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INTERNATIONAL

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MIGRATION AND JIHADISM

IN THE SAHEL:

TRADE ROUTES TO A NEW WORLD

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A report by Hate Speech International
Published March 2017

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MIGRATION AND JIHADISM IN THE SAHEL: TRADE ROUTES TO A NEW WORLD

By Dominic MacIver

Political rhetoric conflating migration across the Mediterranean with the apparent rise of violent jihadism in Europe reached new heights in 2016. But is there a demonstrable link between migrants, jihadist¹ groups and the lucrative smuggling networks which link Africa to Europe, and if so, how can it be managed?

Public fears about mass migration to Europe centre on assumed connections between jihadist militants and emigrants from Muslim countries. Although overblown, these perceptions are not without grounding. An intelligence unit of Islamic State (IS), known as the Emni, has sought to project violence beyond the borders of its self-declared caliphate, sending operatives to conduct attacks in Paris and Brussels.² Al-Qaeda still aspires to conduct spectacles of violence via clandestine operatives, while affiliates infiltrate themselves into the domestic politics of Muslim-majority nations. Both aim to inspire self-organising attacks by “lone wolf” individuals or small cells among Muslim populations, often guided by remote handlers. Each successive terrorist attack on European soil compounds popular fears and lends credence to the claims of fringe nationalists and populist politicians.

“MIGRANT CRISIS OF 2015”

The issue of mass migration has attracted renewed controversy in the aftermath of what became known as the “migrant/refugee crisis” of 2015. Although this focused mainly on the movement of Syrian refugees through the

West Balkan route as a result of Germany's brief flirtation with an open-borders policy, a component of the story was the mass movement of people across the Central Mediterranean route. This was mostly the movement of migrants and refugees from Libya to Italy, and included the humanitarian disaster of thousands of people dying when their boats capsized during the crossing.

Diverse political consequences followed in 2016. Germany's population grew by some 600,000 people, reversing earlier trends of a declining population before 2011.³ Most agree that the narrow votes for Brexit in the UK and for Donald Trump in the US, swept along on a wave of anti-Islamic antipathy, were influenced by the divisive issues of immigration and terrorism. In the sub-Saharan nation of Gambia, a one-time economic migrant to London has recently been elected president. And yet, despite the alarm in the headlines, the true impact of this colossal movement of people across continents and seas each year has yet to fully play out. Instead, it will do so over the lifetimes of those who made the voyages, of those who welcomed or opposed them and of those left behind.

¹ In this report, jihadist and jihadism refer to Islamists who advocate violence to propagate their interpretation of Islam.

² Rukmini Callimachi, “How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers”, New York Times, 3 August 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html?_r=0

³ “Refugee influx helps halt decline in Germany's population”, The Guardian, 6 January, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/jan/06/refugee-influx-helps-halt-decline-in-germanys-population>



