas at this time moved primarily Nigerian migrants from the Niger–Nigeria border to southern Libya. These itineraries bypassed Agadez altogether.

Smugglers active along the route linking Nigeria to Libya during this period said that it generally took them a total of four days to complete the journey. ‘We don’t stop, and we don’t pass through Séguédine or Dao Timmi like many others’, explained two smugglers. ‘Food is just biscuits and milk. We get all the fuel we need near Kouri Kantana, and then go straight to Toummo [on the Niger–Libya border] where armed guys pick up the migrants. We coordinate with them using a Thuraya [brand of satellite phone]’.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Interviews with current migrant smugglers using this route, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*; Fereday (2022), *Niger*.

¹⁰³ Interviews with current migrant smugglers using this route, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

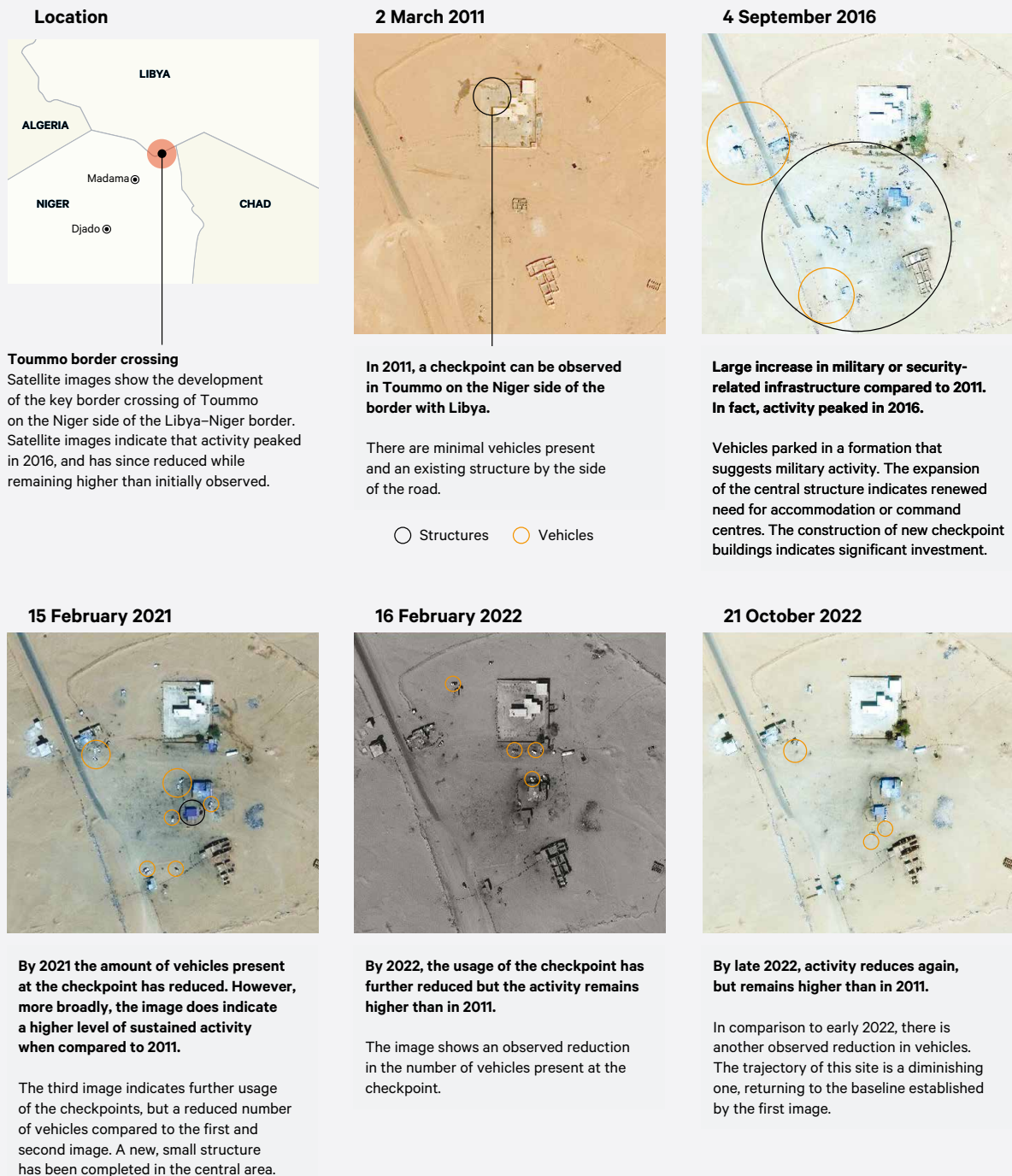
¹⁰⁴ Interview with current migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with two current migrant transporters, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

Box 2. Movement through formal crossings on the Libya–Niger border

Analysis of mobility data – which geolocates the movement of mobile devices – shows that the Salvador Pass¹⁰⁶ is a key route for those moving from Niger to Libya. Available mobility data collected between 2011 and 2022 found that the locations of devices were concentrated along the roads that lead to the area of the Toummo crossing.¹⁰⁷ Satellite analysis of the Toummo crossing shows significant development in terms of infrastructure and fortifications between 2011 and 2022.

Figure 8. Movement through the Toummo formal border crossing on the Libya–Niger border



Source: Satellite images © Maxar technologies 2023.

