

4. Sex, Drugs and Rocket Launchers: Traffics and Conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel

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The Sahara-Sahel has always been a space of circulation. Across history, caravan trades and transhumant pastoralism suggest that in such a barren space, survival and wealth depend less on the soil's (poor) productivity than on the mobility of goods and people.¹ While trans-regional flows of different sorts have long criss-crossed the Sahara-Sahel, some of them have raised growing concerns in light of the conflict escalation observed in the region over the past decade. In particular, it is feared that the trafficking of weapons, narcotic drugs, precious metals and human beings – now widespread across the region – are contributing to fuelling conflict dynamics. A variety of mechanisms are hypothesised which could possibly link illicit trafficking and conflict in the Sahara-Sahel. Trafficking could be exploited by non-state armed groups – including terrorist formations – to raise money (gold, drugs), might (weapons) and manpower (human beings) and help further their destabilising agenda. It could also erode the legitimacy of weak state institutions by fostering clientelism, corruption and unaccountability, thereby eliciting dissent, polarisation and unrest. Trafficking could likewise stimulate violent banditry,

¹ J. McDougall and J. Scheele (Eds.), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012.

prompting the proliferation of armed protection and arms smuggling; and could pave the way for the rise of smuggling cartels, organised crime and money laundering, with the capacity to pose a long-lasting threat to the resilience of local economies and political systems.

While media sensationalism and politicisation have contributed to popularising these fears, a more sober approach should consider the legitimacy of alternative views. Albeit illicit, trafficking provides jobs and livelihood opportunities to disenfranchised local populations, possibly increasing their resilience *vis-à-vis* the impact of conflict and climate change in the region. Critical research, moreover, suggests that criminal organisations could also end up strengthening social and political stability – if not acquiescence – through the enforcement of a *pax mafiosa*.²

The relationship between criminal(ised) trafficking and conflict is therefore far from straightforward and lends itself to multiple interpretations. Building on this uncertainty, this chapter explores the complex interactions between illicit trafficking and armed conflict in the Sahara-Sahel and asks whether and how the former help fuel the latter. To this end, it provides a fine-grained analysis of the political economy of Sahara-Sahel trafficking. After a brief introduction of the genealogy of regional trafficking infrastructure, the analysis proceeds empirically by disaggregating the most significant trafficked goods – drugs, weapons, migrants and gold – and highlights the structures (routes, volumes) and actors (traffickers, protectors, buyers) of the various flows.

The sensitivity of the topic warrants a note of methodological caution. Weak Sahelian states often lack the capacity and political determination to collect and share meaningful data regarding phenomena that are inherently opaque (illicit trafficking) or politically contentious (armed conflicts), even

² F. Strazzari and G. Zanoletti, “North Africa: organised crime, the Sahel-Sahara region and state (un)making”, in F. Allum and S. Gilmour (Eds.), *Handbook of Organised Crime and Politics*, Cheltenham, Edwar Elgar Publishing, 2019.

more so when these take place in remote regions where the penetration of state institutions is shallow, if not entirely absent. These observations cast serious doubts on the reliability of national and international metrics of the criminal activities, illicit trafficking and armed violence taking place in the Sahara-Sahel region. In order to circumvent these obstacles, the analysis presented herein complements statistical data with qualitative evidence, collected by the author in almost ten years of engagement with the region, and triangulated through the meticulous analysis of the most authoritative reports, enquiries and studies on the topic. This approach has the potential to illuminate the positionality of different actors involved in these domains, and therefore make statistical data gaps equally meaningful.

The Infrastructure of Trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel

A widespread narrative suggests that the Sahara-Sahel's vulnerability to trafficking – including of illicit goods – can be largely attributed to the porosity of regional borders, which often amount to elusive “lines in the sand” poorly patrolled by local weak states. By lending significant explanatory weight to material aspects such as natural landscape and power projection, however, this narrative runs the risk of overlooking important political-economic factors which have made of regional states not only the victims but the agents of illicit trafficking.

