



ILLICIT TRAFFICKING IN NORTH AFRICA AND SAHEL (QUICK OVERVIEW)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The illicit trafficking's development that today characterizes North Africa and Sahel is a relevant element in financing terrorist groups in these areas. North Africa and Sahel are populated by nomadic tribes historically characterized by trading activities, including smuggling, as essential part of their economy, culture and means of survival.

In order to address this illicit trafficking, in which economic, social and cultural are intertwined, a comprehensive approach is needed with an integrated strategy that manages to give, in the long term, development alternatives to the region.

KEY WORDS:

Illicit trafficking, Maghreb, Sahel, Tuareg, Fulani, Berbers, Tobou, demographic, droughts, IDPs, refugees, starvation, Arab Spring, MUJAO, Ansar Dine, MNLA, UN, transnational criminal networks, AQIM, , terrorist networks, organized crime, arms, weapons, drugs and human trafficking, BH, mafia's style, Azawad, SALW, weapon stockpiles, foreign fighters, non-state actors, SLA-MM, JEM, cannabis, cocaine and heroin, DAESH, DAESH-L, ISGS, trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, exploitation, JNIM, AAS-L, kidnapping for ransom, cybercrime, G5 Sahel, EU, UNODC, UNOWAS, DPKO, UNDP, MINUSMA

HIGHLIGHTS:

Main factors shaping North Africa and Sahel are:

- Historical: classic trade routes, historical conflicts, decolonization process creating new states.*
- Geographical: wide coasts, deserts and large porous borders.*
- Political: institutional weakness, corruption, poor governance.*
- Demographic and economic: high birth rates, unemployed youth population, chaotic urbanization process, poverty, underdevelopment wealth inequity, uncontrolled markets, fragile commercial regulation and corruption.*
- Social: poor human development (healthy and education), divided and polarized society (ethnic, clans and tribes).*
- Security: poor law enforcement, widely extended traditional smuggling activities, ineffective border control, involvement of terrorist networks in the illicit trafficking's management.*

BACKGROUND

The Maghreb is the Arabic name for the North-West part of Africa, generally including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and sometimes Libya, West Sahara and Mauritania (Great Maghreb). In the South of Maghreb there is the Sahel region, an arid zone highly conditioned by its climate. Nestled between the Sahara desert in the north and savannah in the south it stretches across Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea over an area with the same size as the European Union (EU), from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. As a whole, all these areas are subject to a combination of destabilizing shocks, both internal and external.

The region faces particular vulnerabilities due to factors such as geography, poor governance and demographics, though the most common and unrelenting affliction for the Sahel has been regular and severe droughts.

The illicit trafficking, as well as the increase in migration and the threat of terrorism has sparked a new interest in the Maghreb and Sahel region. Most of the study's conclusions about security in the region highlight the importance of the age-old trade routes in the proliferation of criminal activities.

Historically, this part of the continent has always been a profitable area for informal trade, an area where the main communication routes were controlled, and still are, by different nomadic tribes such as the Tuareg, the Fulani, the Berbers and the Tobou. The routes, used today by traffickers, have been more or less traversed by nomad and merchants for centuries; the only major change has been the leap from the camel to the pickup truck.

It is important to note that most of the challenges confronting this region pre-date the Arab Spring, but they have been exacerbated in the wake of conflict and instability in Libya and Mali.

ILLICIT TRAFFICKING DEFINITION

A precise universal and formal statement to define illicit trafficking does not exist but the United States Court of Appeals' ruling provides a short comprehensive definition: "illicit trafficking" can be defined as "illegal trading, selling or dealing in specified goods"¹.

However, there is a United Nations (UN) precise definition² of Organized Criminal Group: "A structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit."

Traffickers' benefit is the most profitable form of income and particularly takes advantage of a society where many people do not have a clear perception of the differences between lawful and illicit affairs due, historically, to a very latent State presence.

In this environment, criminal activities are linked in a complex local and transnational network, involving both big and minor actors, that finances their "own survival" by the exchange of goods and services, frequently outside the law and often enabling terrorists to thrive.

ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

The existence of transnational criminal networks across the region has in all likelihood facilitated the entry of new violent groups in the region. Terrorism, much like increased illegal activity, constitutes not only a security threat but also an economic one; kidnapping for ransom by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) over the past two years, for example, has reduced tourism and hurt local, already poor, economies.

Another regional instability factor is the population's high dependence on rain-fed agriculture. Droughts have led to poor harvests, resulting in food and pastoral crises and placing millions in extreme poverty and at risk of hunger, malnutrition and disease.

Finally, rapid population growth has been another contributing factor to the instability in the region and is expected to increasingly affect human and food security as well. In the case of Sahel, the population is expected to double within the next 30 years.

The demographic pressure, combined with the presence of a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), from conflicts dating back to the 1990s, can upset fragile internal balances and inter-state tensions.

Economic insecurity resulting from chronic crises, lack of infrastructure, and access to essential services has caused poverty and unemployment, leading people to seek alternative livelihoods; in many cases, leading to participation in widespread illegal activities.

This scenario creates fertile soil for the terrorist groups that have their roots in the region to finance themselves, through their "regional franchising". At the same time, the terrorist groups are reinforcing their presence in the area and improving the links with the local communities. This includes the recruitment of many potential terrorists from the young inhabitants and the establishment of training camps.

¹ United States Court of Appeals decree: *J. Ramon URENA-RAMIREZ, Petitioner, v. J. ASHCROFT, Attorney General, Respondent* - 341 F.3d 51, 57.

² Definition included in the United Nations Resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000 (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime).

Since its founding in 2007, the Algerian-run AQIM has been a key-actor in the Sahel-Saharan region. Following Algeria's fight to contain it, AQIM developed networks in the Sahara, cooperating with smuggling rings in the region. AQIM has been consolidating its hold in northern Mali through control of existing drug trafficking networks, kidnapping ransoms, inflow of arms from Libya along with armed fighters, and armed and extremist groups seeking to expand their activities in the region. In the last years, its tactical choice has been operating in the rear, gaining ground and improving its operational potential; in fact its rooting strengthens thanks to the large base of common economic interests.

Taking inspiration from AQIM, the financing model of jihadist group Boko Haram (BH) has also developed through territorial control in North East Nigeria. It manages the "taxation" of drug trafficking, tobacco, energy resources and fish from the area of Lake Chad, carrying out a system with dynamics more akin to the mafia. Specifically, Boko Haram owes much of its founding to the control of those communications routes that cross the State of Borno, which become an essential hub for trafficking from East Africa.

All the terrorist groups use the local ethnic community net to develop their affairs, while at the same time, improve already strong territorial links (sometimes these bonds are even formalized and strengthened by blood ties) through their aid and support to local communities which limit development and keep the communities at dependent upon the terrorist groups.

The three main traffics in the region are weapons, drugs and humans.

Weapons trafficking

- **Definition**

According the UN Resolution 55/255 (2001), "Weapons illicit trafficking³ shall mean the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from across the territory of one State Party to that another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it in accordance with the terms of this Protocol or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with article 8 of this Protocol".

- **Drivers, routes and actors**

Several African states produce arms, but most arms circulating in the illegal economy are sourced externally, so most of the guns in circulation are originated from outside. The movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW) into Africa is a clear case of an externally supplied but locally engaged criminal market which responds to the demand, driven by conflicts, crime and peoples' perception of insecurity.

Relationships between arms suppliers and African states are often formed during periods of conflict, or where regimes are under arms embargoes. This control regime has created a symbiosis between the arms trade, political interests and the illicit economy in parts of the continent, whereby mining concessions or access to natural resources are bargained in exchange for arms, an exchange that is used to disguise payment.

Africa is a major destination for SALW; it is reported that about 100 million of them are in circulation, stockpiled or in private possession on the continent.

After the Cold War, there was a time when West Africa received tons of armaments from the former Warsaw Pact countries. This weaponry dominates the market: for reasons of training, spare parts,

³ Definition included in United Nations Resolution 55/255 of 31 May 2001 (Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime).

