

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Border insecurity in North Africa

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## Question

*What does the literature say about border insecurity across North Africa (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya (Mahgreb); Egypt, Sudan and Western Sahara)? Identify areas of tension and insecurity around (international) trade routes. Reference both formal and illicit economies including flows of drugs, weapons and people. Identify the key communities, government and business actors and their relationships.*

## Contents

1. Overview
2. Key actors
3. Movement of goods
4. Movement of people
5. References

## 1. Overview

The literature on border security in North Africa has several key themes: **security and terrorism**; **migration**; and **goods trafficking**. These issues are all intertwined. Migration and trafficking tend to follow the same geographical routes, which or may not also include weapons smuggling for extremist groups. In addition, radicalists' movements across borders frequently interact with trafficking for profit. All countries in this region are described as having '**porous borders**', particularly those which border the desert.

Most literature does not take a regional view but focuses on specific countries or areas. **Algeria and Libya are identified in the literature as key actors in the region**, and much of the literature focuses on these countries, and the recent conflict in Mali. The **security literature does not significantly draw out issues around border security**, but focuses more on the larger issues of terrorism and foreign policy.

This report starts by presenting relationships among key actors across the region, and notes the **generally weak state governance**. Governments struggle to police and control remote and vast border regions.

These regions are often dominated by networks of **stateless groups**, including ethnic clans and ideological groups. The nomadic ethnic groups of **Tuareg and Tebu** both operate outside of state governance and are perceived as a threat to security. The North African **branch of Al-Qaeda, AQIM**, is a loose network strong in some areas and weak in others, but which presents a high security risk to the region as a whole.

The lack of state authority at desert borders far from the capital means borders are in practice very open to trafficking and illegal migration. **Smuggling and migration follow many of the same routes from South to North, and West to East across the Sahara.** Key commodities are **drugs, cigarettes and weapons**. The fall of Gaddafi released a large quantity of weapons into the black market, which are mainly moving towards Mali and Mauritania, recent sites of conflict. Drugs and cigarettes travel from West Africa either East or North. The low levels of employment, socio-economic prospects and opportunities for legitimate trade mean that there are **few incentives to desist from smuggling**. It is highly lucrative and to some extent permitted by the authorities, many of whom are involved as well. State control is not currently strong enough to reduce trafficking.

A large section of the literature discusses legal and illegal **migration** from North Africa into Europe. A selection of the key issues is presented in this report, mainly discussing **the routes up from Sub-Saharan Africa and the attempts by both Europe and North Africa to close their shared border.**

## 2. Key actors

### Governments

#### *Regional relationships*

The North African states' regional relationships can be characterised as **distrustful and uncooperative** (Zartman, 2011). The lack of trust means **legal opportunities for cross-border trade are few and costly**, with high tariffs, making smuggling an ongoing preferred option.

**Algeria** is perceived as attempting to act as the main power holder in the region<sup>1</sup>, with foreign security policy dominated by the desire to retain control and influence (Aïda Ammour, 2012) rather than cooperate regionally. However, it has failed to act clearly and decisively over AQIM, and the current conflict in Mali. On the issue of AQIM, Algeria takes an extremely strong anti-terrorism stance and wishes to engage only on a military basis, while other Sahelian countries wish to address political, social and economic causes as well (Aïda Ammour, 2012). Algeria's refusal to cooperate at a regional level and its focus on security seem to indicate that its priorities are to maintain control and authority – it is arguably in its interests to present terrorism as an elusive threat and to blur the lines between counterterrorism and security to consolidate its own control (Aïda Ammour, 2012). Whatever its political strategy, Algeria is believed to regard other North African countries' independent operations as deeply threatening and fears their making alliances which would threaten Algeria's status (Aïda Ammour, 2012). In the case of the current Tuareg rebellion and conflict in Mali, Algeria is choosing not to take an active role. This has caused international concern over its opaque foreign policy, which is apparently driven by regime preservation and legitimisation (Boukhars, 2012a). It is possible that the conflict in Mali may spill over

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<sup>1</sup> Expert comments

into Algeria, and the government has increased its security presence and surveillance in the south (Boukhars, 2012a). This **lack of regional trust and cooperation hampers attempts to secure borders**.

**Trade** between African countries only accounts for 10 per cent of national trade, the other 90 per cent going to non-African countries (Somerville, 2013). In the Maghreb, only 1.3 per cent of trade is intra-regional (Zartman, 2011, p.96). Although there have been a few attempts at creating regional free trade zone, these have not been significantly successful. The most successful is the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), including Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia at its conception in 1997, and with Algeria joining in 2009 (Zartman, 2011, p.96). This has made small steps towards free trade. However, **the nations mostly compete against each other, not using their comparative advantages or operating cohesively**. Each country has its own agreements with the EU, instead of a regional agreement. The major stumbling block for greater cooperation is the **tension between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara**, with Morocco claiming sovereignty and Algeria supporting independence (Zartman, 2011, p.97). This stalemate has prevented regional cooperation.