In the 1970s and 1980s, countries on either edge of the Sahara found themselves on opposite sides of the winners and losers of the oil crises. Labour demand in Mediterranean “Arab” countries to the North, and catastrophic economic and food crises in Sahelian countries to the South triggered major population flows. Ethnic and family networks scattered across the region helped consolidate the trans-Saharan infrastructure of migration and mobility. At the same time, oil-producing countries such as Algeria and Libya exploited their newly

acquired wealth to entrench the survival of local authoritarian regimes by sponsoring generous programmes of public subsidies targeting goods of wide consumption, such as fuel, foodstuffs and textiles. These dynamics nourished a thriving informal economy of subsidised goods smuggled from the North to the South of the Sahara, prompting the rise of what became locally known as “*al-fraud*”, the fraudsters economy.³ In the 1990s, the high demand for tobacco in North African countries, combined with international sanctions regimes, paved the way for a thriving trade of contraband cigarettes through West Africa, reportedly accounting for an estimated 30-70% of local consumption in Libya and Algeria.⁴

Different understandings of legitimacy between local practices on the one hand and international (and national) norms on the other contributed to normalising these informal flows of otherwise licit goods across the Sahara.⁵ At the same time, local authorities often demonstrated a limited resolve to decisively clamp down on these activities. Hardly perceived as threatening, they were instead viewed as providing a valuable tool for co-opting and controlling social and ethnic groups otherwise left at the margins of post-colonial states. Protection rackets and informal value extraction, however, contributed to entrenching patronage networks and neopatrimonialism across the majority of local regimes.⁶ While the smuggling of oil, subsidised goods and tobacco arguably continues to provide the largest share of aggregated profits accruing from informal

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development /Sahel and West Africa Club, *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel. Geography, Economy and Security*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2014.

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational trafficking and the rule of law in West Africa: a threat assessment*, Vienna, UN, 2009.

⁵ T. Reitano and M. Shaw “People’s perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel”, ISS Paper 254, Dakar/Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2014.

⁶ M. Tidjani Alou, “Monitoring the neopatrimonial state on a day-by-day basis. Politicians, customs officials and traders in Niger”, in D. Bach and M. Gazibo (Eds.), *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel, in the long run these dynamics proved instrumental in catalysing the structuring of more organised criminal enterprises.

Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel started in the 1990s and has boomed since the early 2000s. Its rapid development owes much to the existing infrastructure of cigarette smuggling, in terms of networks, routes, organisational arrangements and political protection. That the jihadist leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar was nicknamed Monsieur Marlboro and rumoured to be involved in drug trafficking, too, provides a valuable illustration of these overlapping trafficking flows.

The first narcotic drug to be trafficked across the region was cannabis resin – hashish – which to date continues to represent the steadiest and possibly most profitable drug flow in the area. Growing demand in Europe and in the MENA region, combined with diminishing supplies from traditional producing countries such as Lebanon and Afghanistan stimulated production in Morocco, whose authorities allegedly bought the political acquiescence of the Rif region by turning a blind eye to local extra-legal economies. Yet, enhanced border controls in Algeria and Spain, prompted respectively by regional rivalries and EU policies, encouraged Moroccan traffickers to seek new trade routes.⁷ Circumventing Algeria, by crossing deep into the Sahara Desert, appeared to provide a valuable alternative. Local traders scattered across the region eagerly harnessed their own resources – shared ethnicity, community networks, patronage politics, smuggling expertise – to turn to drug trafficking. Subaltern tribes saw in the business of drug trafficking an opportunity of social mobility and political prominence. At

⁷ M. Herbert and M. Gallien, *A Rising Tide. Trends in production, trafficking and consumption of drugs in North Africa*, Geneva, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2020.

the same time, armed formations positioned along the route – including, since the 2000s, the Polisario Front, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Tuareg rebel groups in Mali and Niger, and para-state militias in Libya – saw an opportunity to enforce protection rackets and raise revenues to further their own agendas.⁸