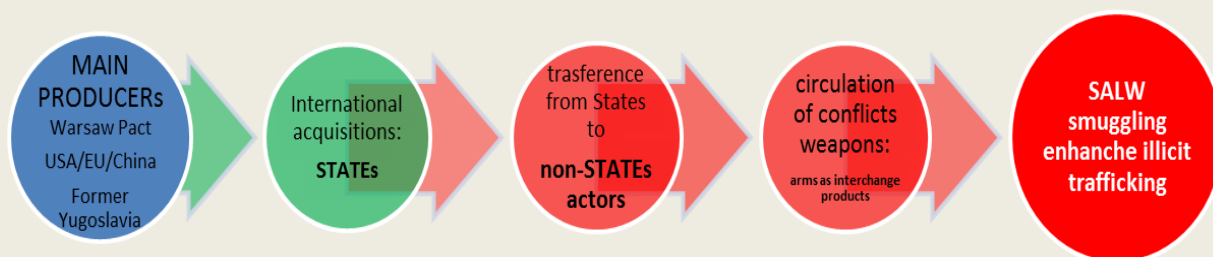
ammunition, and habit, these weapons continue to be preferred some decades after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, most of the assault rifles detected are of the Kalashnikov variety.

This era of arms imports has largely passed, because today, regional supply can satisfy demand. On the one hand, the number of civil wars in Africa has declined since the 1990s, reducing demand but, on the other, the firearms trafficked during those years did not evaporate, and continue to be re-circulated throughout the region.

- **Routes and actors**

The primary source of arms appears to be official state stocks, legitimately procured but diverted to the illicit market. Criminals seem to be able to get what they need from the local security forces, buying or renting weapons from corrupt elements. The imports that do occur are not made through underground arms brokers, but rather through mainstream commercial channels, and then directed through corrupt officials or complicit governments to criminals and rebel groups.

Libya has been a centre of weapon proliferation for more than 40 years. Muammar Qaddafi's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya amassed one of the largest and most diverse conventional weapon stockpiles of any African country. The regime used this stockpile in its own border conflicts, and to supply a wide range of governments and rebel groups across Africa, the Middle East, and beyond.