### *Weak government control of border regions*

The weak states in much of the region contribute to the porous nature of national borders. Both authoritarian structures and post-Arab Spring governments struggle with controlling remote desert regions in the south of the Maghreb. Most of the North African states have **extensive borders along the desert**. These are **vast and almost impossible to police** with a central force, especially as many states lack legitimacy in these areas through long-term policies which marginalise these communities (Somerville, 2013). In Mauritania, just three military posts, at Chegatt, Lemgheity, and Al Ghallawiya, attempt to control the vast area of desert in the north-east, but are weak and under-resourced (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). In Libya under Gaddafi, border monitoring tasks were deliberately split among departments to retain Gaddafi's personal control, relying on individuals operating autonomously (Cole, 2012). This legacy means border points are accustomed to managing their own affairs and not necessarily responding to central government. **After the fall of Gaddafi, different armed groups took control of border points and exercised their own authority** (see 'Tuareg' below), and it has proved impossible for central forces to dislodge them (Cole, 2012). This weak control of the southern border in Libya is indicative of the difficulties of controlling remote regions by a central state, and the power of local groups. Libya has, however, made some progress in tightening laws, signing formal agreements both with armed groups and other states, and moving towards internationally accepted norms (Cole, 2012).

### **Trans-national networks**

Somerville (2013) makes the point that **Africa's borders are largely artificial**, both dividing and uniting non-traditional groups. Much of the movement of goods and people in the region is due to the kin networks in the area which transcend national borders. Several **nomadic groups** in the south of Libya and Algeria (principally Tuareg and Tebu) facilitate and conduct cross-border movement through their longstanding transit routes and ethnic connections in other nations. These two groups have clan structures stretching over much of the Maghreb, travelling regularly to move herds for grazing and to visit. They **often bypass the official border points** to convey goods to other communities, but border officials appear to be informed of their movements, therefore unofficially sanctioning them (Cole, 2012). This movement of nomads and goods through **longstanding commercial and social networks** blurs the boundaries of licit and illicit trade (Lacher, 2012). In Libya, among other issues, these groups are marginalised and discriminated against, making them resistant to cooperation with the government and a

potential source of border insecurity (Cole, 2012). **Ties of trans-national ethnic and kin loyalty are stronger than trust or loyalty to the new government** (Cole, 2012).

### *Tuareg*

This minority ethnic group, numbering approximately 1.2 million, are a **source of tension for both Libya and Algeria**. As pastoralists, they have long-established kin networks spread through the region, and form a link between countries including northern Mali, a current site of rebellion. Many left during the Libyan rebellion, but some supported Gaddafi (Cole, 2012). After his fall, **many Tuareg seized control over Libya's southern borderlands during the power vacuum, particularly Ghadames** (Cole, 2012). Many **Tuareg returned home to northern Mali** after the Libyan revolution, and have triggered the insurgency there (Boukhars, 2012a). **Iyad ag Ghali is a key leadership figure for the Malian Tuareg**, and he has strong connections to Algeria (Boukhars, 2012a). The new Libyan government has less authority than Gaddafi, and the various communities in charge of border posts, drawing on local power bases, have proved impossible to dislodge. Since seizing power, they now control the southern border more formally, having signed agreements with the Libyan state recognising their legitimacy. However, this has little meaning and is regarded as a conciliatory move in the absence of state ability to exercise real control over the border (Cole, 2012). The Tuareg are establishing new bases in the desert (Somerville, 2013), **placing their hopes on creating a new town (al-Waal) as the only sustainable solution** (Coles, 2012). In Mauritania, rivalries for economic control between the Tuareg, weapons and drugs smugglers and illegal immigrants have intensified pre-existing tensions (Boukhars, 2012b).

### *Tebu*

There are perhaps 350,000 Tebu in Libya, who mostly joined the revolt against Gaddafi. Similar to the Tuareg, they seized control of southern borderlands during the revolt, then tried to consolidate their gains by securing citizenship and taking control of local military councils, particularly in Kufra (Cole, 2012). Their change in fortunes **aggravated existing ethnic tensions** with southern Libyan Arabs, who regarded the Tebu as non-Libyan, and **economic rivalries over control of licit and illicit trade routes**, and conflicts broke out (Cole, 2012). Their political demands are quite low – citizenship, jobs – and they are unlikely to secede or radicalise (Cole, 2012).