Critics contend that the bonanza of drug trafficking ended up perverting the original goals of these armed groups, turning politically motivated rebels into opportunistic, profit-seeking criminal networks. While the claim remains contentious – being grounded more on one's political positioning than on (poor) empirical evidence – there are indeed indications that armed groups in the Sahara-Sahel may have negotiated the discontinuation of hostilities in exchange for the continuation of their own involvement in trafficking. The Mouvement Nigerien pour la Justice (MNJ), which led the “second” Tuareg rebellion in Niger, could be viewed as a case in point. The condoning, if not protection, of drug trafficking by state authorities ultimately made of the Sahara-Sahel a fertile ground for transnational drug flows and criminal networks.⁹

The region has also become the target of transnational cocaine flows since the mid-2000s. The hegemony acquired by Mexican organised crime in the American market prompted Colombian and Peruvian cartels to seek new business opportunities in Europe. And West Africa appeared strategically located to provide a valuable logistical hub. Around 2008-10, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that approximately one quarter of Europe's cocaine consumption transited through West Africa, amounting to a flow of 40-50 tons per year, with an estimated value of \$1.8 billion at street prices. A significant share of this flow appeared to transit through the Sahara-Sahel

⁸ S. Julien, “Le Sahel comme espace de transit des stupéfiants. Acteurs et conséquences politiques”, *Hérodote*, no. 142, 2011.

⁹ L. Raineri and F. Strazzari, “Drug Smuggling and the Stability of Fragile States. The Diverging Trajectories of Mali and Niger”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022.

region.¹⁰ The tested solidity of the local trafficking infrastructure helps explain this otherwise counterintuitive trajectory. The infamous “Air Cocaine” case provides a glaring illustration of the extent and organisation of cocaine trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel at the time. In November 2009, the burnt-out fuselage of a Boeing 727 believed to carry 10 tons of cocaine was found in the Tilemsi valley, north of Mali. Subsequent investigations revealed the complicity not only of Malian narco-traffickers, but also of local businessmen, senior policymakers, high-ranking security and military officers, and trusted advisors to the President. The lack of follow-up is indicative of the extent and influence of the patronage networks that profit from drug flows in the region.

Over the last ten years, the conflict that has ravaged the region, spilling-over from Mali to the entire Sahara-Sahel, appears to have reshuffled the roles of individual placeholders without disrupting the overall infrastructure. Drug flows across the region continue unabated. Although evidence is too scant to accurately estimate their volume, the frequency and magnitude of reported drug seizures in the Sahara-Sahel – some of which are unprecedented in scale – is in keeping with the overall doubling of hashish and cocaine production observed respectively in Morocco and the Andean region over the last decade. In the last few years, multi-ton seizures of Moroccan hashish have occurred in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria; at the same time, several hundred kilos of cocaine have been seized in Mali and mostly Guinea-Bissau, on their way to Mali. In many of these instances, the drug flows appear connected to well-known drug barons in Mali or Niger, who have manifestly managed to stay in business despite growing instability in the region.¹¹

¹⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Transatlantic cocaine market*, Research Paper, Vienna, April 2011.

¹¹ United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Reports of the Panel of Experts on Mali, established pursuant to resolution 2374(2017)*, New York, UN, 2018, 2019, 2020; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern*

The attitudes of Niger's and Mali's authorities *vis-à-vis* these dynamics appear to have diverged quite sharply.¹² In Niger, after an initial phase of appeasement, drug traffickers have been progressively marginalised: after the death of Chérife Ould Abidine (nicknamed Chérife Cocaine), Niger's drug godfather, in 2016, his prospective heirs have been prevented from ascending to prominence; military and security forces thought to be colluding with drug trafficking have been side-lined; and in March 2021, a few days after Mohamed Bazoum became President, another well-known local drug lord was arrested. In Mali, on the other hand, drug traffickers are proving capable of perpetuating their influence by negotiating – violently, if need be – their appointment to key positions in the framework of the peace process, such as regional authorities and reconstituted armed forces. Furthermore, UN investigations suggest that the Malian intelligence service has leveraged (some of) the profits of Malian drug barons to sponsor pro-governmental militias, with a view to countering Tuareg irredentism.¹³ The continuity of such practices under the presidencies of both Amadou Toumani Touré (2002-12) and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (2013-20) is worth noting. As a result, Arab and Tuareg armed groups of the “Platform” alliance¹⁴ are now viewed as deeply embroiled with drug trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel.

