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### *Libya's role as a consolidated centre of illicit economies and its impact on the terrorist phenomenon in the Sahel*

#### **Abstract**

This article examines the impact of illicit economies on the security and stability of Libya and its regional neighbourhood. It identifies different sources of illicit economies, such as oil smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking and arms trafficking, and highlights the security challenges associated with their proliferation. The paper suggests that illicit economies have helped shape the dynamics of conflict, governance and development in the post-revolutionary context.

The analysis also concludes that there is a strong link between the illicit economy in Libya and the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region. Terrorist groups have exploited the vast black market and black economy created by the smuggling of arms, drugs and migrants into the Sahel to fund their structures and consolidate their presence on the trans-Saharan routes. The document argues that the political instability and conflict in Libya have created a power vacuum that has allowed criminal gangs and violent extremism to flourish, exporting from Libya a major source of regional instability.

#### **Keywords**

Libya, Political fragmentation, Illegal economy, Violence, Sahel, Terrorism.

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## I. Introduction

Libya has been in a constant cycle of fragile peace and violence since the fall of its former leader, Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011. The chaos that followed the collapse of the Gaddafi regime created a power vacuum that has allowed the proliferation of actors involved in corruption, organised crime and extremist movements. The state is plagued by unprecedented political fragmentation and economic instability.

The country has also become a hub for regional and transnational illicit trafficking ranging from human and drug trafficking to oil and arms smuggling. The lack of effective governance and constant clashes for recognition between factions in Tripoli and rival forces in the west of the country have acted as a catalyst for the black market as means of survival, not only for armed groups and insurgents but also for leaders.

The illicit trade in oil and other natural resources has emerged as one of the main sources of income for these criminal organisations, which have been able to take advantage of the lack of oversight and take large quantities of these resources out of the country and defraud the state for their own profit. In addition, the country's geographical location makes it an ideal transit point for human traffickers, who use it as a gateway to smuggle migrants and refugees into Europe (Amnesty International, 2020).

The consequences of Libya's recent political and economic history have had a significant impact on the stability of the region. Some research even points to the long history of criminal activities such as the illegal arms or drug trafficking as a vector for the spread of conflict in the Sahel region, which has been exploited on by violent extremist organisations that exacerbate existing security problems (Micallef *et al.*, 2019: 5). The crisis in Libya, which promoted terrorist groups to penetrate beyond its borders and advance their agenda with limited state opposition, risks transferring the Libyan reality to the rest of the region, thereby making the presence and dominance of terrorism chronic in parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger or Nigeria.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to answer two questions. First, the paper analyses the extent to which the various actors, methods and impacts of the illicit economies in Libya have shaped the dynamics of the conflict, lack of governance and lack of development in the post-revolutionary context. Given the opacity of the real size of the illicit economy in the country, as well as the obvious limitations of access to information and the need for human sources to produce primary data, the analysis relies on sources from official channels and reputable research centres. The former sources are official agencies involved in the investigation and monitoring of illegal trade, while the latter are publications by specialists in the analysis of security issues in Libya and its neighbouring region.

Second, given the nature of illicit economies and their impact on regional security and stability, this article examines whether the Libyan context has actively fuelled the emergence of violent extremist movements in the Sahel, a high-profile exercise that will help to understand and address one of the most significant threats to global security today. The article draws on reports and authoritative sources in the field of

counter-terrorism such as reports to the UN Security Council, experts in the field of violent extremism, results of law enforcement operations and research by multilateral working groups on countering money laundering and terrorism financing.

The paper begins with a brief contextual analysis of the current political order in Libya as a prelude to the role of the political economy in the dynamics of the illicit trade in the country, before outlining the ongoing conflict landscape that will help to understand the growing importance of the illicit economy and its key actors. Subsequently, the article will analyse how the Libyan conflict is exacerbating the crisis in the Sahel and in creating interactions between organised crime and terrorist organisations, with Libya at the nexus of this criminal network.

## 2. Libya's current political order

Libya is currently in a state of civil war and chronic instability. It is trapped in cycles of violence and political stalemate. The country has been divided since 2011, when a popular uprising led by the younger generation rose up against the regime and overthrew dictator Muammar Gaddafi. After many reformulations and capitulations of power, two prime ministers are currently vying for recognition as the *de jure* government: the Government of National Unity (GNU), led by Dbeibah and based in the capital, Tripoli, and the Libyan House of Representatives-backed government led by Fathi Bashagha (Security Council Report, 2022: 1).

From the eastern city of Tobruk, Khalifa Haftar, head of the powerful self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), is the *de facto* ruler of much of the east and south of the country. Haftar is a pivotal figure among rival factions and has sought to rule over the whole of Libya. However, his failure has recently led him —not without considerable reluctance— to balance his relations with political leaders in Tripoli and his support of Bashagha's government in order to further his political and personal interests. The presence of mercenaries, armed militias, foreign fighters and international powers involved has further exacerbated the conflict, stalling the political process for more than a decade.