¹⁰⁶ The Salvador Pass is a mountain pass in Niger just south of the borders with Libya and Algeria.
¹⁰⁷ EMDYN (2023), *In depth report: Libya border mobility*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in March 2023 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

Multiple smugglers and people in proximity to the migrant smuggling economy between 2011 and 2022 reported that there were relatively few problems with state security forces at that time outside of Agadez. The challenge, which almost every smuggler reiterated, was getting migrants out of the city in the first place. As a result, many of the most active smugglers, especially Nigerien nationals, preferred to operate in the small towns and villages outside of Agadez. Smugglers still operated in Agadez, but migrants who arrived in Agadez were less likely to depart directly from Agadez when they eventually left for Libya. Rather, smugglers moved migrants to towns, villages and locations outside of Agadez in small numbers, often individually, in order to avoid detection.¹⁰⁸

‘Once you are outside Agadez, the authorities aren’t really concerned with stopping or arresting you. You pay a bribe and negotiate’, explained one smuggler active at the time. ‘You can say migration has diminished, that is true, but it isn’t the whole story’, he continued, referencing the fact that there were no longer massive convoys of trucks full of migrants leaving the city. ‘You can take them in groups of two or three or four on a motorbike or on trucks and lorries that are carrying Nigeriens to gold sites’.¹⁰⁹

To get around the increased security, smugglers will also mix small numbers of migrants with larger groups of Nigerien nationals travelling to work at gold sites on the weekly convoys with military escorts. Smugglers in Agadez said this method was likely to succeed because authorities working at the checkpoints outside the city were more inclined to let a few migrants pass, moving within the flow of mostly Nigeriens, in exchange for a small bribe that is the equivalent of a few euros.¹¹⁰ ‘You put a few of them on a lorry, and if the police end up asking them for their papers, they can just pay 1,000 CFA (€1.50) or 2,000 CFA (€3) each. The police are interested in money. It’s a business’, claimed one smuggler.¹¹¹

For all of these new routes, migrants paid more than they did during the pre-criminalization period, with prices ranging between €220 and €1,000 depending on the itinerary and the final destination in Libya.¹¹²

Increased risk for migrants

One clear and widely predicted humanitarian cost of anti-migrant smuggling policies was the increase in migrant deaths in Niger’s desert areas. As early as 2017, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Nigerien Red Cross reported an increased number of deaths due to smugglers reportedly abandoning migrants in the desert when detected by Nigerien authorities, but also because smugglers were taking more perilous routes to avoid detection.¹¹³ Drivers and smugglers in Agadez said that migrants were at greater risk because they could

¹⁰⁸ Interviews with current migrant smugglers and local observer, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Interview with smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹¹³ Penney, J. (2017), ‘Why more migrants are dying in the Sahara’, *New York Times*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/opinion/migrants-dying-sahara-niger.html>.

no longer travel in large convoys, and therefore had less margin for error when there were breakdowns. Some journeys were made by a single car, which increased the risk of death in the desert should something go wrong.¹¹⁴

There are no reliable estimates of how many migrants were dying in the desert each month or year during the period after criminalization, but organizations like Alarme Phone Sahara, which has its main office in Agadez and staff located in several areas in northern Niger, said that there is no doubt that there were more fatalities in the desert after the crackdown.¹¹⁵

A 2023 investigation by Border Forensics also concluded that although reliable data on migration patterns and deaths have become more difficult to gather, and the true scale of migrant deaths across the desert is unknown, there is a ‘causal relationship between border control and deaths in the desert’.¹¹⁶ European, and to a lesser extent Nigerien, policymakers tend to place responsibility for these deaths on smugglers, whereas locals in Agadez argued that it was a logical consequence of efforts to criminalize irregular migration.¹¹⁷

‘It’s more dangerous now. Before, we gave every migrant two bottles of water; five litres and five litres’, explained a smuggler from Guinea who arranged weekly departures. ‘Now we have changed the system. Every migrant gets 20 litres plus a small bottle, because in the Sahara the problem is water. When you run out of water. It’s over’.¹¹⁸ ‘Before, everything was fine. Everyone made money, everyone stayed in touch with their family, and the journey was safe’, explained another smuggler who is a native of Agadez. ‘They [the government] say they are [arresting smugglers] to help migrants, but it is the migrants who suffer’.¹¹⁹

Unlike in Libya, where armed groups seek to profit from either running migrant detention centres or engaging in kidnap-for-ransom,¹²⁰ the detention of migrants has not been systematically commodified in Niger.¹²¹ The victims of human trafficking in proximity to migrant smuggling in northern Niger are generally women who are Nigerian nationals, many of whom may be working in major towns under arrangements that can be defined as human trafficking and who may be continuing onward to Libya. The networks that traffic Nigerian women into Europe are reportedly organized criminal networks, with several members fulfilling defined roles across multiple countries.¹²² Interviews in Niger indicate that these criminal networks may use existing migrant smuggling infrastructure to move women through Niger into Libya, and that they also have their own networks of liaisons and payment-debt schemes that operate independent of the migrant

¹¹⁴ Interviews with drivers and smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹¹⁵ Interview with staff at Alarme Phone Sahara, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹¹⁶ Tchilouta et al. (2023), *Mission accomplished?*

¹¹⁷ Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

¹¹⁸ Interview with smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹¹⁹ Interview with current migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹²⁰ Malakooti, A. (2019), *The Political Economy of Migrant Detention in Libya: Understanding the players and the business models*, Geneva Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final-Report-Detention-Libya.pdf>.

¹²¹ Interviews with current and former government officials and civil society representatives, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹²² Osezua, C. O. (2016), ‘Gender Issues in Human trafficking in Edo State’, *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, 20(1), pp. 36–66, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/asr/article/view/153928>.

smuggling economy.¹²³ Human trafficking networks clearly access the existing mobility infrastructure to move people through Niger, but for the most part operate independently, outside of Niger’s borders.¹²⁴

More common is violence against individuals being trafficked through or within Niger for forced labour at gold sites, as well as instances of hereditary slavery, forced prostitution and child labour.¹²⁵

Lost revenues, the pivot to gold and illicit economies: the emergence of protection markets

Following the 2015 law criminalizing transportation of irregular migrants, local officials, community leaders and outside observers warned that such measures could have a destabilizing impact and potentially lead to armed conflict in Niger.¹²⁶ While there has been no further armed conflict, and many of these dire warnings could be interpreted as a strategy to pressure elected officials and secure more development funds from European states, the anti-smuggling interventions have had an impact on various sectors of the economy that continue to shape conflict dynamics in Niger, Chad and southern Libya.