Mali, Africa Report no. 267, 2018; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger*, Africa Report no. 285, 2019; M. Micallef, R. Farrah, A. Bish, and V. Tanner, *After the Storm. Organized Crime Across the Sabel-Sahara Following Upheavals in Libya and Mali*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019.

¹² Raineri and Strazzari (2022).

¹³ United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, established pursuant to resolution 2374(2017)*, New York, UN, 2020.

¹⁴ The “Platform” is an alliance of self-defense movements from the North of Mali. It was born in June 2014, as part of the peace negotiations between the government of Mali and non-state armed groups. It includes ethnic-based armed groups (Arab, Tuareg, Songhay and others) which are considered close to – if not proxies of – Mali's government.

There are instead few indications that jihadist armed groups take advantage of these flows. This contrasts with past observations, which attested the involvement of AQIM's Sahara *katiba* – led by the infamous terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar – and of the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in the protection if not organisation of drug trafficking in the region over the 2007-12 period. Today's most prominent jihadist formations – JNIM and Islamic State – appear to rely on alternative sources of revenues, such as taxation, goldmining, and kidnapping for ransom. These observations prompt the uncomfortable conclusion that in the Sahara-Sahel a crime-terror nexus is probably less cogent than a crime-counterterror nexus, whereby non-state (yet state-sponsored) armed groups are involved in both counterterrorism operations and drug protection rackets. AQIM's component of JNIM may represent a possible exception, given the allegations of its involvement in drug trafficking along the Mali-Mauritania border.

The combination of drug profits, conflict economies and patronage politics contributes to the resilience of the situation depicted here. Two emerging trends may nevertheless unsettle it. In the first place, the development of container trafficking has provided drug cartels with a cheaper and safer alternative to connect producing and consuming nations. The large-scale drug seizures recently seen in Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Italian, Balkan and Algerian ports and waters illustrate the growing prominence of sea-routes which completely bypass West Africa and the Sahara-Sahel. Reports indicate that Libyan ports controlled by local militias – al-Khoms, Misrata, Tobruk – are becoming key hubs in the transnational value chain supplying drugs to the European and MENA markets, while limited local consumption could lead to a rapid decline in the Sahara-Sahel's role.¹⁵

¹⁵ J. McDermott, J. Bargent, D. den Held, and M.F. Ramírez, *The cocaine pipeline to Europe*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2021.

In the second place, the boom of synthetic drugs is establishing a trend that could disrupt existing drug markets. The Sahara-Sahel is not immune to these dynamics. A few rudimentary facilities have been identified in Burkina Faso and Nigeria for the production of methamphetamines, whose precursors are relatively easy to procure and difficult to intercept. Most importantly, the trafficking of Tramadol, a synthetic opioid painkiller, is booming across the Sahara-Sahel. Produced mainly in India and China, it is shipped to West African ports, mainly in Nigeria, Benin and Togo, and then proceeds to the Sahara-Sahel. Low prices and limited social stigma help explain Tramadol's popularity on local markets, especially among workers enduring hard conditions, such as miners, farmers and lorry drivers. A sizeable part of Tramadol flows, however, is rerouted to North Africa, where high demand and greater purchasing power enable a considerable mark-up. Tramadol trafficking is booming especially in Niger, where it has helped reabsorb part of the job losses resulting from the clamp-down on irregular migration. So far, however, Tramadol trafficking appears less structured and organised than that of hashish and cocaine, and the presence of centralised crime syndicates, drug barons and armed protection rackets is less apparent.