Mixed migration routes to Europe

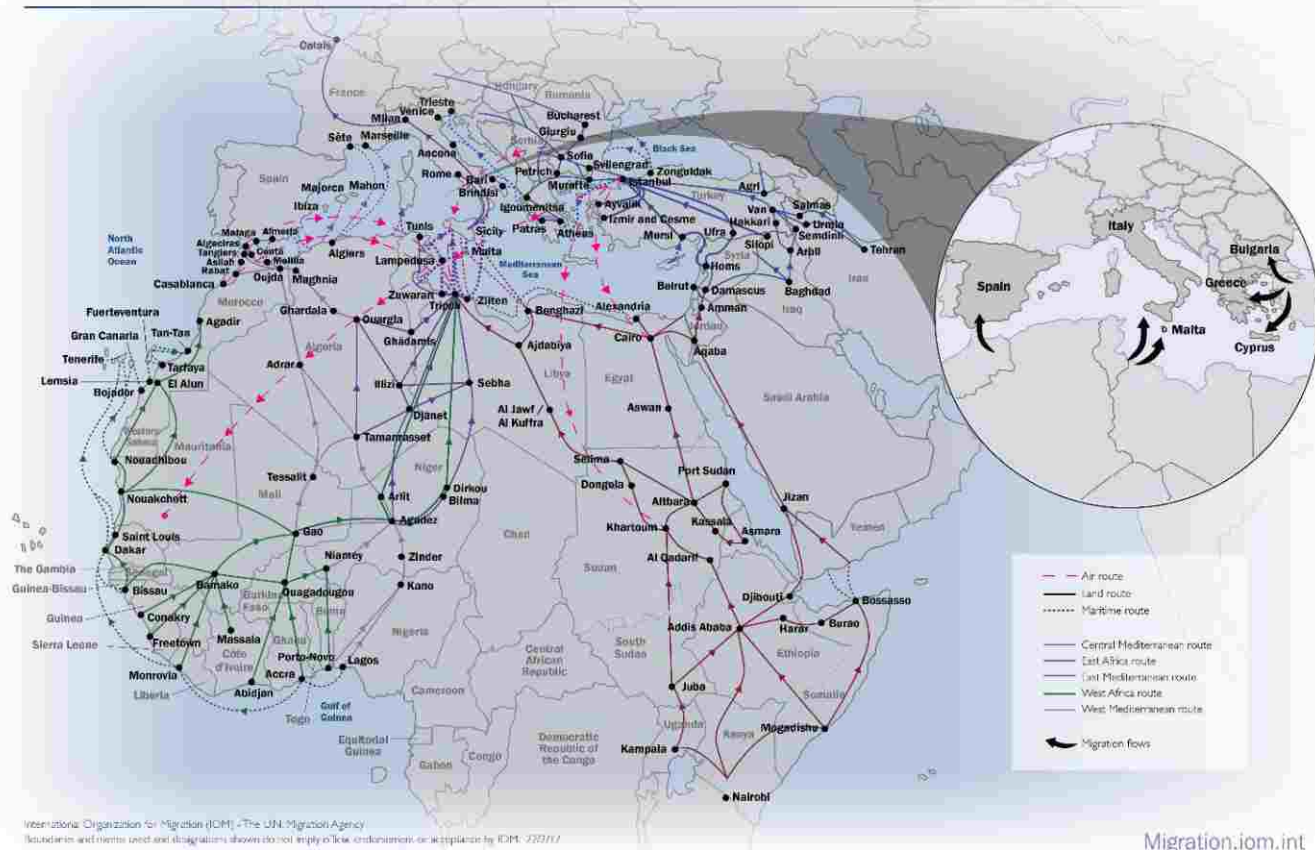


Figure 1: International Organisation for Migration, Mediterranean Migration Routes 2017. Figure by International Organization for Migration (IOM).⁴

As these globalised migration patterns affect societies, it becomes necessary to ask if the rhetoric conflating migration to Europe with the threat posed by violent jihadism in failed states has any basis in reality. To investigate, this report will look at the modus operandi of jihadist groups and smugglers operating along the West Africa-Central Mediterranean migration route. Although evidence indicating direct ties between the two malign sub-state forces is lacking, it is clear that there is a structural relationship that permits both to take advantage of, and in many cases accelerate, weak state capacity. This dynamic will play out in global security trends for years to come and will have to be managed by all those affected by it.

THE WEST AFRICA-CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION ROUTE

Although some migrants attempt the Western Mediterranean crossing to Spain, departing from Morocco or Algeria, the majority of those leaving African shores for Europe use the Central Mediterranean crossing, departing from Libya, where smugglers dispatch migrants in wooden fishing vessels or inflatable dinghies destined for Italy or Malta. In order to

⁴ Mixed Migration routes to Europe | 22 February 2017", International Organisation for Migration, [http://www.arcgis.com/sharing/rest/content/items/446a1fd87f3c4f5baf943eacdd02a215/resources/Mixed_migration_routes_to_Europe%20\(M\)_1487835659230_w1500.jpg](http://www.arcgis.com/sharing/rest/content/items/446a1fd87f3c4f5baf943eacdd02a215/resources/Mixed_migration_routes_to_Europe%20(M)_1487835659230_w1500.jpg)



reach departure points in Libya or anywhere else along the North African coast, most migrants will pass through the Sahel, a region of semiarid land stretching from Senegal eastward through to the Sudan, forming a transitional zone between the desert to the north and the belt of humid savannahs to the south.

WHO ARE THE MIGRANTS?

Reliable statistics on who uses this route are hard to find, as migrants often destroy identification documents to make it more difficult for European authorities to deport them. On the Central Mediterranean route, an estimated 170,060 people illegally crossed in 2014, 153,946 in 2015 and more than 181,000 in 2016.⁵ The International Organisation for Migration reported 5,079 recorded deaths in the Mediterranean in 2016, making it the deadliest year on record for those making the crossing to Europe. Of these, an estimated 4,576 deaths were recorded along the Central Mediterranean route to Italy.⁶

Along with Eritreans and Somalis, West Africans make up a large proportion of those attempting the Central Mediterranean crossing. According to the EU border agency Frontex, in 2015 Nigerians constituted the second-largest proportion of nationalities detected making illegal border crossings on the route, comprising 14 per cent of the total.⁷ In Italy, the number of Nigerians arriving illegally in 2016 increased by 37 per cent on the previous year.⁸

The Mixed Migration Hub reports that 21 per

cent of arrivals by sea to Italy in 2016 were from Nigeria, 12 per cent from Eritrea, 7 per cent from Guinea, 7 per cent from Ivory Coast and 6 per cent from Gambia.⁹

Most arrivals from West African countries are classified as economic migrants, who are assumed to have no right to legal protection under international humanitarian law. However, 39 per cent of the migrants who were examined by Italian asylum panels in 2016 received either refugee status or humanitarian protection, a lesser and more temporary form of protection. According to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, 45 per cent of those who pass through the Central Mediterranean meet European standards for refugee status.¹⁰ In this report, we use the term "migrant" interchangeably to denote someone undertaking the journey to Europe, including emigrants, economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

SMUGGLING: LIFEBLOOD OF SAHARAN DESERT ECONOMIES

Smuggling has a rich history in the Sahara, playing an important role in desert economies that depend on trade routes in the absence of farming or other productive work. Historic trade routes in salt and other legitimate goods have ceased to be viable and traders have adapted their cargos as more lucrative illicit opportunities have become available. The trade routes are two-way, as they always have been. Migrants and contraband such as drugs and cigarettes are taken northwards to Libya, mostly on four-wheel-drive pick-up trucks. New contraband, including Libyan weapons, is loaded for the return journey. The

⁵ "Central Mediterranean Route", Frontex, 2017, <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/central-mediterranean-route/>; "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and The Council, Migration on the Central Mediterranean Route; Managing flows, saving lives", European Commission, 25 January 2017, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52017JC0004&from=EN>

⁶ "Monthly Trend Report", Mixed Migration Hub, December 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MHub-Trend-Bulletin-December-2016.pdf>

⁷ "Risk Analysis for 2016", Frontex, 2016, http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annula_Risk_Analysis_2016.pdf