As previously mentioned, the growth of gold mining likely eased some of the economic pressures and second-order effects that many feared would emerge after the arrests and crackdowns of 2015 and 2016.¹²⁷ According to the secretary-general of Agadez, gold ‘saved’ the region, and many of those affected by Law 2015-36 found another way to make a living thanks to gold.¹²⁸

A Chatham House analysis found significant growth in three gold mining areas – Tchikabarten, Djado and Tabelot – in the Agadez region from 2014 to 2016.¹²⁹ Following a fall in mining activity in 2018–19, mining again expanded rapidly from 2020 onwards.

¹²³ Key informant interviews with current smugglers and local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022; research interviews with government officials and local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹²⁴ Interviews with current migrant smugglers and local observers in Agadez and a civil society representative in Niamey, Niger, November 2022.

¹²⁵ US Department of State (2022), *Trafficking in persons report: Niger*, Washington DC: US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/20221020-2022-TIP-Report.pdf>; Fereday, A. (2023), *Labour-trafficking in ASGM: Assessing risks in the Sahara-Sahel goldfields*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/OCWART-Paper-3-E.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Tinti (2017), ‘In Niger, anti-smuggling risk trading one crisis for another’; Tinti (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’; Diallo (2017), ‘EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost’; Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

¹²⁷ Interviews with government officials and civil society leaders, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022. See also: Pellerin, M. (2017), *Beyond the “Wild West”: The Gold Rush in Northern Niger*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-BP-Niger-Gold.pdf>; Micallef et al. (2021) *Conflict, coping and covid: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020*; Tinti (2018), ‘Niger’s Gold Rush Has Turned Bandits into Barons’.

¹²⁸ Emani (2022), *Economic Assessment of Agadez in Niger*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in May 2022 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

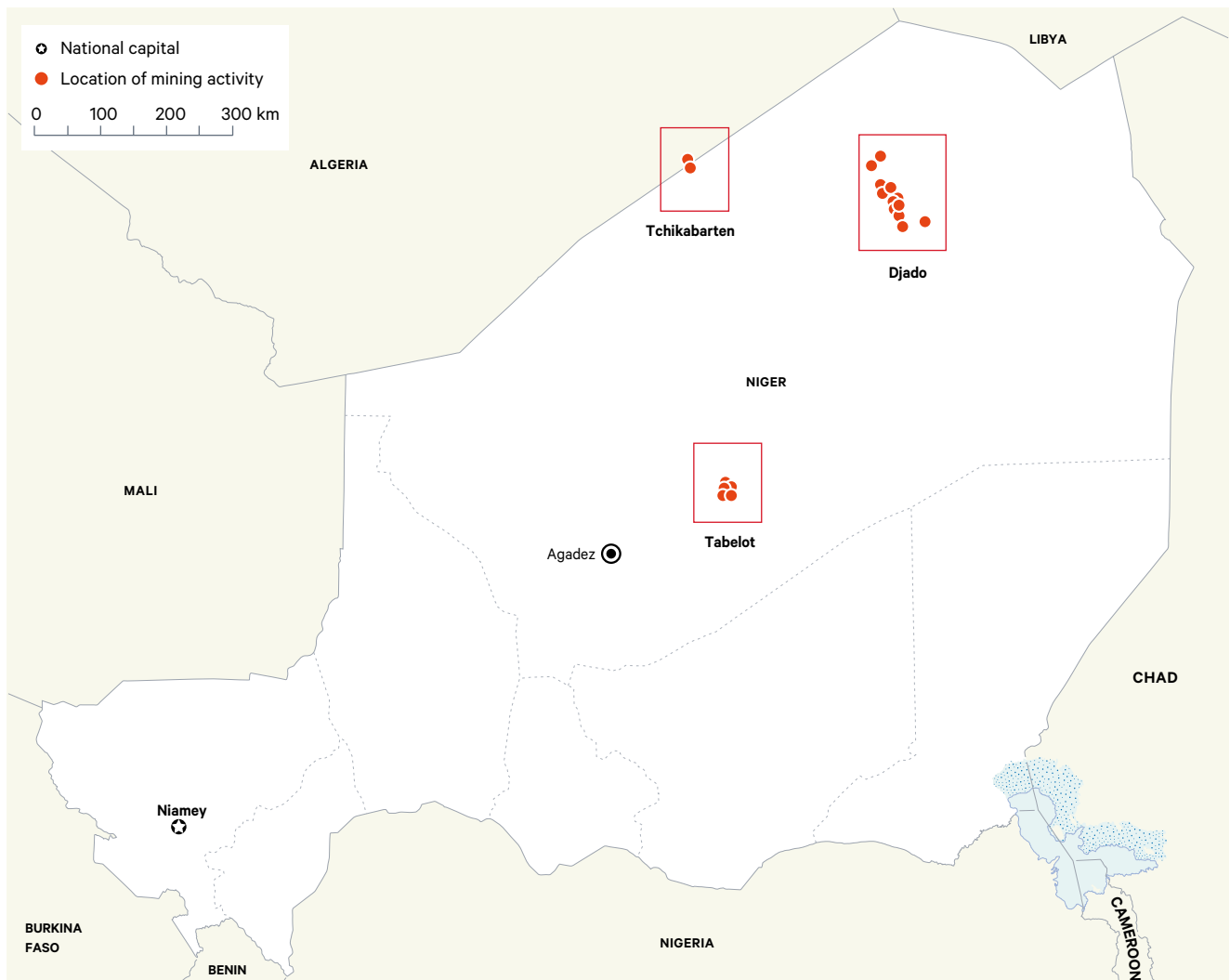
¹²⁹ This analysis of satellite imagery was based on satellite data commissioned for Chatham House by the XCEPT Research Fund with Satellite Applications Catapult. The satellite images were commissioned from Maxar Technologies 2023 for Figure 8.

Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route

How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy

Many of the actors previously involved in migrant smuggling have switched their activities to the gold sector, choosing to invest capital in an area they consider more lucrative and less risky from a legal standpoint.¹³⁰ Business owners and entrepreneurs who benefitted from the migration economy, such as those who sold satellite phones and GPS devices, money transfer agents, mechanics, and vendors of hardware and materiel, found a new market for their business activities. Drivers found work moving goods, equipment and people to and from gold sites. As a result, political economies that had previously centred on migrant smuggling were transposed to the gold sector.¹³¹

Figure 9. Overview of three gold mining areas in Niger, namely Tchikabarten, Djado and Tabelot



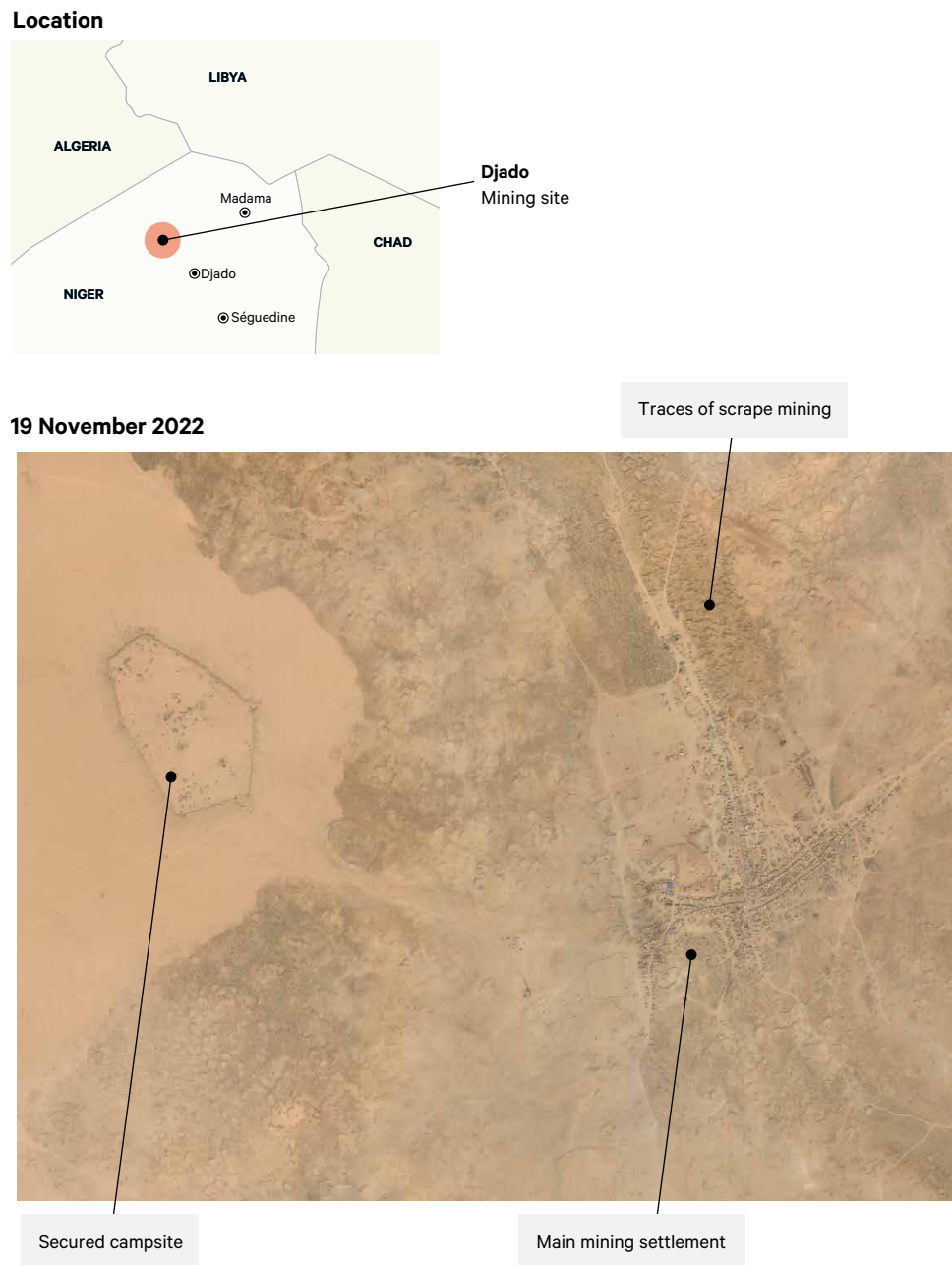
Chatham House XCEPT research and Basemap © OpenStreetMap contributors, Humanitarian Data Exchange, Earthstar Geographics, contains modified Sentinel-2 data 2024

¹³⁰ Interviews with current and former smugglers as well as local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Developments have increased rapidly around mining sites with the construction of new infrastructure and buildings. In the satellite image below, the Djado mining site is shown complete with a secured campsite for workers and a mining settlement.

Figure 10. The Djado Plateau gold mining site



Source: Satellite image © CNES (2022), Distribution Airbus DS.