Arms Smuggling

The Sahel has been exposed to significant arms smuggling flows since at least the end of the Cold War. The broader region's proneness to civil wars – including in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Libya, Western Sahara, Sudan, as well as Mali, Niger, and Chad themselves – has fuelled both the demand and the supply of trafficked weapons. These mostly originated from the looting of local stockpiles, thereby turning the region pivoted on the Sahara-Sahel into a self-sufficient system of arms, with limited inputs coming from outside.¹⁶ The

¹⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organised*

overall fragmentation which has characterised the emergence of a regional market is the outcome of the scattering of potential suppliers, diffusion of demand, and the limited costs and logistics involved in the trade of small weapons.

Until 2010, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 small arms were allegedly circulating in the region. Since 2011, the Libyan civil war has represented a game changer. While the NATO-led military intervention managed to destroy Gaddafi's prohibited chemical weapons, it failed to prevent – rather, it triggered – the trans-Saharan spill-over of an estimated 10-20,000 small arms looted from Libyan arsenals. Part of these flows ended up in Sudan, Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, and even Syria.¹⁷ But the largest share of Libya's trafficked weapons – light and heavy alike – were shipped to Mali by disgruntled loyalist militias of Sahelian origin, mostly hailing from Gaddafi's Tareq Bin Zayed, Tende and 32nd Brigades. This massive inflow of Libyan weapons contributed decisively to catalysing the seeds of revolt that were brewing in the north of Mali, precipitating the rise of local armed groups, the eruption of a multi-faceted civil war, and the collapse of the Malian state.

Libyan weapons also helped boost the strength and ambitions of jihadist groups present in the region, whose purchasing power exceeded that of rival factions because of the unparalleled revenues accruing from kidnapping activities. Early allegations that Sahelian jihadist groups had received additional weapons from malevolent foreign backers – among whom Qatar and Algeria were mentioned – proved baseless.¹⁸

Subsequent developments, however, have contributed to further restructuring the regional arms trafficking market. On the one hand, the breakout of the so-called second civil war in Libya in 2014 led to an inversion of arms trafficking flows,

Crime in West Africa: A threat assessment, Vienna, UN, 2013.

¹⁷ Conflict Armament Research, *Investigating cross-border weapon transfers in the Sabel*, London, CAR, 2016.

¹⁸ H. Anders, "Expanding arsenals. Insurgents' arms in northern Mali", in *Small Arms Survey 2015: Weapons and the World*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2015.

which were reattracted to Libya by pressing domestic demand and comparatively higher purchasing power. On the other hand, the deployment of military operations along Libya's borders contributed to significantly curtailing the large-scale export of weapons from Libya. The step-up of Algeria's border protection forces, and the launch of the French Operation Barkhane – tasked with disrupting jihadists' supply lines from its bases in Chad, Niger and Mali – led to a sharp increase in arms seizures across the Sahara Desert, subsequently discouraging traffickers.

As a result, today, only a negligible proportion of the weapons that fuel Sahelian conflicts are trafficked from outside the region. Libya remains the main conduit, albeit to a much smaller extent. As Libyan factions are constantly fed with new equipment by their Emirati, Turkish or Russian partners, weapons (and fighters) occasionally trickle down from southern Libya into Chad or Niger.¹⁹ Their impact on local conflicts is, however, marginal. Instead, available data suggest that most of the weapons used by Sahelian non-state armed groups, including jihadist organisations, originate from the stockpiles of the Sahelian state forces formally tasked with combating them. The exponential increase in Sahelian states' defence and security budgets, which European partners have sponsored politically and economically, ensures the constant replenishment of local arsenals which represent easy prey for local armed groups, experts in looting and pillaging.

Irregular Migration

Intra-regional and seasonal migration patterns have long characterised human mobility from the Sahel to North Africa, across the Sahara. Until recently, the phenomenon was hardly considered of security relevance, if not in positive terms, as migration provided an escape valve to compensate for the

¹⁹ S. De Tèssières, *At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger*, Report, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2018.

exponential demographic growth and limited job absorption capacity of Sahelian countries.