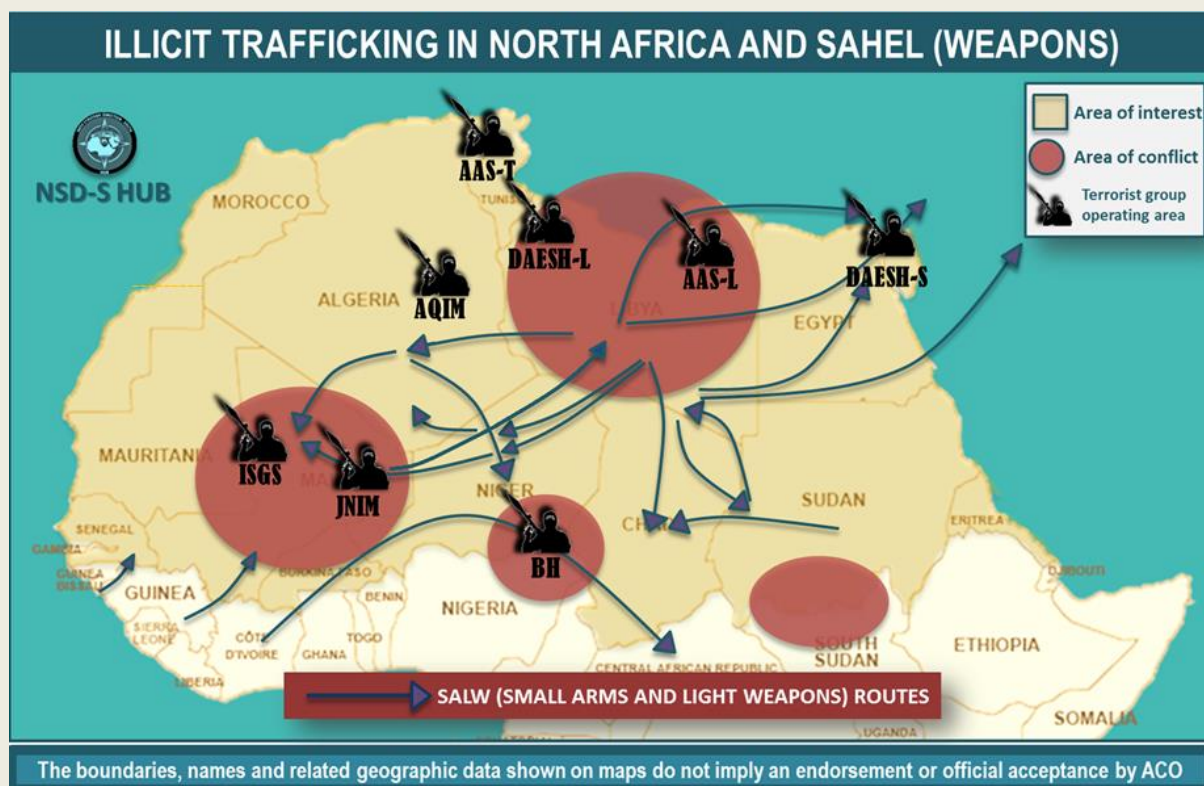


SALW - African flow dynamics

Unsecured weapons storage facilities that were previously guarded by the Libyan government are the main source of the outflow. The movement of these weapons across state borders by former fighters (large numbers of Tuareg fighters, who had been recruited by Qaddafi, Maghawir Brigade, and other parts of the Libyan Army left for Mali and Niger in 2011) has led to the proliferation of arms, to the benefit of arms traffickers and terrorist and other armed groups operating in the region. The large-scale movements of foreign fighters fuelled the transfer of weapons.

Conflict Armament Research Institute (CAR) documented materiel obtained directly from Qaddafi-era stockpiles, captured from DAESH-Libya (DAESH-L) forces in Sirte, and seized or purchased from local ethnic militias or smugglers. Weapons flow move from Libya to non-state actors in Mali, Central African Republic, Chad–Libya border area, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

Since before the Qaddafi's fall, the primary transit route of weapons and armed groups between Libya and northern Mali has historically run through the Salvador Pass area, along the Algerian and Nigerien border. This route then crosses the Taoua and Tillabéry regions of western Niger, entering Mali around the Niger–Mali–Burkina Faso tri-border area. Tuareg fighters and civilians in particular have used this route to move from southern Libya to northern Mali (between Ubari and Sebha to Kidal region). These movements continue to be orchestrated through a combination of communal and commercial loyalties.



Another Libyan outflow is to and via Chad. The large region of Tibesti, near the Chad–Libya border, constitutes a strategic location along the major trafficking routes that cross the Sahel close to Libya. It has ethnic and historical commonalities with southern Libya, northern Niger and Chad (Tebou groups). The area plays a key role in trans-border trade, both legal and illicit, between Chad, Libya, and Niger, underpinned primarily by Tebou commercial networks. There were three main weapon trafficking routes between mid-2011 and late 2012 (after 2012 the Libyan outflows transiting diminished but remain nowadays):

- East–West route along the northern border to Niger, Algeria, and northern Mali.
- South/South-East route following the border with Sudan, supplying the Sudan Liberation Army–Minni Minnawi (SLA–MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).
- South-West route transiting through Chad to the Lake Chad Basin region.

The Libyan stockpiles have not been the only points of origin for these movements. Outflow from Libya has diminished and, in some cases, reversed during the last five years. While these reductions are partly because of border security enforcement and convoy interdiction by national and international forces in the area, the reverse flow also reflects rising internal Libyan demand, particularly in the southern areas of the country.