⁸ Maggie Fick, "Nigeria and EU to start migrant return talks", Financial Times, 27 April 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/c082e124-0c77-11e6-b0f1-61f222853ff3>

⁹ "Monthly Trend Report", Mixed Migration Hub, December 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MHub-Trend-Bulletin-December-2016.pdf>

¹⁰ Mattia Toaldo, "The EU deal with Libya on migration: a question of fairness and effectiveness", ECRF, 14 February 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_eu_deal_with_libya_on_migration_a_question_of_fairness_a



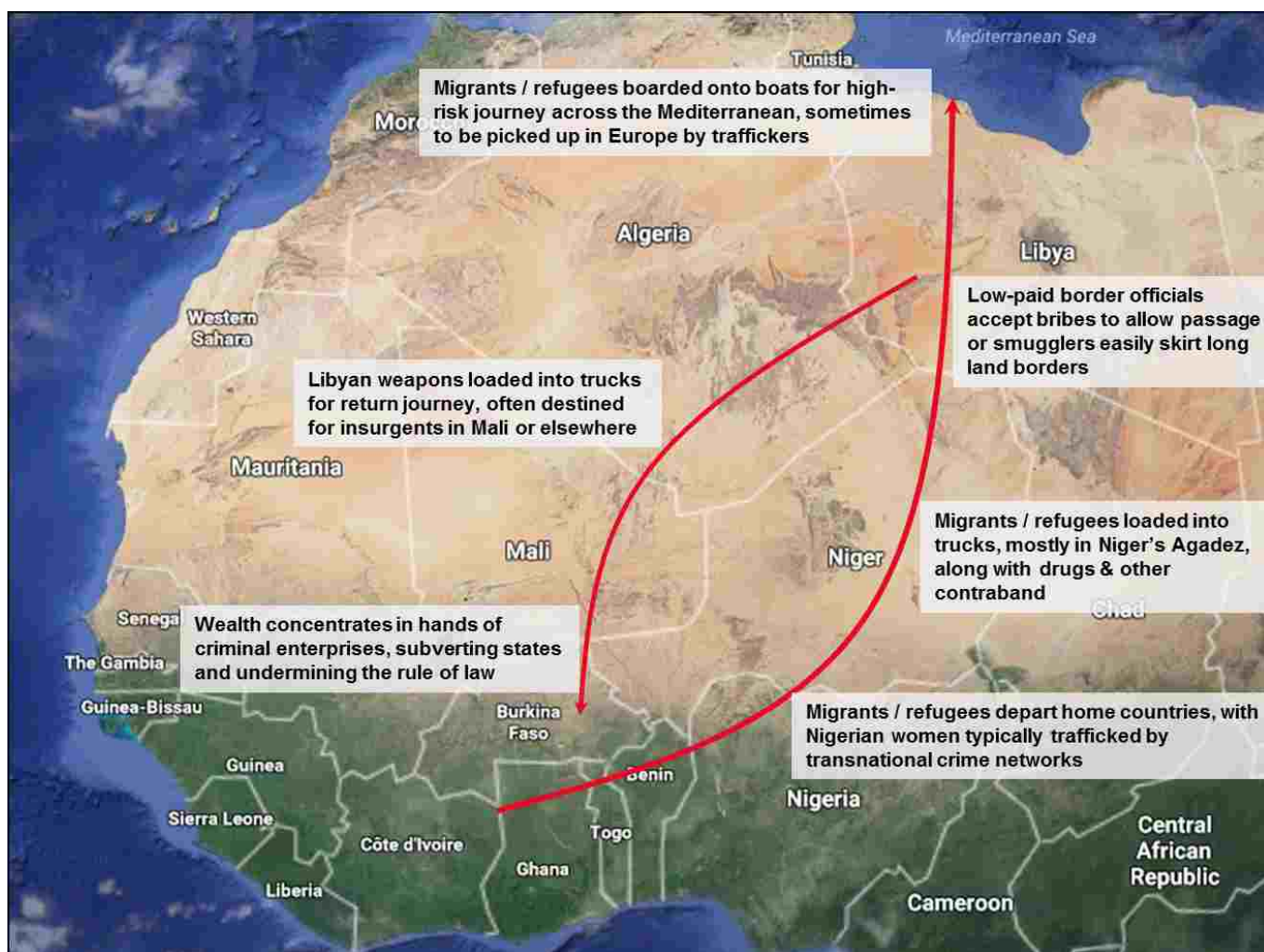


Figure 2: Map demonstrating circular trade routes for smuggling people, drugs, cigarettes and weapons. Such trade feeds localised insurgencies and conveys emigrants northwards to the Central Mediterranean route to Italy.¹¹ Infographic by Dominic MacIver

weapons overwhelmingly consist of small arms such as AK-47s, but may also include high explosives coming from the deep stocks of Gaddafi-era weapons, which are now controlled by Libya's various militias.¹²

Smuggling networks were well embedded in certain parts of Libya even under Muammar Gaddafi's regime. On more than one occasion, Gaddafi threatened to flood Europe with African migrants if his demands

for funding were not met.¹³ Libya's combination of established smuggling networks, ongoing conflict and a weak and fragmented state allows smugglers to act with impunity. As a result, the number of migrants reaching European shores via this route reached record levels after 2014 as the Libyan state fractured into multiple warring factions, allowing people smugglers to take advantage of the collapse of ground and naval security forces to dispatch boat after

¹¹ In the absence of reliable data concerning a relatively new economic driver, this graphic draws heavily on the investigative reporting of Malia Politzer and Emily Kassie, "The 21st Century Gold Rush: How the refugee crisis is changing the world economy", Huffington Post, 21 December 2016, <http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/the-21st-century-gold-rush-refugees/#/niger>.