### *AQIM*

The North African branch of Al-Qaeda (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) is a source of much insecurity, tension and conflict for all states, including powerful international actors. AQIM **has considerable resources in cash, Libyan weapons and freedom of movement** in northern Mali, making it a key actor in instability in the region (Boukhars, 2012a). It is **unclear if its members operate as jihadists, traffickers, or both** (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). They are certainly known for facilitating the movement of migrants across the desert and guaranteeing their security in return for weapons, and for following the same routes as traffickers (Pézard and Glatz, 2010), as well as for their terrorist attacks. When it suits their purposes, they will **condone and profit from drug trafficking** (Boukhars, 2012b), which is an important source of revenue for them (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). AQIM is **closely linked to Algeria**, with several of its leaders having been trained there. Although it has the strongest military in the region, even Algeria is unable to police and secure the remote regions where AQIM has a presence, and does not engage militarily outside its own borders (Aïda Ammour, 2012). Although AQIM has a strong presence in the same areas as the Tuareg, the **Tuareg have shown no signs of becoming radicalised** or any amenability to AQIM (Aïda Ammour, 2012).

### 3. Movement of goods

The regional economy of North Africa is characterised by suspicion, corruption and bureaucracy. The red tape around legal commercial activities and lack of legitimate jobs **inhibits legal trade, making borders actually blockage points** (Somerville, 2013). This increases the likelihood of smuggling. Other key factors incentivising smuggling are the lack of any legal activities of equal profitability, and the corruption of officials, who are **often thought to be complicit in smuggling, with even high-ranking officials involved** (Lacher, 2012).

Two key commodities which are smuggled through North Africa are **cigarettes and drugs** (principally cannabis from Morocco and cocaine from South America) (Lacher, 2012). Cigarettes are mostly moved by legal traders from free trade zones such as Dubai, and can be seen as a strategy to avoid tax (Lacher, 2012). **Mauritania is a hub for cigarette smuggling to Algeria** (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). These tax avoidance routes have leant themselves to increased illegal trade along the same pathways; **South American cocaine to Europe via Libya and Egypt, and Moroccan cannabis eastwards to Libya, Egypt and the Gulf states** (Lacher, 2012). In Mauritania, the cigarette routes appear to have opened the routes for drugs and weapons, although it is not clear that the transit is operated by the same networks in both cases (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). Lacher does not identify any particular routes for cocaine, but cannabis is known to travel south to Mauritania and Mali through networks of Moroccan, Sahrawi, and Mauritanian nationals, then across northern Mali and Niger by Malian Arabs, and to Egypt, the Balkans, or the Gulf state through Chad and Sudan.

#### Country specifics

##### *Libya*

In Libya, there have never been enough incentives for the government to stop trafficking, nor has the government ever had enough power to try (Cole, 2012). The **southern borderlands** have a long-established system, whereby border officials exacted tolls from traffickers, and individuals perceived it as normal to travel south with fuel and food and return with white goods, drugs, alcohol and cigarettes (Cole, 2012). Cigarette smuggling is controlled by networks in the security apparatus dominated by members of the **Qadhafya tribe** (Lacher, 2013). **Senior officials are said to be involved in smuggling arms to Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and the Sahel**, which trade has been thriving since the overthrow of Gaddafi (Lacher, 2013, and Lahcen Achy, expert comments). Larger scale ventures taking fifteen days to one month are also undertaken, reaping considerably more profit than any legal activity, even after cuts given to families involved and safe houses (Cole, 2012).

##### *Algeria*

In Algeria, **provincial officials** are thought to illegally sell subsidised fuel, food and humanitarian aid to northern Mali and Mauritania<sup>2</sup>, and receive cigarettes from Sahrawi networks (Lacher, 2013). Cigarettes leave Nouakchott or Nouadhibou in Mauritania, travel to the interior and then on to Atar and Zouerate, before reaching Algeria (Pézard and Glatz, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Expert comments

## **Mauritania**

Trafficking in Mauritania is very much linked to **armed non-state groups**. The Small Arms Survey provides some detailed analysis of the movement of small arms in and out of Mauritania (Pézard and Glatz, 2010), which is largely supported by Boukhars (2012b). Arms are transferred through Algeria, Mali and the Western Sahara. Zouerate and Nouadhibou are hubs for trafficking in drugs, cigarettes, and weapons, followed by Aioun al-Atrous and the capital Nouakchott (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). **Weapons coming in to Mauritania from the west and north are often from the Polisario Front** (Western Sahara independence movement), which has a surplus to sell (Boukhars 2012b). Mauritania transfers automatic weapons such as Kalashnikovs into Western Sahara and absorbs other weapons through the same routes. The village of Modibougou in the south is also a centre for the black market in weapons, receiving from Mali, Sierra Leone, and Guinea (Pézard and Glatz, 2010). The ex-President Ould Tayawas was known to control the major trafficking and contraband hub in the north, sustained by commercial, political, and military patronage networks. His alliances with the Rgueibat tribe, which also controls the Polisario independence movement, and his own tribe, the Smacid allowed him to retain control (Boukhars, 2012b). Post-2007, the lines in Mauritania become blurred between state actors and criminal ones, with many officials involved in illegal trade (Boukhars, 2012b). There has also been a recent influx of weapons from Libya and refugees from Mali, which contribute to a combustible mix (Boukhars 2012b). **Mauritania has become a crossroads for several different wars and tensions; AQIM, Malian Toureg, and Arabs** (Boukhars, 2012b).