Mali and Ivory Coast have also seen national arms stockpiles diverted for trafficking, probably caused by partial or major state crises. Outflows from Ivorian state stockpiles are less well understood than those from Mali. Weapons that likely originate in Ivorian stockpiles have been seen as far afield as the Central African Republic and some evidence linked AQIM fighters, near the Nigerien–Libyan, to Ivorian SALW stockpiles⁴

In addition, the reported presence of Middle Eastern SALW in Sahel terrorist attacks, denote an emerging trend in arms smuggling: the transnational supply chains take advantage of the terrorist groups' links in other crisis areas.

⁴ CAR (Conflict Armament Research) Institute report 2016.

Drugs trafficking (cannabis, cocaine and heroin)

• Definitions

*“Illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances means many offences involving narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances such as the production, cultivation, import, smuggling and promotion. The term extends to include crimes related to the tools and means of transportation used in the commission of the offences and the diversion of precursors and chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as well as crimes related to proceeds used in or resulting from illicit trafficking”.*⁵

• Drivers

From the beginning of the present century, Africa has acquired a relevant role in international drugs trafficking. Factors such as the increase of drugs’ demand in Africa and Europe and the expansion of organized crime on the continent have motivated the transnational criminal organizations to include Africa in the international routes of drugs trafficking.

However, international drugs trafficking nets need local involvement of communities or terrorist groups in order to develop and prosper.

Local tribes collaborate with the organized crime nets for financial gain. Also, the drug-traffickers have links with the terrorist groups, who control certain routes of communication.

In addition, the conflicts in Mali and Libya have facilitated the movement of drugs in the continent. Cannabis moves from North West Africa to South and Eastern Africa towards the Middle East, and the cocaine, transits from Sahel to North Africa, moving either northwards, or eastwards, on its way to the Europe and Middle East.

• Routes and actors

Maghreb and Sahel are areas of production (cannabis) and transit (heroin and cocaine) of drugs in the African continent. Each drug has a proper route in the continent, in many cases these routes are linked by common actors (enablers and traffickers) and itineraries.

*According to the 2016 EU Drug Markets Report, mostly of **the cannabis resin** has its origin in Morocco and takes two different channels:*

- Land channel crossing Mauritania and Algeria in direction to Sahel, Middle East and Asia.*
- Sea channel from the coasts of Morocco and Algeria in direction to Europe.*

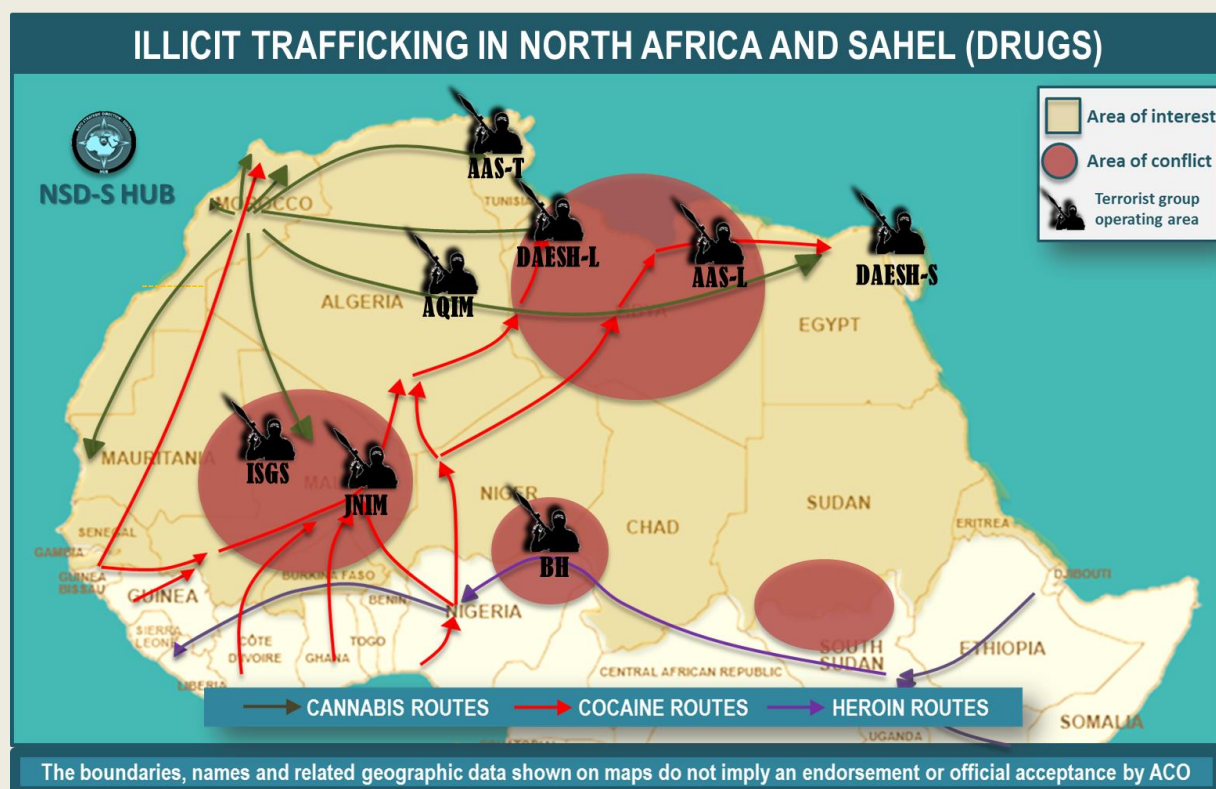
AQIM, which operates primarily in North and West Africa, DAESH-L and Ansar al Sharia-Libya (AAS-L) are involved in different ways in this traffic by collecting taxes and/or protecting traffickers.