The GNU, which is supported by the UN and several Western countries, is based in Tripoli, while Bashagha wields power from Sirte and Benghazi (Security Council Report, 2022: 5). The former is regularly targeted by Haftar's forces from Tobruk, which are supported by several countries in the region, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and have been gaining ground in recent years.

The political situation in the country is fragile, with various actors vying for power and opportunities for national reconciliation systematically missed. Although the GNU and Haftar have engaged in peace negotiations, followed by a cessation of hostilities by the end of 2020, no lasting solution has been reached so far. Some tentative steps are being attempted in this direction: for example, the recent approval

of a coordination mechanism by the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC)<sup>1</sup> and the liaison committees for the withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign fighters from the country (UNSMIL, 2023).

The current conflict in Libya has led to unprecedented violence and human suffering, with thousands killed and more than 1.5 million displaced (IDMC, 2022). The dire humanitarian situation in the country is characterised by a lack of access to basic necessities such as food, water and healthcare, and the approval of a national budget to improve infrastructure or basic services is still pending (OCHA, 2022). The UN estimates that 800,000 people needed humanitarian aid in 2021, a dramatic figure considering that Libya's population was 6.735 million in the same year (World Bank, n.d.). In addition, the civil war has devastated the country's economy by disrupting oil exploration and leaving oil and gas production at historic lows, leading to hyperinflation and commodity shortages (Shaltami, 2019: 6). The ongoing fighting has also disrupted the provision of basic services such as electricity and education, putting the fragile peace at risk of collapse at any moment.

The international community has struggled to find a solution to the conflict. The United Nations has been at the forefront of efforts to broker a peace agreement between the warring parties, although the peace process has been complicated by the involvement of foreign countries, that have supported both sides of the conflict.

European Union (EU) policy towards Libya is geared towards improving border security and managing migration flows, both of which are seen as major security challenges for Europe. This policy is part of the EU's broader efforts to address instability in the Sahel region and counter the terrorist threat posed by movements such as the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel). Since the fall of Gaddafi, the EU has played an active role in improving the country's security, but its efforts have been plagued by challenges and divergent interests among its member states.

One of the main challenges facing the EU in Libya is the persistent conflict and instability, making it difficult for the EU to coordinate its efforts and achieve its objectives in the country. To this must be added the different motivations among member states. Some countries, such as Italy, have strong interests in Libya's stability due to its proximity to Europe and potential migration flows, as well as trade.<sup>2</sup> Other countries, such as France, are more focused on counter-terrorism and have been accused of supporting different factions in the conflict.<sup>3</sup> However, Italian economic

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1 The committee consists of five members of the GNU and five members of Khalifa Haftar's forces.

2 As Meloni's recent visit to Libya highlighted, there are important economic interests at stake for Italy. The prime minister's visit was aimed at signing a major gas deal with Libya, underlining Rome's interest in securing energy resources and economic cooperation with its North African neighbour. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-meloni-expected-sign-major-gas-deal-she-starts-libya-visit-2023-01-28/>

3 According to analysts on the ground, Libyan officials accuse France of supporting Haftar's offensive and obstructing EU diplomatic efforts to impose sanctions on him. Despite ample evidence, France denies

interests may complicate EU efforts to address political and security challenges in Libya. Libyan officials furthermore consider that France's actions contradict the official joint European policy of support for the GNU. The main source of influence that Europe as a whole has in Libya is its diplomatic weight, particularly that of France and the UK, but diverging interests have made it difficult for the EU to speak with one voice and constrained its ability to take decisive action on the country as a whole.

In any case, Libyan officials see Europe as an important energy partner and a potential source of political legitimacy and financial support. But they are also aware that Europe is a complex patchwork of states and competing interests. Libyan officials understand that EU members can provoke political change in Libya through diplomatic, economic and military means and that they, in turn, can be influenced by Libyan policies (el-Gomati, n. d.).

For their part, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates financially and militarily support Haftar and his allied forces, while Russia has allowed the NLA to consolidate its hold on the eastern and southern flank, where most of the country's oil fields are located (*The Economist*, 2019). With the presence of 2,000 Wagner Group contractors since 2019, the mercenaries, under Kremlin direction, are currently operating in Libya and Ukraine. In Libya, they contribute to Haftar's campaign to wrest control of the country from pro-GNU governments and forces; they act as a tool of Russian pressure to destabilise Europe. Libya has oil reserves of 48 billion barrels and more than 1.5 trillion cubic metres of natural gas, which establishes it as a potential energy giant on Europe's doorstep (Unlacke, 2022).

With almost 40 % of Africa's total oil reserves more than two-thirds of which will be exported to EU countries in 2020, Wagner has sought to undermine this in order to prevent Europe from reducing its energy dependence on Russia and turning to a potential energy partner in Libya. The Wagner group is present and controls oil fields with high oil production levels, such as Sharara, in the south-west of the country; it also has military bases from Sirte to Brak, near Sabha (Unlacke, 2022). Wagner's mercenaries deliberately act in pursuit of Moscow's geopolitical interests in Libya and project their strength in the rest of Africa, even operating independently of Haftar's forces and beyond their control.