Things have changed markedly since the outbreak of the second civil war in Libya in 2014. The fragmentation of Libya's security forces and the collapse of border controls significantly eased prospective migrants' access to Libya, and the possibility of onward shipment to Europe. Strategically located at the northern terminal of bus lines from West Africa, the Nigerien town of Agadez soon became a hub of migration flows to Libya, eclipsing previously popular routes to North Africa via Mali or Mauritania. Northbound transits of migrants through Agadez increased from an estimated 40-60,000 crossings per year in the early 2010s, to 330,000 in 2016, largely originating from Nigeria, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Mali and Niger itself.²⁰

Observers feared that large-scale irregular migration could feed armed groups, criminal organisations and terrorist formations. In Libya, armed groups reportedly established protection rackets over migratory flows, while the involvement of organised crime remains disputed and that of terrorist formations is in fact poorly substantiated. In the Sahel, and in Agadez in particular, it appears instead that migration provided job opportunities which helped reabsorb former Tuareg rebels, who in turn strived to steer away from contacts with terrorists in order to avoid attracting unwanted attention on their businesses. Collusion between Nigerien traffickers and authorities was also observed, suggesting the problematic convergence between trafficking and regime stability.²¹

The growing concern of European audiences *vis-à-vis* irregular migration, however, has led EU authorities to adopt an unprecedented combination of incentivising and

²⁰ M. Micallef, R. Horsley, and A. Bish, *The Human Conveyor Belt Broken. Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2019.

²¹ L. Raineri, "Human smuggling across Niger: State-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2018.

dissuasive measures to stem irregular migration from and across the Sahara-Sahel since 2016. The reluctance and hesitancy of Sahelian countries' cooperation, however, testifies to the difficult balancing exercise between domestic interests, societal resilience and reliance on international aid. Niger, for instance, adopted harsh provisions to criminalise, deter and repress migrant smuggling and human trafficking, yet their implementation remains haphazard and exposed to the volatility of political opportunity. As a result, migrant traffic through Agadez has fluctuated significantly in the last few years: it drastically declined in 2017, only to progressively resume in the subsequent years. In 2020-21, the border restrictions implemented in Niger, Libya and Algeria to combat the spread of Covid-19 reduced opportunities for regular migration, but did not curb demand, thereby leading to an increase in irregular crossings facilitated by smugglers.

At the same time, the focus of law enforcement anti-migration measures on Agadez has prompted the restructuring of irregular trans-Saharan migration. A myriad of alternative routes has been carved out, or resumed, channelling smaller volumes of migrants to Libya via north-east Niger and Chad, or to Algeria via west Niger (Tahoua and Arlit) and north Mali (including Gao and even Timbuktu), or to Morocco and Spain via Mauritania. Overall, Algeria and Morocco appear to have replaced Libya as the favoured destination (or transit) country of migrants from West Africa.²² The logistical, security and political challenges involved in traveling these remote routes, however, have raised the entry barriers to the migrant smuggling market, leading to the progressive marginalisation of the horizontal, social-networked arrangements that previously helped ensure migrants' agency and safety. One could therefore argue that anti-migration measures have paradoxically contributed to strengthening the grip of better structured criminal cartels

²² A. Fereday, *Niger. Routes shift amid post-covid increase in human smuggling*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022.

– most notably from Nigeria and Libya – in the organisation of irregular migration flows across the Sahara-Sahel.

Overall, however, the volume (as well as political salience) of trans-Saharan migration appears to have declined compared to the peak of the so-called migration “crisis” of 2015-16. Exogenous dynamics have contributed to this outcome: stricter border enforcement in Libya and Algeria, including on their Mediterranean shores to the north, and massive expulsion to the south have arguably had a dissuasive impact upstream. In this context, booming labour demand in artisanal goldmining and the rise of Tramadol trafficking have provided an opportunity to partly reorient and repurpose the infrastructure of irregular migration in the Sahara-Sahel. These dynamics have contributed to a provisional shift from migrant smuggling to human trafficking activities, including the exploitation of children around mining sites, as well as that of women in the Malian towns of Gao and Timbuktu.