***The cocaine** is produced in Latin America and arrives to Sahel through the coastal countries of Western Africa. After its arrival, the drug crosses Mali and Algeria, and ends up on the coast of Libya. From here, it is smuggled to Europe.*

Tuareg population and terrorist groups such as Jama’ at Nasrul Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali, the so called Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Mali and Niger, AQIM in Algeria and Mali, AAS-L, DAESH-L and BH have reportedly helped drug criminal organizations to traffic cocaine across West Africa.

⁵ According to Article 3 of the United Nations Convention Against Illicit trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) (Vienna Convention) and Article 2 of the Arab Convention Against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1994).

The route of heroin in Africa begins on the Eastern coast of the continent. The drug arrives by air or sea and subsequently crosses the continent towards Nigeria, the main hub in Africa. From here, the drug travels to Europe and North America by sea and air.



Human trafficking

• Definitions

“Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”⁶

“Smuggling of migrants shall mean 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”.⁷

Both crimes often represent overlapping criminal activities; however, they are distinct crimes. The key distinction is that smuggled migrants normally consent to the smuggling activity, and their relationship with the smuggler terminates once they arrive at their intended destination.

On the other hand, victims of trafficking have either never given their consent or their initial consent is nullified by the means used by the trafficker to gain control over the victim, such as deception and violence.

Also, the purpose of trafficking is always exploitation, which ultimately generates profits for the traffickers, while smugglers generate their profits through selling their services to their clients (illegal entry to another country) a relationship that is terminated when reaching the destination country.

⁶ Definition included in the United Nations Resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000 (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime).

- **Drivers**

The enduring political, economic and security instability in Africa has turned the continent into an important depot for the human traffickers and smugglers, serving as place of origin and transit for African inhabitants to Europe, Middle East and Asia.

Fragile state structures have resulted in the inability of governments to exercise authority and sovereignty over all parts of their territories. In addition, long and porous borders caused by the absence of efficient border management and the lack of security infrastructure and transnational security cooperation facilitate illegal activities in the continent.

In addition, others factors such as conflicts, ethnic/tribal tensions, terrorist activities and the establishment of IDPs camps along the continent are drivers that should be considered.

The conflicts in Mali and Libya forced refugees and local populations to flee into neighbouring states. After Gadhafi's fall, the number of returnees from Libya exceeded 210.000 and more than 250.000 Malians are estimated to have poured into Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Algeria. Both conflicts increased the pressure on local communities and state governments that are already grappling with severe droughts and food shortages.