Meanwhile, Türkiye is leading the resistance to Haftar's troops and their international allies, although along the way it is taking the opportunity to advance its energy agenda and reconfigure its maritime borders with Libya in a way that allows them to continue exploring for hydrocarbon deposits. An example of this was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Türkiye and the government of Dbeibah in October 2022, which would allow exploration drilling activities in other countries' exclusive economic zones, including those of Cyprus and Greece (AFP, 2022).

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these allegations, and government officials are leaning towards the possibility that Paris is seeking a new alliance with its Middle Eastern and North African partners in Libya. Available at: [https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_eu\\_leverage\\_mena/libya](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/libya)

Regarding Libya's political regime, both Ankara and Paris are seeking the resumption of elections to establish a presidential system, which is opposed by rival factions. On the other hand, parliamentary elections remain in limbo as the majorities in the rival legislative bodies strike down any electoral laws in order to retain their seats (Lacher, 2023). For their part, the leaders of the dozens of armed militias acting at the will of rival governments are playing an increasingly prominent role in politics, sitting at the negotiating table and building embedded clientelism within the Libyan political apparatus.

Libya has thus been facing a complex crisis since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, which has led to the fragmentation of the country, the emergence of multiple centres of power and the collapse of state institutions. The continued instability and governance vacuum has allowed criminal groups to operate with relative impunity, leading to the consolidation of illicit economies and promoting the consolidation of extremist activities —such as terrorism— on its southern flank.

### 3. The political economy in the dynamics of illegal trade

Black markets in Libya have become a crucial part of the post-revolutionary landscape since 2011, intersecting with and shaping the different dimensions of the conflict. Illicit trade that has become a major source of power, wealth and influence for the actors involved, creating a parallel market that operates outside state control and regulation.

According to research by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, it is often representatives of the state apparatus itself who are enmeshed in illicit activities, with a high volume of corruption systematically undermining the legitimacy of institutions. Embezzlement within the state itself, in a country where the public sector employs 70-85 % of of the working population, constitutes a large illegal market in areas such as construction or the allocation of public contracts (UNICRI, 2021: 20).

Libya's war profiteers feed off the country's tangible assets, creating patronage and clientelistic networks that allow them to reinvest their capital to profit not only in times of war but also in an eventual post-conflict scenario. Property is often the most attractive target. According to Wolfram Lacher, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, a number of local sources claim that relatives of Dbeibah —the head of the Western-backed government in Tripoli— have employed third parties to take over properties in the upscale district of Hay al-Andalus, while the leaders of the different militias on both sides have taken over beach resorts, cafés and private clinics, among others (Lacher, 2023).

In Benghazi, Haftar's commanders have been able to capitalise on their power by seizing the homes of suspected terrorists who were forcibly evicted from their homes. On the business side, examples given to the researcher point to the acquisition of new

shopping centres by a businessman with a history of drug smuggling and links to one of Haftar's two sons, Saddam.<sup>4</sup> According to Lacher, Saddam himself (informally) owns a private bank in Benghazi, which he has used to finance Berniq Airways, a new private airline (Lacher, 2023).

Several local sources also echoed the Libyan Audit Office's 2021 annual report, published in 2022. The report, which aims to monitor the country's financial situation, denounced violations found the Government of National Unity, the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) and the National Oil Corporation (NOC). Among other non-transparent activities, the auditors found evidence of the GNU's alleged use of the emergency budget to book flights and hotels, as well as to provide gifts and other services to Prime Minister Dbeibah. Development contracts were also been awarded without a public tender process (El-Assasy, 2022).

The web of private speculators and public actors who use their position to enrich themselves is a very long list. However, this practice is nothing new, as the organised crime operating in Libya has its roots in the legacy of state-led corruption and predation under the Gaddafi regime, which co-opted and relied on criminal networks for its own survival and expansion. It was precisely the collapse of the state structure and the proliferation of armed groups after the revolution that created a power vacuum and allowed these networks to flourish and diversify their operations. Today, they rely not on a corrupt regime under a single leader but on a complex criminal structure of officials, militia leaders, businessmen and warlords. They have become key players in the current conflict, enriching themselves and providing financial, logistical and human resources to the warring sides.

The illicit oil trade, which accounts for most of the country's wealth, has been particularly significant in Libya's criminal economy, with losses estimated at nearly \$1 billion annually (Kirchgaessner and Tondo, 2018). The country has Africa's largest oil reserves and the collapse of state institutions and the ongoing civil war have allowed criminal gangs and armed militias to exploit its oil resources. The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned six individuals, 24 entities and seven vessels in 2018 for illegally profiting from Libyan oil (Department of the Treasury, 2018). On several occasions, Haftar's forces have even been accused of benefiting from the illicit market in the oilfields that the NLA has managed to bring under its control through an outside support network. In 2020, in the midst of an oil blockade and shut-down of oil wells, security sources reported that Haftar had signed an illegal agreement to monopolise the country's oil sector, bypassing the NOC. Investigations have also revealed extensive links between brigades loyal to Haftar and the smuggling of petroleum products at facilities such as al-Sarir (Noria Research, 2019:15).