Artisanal Goldmining

That the Sahel’s soil is brimming with gold has been known since the Middle Ages, and crucially contributed to inciting the European colonisation of West Africa. Industrial and artisanal goldmining have proliferated in independent Sahelian countries, with gold replacing cotton as Mali’s and Burkina Faso’s main export in the 2000s. More recently, a combination of high gold prices prompted by the 2008 economic crisis and cheap technologies originating from China has led to the discovery of a particularly rich gold vein stretching across the Sahara Desert from east to west. After the first finds in 2012 around Jebel Amir, in Sudan, rich gold deposits were subsequently discovered in the Chadian Tibesti area in 2013, then in Niger’s Agadez region in 2014, and finally in north Mali and Mauritania in 2016.²³ As a result, Sudan,

²³ R. Chevrillon-Guibert, L. Gagnol, and G. Magrin, “Les ruées vers l’or au Sahara et au nord du Sahel. Ferment de crise ou stabilisateur?”, *Hérodote*, no. 172, 2019.

Mali and Burkina Faso have become respectively the third, fourth and fifth most important gold producers in Africa.²⁴

The boom of artisanal goldmining represents a potential game-changer for the region. Recent discoveries of goldmining sites have turned the Sahara-Sahel not only into a space of transit and circular migration, but also of inward migration. Goldmining – especially when entrusted to local, small-scale enterprises – has become one of the main job providers in the region. It has consequently contributed to propping up local economies, strengthening social resilience, and luring disenfranchised youth away from criminal and armed groups. At the same time, considerable challenges arise from the remoteness of the newly discovered goldmining sites, where weak local states struggle to project governance and law enforcement.

In the first place, goldmining runs the risk of fuelling money laundering and illicit financial flows. The largest share of gold extracted in the Sahara-Sahel is smuggled out of the region, escaping state oversight. Available reports estimate that the amount of gold illegally smuggled out of the Sahara-Sahel is far greater than that outflowing from the Great Lakes region, and its aggregate economic value higher than that of drug or migrant smuggling. Gold is first shipped to regional hubs such as Mali, Togo and Libya, where the complacency of local authorities and the opacity of local regulations enable onward air shipment, Dubai being the main destination.²⁵ The problematic management of gold imports contributed to relegating the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the Financial Action Task Force's grey list in 2022. However, it remains unclear to what extent criminal organisations, whether regional, transnational or foreign, are involved in existing smuggling schemes.

²⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Gold at the Crossroads. Assessment of the Supply Chains of Gold Produced in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*, Paris, OECD, 2018.

²⁵ M. Hunter, *Pulling at Golden Webs. Combating Criminal Consortia in the African Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining and Trade Sector*, Research Paper 08, Pretoria, ENACT, 2019.

In the second place, the high availability of valuable resources combined with poor regulation makes artisanal goldmining sites prone to conflict, which could easily escalate in the explosive regional context of the Sahara-Sahel. This situation has prompted non-state armed actors to step in and provide ambiguous protection and dispute settlement mechanisms, often in exchange for a substantial protection fee. The modalities and providers of such informal regulations vary, depending on contextual arrangements and power relations. The management of the large goldmining site of Tchibarakaten, close to Niger's border with Algeria, is informally entrusted to prominent members of the local Tuareg elite, many of whom are known for their former engagement in rebel movements and smuggling activities. In the north of Mali, Tuareg leaders and rebel groups hailing from the CMA (Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad) ensure the governance of Kidal's and In-Tahaka's goldmining sites. Elsewhere, the fear that violent bandits, regime opponents or jihadist formations may profit from goldmining revenues has prompted local governments to close the sites and forcibly evict the miners, as happened in the Djado (north-east Niger) or, more brutally, in Chad's Tibesti region. Goldmining sites in north-east Burkina Faso appear to be the most problematic: the de facto evacuation of state authorities has afforded jihadist groups the opportunity to establish protection rackets and enforce strict moral codes inspired by jihadist governance ideals. The deployment of clever propaganda combining social grievances with religious legitimacy underpins the jihadists' claims to protect people's livelihoods from corrupt state capture.²⁶