There is also evidence that the gold mining sector and the migrant smuggling sector are intersecting. As outlined above, some migration itineraries now include travel via gold mining areas, as smugglers place migrants within the mobility patterns used by non-migrants to reach gold sites. In some cases, these migrants

seek to work in mining areas to fund onward travel. Moreover, Chatham House analysis of mobility data and satellite imagery from March 2022 to March 2023 illustrated that there was interconnectivity between mining areas in Niger and in Libya. Chatham House analysis also found that a significant number of mobile devices moved from the Djado mining area to a large processing facility in the Libyan city of Murzuq, indicating that the processing of gold mined in Djado may occur in Libya.¹³²

At the same time, gold mining in places like northern Niger requires transport of a valuable commodity from remote extraction sites to urban transport hubs, thus fostering the emergence of various protection rackets (which may involve state security services), banditry and an increase in arms trafficking to meet demand for small arms and light weapons.¹³³

Aside from gold, other actors previously involved in migrant smuggling have turned to or reverted to smuggling contraband. This involves transporting products such as fuel and foodstuffs across various borders in the region, as well as alcohol and tramadol into Libya. Many view the smuggling of such products as having a better risk–reward ratio compared to migrant smuggling post-criminalization.¹³⁴ One individual who was arrested for migrant smuggling in 2019, and spent five months in prison before he was released due to the COVID-19 pandemic, pivoted to smuggling beer and whisky into Libya (where alcohol is illegal) for this very reason.¹³⁵

However, there is no substantial evidence that drivers previously involved in migrant smuggling have transitioned to more high-profile types of criminal activity such as arms trafficking from Libya into Niger for onward transport to Mali, or the trafficking of high value narcotics such as cocaine (transported into the region from Latin America into coastal states and transported overland through the Sahel into North Africa) or cannabis resin (cultivated in Morocco). Despite these activities having overlapping skillsets, the subset of actors involved in these forms of arms or high-value drug trafficking is considerably smaller than those involved in migrant transportation, the former requiring levels of discretion, acumen and connections within formal and informal state security structures.¹³⁶

¹³² EMDYN (2023), *In depth report: Libya border mobility*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in March 2023 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

¹³³ Raineri (2020), 'Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking'; Pellerin (2017), *Beyond the "Wild West"*; De Tessières, S. (2018), *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-Report-Niger.pdf>; Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in Trans-Nation*.

¹³⁴ Interviews with smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022; Micallef et al. (2021), *Conflict, coping and covid*.

¹³⁵ Interview with smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹³⁶ Interviews with smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

Expansion of Libya’s conflict economy and the rise of banditry

The presence of non-local Tebu in the city of Agadez appears to have diminished considerably after the crackdown on migrant smuggling in 2016, although several affluent and influential members of the community are still based or spend time there. Interviews with members of the Tebu community in Agadez, as well as with other key interlocutors, indicated that many Tebu who were previously involved in migrant smuggling as drivers have transitioned to the gold sector in northern Niger and northern Chad, and are no longer based in Agadez.¹³⁷

Banditry throughout northern Niger has also increased in recent years and is linked to the growing presence of armed actors from southern Libya and Chad.¹³⁸ These bandits, who are active along key transit corridors linking gold sites to trading and logistics hubs, are often referred to as ‘Chadian’ and ‘Sudanese’ by local populations, although their legal nationalities may be from other countries in the Sahel-Sahara region.¹³⁹ They have access to heavy weaponry and materiel, having brought them from Chad and southern Libya, and many are ex-mercenaries as well as former members of the Chadian military. Their military capabilities combined with their knowledge of the area enables them to operate across northern Chad, northern Niger and southern Libya.¹⁴⁰

Banditry throughout northern Niger has also increased in recent years and is linked to the growing presence of armed actors from southern Libya and Chad.

Interviews in Agadez and Niamey, the capital city of Niger, indicated that bandits operating in northern Niger generally avoid encounters with the Nigerien security services, whose role in the north is largely limited to intermittent patrols along transit corridors linking military outposts in key towns and cities.¹⁴¹ There have been clashes between the Nigerien military and armed bandits, with one notable incident taking place in 2018 when Nigerien special forces pursued a convoy of 17 heavily armed vehicles belonging to ‘Chadian’ bandits near Arbre de Ténéré (the location of a publicly accessible well in the middle of the desert). Two Nigerien

¹³⁷ Interviews with members of the Tebu community and local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹³⁸ Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in trans-nation*; Raineri (2020), ‘Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking’; Fereday (2022), *Niger*; Bish, A. (2021), *Soldiers of fortune: The future of Chadian fighters after the Libyan ceasefire*, GI-TOC, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/chadian-fighters-libyan-ceasefire>.

¹³⁹ Key informant interviews, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Fereday (2022), *Niger*; Bish (2021), *Soldiers of fortune*; Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in trans-nation*.

¹⁴¹ Interviews with local observers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez and Niamey, November 2022.

soldiers and an unknown number of bandits were killed.¹⁴² Attacks by bandits on gold sites or convoys carrying gold continue to proliferate.¹⁴³

The rise of heavily armed ‘Chadian’ bandits in northern Niger is a source of resentment among local communities, particularly ethnic Tuareg who compete with the ‘Chadian’ bandits throughout the region for control over licit and illicit activities. Several Tuareg leaders interviewed during fieldwork for this paper, including community leaders and elected officials, stressed that there is a need to ‘securitize’ or even ‘militarize’ northern Niger to restore order to the region.¹⁴⁴