The illegal oil trade has caused significant losses to the Libyan state and to international oil companies operating in the country. The lack of state control over oil facilities and

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4 According to a leading Libya analyst, Wolfram Lacher, the businessman published videos in 2022 in which he bought a hunting falcon for one million dollars and then gave it to Saddam as a gift. *Source: New Left Review.*

terminals, coupled with the absence of an effective navy and coastguard, has facilitated the theft and export of crude oil and refined products, mainly to Europe and Turkey, by a variety of actors, including armed groups, private smugglers and corrupt officials. Over the last decade, the declared rulers (i.e. state officials, businessmen or militia leaders) have been able to profit from unprecedented illicit enrichment by taking advantage of their position and influence. One example is Fahmi Salim Musa Ben Khalifa. A notorious arms dealer, people trafficker and oil smuggler (nicknamed the 'smuggler king'), this individual was, prior to his arrest in 2017, selling smuggled oil products on the black market at a cheaper price (Zaptia, 2017). His activities in the coastal towns of Zuwara, Zawia and Sabratha were linked to oil smuggling, but he was also allegedly to have been involved in property trading and resort construction activities in Malta and Turkey.

In the case of links to terrorism, the evidence is also thick. In December 2019, the ENL-aligned Benghazi Central Investigations Directorate arrested two individuals suspected of smuggling, in cooperation with an Egyptian national, with the intent to fund the self-proclaimed Islamic State (US Department of State, n.d-a.). Following the arrests, firearms and ammunition were recovered from their homes. Both confessed and identified two other suspects, whose cases have been referred to the Benghazi prosecutor's office.

Oil smuggling has not only undermined the legitimacy and revenues of the Libyan state, but has also created a parallel market that fuels the conflict, undermines the peace process and threatens the regional stability. These activities have also had a profound impact on the Libyan economy, contributing to currency devaluation, fuel shortages and the erosion of state revenues. In addition, the illicit oil trade has created a parallel market that operates outside the control of the state and the international community, threatening the stability of the region and the environment.

Oil smuggling from Libya has not only affected Libya itself, but also neighbouring countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, as parts of their territory are used as transit routes for the illegal trade. This has caused significant losses to these countries, as well as to international oil companies operating in the region. Many international companies have been hurt by the illegal oil trade in Libya, as smuggled oil is often sold at a cheaper price, undermining their operations and revenues. In addition, profits from oil smuggling have been used to finance the activities of extremist groups, harming many countries in the region.

Libya is a major transit point for migrants from conflict countries who are trying to reach Europe, leading to exploitation and abuse by criminal organisations. In 2021, the number of people leaving Libya for Europe increased by 150 % (US Department of State, n.d-b.), with many victims suffering enslavement and even death along the way.

It is estimated that there are still hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees in Libya, many of whom are trapped in detention centres where they are subjected to horrific conditions, including torture, rape and forced labour. According to the US State Department, the Libyan coast guard allegedly collaborates with armed groups

and other criminal organisations, including smugglers, to exploit migrants for profit (US Department of State, n.d-b). The lack of law enforcement and humanitarian aid, combined with the exploitation and abuse of migrants by smugglers, armed groups and state agents, has created a humanitarian crisis that could be described as modern-day slavery. According to international sources, individuals linked to human trafficking networks are also involved in oil smuggling operations, profiting from the sale of migrant labour to oil facilities (UN News, 2018).

The increase in migration to Europe has strained resources and created political tensions among EU member states, leading to a focus on border security and limiting immigration. The EU has supported the Libyan authorities in managing their borders and developing policies to deter irregular migration. However, European policy has also been criticised for neglecting the humanitarian situation and root causes of the crisis (Salah, 2023).

The impact of the migration crisis in Libya on European security has been significant, especially in light of the current terrorism crisis in the Sahel. The power vacuum created by the instability in Libya has been exploited by various armed groups, including terrorist organisations such as Daesh and al-Qaeda. These movements have used Libya as a base for their intra- and inter-regional operations, posing a serious threat to European security and continues to pose numerous risks. In response, the EU has sought to strengthen its military presence in the Sahel, working closely with regional partners to counter the terrorist threat. Despite this, it has been questioned whether the EU's focus on security and counter-terrorism has come at the expense of addressing abuses and other human rights violations by local security forces (Freudenthal *et al.*, 2021), a criticism that is also made on the EU's stance in Libya.

The proliferation of drug trafficking in Libya is another critical issue with important implications for the country and the wider region. The lack of a unified state apparatus and the proliferation of armed groups following the uprisings that led to the collapse of the regime in 2011 have created the conditions for a web of criminal networks to flourish, connecting West Africa in general with the drug market and end-users, especially in Europe and America (Aguilera, 2022: 54).