- **Routes and actors**

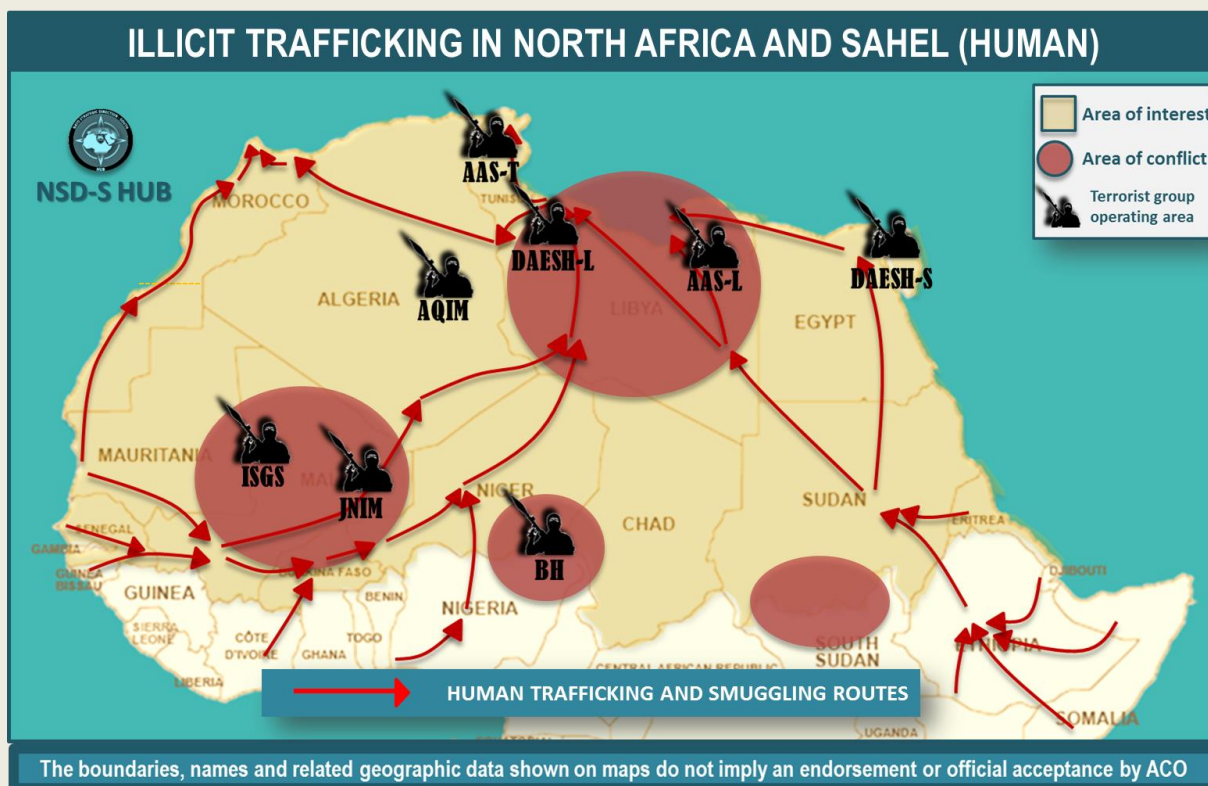
The irregular migration routes cross Maghreb and the Sahel but have their points of origin in the coastal countries of Western and Eastern Africa. Depending on the countries of departure, we can identify two different routes: Western route and Eastern route.

In Western Africa, the routes depart from Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Ivory Coast , Ghana and Nigeria, pass through Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Niger, and end on the coast of Morocco (Western coastal route) or Libya (Western interior route).

The Eastern Africa's routes depart from Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, pass through Sudan and continue towards Egypt or Libya.

In both routes human trafficking and smuggling are an important source of income for criminal organizations, terrorist groups, militias and for some tribes. Libya, where Western and Eastern routes converge, is the main point of departure for migrants heading towards Europe.

⁷ Definition included in the United Nations Resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000 (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime).