Although bandits operating in northern Niger generally target vehicles carrying gold, cash and equipment, they do occasionally attack vehicles transporting people. There have been several incidents of bandits attacking vehicles carrying Nigeriens to gold fields or to Libya. Generally, these incidents tend to be ‘shakedowns’ in which the bandits either ask for a payment or rob the driver and passengers of their money and mobile phones.¹⁴⁵ There are occasionally violent clashes over drug consignments – notably cannabis resin cultivated in Morocco being trafficked through Niger, as well as cocaine trafficked through Niger via Mali or Nigeria. However, these networks, their protection economies and the patterns of violence do not intersect with the migrant smuggling economy, as there is minimal overlap among the actors involved in each activity.¹⁴⁶

Local grievances and dissatisfaction with national government and the international community

Efforts to curb migration through criminalization also eroded trust between local populations and their government, as well as between local officials and the national government.¹⁴⁷ The crackdown disproportionately affected Agadez, home to communities that have traditionally felt marginalized and discriminated against by the government in Niamey. This in turn has reinforced narratives that the national government is willing to sacrifice the economic well-being of northern communities to ensure that the international funds tied to cooperation continue

¹⁴² Bish (2021), *Soldiers of fortune*; Fereday (2022), *Niger*.

¹⁴³ Mamane, D. (2023), ‘Gunmen kill 5 soldiers in Niger convoy ambush’, Associated Press, 11 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/niger-convoy-attacked-soldiers-killed-9e6a66f63f5e3db417737ef92e7484cc>; International Crisis Group (undated), ‘Tracking Conflict Worldwide: June 2023 - Low-level jihadist violence persisted notably in south east, and reports emerged of Arab tribesmen from Niger fighting in Sudan’, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B0%5D=27&page=1>.

¹⁴⁴ Interviews with current and former government officials in Agadez, Niger and former security officials in Niamey, Niger, under the condition of anonymity, November 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Interviews with current and former migrant smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022. See also: Micallef et al. (2021), *Conflict, coping and covid*; Fereday (2022), *Niger*; Pellerin (2017), *Beyond the “Wild West”*.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with former security officials in Niamey and interviews with current and former migrant smugglers in Agadez, Niger, under the condition of anonymity, November 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Tinti (2017), ‘In Niger, anti-smuggling risk trading one crisis for another’; Tinti, P. (2017), ‘The E.U.’s hollow success over migrant smuggling in West Africa’, *The New Humanitarian*, 17 January 2017, <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2017/01/17/the-e-u-s-hollow-success-over-migrant-smuggling-in-niger>; Molenaar, F., Ursu, A. and Tinni, B. A. (2017), *Local governance opportunities for sustainable migration management in Agadez*.

to flow to the central government.¹⁴⁸ Local authorities in Agadez claim they are never properly consulted and cite Law 2015-36, as well as other controversial measures such as permitting the US to build a drone base outside of Agadez, as evidence that the national government prioritizes placating powerful counterterrorism allies and aid donors over the interests of its own citizens.¹⁴⁹

‘I couldn’t provide anything for my family for months. How is that just?’ asked one smuggler who had been arrested, and who like many interviewed for this paper, questioned the motives of his government, the EU and the international organizations present in Agadez. ‘They [the Niger government] are doing this because they get money from Europe’, he said. ‘The migrants who are suffering here could be fed with 500 francs [€0.76] but they don’t do that. Instead, they spend money arresting me and harassing people’.¹⁵⁰

Three different current and former government officials interviewed for this research paper expressed similar frustrations at the time.¹⁵¹ ‘We keep being told that there is money for security and development, but we never seem to find it’, said one official. ‘Before the [anti-smuggling] law, we were the border of ECOWAS’, he continued. ‘The government took money from the Europeans... and afterwards, we learn we are now the European border’.¹⁵²

A driver, who had been mugged on his way to buy bread the evening prior, which he said would have never happened before, said that he felt unfairly targeted by the government as well as by Europe. ‘I am not the one putting them on boats. I am just transporting people across my country, which is my right and their right’.¹⁵³

In response to calls from local leaders warning of the economic fallout from Law 2015-36, the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa) and Niger’s High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace launched a ‘reconversion plan’ for ‘former recognized smugglers and other actors of migration’.¹⁵⁴ The highly publicized plan was, by all accounts, poorly communicated and haphazardly implemented, with only a small amount of projects actually receiving funds amid accusations of mismanagement and corruption.¹⁵⁵ According to a government official in Agadez who is an adviser to the president of the regional council on issues of migration, the project struggled not just because of a lack of resources and poor implementation, but because it is conceptually flawed.¹⁵⁶ The failed implementation of this programme had the dual impact of exacerbating local populations’

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.; Raineri, L. (2018), ‘Human smuggling across Niger: State-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(1), pp. 63–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X17000520>.

¹⁴⁹ Interviews with current and former government officials, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022; Tinti (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁵¹ Interviews with current and former government officials, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁵² Interviews with government official, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁵³ Interview with migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Tinti (2018), ‘A dangerous immigration crackdown in West Africa’.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with government official, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

frustrations with their own government, as well as reinforcing local scepticism that European aid and development funds will ever reach local populations.¹⁵⁷

‘They said, you have to write these papers and turn them into this programme. It’s been four years and I have not one cent from it’, said one smuggler who is still regularly active moving migrants from Nigeria to Libya. ‘They gave some money to some people, but it wasn’t enough. They haven’t given me anything. So, if I have passengers, I go’.¹⁵⁸

The mass arrests in 2016 also had the adverse effect of exposing hundreds of people to the workings of the Nigerien justice system, where corruption is deeply embedded into social and institutional norms.¹⁵⁹ After Law 2015-36, people were arrested without due process, and several people who were arrested said the process was arbitrary, based on a system of bribes, and that they were held for months without ever being formally charged.¹⁶⁰