¹² The criminal nature of the industry means that statistics are not readily available, but the UN Office on Drugs and Crime Country Factsheet found that AK-47s represented 50 per cent of weapons seizures in Niger in 2012. https://www.unodc.org/documents/firearms-protocol/Country_Factsheet_WEB.pdf.

¹³ Nick Squires, "Gaddafi: Europe will 'turn black' unless EU pays Libya £4bn a year", The Telegraph, 31 August 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/7973649/Gaddafi-Europe-will-turn-black-unless-EU-pays-Libya-4bn-a-year.html>



boat.¹⁴

Part of the reason that smuggling networks have remained deeply embedded in Saharan and Sahel societies is the disparity between the low pay of those employed in government institutions and state security forces and the wealth that can be earned from smuggling. This creates strong incentives for border guards, local police and politicians to accept bribes rather than confront criminals. The smuggling networks are not confined to the African continent. Criminal networks in Europe have profited from their involvement in the smuggling of illicit fuel, drugs and other substances across the Mediterranean into Europe. Transnational criminal networks are expanding into the trafficking of people. The Black Axe, a Nigerian criminal society, is involved in the trafficking of Nigerian women into prostitution in Italy, setting down roots in Palermo as a junior partner of the Cosa Nostra, its Sicilian counterpart.¹⁵

LACK OF EMPLOYMENT AND OPPORTUNITY DRIVES MIGRATION NORTH

Several trends sustaining this northward flow of people are unlikely to subside quickly. Many young people in West Africa are unable to access full and meaningful employment due to a high rate of population growth combined with low GDP growth rates and socio-economic systems that do not promote an equitable distribution of wealth. The continuing gap in income between the global north and south, as well as rising awareness of it as a result of technological advances ranging from social media to affordable smartphones, will continue to persuade young men to seek their fortunes elsewhere. In addition, the growth of diasporas in Western Europe will make attempting the journey more attractive and better value. In an age of social media and affordable technology, an aspiring migrant in Nigeria or Mali can easily learn how to make

the journey from a friend or relative in Italy or France.

Finally, if the security conditions in North Africa and the Sahel continue to deteriorate, leaving people vulnerable to exploitation by extremists, warlords and smugglers, many more will decide to take the high-risk journey northward. Libya's transition from a key destination for West Africans seeking employment to a feared halfway house on the route to Europe is one indicator of this

CLOSING TRANSIT ROUTES

Under pressure from uneasy voters and nationalist politicians, European governments have responded with a number of successful attempts to close off transit routes and mostly unsuccessful attempts to address the sources of the crisis. Given the difficulty of resolving the poverty, wars or dictatorships that drive migrants and refugees to depart Nigeria, Somalia or Eritrea, European authorities have focused on cutting off means of travel, particularly the smuggling networks involved in ferrying people across seas and continents, and blocking borders, notably those of the Schengen free movement zone, which has effectively been closed through south-eastern Europe since 2015.

However, in contrast with the West Balkan route, efforts to close the Central Mediterranean route have largely been unsuccessful, undermined by the chaos in Libya and the complex insurgencies in north-eastern Mali, both of which undermine efforts to close borders and arrest smugglers operating through Niger and elsewhere.

Despite the efforts of European governments to reduce the numbers of people arriving illegally, there is little reason to expect these numbers to decline when migratory push factors appear to be growing stronger. In addition, as diasporas grow they reduce the investment costs of travel and make it more

¹⁴ "Central Mediterranean Route", Frontex, 2017, <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/central-mediterranean-route/>

¹⁵ Lorenzo Tondo, "Mafia at a crossroads as Nigerian gangsters hit Sicily's shores", 11 June 2016, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/11/mafia-palermo-nigerian-gangsters-hit-sicily-shores>



attractive for future emigrants to resettle in new host countries, accelerating the pace of migration.¹⁶ Rates of emigration are likely to continue to rise unless the political backlash forcefully closes routes for travel.

ADDRESSING POPULAR FEARS: JIHADISM AND MIGRATION

The threat of jihadist groups infiltrating Europe via these migration routes, or generating income to fund terrorist attacks through smuggling activities, has been cited frequently in recent years by populist politicians and right-wing media outlets in Europe seeking to garner support for stringent immigration policies, contributing to heightened mistrust and resentment of migrants.¹⁷ It is along the Central Mediterranean route that these two popular fears overlap most definitively: mass emigration – as distinct from the displacement of refugees who wish one day to return home – and jihadist terrorist groups active in Mali, Libya and elsewhere.

Even where there is overlap, nuance is required in investigating any direct linkages. Security challenges and the clandestine nature of migration routes complicate the pursuit of rigorous data. Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), operating out of Mali, habitually kidnap aid workers and journalists. The state of anarchy in Libya makes it hard to come by reliable data there. The criminal networks that control illicit trade routes in Niger and elsewhere do not publish quarterly statements.