Drug trafficking in Libya is not a new phenomenon, but its scale and scope have increased dramatically in recent decades. The country has become a hub for drug trafficking with criminal networks taking advantage of its porous borders, weak institutions and lack of law enforcement. Cocaine is often transported from its production centre in South America to Europe via Libya, and the trade generates exorbitant profits that often end up into the pockets of armed groups, clans, mercenaries and terrorist groups (Aguilera, 2022).

The production of cannabis and its derivatives in Morocco is connected to European and African markets via Libya. Indeed, Libya acts as one of the most important hubs for the regional distribution of this drug; it receives shipments both from Morocco in the west and from Lebanon in the east. The Salvador Pass, a border crossing between Algeria, Niger and Libya, serves as a transit hub for the distribution of drugs to Egypt

and Europe via the ports of Al-Khums and Tobruk. Sabha is a major trafficking point, with Benghazi, Al-Khums, Misrata, Tobruk and Tripoli serving as storage and distribution centres (Aguilera, 2022: 55; Mangan, 2020: 8; Micallef, 2019: 6).

In recent years, drug trafficking has become an important component of Libya's illicit economy, and its impact on the region has been well documented by regional and international law enforcement operations. These operations have revealed the involvement of organised criminal networks in drug trafficking, such as Operation Lionfish, which seized 17 tonnes of cannabis in Niamey, Niger, in 2021, destined for Libya and worth more than 30 million euros (INTERPOL, 2021).

According to a UN official stationed in Guinea-Bissau, as of 2013, West Africa served as a major transit route for global drug trafficking, with at least 30 tonnes of cocaine passing through the region annually. Malian drug traffickers are especially instrumental in facilitating this route (Tinti, 2020: 6). As a result, West Africa has become the fourth largest entry route for cocaine into the European continent, with approximately 50 tonnes of drugs, worth around \$2 billion, passing through the region each year (Ortega, 2021).

The amount of cocaine seized in West Africa increased significantly between 2015 and 2019, with almost 13 tonnes seized in 2019, mainly in the northern, western and central regions of the continent (UNODC, 2021: 29). Colombian authorities even claimed in 2007 that more than a third of cocaine from South America passed through Africa at some point on its way to the European market, which tripled in size by the early 2010s (Blanco and De la Corte, 2013: 6).

Drug trafficking and smuggling in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the Western Sahel, is complicated by the involvement of numerous actors with different interests and capacities. Influential political figures are often the actors of choice for organised crime due to their high level of discretion and power, and frequently implicated in drug trafficking operations in Niger, Mali and Guinea-Bissau. In the latter, high levels of corruption and clientelism have allowed traffickers to obtain institutional collaborators on the ground, be it using one-off bribes or developing a genuine symbiosis with state institutions (Aguilera, 2022: 37).

Transnational organised crime often intersects with local actors who have conflicting interests and motivations, but are keen to profit financially from drug trafficking. Ethnic groups and community leaders in the regions add an ethnic dimension to the conflict and the struggle for drug profiteering, with examples in Mali where Arab and Tuareg tribal actors cooperate despite having previously being antagonistic to one another. These complex networks operate with a high degree of secrecy, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to gain access.

The cocaine economy has become an important source of income for terrorist groups, armed factions and criminal organisations in the Sahel. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), West Africa has become a major transit hub for cocaine trafficking, which has been growing dramatically in recent years (UNODC, 2023: 106). It is believed that most cocaine is destined for

European markets, as the African continent is geographically closer to South America than Europe is, and maritime and air entry controls are less stringent than those encountered in the target markets (Aguilera, 2022: 26).

Despite the difficulties in establishing the degree of linkage between the two criminal groups, the relationship between cocaine smuggling and terrorism financing in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin has been extensively documented by various sources. The drug has been found to be a source of income for individuals belonging to jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Brown, 2013: 22; Raineri and Martini, 2017: 5; Zimmerer, 2019: 11), Ansar al Din, Al Murabitun or Boko Haram (Aguilera, 2022: 81-85; Sampaio, 2022: 22).

There is evidence that cocaine trafficking contributes significantly to the financing of armed groups in Sahel countries and is often one of the causes of conflict and violence (International Crisis Group, 2018). In northern Mali, control of drug trafficking has joined other inter-communal disputes, leading to increased violence and instability in the sub-region (International Crisis Group, 2018). The presence of criminal networks has led to conflicts between economic, political and ideological objectives among non-state actors and hindered the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Agreement in northern Mali (Tinti, 2020:10). The Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) acknowledged in an interview with International Crisis Group to have escorted a drug shipment coveted by the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA-Platform) in 2018, which led to the Ménaka offensive between the two armed groups, highlighting the potential profits from this criminal enterprise (International Crisis Group, 2018: 15).