‘The judges were not up to the task’, explained a regional councillor who is highly critical of the law. ‘They judged according to the parents’ envelope [from families of the accused], releasing some detainees and keeping others caught up in the same affair.’¹⁶¹ Others further argued that the law exacerbated corruption. ‘You are always going to lose out to those who have money to give to the judges’, explained a retired teacher who described the criminalization of migration as ‘the root cause of poverty, injustice and banditry’ in Agadez.¹⁶²

Agadez has also seen a marked increase in the use of hard drugs in recent years, particularly heroin and a local version of crack cocaine. Several drivers who had previously been involved in migrant transportation said they are now involved in low-level local dealing of heroin and crack cocaine that comes to Agadez from Nigeria. One interviewee alleged that he recently learned from Nigerians how to adulterate cocaine powder, and purchased a small quantity of powder from a local dealer that he plans to dilute and then sell.¹⁶³ This is a new phenomenon in Niger, where the use of hard drugs and abuse of pharmaceutical painkillers is reportedly growing among men under 50 as well as among young women.¹⁶⁴

Multiple people in Agadez cited unemployment and the lack of youth opportunities for the increased drug consumption. ‘Libya’s no good. Chad too. Algeria’s the same. We don’t know where to go anymore. It’s difficult. That’s why young people steal or take drugs to forget their problems’, explained a Tebu driver who described

¹⁵⁷ Howden and Zandonini (2018), ‘Niger: Europe’s Migration Laboratory’; Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the middle: A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel*.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Hahonou, E. K. (2016), *Corruption, Insecurity and Border Control in Niger*, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep13124.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Af91096b23aaad0bfa8fd525bc9b8bd49&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with current and former migrant smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁶¹ Interview with former regional councillor, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁶² Interview with retired schoolteacher, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹⁶³ Interview with former migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Interviews with community members as well as current and former government officials, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

migrant smuggling as his ‘real source of income’ and the reason he was able to get married and build a house. ‘As far as I’m concerned, it’s the closure of migrant smuggling that has led to all the problems we’re experiencing’.¹⁶⁵

One side effect of Agadez becoming a concentrated area of international resources devoted to migration control is that northern Niger came to be used as a ‘dumping ground’ for states wishing to expel migrants. Since 2016, there has been an unprecedented number of deportations from Algeria to Niger, in which Algerian authorities drop migrants off just over the border, in the middle of the desert, 15 kilometres away from Assamaka.¹⁶⁶ As is often the pattern, IOM offers assistance, transporting the migrants to Arlit, from where they are entered into IOM’s Assisted Voluntary Return and Repatriation (AVRR) programme.

Several locals expressed frustration that there is an influx of migrants who are stuck in Agadez and complained that migrant men do drugs and harass women, while migrant women dress and behave inappropriately according to local social norms. They characterized migrant women as prostitutes who ‘spread disease’ or that migrant men brought ‘new diseases’ to the community and argued that migrants have ‘accentuated the problem of drug abuse’.¹⁶⁷ ‘Before, our children didn’t know about certain types of drugs, but now it’s worse’, explained one local. ‘Girls are in a catastrophic situation in Agadez’.¹⁶⁸

‘It’s all connected,’ said a former smuggler. ‘Look at all the young people, especially the girls, who are taking drugs. Stealing... that’s serious. We’ve never seen this before. No one in Agadez is happy with the current situation,’ he continued. ‘Today, people can no longer travel. People can no longer sleep peacefully in their homes. People can’t even hold a telephone in the streets of Agadez [for fear of theft].’¹⁶⁹

The intervention in the mobility economy was reported by locals to have disrupted flows of other trade from Libya into Niger, as a reduction in the number of vehicles travelling north with migrants since the 2016 crackdown constrained freight capacity on the return journey. This has contributed to price increases for available goods in Agadez.¹⁷⁰

‘I’ve seen Agadez evolve over the years. I can assure you that Agadez has changed and changed for the worse’, explained a retired schoolteacher who lamented the current situation in Agadez. ‘Before, you could leave a bag outside your door and find it the next day. Now, that’s impossible. Too much theft, too much crime, too many falsehoods. One thing’s for sure, here in Agadez, there’s hunger, thirst and disease’.¹⁷¹

These local perceptions further illustrate the extent to which policies that aimed to transform Agadez and boost migration management have not only reinforced local frustrations with the government but fostered local animosity towards migrant populations themselves.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with migrant smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹⁶⁶ Yuen (2020), ‘Overview of migration trends and patterns in the Republic of the Niger, 2016-2019’.

¹⁶⁷ Interviews with community members, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with 36-year-old housewife, mother of four, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹⁶⁹ Interviews with former smuggler, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Emani (2022), *Economic Assessment of Agadez in Niger*, unpublished research report commissioned by Chatham House in May 2022 through the XCEPT Research Fund.

¹⁷¹ Interview with retired schoolteacher, under the condition of anonymity, in Agadez, Niger, September 2023.

04

Policy implications

A systems analysis can help policymakers better understand the interplay between cross-border conflict dynamics, including those that relate to mobility economies in Niger, to develop more effective and strategic policy approaches.

This research paper has explored the interconnected socio-economic and political processes that have shaped the migration economy of Agadez since 2011. The systems analysis presented here highlights the extent to which armed conflict in Libya has had a profound impact on the scope and structure of the migrant smuggling economy in Agadez. This, in turn, shaped conflict dynamics in southern Libya, as various actors involved in migrant smuggling began using their newfound revenues to further their own political and military objectives. At the same time, domestic and international efforts to curb migration through the criminalization of migrant transportation had the practical effect of displacing migrant itineraries, driving the industry underground, placing migrants at greater risk, straining livelihoods in Agadez, and exacerbating various longstanding social and political tensions in Niger.