Nevertheless, investigative reporting and data collection by bodies such as the UN's International Organisation of Migration (IOM) demonstrate that there are clear connections relevant to policy-makers who wish to tackle both jihadist terrorism and transnational

organised crime networks. The most serious are the two-way trade routes that ferry migrants northward and transport Libyan weapons southward, as described in figure 2.¹⁸

JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE SAHEL

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the leading transnational jihadist group in West Africa. Paradoxically, even as it has sown chaos by filtering into the uncontrolled spaces of north-eastern Mali and the Sahara, its leadership – based in Algeria's Kabylia region and reporting directly to the al-Qaeda high command in Afghanistan-Pakistan – has often proven weak and divided. Scraps of information that have emerged into the public domain show a weak organisation beset by internal rivalries and largely unable to control its most effective battle commander, Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

AQIM has planted itself in north-eastern Algeria while operating in neighbouring countries, particularly Mauritania and Mali. It emerged out of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), itself a faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which was the most active terrorist group in Algeria's Islamist insurgency of the 1990s. Formed in 1998 and led by veterans of the war in Afghanistan, the GSPC gained its al-Qaeda affiliate status in 2006 and changed its name a year later to AQIM. Its emir is Abdelmalik Droukdel, who reports directly to al-Qaeda's leaders: first Osama bin Laden and, since 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

THE AQIM MODUS OPERANDI: KIDNAPPINGS AND DESTABILISATION

AQIM has adopted the current al-Qaeda modus operandi, combining rare high-profile attacks with kidnappings, ambushes and

¹⁶ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Migration, Diasporas and Culture: an Empirical Investigation", CSAE Working Paper, No. WPS/2014-27, August 2014, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/272a/77b353e38c7a65ebfbf1fa495c3b21d31167.pdf>

¹⁷ James Rothwell, "Majority of Paris attackers used migration routes to enter Europe, reveals Hungarian counter-terror chief", The Telegraph, 2 October 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/02/majority-of-paris-attackers-used-migration-routes-to-enter-europ/>

¹⁸ Malia Politzer and Emily Kassie, "The 21st Century Gold Rush: How the refugee crisis is changing the world economy", Huffington Post, 21 December 2016, <http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/the-21st-century-gold-rush-refugees/#/niger>

lightning raids conducted by a narrow cadre of dedicated insurgents. In contrast with the Islamic State (IS) strategy of holding territory and suppressing local enemies, AQIM has adopted al-Qaeda's emphasis, since the rise of IS, on developing close ties with local allies. Belmokhtar is believed to have formed marriage alliances with several groups in his main area of operation, including with the al-Amhar/Lamhar tribe from Gao, the Barabich tribe from Timbuktu and with Tunisian jihadists linked to the Libyan jihadist stronghold of Derna.¹⁹

Relations between Belmokhtar and the AQIM leadership have been far less successful, however. Evidence such as the account of a kidnapped Canadian diplomat and internal letters found in Timbuktu reveal Belmokhtar's contempt for the AQIM leadership. One Timbuktu letter in particular is a scathing, blow-by-blow account of the disagreements between Belmokhtar and the AQIM leaders, who criticise the militant commander for failing to submit his expenses, negotiating a poor ransom for high-value hostages, failing to answer his phone and refusing to dedicate his fighters to committing a high-profile attack.²⁰ Belmokhtar may have been stung by the criticism, for he dispatched his fighters to stage the In Amenas attack on a gas facility on the Algeria-Libya border just a week after the letter was dated, leading to the deaths of 39 hostages and 29 militants, mostly at the hands of the Algerian military.

A key source of tension was Belmokhtar's feud with Abu Zeid, a rival AQIM battalion commander in his area of operations. In 2009, the two commanders engaged in kidnapping western tourists in a tit-for-tat competition.

Belmokhtar's loathing for Abu Zeid was described in the account of his kidnapping of Robert Fowler, a Canadian diplomat and the UN special envoy to Niger at the time. Fowler said he was fairly well treated during his captivity, but said that Belmokhtar was clearly outraged at the abuse of two European women held by Abu Zeid's brigade.²¹ Belmokhtar negotiated the release of Fowler, his colleague and the two European women without the permission of Abu Zeid or the AQIM leadership, leading to the condemnations outlined in the Timbuktu letter.

ATTRACTING LOCAL ALLIES

Nevertheless, AQIM has proven to be a resilient entity, moving fighters across porous desert borders, kidnapping for ransom, mounting destabilising attacks across a wide field and adopting a fluid and adaptive political strategy that succeeds by attracting allies with appeals to highly-localised grievances.²² This has allowed its command structures to endure in the Kabylia region, where Amazigh resentment of Arab subjugation ensures that local communities refuse to cooperate with Algeria's strong and otherwise effective security forces.²³ Its approach has been most successful, however, in Mali, where it has formed alliances with various marginalised communities, expanding its reach.

One of the most effective jihadist groups in this nebula of AQIM-linked armed factions has been Ansar Dine, a mostly-Tuareg militant group headed by the veteran rebel Iyad Ag Ghaly. Another close ally was the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

¹⁹ According to anonymous Algerian intelligence sources cited in "Captured wife of Mokhtar Belmokhtar confirms militant leader 'alive'", The Middle East Eye, 23 November 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/mokhtar-belmokhtar-still-alive-one-his-wives-confirms-1187655554>

²⁰ "Al-Qaida Papers: A disciplinary letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department", Associated Press, dated 3 October 2012, <http://www.wikileaks-forum.com/ap-al-qaeda-papers/606/al-qaeda-papers-a-disciplinary-letter-from-al-qaedaand700s-hr-department/25471/>

²¹ Robert Fowler, "A Season in Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al Qaeda", (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2011), pp. 264-265.