The impact of the cocaine trade on the security situation in the Sahel region and its link to terrorist and criminal activities is of concern to European policy makers. The illegal trade has important implications for security and stability in Libya, as it is considered a macro-structure with links to Africa, the Middle East and end distributors in Europe. In addition to drug trafficking, the Libyan conflict has created opportunities for smuggling and illicit arms trafficking, especially in the trans-Saharan region. The absence of a central authority, the desertion of security forces and the proliferation of armed groups in the country made it easier for these weapons and ammunition to be smuggled across the border, for the Gaddafi-era weapons to be recovered from large stockpiles or the battlefield or intercepting them from other actors involved in the conflict. Instability in the region has, in turn, opened up a new market for weapons, as both armed groups and the population seek to acquire the means to defend themselves or promote their interests. In 2018, the Small Arms Survey platform reckoned that Libya was the country with the most weapons in private possession, with 13.27 weapons per 100 inhabitants (Small Arms Survey, 2020). The fall of the Gaddafi regime opened up new opportunities for criminal networks, transforming the country into a hub for arms smuggling and arms sales after the leader's iron grip on a monopoly of all business related to the arms and weapons trafficking and smuggling was removed.

Trans-Saharan arms trafficking from Libya poses a serious threat to regional stability since it fuels conflicts and exacerbates existing tensions. Cross-border arms trade is also

related to the global economy in general. The demand for pistols, rifles, machine guns, grenades or ammunition in the region creates a market for arms dealers and traffickers willing to take advantage of the instability in Libya and divert stockpiles to other ongoing conflicts, such as Iraq and Syria (Conflict Armament Research, 2017: 7).

Illicit activities, including trafficking in drugs, people and arms, have a significant economic impact on the regions in which they operate. This impact goes beyond direct benefits and includes indirect economic effects, such as the market development, money laundering and corruption. These illegal markets can also lead to the destabilisation of economies and institutions, which can affect neighbouring regions. The Sahel region, in particular, is vulnerable to the spread of violent extremism due to links between illegal trade and terrorist organisations. The replication of Libya's illicit trade provides these groups of additional resources and funding, thereby posing a greater threat to Europe because they can carry out attacks beyond its borders.

#### 4. How the Libyan conflict is fuelling terrorism in the Sahel

The replication of Libya's illicit trade poses a risk to the rest of North Africa, the Sahel and Europe. The spread of these illicit economies further destabilises already fragile economies and political systems, leading to increased violence, corruption and criminal activity. These factors are key vectors for the expansion of migration and refugee flows, as people are forced to flee their homes due to violence and economic instability.

In the Sahel in particular, Libya's illicit economy fuels violent conflict and insecurity. The different actors involved in conflict, governance and development in Libya have different interests, motivations and capacities that influence their roles and actions in relation to illegal trade and its spillover effects. The impact of Libya's illicit economies on the Sahel region is multiple and interrelated. They include the proliferation of arms, the influx of migrants, the spread of organised crime, the erosion of state institutions, and the deterioration of security and human rights protection (Witthoft, 2020: 3). The illicit trafficking of arms and ammunition has, in fact, exacerbated violence and conflict in the Sahel, where a large market for exploitation by armed groups and criminal networks is located, and has greatly contributed to the rise of terrorist organisations and other armed groups.

The influx of migrants and refugees from Libya into the Sahel region has also increased pressure on local communities and state institutions struggling to meet basic needs and address social and economic challenges. The expansion of organised crime and corruption has similarly undermined state institutions and the rule of law, since criminal networks seek to exploit weaknesses and loopholes in government structures and security sectors (Micallef *et al.*, 2019: 52).

The erosion of these institutions has further exacerbated conflict and insecurity, as national authorities struggle to exercise their authority and provide basic services

to the population, duties in which they often fail. In turn, conflict and insecurity have exarberated the humanitarian crisis. The population is exposed to violence, displacement, poverty and human rights violations, with millions of people in need of humanitarian assistance and trapped in poverty exacerbated by the conflict.

In addition to organised crime, the Libyan conflict appears to have had far-reaching repercussions in countries such as Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Chad, because it has served as a breeding ground for the proliferation of terrorism within their borders. Numerous official testaments point to the proliferation of weapons and disintegration of Libya as a state acting as catalysts for a permissive environment for extremist groups to plan and execute attacks in the face of national authorities unable to control swathes of their national territory. In the case of Daesh, its attempt to create a caliphate in Libya in 2014 was aided by the power vacuum in the country following the overthrow of Gaddafi. It took its opportunity to occupy major cities, such as Derna and Sirte, and establish a stronghold in the country (Warner *et al.*, 2020: 20). However, its success in Libya was short-lived, as it was weakened from 2016 onwards by the numerous Libyan coalitions and operations as well as the presence of international actors on the ground. Despite its setback in Libya, Daesh has managed to project its strength into the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. In Nigeria, for example, Daesh established a relationship with Boko Haram, providing the group with funding and resources in exchange for loyalty and allegiance. Until their personal rift and current confrontation, they shared space, activity and resources, such that the power of their West African branch (ISWAP) has grown at a dizzying pace and even taken over its rivals. For its part, Daesh's Western Sahel branch has achieved a degree of autonomy that culminated in the reformulation of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGWS) into the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel) in March 2022, a strategic move that ended its dependence on ISWAP. The group's evolution has been characterised by a series of strategic and tactical adaptations around local realities in order to maximise inter-communal vulnerabilities and tensions. It has moved from cross-border attacks against military and civilian targets in Mali and Niger to a combination of conventional insurgent-style attacks against its main rival (JNIM) and armed militias.