## **Sudan/South Sudan**

A 2006 research initiative conducted in southern Sudan (now South Sudan) by the Small Arms Survey (Marks, 2007) bears out many of the points noted above, suggesting that trafficking follows similar patterns across North Africa. In Sudan, **small arms** generally travel one-way, towards DRC. Clan groups exploit their ethnic links to trade in guns, and pastoralists and armed civilians travel more or less freely across the border, rarely hampered by the authorities (Marks, 2007). Arms are commonly sold in border town markets, and armed groups play a key role in both demand and supply.

## **4. Movement of people**

UNODC has published a comprehensive review of the smuggling of illegal migrants into, through and from North Africa (Monzini, 2010). It provides a valuable synthesis of information on trends. Some key points relating to border security are:

- **Land, air and sea routes are used for migration from North Africa to EU countries.** Sea routes are most common, and the **most common destination countries are Italy** (often Lampedusa), and **Spain** (via Morocco and/or the Canary Isles).
- **North Africa is increasingly a destination** for economic migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, but also South Asia. **Libya is a key destination country** (although perhaps not after 2011). These migrants **do not intend further travel to the EU**.
- **Most migrants in North Africa seems to be Malian.** The other most common nationalities among migrants in the region are Nigerian, Guinean, Chad, Ghanaian, Senegalese and Liberian. In Libya, 50 per cent of migrants are Nigerian and 20 per cent are Ghanaian. In Egypt, many migrants are refugees from Sudan and Somalia.
- **East African routes through Chad and the Sudan are likely to become important soon.**

- **Migrants tend to be young, middle-class men, not poor, and quite well educated.** They are mostly **in search of short-term work** to send remittances home. It is unclear how many are asylum seekers.
- **Smugglers' organisational structures are extremely flexible and not hierarchical.** Small networks, often ethnic, interact with each other to arrange passage. **The networks adapt to any new controls put in place by authorities,** making it extremely difficult to eradicate their activities.

**Data is scarce** on illegal migrants. Some of the evidence presented in this paper is journalistic, but enough exists to be reasonably sure of the main points above. There have been varying trends reported about the flow of migration in the last decade. For example, Malta has made it impossible for migrants to leave once they arrive, however they continue to arrive; Spain and Morocco together have managed to reduce migrant flows by 50 per cent; flow to Italy is still strong.

While in transit, illegal **migrants are seen as people with money to spend,** and thus an **informal economy springs up** around them. The possibility of gaining money from migrants means local communities do not necessarily see their presence as negative. Anecdotally, smugglers appear to be quite well-off and well-connected. They are not akin to mafia organisations as they have flat hierarchies and constantly change. In most of the departure points in North Africa, **smuggling migrants appears to be well-established and to some extent permitted** by the authorities. In Morocco, the smugglers are not stigmatised and they operate relatively overtly. There are well-established routes into Libya through al-Wigh and Qatrun from Niger and western Africa, through a valley in the Tibesti mountains from Chad, or to Kufra from Sudan and eastern Africa (Cole, 2012). The trafficking networks are ingrained and accepted by the authorities, with unclear incentives to desist. As with many other countries, illegal migrants into Libya provide many services that Libyan nationals would not undertake (Cole, 2012).

Smuggling networks are extremely flexible and responsive, so **attempts by authorities to crack down have only resulted in smugglers adapting and diversifying their activities.** Regarding illegal migration into Libya, which is the most well-studied, shows that there is no single group operating a monopoly on the transit routes; rather, different actors are involved at each stage of travel (Lacher, 2012). Monzini (2010) emphasises that this situation indicates the **need for responses to go beyond a security approach,** as this has proved inadequate, and to examine holistic approaches. There is an increasing trend towards considering a human rights-based approach to migration, as many of the journeys undertaken are extremely dangerous and risky. Baldwin-Edwards (2006) takes up the issue of the EU's fragmented response to North African migrants, stating that the **increasing securitisation and militarisation of borders has offered no solution to the issue.** The EU has no coordinating policy, but all discussions are in the political and security arenas, not addressing the underlying issues causing migration or offering any strategy other than preventing immigration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006).

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## Key websites

- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – North Africa section: <http://carnegieendowment.org/regions/?fa=list&id=135>
- Small Arms Survey: <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/>
- African Borderlands Research Network: <http://www.aborne.org/bibliography.html>

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