²² "Mali-Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press, Accessed 4 January 2017, http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaeda-manifesto.pdf

²³ Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf



(MUJAO), which had splintered off from AQIM, reportedly in opposition to the Algerian militants' refusal to award command positions to black Africans. A more obscure outfit is the Macina Liberation Front (MCF), an Ansar Dine affiliate that draws fighters from marginalised Fulani nomads, who inhabit the central Mopti region.

RISE OF AQIM IN NORTH-EASTERN MALI

AQIM's strategy has been most effective in north-eastern Mali, where various jihadist factions formed an alliance of convenience with Tuareg rebels from the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) to pursue a separatist state. This rebellion temporarily seized swathes of the country from January 2012, before a French-led military intervention a year later restored government control. A tenuous peace enforced by UN peacekeepers held in the run-up to a peace deal in 2015, but the deal remains patchy and incomplete. Islamist insurgents continue to operate to the present day, as local minorities grow alienated by the repressive approach taken by the Malian army and government, which is dominated by Mali's ethnic Bambara majority.

In the midst of the rebellion, the Tuareg nationalists and the jihadists soon fell out, even as they controlled Mali's north-eastern towns and cities, including the lawless desert outpost of Kidal, the historic cultural centre of Timbuktu and the economic hub of Gao. By July 2012, the Islamists had seized control from the MNLA. At this time, Mali's government had collapsed, taken over by a military coup led by mid-ranking soldiers angry at the government's failure to maintain control over the north. It appears to have been only the French military intervention and subsequent UN-African Union deployments that prevented the country's collapse.

Although the political situation in Bamako has since stabilised with the return to civilian rule, north-eastern Mali continues to be a critical

safe haven for jihadist insurgents to launch terrorist attacks further afield. In the space of five months in 2015-2016, AQIM-linked militants attacked the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou and the L'Etoile du Sud resort in Cote d'Ivoire. In January this year, AQIM claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in a French-UN base in Gao that killed 50 and injured more than 100, attributing it to Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun battalion.²⁴

JIHADIST FRANCHISES

Meanwhile, IS has received a pledge of allegiance from jihadists operating in Mali. Abu Walid al-Sahrawi first pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015, but IS only acknowledged it publicly in October 2016. IS franchises in peripheral conflict zones, which it calls provinces ("wilayat"), have attracted less attention than the core organisation in Syria and Iraq. This is primarily the result of their lower capability, as they are typically faced down by effective local opponents, whether the Taliban in Afghanistan or post-revolutionary militias backed by Western special forces and airstrikes in Libya. Nevertheless, the IS brand retains a cogent ideological appeal for a subsection of distressed regions.

In contrast, al-Qaeda, although weakened in its core, has become strong in some local outposts, particularly Syria and Yemen, via its franchises there. This has come as a result of middle management's embrace of the centre's advice to insert itself into local dynamics, which has helped to establish resilient jihadist insurgencies in the likes of Somalia and Yemen. The same process appears to have taken hold in Mali, with an expanding militant network represented by Belmokhtar and his allies. The danger is that these groups will infiltrate themselves into local society, undermining the rule of law and existing political structures and economic relationships.

²⁴ Caleb Weiss, "AQIM claims massive suicide attack on Malian base", Long War Journal, 18 January 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/suicide-attack-targets-military-base-in-northern-mali.php>

MOVEMENT OF FIGHTERS

Fears of jihadist fighters infiltrating Europe from North Africa routes are widespread, particularly after the IS attack in Tunisia and the seizure of Sirte in 2015. While it would be possible for jihadist fighters to cross into Europe in this way, the journey is high-risk and would be difficult to undertake carrying weapons or explosives. Furthermore, although some jihadi fighters are believed to have used the West Balkans route to return to Europe after fighting or training in Syria and Iraq,²⁵ the majority of high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe in recent years have been conducted by people living in, or visiting, Europe legally, whether they were individuals conducting 'lone wolf' attacks or clandestine cells following orders from attack planners communicating via encrypted messaging apps from locations such as Raqqa and Mosul.

Nevertheless, the ability of jihadist groups to move fighters and weapons freely within North Africa is a significant cause for concern as it provides a safe haven for recruitment, indoctrination and training while contributing to the destabilisation of the wider region. In turn, this will propagate further violence and create additional push factors for those considering migrating to Europe.

INCOME STREAMS FOR JIHADIST GROUPS

There have been many suggestions that some of the jihadist militants operating in the Sahara earn revenue from their role in smuggling. The most notorious figure in this regard is the AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who has

been given the nickname "Mr Marlboro", mainly in the international press, supposedly the result of his involvement in cigarette smuggling in the 1990s.²⁶ According to Jean-Pierre Filiu, professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Sciences Po, from whose research the nickname emerged, Belmokhtar's smuggling revenues allowed him to avoid extorting money from the local population. The practice of extracting wealth from the region's Amazigh communities had meant that the GSPC and then AQIM initially struggled to attract popular support in its Kabylia stronghold.

Although this nickname has been widely repeated, it has been questioned by others, such as the Mauritanian journalist Lemine Ould Salem, whose interviews with government officials and traffickers in the region insist Belmokhtar was never involved in cigarette smuggling networks. Instead, they insist Belmokhtar's fighters frequently intercepted and burned contraband convoys, burning cargos on the grounds they were forbidden by Islamic law.²⁷ Various other explanations have emerged for the persistent rumours about AQIM's link to organised crime, such as that the militants either run protection rackets in the illicit economy or provide security for convoys, or a combination of the two, burning convoys that did not pay the group off and protecting convoys that did.