The spillover of violence and insecurity from Libya has affected Sahel countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. There, extremist groups financed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (now integrated into the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM coalition) or *Boko Haram*) have been able to establish a significant presence and increase their material and financial resources through taxes paid on drug trafficking, the seizure of weapons or extortion and blackmail (Aguilera, 2022: 73). Kidnapping for ransom, a practice promoted since the beginning of the century by al-Qaeda and its precursors in Algeria and Niger, and now by Boko Haram, also forms part of this amalgam of activities where terrorism and organised crime meet.

If we frame the relationship between organised crime and terrorism in the post-international paradigm advocated by Picarelli (2006), we see how there is a multicentric scenario where both criminal groups do not find a red line that prevents them from

finding common cause and collaborating in global operations (Picarelli, 2006: 18). In this reality, where the deteriorating security landscape in West Africa following the collapse of the regime in Libya can easily be contextualised, it is easier for both criminal groups to find common cause and potential areas of collaboration. When such interactions are synchronised and systematically repeated, it becomes an opportunity to cement closer ties.

Sources consulted by the UN inter-agency assessment mission to the Sahel indicated that some of the weapons had been smuggled into the region by returnees, especially by former fighters in the ranks of the Libyan army or mercenary forces during the conflict. Some of the weapons, according to authorities briefing the mission, may have been hidden in the desert and “sold to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram or other criminal organisations” (Security Council Report, 2012: 10). The same sources warned of an increase in the arms trafficking in the West African region, and indicated a growing shared space of activity between arms smuggling groups and insurgents. Despite this, some countries were able to thwart attempts to divert weapons within their territories. This was the case in Niger, whose army managed to seize weapons, ammunition and explosives suspected of originating from Libyan stockpiles from returning fighters, arms dealers and AQIM terrorists. With regard to AQIM, the Niger authorities confiscated a convoy carrying 645 kg of explosives and 445 detonators that were destined for AQIM’s camp in northern Mali, thereby demonstrating that the terrorist group had been acquiring weaponry from Libyan arsenals (Security Council Report, 2012: 10).

The interaction between criminal networks involved in drug and arms trafficking and terrorist groups operating in the area has become a major factor of instability and violence in the Sahel, as both have been able to mutually benefit from Libya’s black market. In March 2015, nine AQIM members were arrested in northern Niger for drug and arms trafficking, the investigation revealed that they had been selling drugs in southern Libya and that the money raised (more than half a million euros) was intended for terrorism financing (Financial Action Task Force, 2016: 19). The JNIM coalition, which includes some of the terrorist groups with the most developed links to drug trafficking and the smuggling of stolen vehicles (AQIM and al-Murabitun), plays a leading role as a facilitator of smuggling in the areas under its control and as a protector of cargo in transit. In return, it receives large sums of money that contribute to the group’s funding. There is also strong evidence pointing to a method employed by AQIM based on recruiting locals to transport the drug via routes between Mauritania, Mali and Algeria to Europe (Clarke, 2016: 5). Al-Shabaab is part of an arms trafficking network in Yemen and transports ammunition and weapons from Yemen to Somalia across the sea, with the aid of members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In these and many other cases, Libya plays a privileged role as a transit point for supplies to Europe, while armed groups are able to carry out criminal activities on its territory.

Intermediary groups between organised crime and terrorism take on a variety of characteristics and natures. These range from non-profit organisations, acting as

intermediaries for local partners who divert funding and material to violent groups, to individuals and networks linked to extremist organisations that organise the purchase and delivery of illegal goods such as drugs and weapons, and facilitating inter-regional trafficking (Financial Action Task Force, 2013: 12-25). Warlords should not be excluded from the group of intermediaries between the two criminal sectors, as these individuals have greater autonomy than criminal and terrorist groups as well as insurgents and militias (Vinci, 2007: 38).

Terrorist movements with a regional or transnational presence, such as AQIM, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, have capitalised on regional dynamics to exploit and profit from prevailing criminal activities, while seeking to increase their political influence and military and financial power in the area (Reitano, Clarke and Adal, 2017). Focusing on Daesh in both the Sahel (IS-Sahel) and the Lake Chad Basin (through ISWAP), funding becomes less evident from organised crime. In the case of its central command in Iraq and Syria, there is ample evidence of human smuggling activities. The same is true of its branch in Somalia and its Yemeni counterpart involvement of arms smuggling activities. Even in Libya, the Daesh franchise uses arms smuggling, oil and money laundering to finance its cells in the region. However, the evidence of such funding for IS-Sahel and ISWAP is sparse.