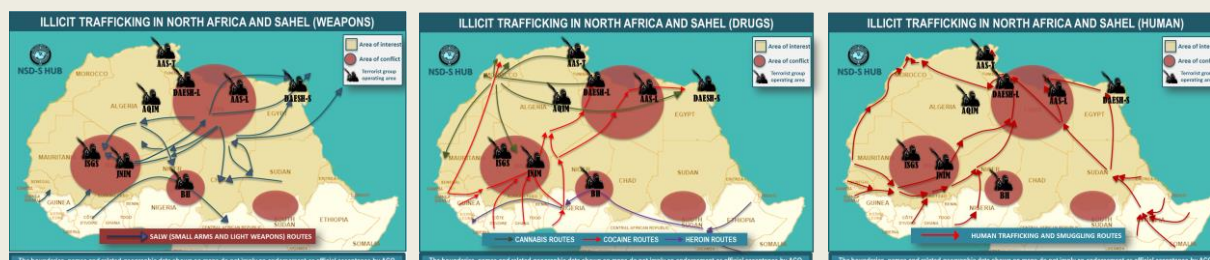
Terrorist groups JNIM in Mali, ISGS in Mali and Niger, AQIM in Algeria and Mali, AAS-L and DAESH-L reportedly obtain economic benefits collecting taxes to the traffickers and smugglers.

FINAL REMARKS

The economy of North Africa and the Sahel, has always been developed through autonomous structures opposed to traditional state ones, which have allowed the trade of goods of all kinds: from food resources to smuggled goods.

In recent years, this area has become one of the most important hubs for the fusion of transnational organized crime, terrorism, and trafficking nets. This illegal economy has assured the minimal economical support to local communities while fuelling the terrorist groups' finances and enhancing local and international illicit activities.

Additionally, terrorist groups seem to consolidate their links with local tribes by carrying out more and more social and welfare functions in place of failed states while the single governments principally propose only a "strong action" (military and legislative enforcement) and are not still able to offer together a valid alternative development options. The illicit traffic dynamics lead into a vicious circle where criminal actors find fertile soil for their activities to grow, and in which economic and human development opportunities are heavily reduced.



This is likely to have repercussions for global security. The main threat stems from the potential for expansion of operations of transnational terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliates; Northern Mali could qualify as an accessible base for this. This means that, even by reasoning in a selfish way, the

Western countries and the International Community should continue to intervene in this part of Africa.

On various occasions it has been possible to evaluate that the destiny of a country, or in this case, a region, must be in the hands of its inhabitants. With this in mind, G5 Sahel, with the implementation of its Joint Force (in 2017) to combat terrorism and illicit trafficking, is certainly an important effort. And, even if dissenters objects that despite its dual emphasis on “security and development”, the G5 Sahel’s approaches have so far mainly focused on military and security coordination, this initiative represents the first response with a regional guide to the local established weakness of the states, it could be able to enforce legality, employing local military forces.

Clearly this initiative is not enough to eradicate the criminal system. In the vision of many analysts, it will not be able to be fully successful because it lacks the direct financial support from the UN, needed to implement concrete economic development.

It could be true but, in a holistic vision on the problem, the UN has been moving through multiple agencies to tackle the theme of West Africa with a comprehensive approach. As an example, the “UN integrated Strategy for the Sahel” revolves around three key objectives:

- Making governance more inclusive and effective*
- Building capacities to counter cross-border threats*
- Strengthening the resilience of the Sahelian people*

As it cannot ignore the need for sustainable development, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) activity implementation, through the Sahel Programme, is coordinated with all the other UN agencies participating in the implementation of the UN Integrated Strategy including the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Head of Mission of MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali).

This Sahel Programme could be considered one of the biggest challenges in the next decades for this African region.

The NSDS HUB has been established at Allied Joint Force Command Naples in order to improve NATO’s awareness and understanding of the opportunities and challenges from those regions, while contributing to the overall coordination of NATO’s activities and efforts. The NSDS HUB products are developed with open-source information from governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, international organisations, academic institutions, media sources and military organisations. By design, The NSDS HUB products or links to open sourced and independently produced articles do not necessarily represent the opinions, views or official positions of any other organisation.

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