There have also been claims that the Islamic State's Libyan branch generated income via its involvement in the smuggling of drugs, antiquities and people through the coastal city of Sirte, which it controlled from February 2015 to December 2016. However, these claims have never been proven and are likely to have been exaggerated. It is believed IS in Libya earned revenues through predation as

²⁵ James Rothwell, "Majority of Paris attackers used migration routes to enter Europe, reveals Hungarian counter-terror chief", The Telegraph, 2 October 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/02/majority-of-paris-attackers-used-migration-routes-to-enter-europ/>

²⁶ In print, this moniker dates back to a publication by the French historian Jean-Pierre Filiu, who reported that Belmokhtar replaced the loss of income from extortion from the local population with smuggling after he swapped allegiances between militant groups. Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf

²⁷ Lemine Ould Salem, "Le Ben Laden du Sahara: Sur les Traces du Jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar", (Paris: La Martiniere, 2014) pp.42-45.



Number of hostages	Ransom date	Reported ransom total (\$ million)	Average per hostage (\$ million)
15	August 2003	6	0.4
2	November 2008	4	2
2	April 2009	6.5	3.2
3	July 2009	3.9	1.3
2	February 2010	6.5	3.2
3	April 2010	10.3	3.4
3	August 2010	10.3	3.4
5	February 2011	16.8	3.3
2	April 2012	5.2	2.6
3	July 2012	19.4	6.4
4	October 2013	34.2	8.6

a result of its territorial control: extorting taxes from residents, charging road tolls on traffic, accessing the state salaries of local citizens and seizing goods from residents fleeing the city.²⁸

REVENUE FROM KIDNAPPING

In contrast with the lack of certainty surrounding the role of smuggling revenues in militant financing, it is certain that kidnap ransoms have been a critical component of jihadists' operating revenues. AQIM itself was funded partly with ransom money obtained from the first major kidnapping of a large group of Europeans in 2003, for which Belmokhtar received around USD 6 million. According to the estimates shown below, AQIM brought in as much as \$123 million in ransoms between 2003 and 2013. It appears that the payment of ransoms ended after the French government drew condemnation for paying a ransom of a reported EUR 25 million for four hostages in 2013.

WHO ARE THE SMUGGLERS?

There is little clear evidence that AQIM or its

various allies – focused as they are on the internal politics of creating an Islamic state and financing rebel activities – play a direct role in trafficking migrants. Much of the testimony of migrants on the Central Mediterranean route suggests that smugglers are often nationals of West African countries from which the migrants originate. For example, public prosecutors in Agadez said that that some 100 arrested smugglers were “of different West African nationalities, but especially Nigerians”.²⁹ Libyans and Nigeriens are also involved, but rigorous statistics are not readily available.

The increase in irregular migration has occurred now primarily because of the collapse of the state in Libya, which has opened up the country's coastline to smugglers. Insecurity in Libya has allowed the diverse Amazigh communities that have historically operated trading routes across the Sahara to ramp up the pace of smuggling. These include the mostly nomadic Tuareg, particularly among the Barabich and the al-Amhar, the tribes that the AQIM commander Belmokhtar reportedly has married into.³⁰

²⁸ James Roslington and Jason Pack, “Who Pays for ISIS In Libya?”, Hate Speech International, August 2016, <https://www.hate-speech.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/isis-rapport.pdf>

²⁹ Ibrahim Manzo Diallo, “EU strategy stems migrant flow from Niger, but at what cost?”, IRIN News, 2 February 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/special-report/2017/02/02/eu-strategy-stems-migrant-flow-niger-what-cost>

³⁰ Andrew Lebovich, “The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali”, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, June 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali>

STRUCTURAL CONNECTION BETWEEN JIHADISM AND SMUGGLING

It is possible that the connection between jihadism and smuggling in the region is structural rather than causal. There are indications of a symbiotic relationship between jihadist groups and smugglers. Both are part symptom and part cause of wider state failure in the region as criminal economies offer incentives for all to subvert legitimate state structures.

Jihadist groups and smuggling networks are able to take root due to the power vacuum created by a lack of security, stability and state control in the region. Meanwhile, the population of vulnerable and determined individuals created by such conditions provides the opportunity for illicit profits. As state security forces deteriorate or resort to corruption and repression, jihadist groups may find more malleable recruits in the form of marginalised young men who feel abandoned by their governments. Smugglers, for their part, find customers and middlemen willing to risk it all to seek a better life elsewhere, creating a feedback loop.

Once established, both do their part to maintain the status quo. The AQIM modus operandi of high-profile attacks, kidnappings and ambushes will perpetuate insecurity and economic damage in the region, while the deep penetration of smuggling activities into local economies through bribes, gainful employment and access to black market goods and weapons ensures that the smugglers come to control trade throughout the region.

EUROPEAN RESPONSE

It is this structural problem that the European Union sought to tackle in 2015 by launching the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, a 2 billion aid programme aimed at securing

support from West African governments to tackle illicit migration. Niger, for example, has received a promise of 610 million in development aid if it takes action to stop migrant smuggling. In December, the fund announced a 37 million package to increase migrant protection and strengthen migration management in North Africa, along with an additional 100 million for an IOM initiative focusing on migrant protection and reintegration of returnees along the Central Mediterranean migration routes.³¹

However, the main focus of European support is on preventing migrants from entering Europe. In late 2014, Italy's Mare Nostrum search-and-rescue mission in the Mediterranean was axed following concerns that search-and-rescue missions were acting as a pull factor for migrants planning to cross the Mediterranean. It was replaced by Operation Triton, a Frontex operation with a much narrower border-control remit, yet unsurprisingly the numbers of people attempting the crossing did not diminish. In June 2015, the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was launched with a mandate "to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean",³² and in February 2017 Italy signed a controversial Memorandum of Understanding on migration with the UN-backed Libyan government, including returning boats to Libya and creating migrant processing and repatriation centres in Libya.