For their part, both the Daesh affiliate operating in the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and the branch near Lake Chad share a financial strategy of collecting taxes (*zakat*) to finance the recruitment of fighters. They levy a tax on the transport of goods, excavations and local resources, receive donations, carry out extortion, cattle rustling, looting, and, more recently, kidnappings for ransom to finance their operations. As for ISWAP, one of its main sources of funding and social legitimacy is taxing transporters, ranchers, fishermen and farmers on the legal market in the territory under its control, as well as rewarding traders who smuggle in contraband. However, when it comes to linking these Daesh-affiliated groups to the trafficking or smuggling of illicit goods such as drugs or weapons,<sup>5</sup> their use is predictably linked to the combatants' own consumption and/or profit rather than their distribution or sale (Sampaio, 2022: 22). Thus, there is no overwhelming evidence or documentation of a link between organised crime funding and the franchises based in the Western Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.

For those groups where there is sufficient evidence of links to organised crime, the evidence shows a strong link between illicit economy in Libya and the rise of terrorism in the Sahel region, with the relationship between transnational organised crime and armed groups being considered one of the most important security problems in the West African region. The proliferation of arms, drugs and other illicit goods in these regions has been identified as a key factor fuelling these security problems, with Libya at the centre of today's criminal underworld. The smuggling of arms, drugs and people

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<sup>5</sup> Weapons smuggled across ISWAP-controlled borders are usually taxed, while almost all the weapons they use are supplied by middlemen or looted from national stockpiles during ambushes. *Source*: UNODC.

into the Sahel has created a vast black market and shadow economy, that terrorist groups have exploited to fund their organisations and consolidate their presence on trans-Saharan routes. Political instability and conflict in Libya, in turn, have created a power vacuum that has allowed this relationship of convenience between criminal enterprises and violent extremism to flourish and export instability across the region.

## 5. Conclusions

The political economy of illegal trade in Libya highlights the interplay between the economic, political and security dimensions of the conflict, and how illicit economies shape and are shaped by the actions and interests of the actors involved. Illegal trade has proved to be both a challenge and an opportunity for the Libyan state, which seeks to exercise a monopoly on violence yet establish corrupt practices that fuel the informal economy and criminal behaviour.

Illicit economies also pose a challenge to the peace process, as they are a source of funding and influence for armed groups and act as a vector of instability and insecurity for the state and the international community. This paper has highlighted how the various actors involved in the conflict and the peace process, as well as in activities across the region and the globe, will continue to shape and be shaped by illicit economies in Libya, as they pursue their own interests and tap into sources of wealth and influence.

Libya's current political order and the absence of a functioning central government have created a power vacuum that has allowed a number of criminal and extremist groups to emerge. The country has become a hub for the consolidation of black markets in human trafficking, arms proliferation and smuggling of oil and natural resources. These criminal activities have had far-reaching consequences: they fuel conflicts across the Sahel region and contribute to the rise of extremist groups, thereby opening up new security challenges.

The lack of a unified and effective state structure and the absence of a functioning security apparatus have facilitated the proliferation of these illicit practices, as actors with various motives and affiliations seek to exploit the power vacuum and opportunities for profit. The illicit oil trade, for example, has been an important factor in the financing of armed groups and undermining the peace process, as the actors involved seek to maintain their control over oil facilities and terminals and maximise their revenues.

In turn, the proliferation of the illicit economy in Libya has acted as a catalyst for conflict and the rise of extremism in its immediate vicinity. The Sahel has fallen victim to Libya's political history and violence. It is suffering the consequences of the trafficking of illicit goods and the informal economy, namely in the growth of armed groups and terrorist organisations funded by groups such as al-Qaeda, Daesh and Boko Haram. The challenges for the international community are numerous in this

regard, given that security threats can be relatively easily exported to other spaces. The restoration of political order in Libya is therefore more necessary than ever, which will in turn allow us to focus on those regions, such as the Sahel, that are suffering the consequences of violent extremism within their borders.

Based on the findings presented in this article, future research efforts have the opportunity to focus on developing a comprehensive understanding of the illicit economies present in Libya and their connections to transnational terrorism. This should include the development of foresight exercises to anticipate and mitigate future security threats, as well as a deeper analysis of the geopolitical relationships between the various actors on the ground in Libya. In parallel, there is a need to constantly monitor the impact of the illicit economies on the Sahel region, with a particular focus on identifying and dismantling the financial networks that support terrorist groups. This research will provide vital information to military and law enforcement agencies, enabling them to develop more effective strategies to counter the proliferation of illicit economies and the threat of terrorism in the region. Future research also has the unique opportunity to examine the possible impact of regional and global developments — such as the evolving strategies of terrorist groups or changes in the balance of power among regional actors— on the security situation in Libya and the Sahel.

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