The overall impact of the recent boom in artisanal goldmining in the Sahara-Sahel is further compounded by the rise of banditry in the region, the exploitation of child labour, and the environmental degradation that rudimentary gold extraction

²⁶ L. Raineri, "Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel: The Political Geography of State-making and Unmaking", *The International Spectator*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2020.

techniques entail. Popular pressures for the reopening of the Djado goldmine, and the hesitancy of Niger's administration suggest that this is likely to remain a contentious and polarising domain for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: Conflict, Trafficking and International Interventions

The question as to whether, how and to what extent trafficking contributes to fuelling conflict in the Sahara-Sahel eschews simplistic and reductionist answers. The largest share of regional trafficking – in terms of diffusion, volume and aggregate value – does not involve illicit goods, but goods of daily consumption and limited security relevance such as fuel, textiles, foodstuff and cigarettes. Such flows are therefore more likely to contribute to social resilience than to conflict and armed violence.

Drug trafficking remains acutely worrisome. Over the years, it has led to the emergence of criminal networks featuring some symptoms of organised crime: widespread corruption, state capture and impunity. Drug profits have contributed to fuelling armed violence. Disturbingly, however, the armed groups which have profited the most from drug revenues appear to be less insurgents than militias: that is, less the challengers than the partners of local states. For international interveners, then, partnering with Sahelian countries to counter drug-fuelled violence may be a self-defeating strategy, unless rule of law is prioritised in all domains (including peacebuilding) and targeted institutions and individuals are empowered on the basis of fine-grained vetting.

That arms smuggling is connected to armed conflict is a truism, and the Sahara-Sahel makes no exception. Yet, while there is no doubt that large-scale arms smuggling from Libya was instrumental in catalysing the outbreak of the conflict in Mali in 2012, today, arms proliferation and smuggling is less the cause than the consequence of ongoing conflicts. On the one hand, this suggests that international efforts to curb

regional arms trafficking have been successful, and arguably helpful in reducing the destabilising potential of non-state armed groups. On the other hand, the observation that non-state armed groups – including rebels, militias and jihadists – have ended up sourcing their weapons essentially from state stockpiles through robberies, raids and opaque deals provides an additional reason to reconsider international stabilisation strategies that prioritise security and military build-up.

The contribution of irregular migration to armed conflict in the Sahara-Sahel is scant. Early claims to the contrary have proved poorly substantiated. In both Mali and Niger, the involvement of organised crime and armed groups – let alone jihadist formations – in the recruitment, organisation, protection and exploitation of irregular migration is limited. Paradoxically, though not entirely unpredictably, it has (slightly) increased *as a result* of internationally sponsored measures of mobility interdiction and border restriction. Overall, irregular migration appears to be less a resource for, than an alternative to, the strengthening of non-state armed actors.

The boom of artisanal goldmining manifests a disruptive potential and warrants close monitoring. On the one hand, available reports suggest that job absorption in artisanal goldmining helps inhibit the “push factors” of irregular migration and armed group mobilisation in the Sahara-Sahel. On the other hand, though, artisanal goldmining catalyses human trafficking, arms smuggling and Tramadol trafficking. The involvement of transnational organised crime networks is not unlikely, yet still to be proven, while there is ample evidence that non-state armed groups are taking advantage of the defective governance of goldmining sites by local states. Informal but substantial involvement in gold production and trade governance provides rebels, militias and jihadists with resources and legitimacy that could arguably be leveraged to further a destabilising agenda. Although the international community has been slow in recognising the significance of these dynamics, subjecting goldmining to transparent and

participatory state-led governance should be considered a priority.

These observations suggest the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive international interventions in the Sahara-Sahel. Neglecting the challenges of trafficking and organised crime could further entrench the fragilities that make the Sahara-Sahel prone to conflict, yet mismanaging such challenges could make existing conflicts intractable.