The negative economic consequences of the crackdown on migration were softened by a gold rush that provided alternative opportunities to various actors directly involved in migrant transportation and adjacent migration activities. However, the development of gold mining is intertwined with restructured mobility economies, and this has resulted in the emergence of violent protection rackets and competitive security actors that are an extension of those present in southern Libya and northern Chad.

Recognition of this bidirectional interplay and the complexity of these transnational systems, brings into sharp focus three shortcomings of Western policy interventions in Niger. First, Western policy interventions have addressed migration as a technical issue rather than a political one. Second, they have failed to acknowledge the complexity of the connections between the geographies in question – instead pursuing generalized and simplistic approaches. Finally, the West’s partnering with Niger under previous governments reveals a degree of transactionalism that has not resulted in sustainable and positive outcomes. An approach to conflict stabilization and migration limitation that makes use of comprehensive systems analysis could support more effective and strategic policy interventions by:

Assessing cross-border mobility within broader transnational socio-political and economic contexts

The most vital lesson going forward is for Western policymakers to acknowledge that policy interventions in the form of criminalization, state law enforcement and border control in Niger are unlikely to yield sustainable or productive outcomes. While there is a certain logic to these approaches, they are predicated upon a misreading that sees migration as a technical issue to be addressed through state capacity, rather than a socio-economic phenomenon that is inherently political and, in the case of Niger, entangled within complex socio-economic systems that can have a considerable impact on transnational conflict dynamics.

Analyses that seek to understand a specific informal, criminal or illicit economy on a granular level, but fail to situate them within broader systems will inevitably lead to policy approaches with significant blind spots. They are also likely to lead to policy interventions that are ineffective and, in some cases, counterproductive. In the case of Niger, many of the negative consequences of criminalization were, in fact, anticipated, but not adequately addressed. Incorporating systems analysis into existing country and conflict assessments would not only enable policymakers to have a more complete understanding of the conflict dynamics at work, but would also make it easier to anticipate second-order repercussions of a given policy intervention and even proactively pre-empt potential negative externalities of well-considered policies.

Niger’s experience in tackling migrant smuggling should demonstrate to policymakers the risks of entrenched biases towards criminalizing activities like migrant transportation and formalizing or impeding informal economies. In addition, failing to understand the full contexts in which these economies function only compounds these issues.

Understanding that transnational dynamics require transnational responses

Issues relating to international migration are, by definition, transnational in nature. However, the policy interventions in Agadez specifically, and Niger more generally, are fundamentally an attempt to stem migration while bypassing the formidable challenge of adequately addressing the governance issue in Libya. Alternatively, the application of a systems-analysis approach to transnational conflict dynamics in places like Niger and Libya would enable policymakers to better understand

the ways in which various formal and informal economies intersect, and to anticipate the broad range of possible consequences that can follow a given policy intervention. Thus far, the approach has been used by peacebuilders to understand how to reveal the structures of conflict, including the hidden aspects, in order to support systemic conflict transformation,¹⁷² but there is clearly space to develop the approach into strategic policy action.

Moving from transactionalism to a wider strategy

The current military-led government in Niger has thus far signalled that it intends to pursue policies that ‘reset’ its relationships with several longstanding security and development partners, most notably France, the EU and the US, while deepening its relationships with partners such as Russia. Given that the geopolitics of the Sahel have changed dramatically since 2021, and are likely to continue to shift, a range of traditional development and security partners are now reassessing how to best engage the Sahel-Sahara. These developments necessitate a reappraisal of Western-led policies in the region, particularly those that seek to influence migration. To effectively address the issues, patterns of human mobility in Niger need to be considered within the wider context of conflict-related socio-political developments, geopolitical competition, growing pressures emerging from climate change and emerging political economies linked to the mining sector.

One clear consideration here is that the repercussions of deals to reduce migration need to be better incorporated into policy approaches aimed at conflict stabilization. Indeed, migration deals with transit states are inherently transactional, and often unpopular with local populations. While there is no evidence that dissatisfaction with the anti-migrant smuggling law was a motivating factor behind the July 2023 coup in Niger, the analysis above demonstrates the ways in which the crackdown on migrant smuggling invigorated longstanding narratives that the Nigerien government does not prioritize the interests of its own citizens, and further eroded trust between local communities and government authorities. The fact that the new military-led government repealed Law 2015-36 and that the decision to do so was met with widespread approval, further underscores the limits of transactional approaches to ‘migration management’.

¹⁷² Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (2006), *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Guiding principles for practitioners and policy makers working on conflict*, Berlin: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/SCT_Systemic_Conflict_Transformation_Brief.pdf.

About the author

Peter Tinti is a lecturer at the Committee on International Relations, University of Chicago, and a Chatham House XCEPT researcher, focusing on security, human rights, conflict and organized crime. Among other outlets, Peter's writing and photography has been published by *Foreign Policy*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Vice*, and he has written research reports for a variety of international organizations, including the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. He is the author, with Tuesday Reitano, of *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Savior*, a book that investigates the migrant-smuggling networks that comprise the multibillion-dollar industry moving migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia into Europe.

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This paper forms part of series of three papers developed by Chatham House that seek to understand how the outbreak of violent conflict in Libya has conditioned the movement of people from Nigeria to Libya via Niger between 2011 and 2023. In so doing, it seeks to use the movement of people as a lens to understand how the impacts of conflict in Libya have cascaded transnationally, and, in turn, how those cascading impacts have rebounded back to Libya.

Other papers in this series focus on the complex dynamics that underpin people on the move in Edo State, Nigeria and the development of migrant smuggling and human trafficking within Libya's conflict economy.

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Cover image: A pick-up truck filled with migrants returns to the city of Agadez after it was turned back by military checkpoints in the Sahara Desert.

Photo credit: Copyright © Washington Post/Getty

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T +44 (0)20 7957 5700

contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

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