The international community has taken a similarly narrow approach to the rise of jihadist groups in North Africa and the Sahel, shaping policy in purely counter-terror terms. In Libya, the US bombed an IS training camp in Sabratha near the Tunisian border in February 2016, and in August the same year launched Operation Odyssey Lightning to support Libyan fighters nominally allied to the UN-backed government of Libya to retake Sirte

³¹ "Monthly Trend Report," Mixed Migration Hub, December 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MHub-Trend-Bulletin-December-2016.pdf>

³² "About EUNAVFOR MED Operation SOPHIA", European External Action Service, 1 March 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/csdp-missions-operations/eunavfor-med/36/about-eunavfor-med-operation-sophia_en



from IS. They succeeded in evicting IS from Sirte in December 2016, after eight months of fighting. French airstrikes in southern Libya in November 2016 reportedly targeted and killed several senior AQIM operatives, and there were claims that Belmoktar was among the dead. However, Belmoktar's death has been reported several times over the last decade, including by the US government, which claimed to have killed him during an airstrike on Ajdabiya in eastern Libya in 2015.³³

Despite the resources dedicated to them, aid programmes and counter-terror interventions are unlikely to create sustainable changes unless the underlying political issues are addressed, in particular the absence of viable economic opportunities, the corruption that deters investment and holds back growth, and the inevitable incentives that will attract determined migrants to seek better opportunities for themselves and their families in Europe. Policy responses that focus on migration and jihadism as discrete problems rather than interlinked regional issues will only ever treat the symptoms rather than the underlying causes.

TREAT THE CAUSE, NOT THE SYMPTOM

The flow of refugees and migrants into Europe reached crisis levels in 2015, with an ever-growing tally of deaths in the Mediterranean, worsening conditions in refugee camps across Europe and no end to the flow of people making the dangerous journeys north. According to populist nationalists, Europe will be taken over from within, Western civilisation undermined by the naïve incompetence of liberal elites and the decadence of wealthy cosmopolitans. These fears have contributed to the UK's vote for Brexit and to the rise of the populist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in France.

South-north migration through the Central and West Mediterranean routes also spiked in

the 2014-2016 period. These routes are more controversial by virtue of the nationalities using it. While the West Balkans route is favoured by people fleeing Syria, whose plight attracts sympathy, those crossing the Mediterranean further west tend to come from countries where the suffering is of a lower priority. Emigrant countries such as Nigeria, Mali and Gambia are widely perceived to be sources of "economic migrants", a category of persons afforded less legal protection than refugees or asylum seekers under international humanitarian law.

The growing presence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State franchises in North Africa and the Sahel has compounded popular fears that jihadi groups will either infiltrate Europe via these migration routes, or will use their control of territory in the region to "flood" Europe with migrants in the same way that Gaddafi once threatened to do, in an attempt to destabilise Western societies.³⁴ As a result, this led European nations to adopt policies purely focused on cutting off transit routes and preventing jihadist groups from seizing territory in the southern Mediterranean.

And yet, although reliable information on this phenomenon is difficult to come by, there is little evidence to suggest that jihadist groups are directly involved in people smuggling or that they are using the Central Mediterranean route to infiltrate Europe. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State franchises in the region generate income primarily through ransoms, extortion or protection rackets, while their modus operandi relies on infiltrating local communities and using local recruits to conduct spectacular terrorist attacks, mainly in North and West Africa. The threat of individual jihadists illegally crossing the Mediterranean into Europe is negligible in comparison to the threat posed by potential sympathisers already based in Europe.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a clear

³³ Gordon Lubold and Matthew Dalton, "U.S.-French Operation Targeted Elusive North African Militant, U.S. Says", The Wall Street Journal, 27 November 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-french-operation-targeted-elusive-north-african-militant-u-s-says-1480276417?mod=e2tw>

³⁴ Aaron Brown, "Islamic State threaten to 'flood Europe with half a MILLION Libyan migrants'", The Express, 19 February 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/559210/Islamic-State-ISIL-Flood-Europe-Libya-Migrants>



structural link between the rise in the numbers of people risking the dangerous Central Mediterranean crossing and the growing presence of jihadist groups in the Sahel. The deterioration of state control, violence, poverty and lack of opportunity allows smugglers to ply their trade unhindered and jihadists to access weapons, funds and recruits. Similar conditions in parts of Europe allow criminal networks such as the Italian mafia to operate with impunity, providing a crucial link between smuggling networks across the continental divide.

Globalisation means that it will become ever more difficult to close borders to those who have been described as the “bottom billion” in the poorest countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, who face various traps that prevent

them from getting richer, such as civil war, bad governance and dependence on the extraction and export of natural resources.³⁵

Contrary to the aspirations of a utopian strand of liberal thought, public opinion in the rich North will not tolerate an opening of borders to those in the poor South. As such, hard borders will remain critical. But they will not solve the problem. All they can do is delay the consequences of global disparities in wealth and opportunity. European governments should support measures that alleviate the massive income differentials that drive emigration, as well as the conflict and governance failures that force others to flee. It is only by tackling the underlying causes that long-term solutions will be found.

³⁵ Paul Collier, “The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It”, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).





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