

Illicit Flows Fuelling Conflict in the Tri-Border


**MIGRATION AND ARTISANAL GOLD
MINING IN SUDAN, CHAD AND LIBYA**



XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS



A satellite image of a desert landscape, likely in the Sahel region. The terrain is characterized by large, rolling sand dunes in shades of beige and tan. In the lower-left quadrant, there is a small, rectangular compound or settlement. This area contains several small, light-colored buildings, some with flat roofs, and a few darker, possibly metal-roofed structures. There are also some small, dark patches that could be trees or shrubs. The overall scene is arid and sparsely populated.

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Satellite Image
Maxar Technologies© 2021

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About XCEPT

The UK Aid-funded Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme examines transnational conflict dynamics, the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, and more effective international policy responses. Bringing together international and local experts, research spans the Middle East and North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, and parts of Asia. XCEPT includes Chemonics, Chatham House, King's College London, Conciliation Resources – through the X-Border Local Research Network – The Asia Foundation, Rift Valley Institute, and Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center. The programme melds mixed-methods research with innovative use of satellite data and open-source investigations to deepen insight on conflict-affected areas. The programme also includes the XCEPT Research Fund to enable responsive research on emerging conflicts and to build evidence on what works to stabilise, resolve and prevent conflict.

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Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
ANT	Armee National du Tchad
CCMSR	Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la République/Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic
EU	European Union
FACT	Front pour l'antennance et la concorde au Tchad
FCFA	Central African Franc/ Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne
GNA	Government of National Accord
GNC	General National Congress
GNU	Government of National Unity
GSLF	Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
KII	Key informant interview
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LBMA	London Bullion Market Association (gold price)
LNA	Libyan National Army
MDTJ	Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad/ Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad
RAC	Revolutionary Awakening Council
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SLA-MM	Sudanese Liberation Army/ Movement – Minni Minnawi faction
SLA-TC	Sudanese Liberation Army/ Movement – Transitional Council
SLM-AW	Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army - Abdul Wahid faction
SRF	Sudanese Revolutionary Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UFDD	Union of Forces for Democracy and Development
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees



Introduction

The tri-border area between Libya, Sudan and Chad sits on the periphery of all three countries both geographically and politically. While far from the control of capitals, these areas are not ungoverned. At least in Libya and Sudan, strongmen have taken control of these areas, capitalising on the presence of gold and the flow of people and other commodities to enrich themselves and bolster their power. But their power is not absolute. The potential revenue from gold and migration has encouraged other armed actors to also seek out an income, which makes some of the areas contested to varying extent and duration. This is particularly evident in northern Chad, where there is no dominant power, but rather multiple competing groups.

Frequent challenges from armed groups and mercenaries eager to profit generates a complex conflict system that crosses borders. Allegiances between different powerbrokers active in the tri-border area shift as their power waxes and wanes. The area is currently more stable than in recent decades, but the strength of each powerbroker is constantly under pressure from other groups. This increases the urgency to capitalise on illicit revenues to shore up patronage networks and military defences.

Smuggling routes traverse the borders, moving armed groups, migrants and commodities. Militants from different armed groups have moved across borders to support groups in other countries for



payment, but also for future alliance support. Labour migrants have gravitated to the gold mining areas of all three countries seeking work either mining or in associated services, an industry that feeds the war economy. European-bound migrants have also been found to work in gold mines to pay for the next leg of their journey. These migrants often faced extortion from armed groups controlling territory along their journey.

In recent years, these dynamics have been affected by developments inside the three countries. Migration across Sudan into Libya has waned following reports of torture in Libya. The ceasefire agreement in Libya requires foreign fighters, including Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries, most part of rebel groups in their own country, to depart. General Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagalo, head of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a group that has been implicated in the exploitation of migrants, has become part of the Sovereign Council in Sudan's transitional government, increasing his legitimacy. More recently, Chad's President Déby was killed during fighting against rebel groups in northern Chad, and his son has stepped up to lead the transitional government.

Even wider international developments have also influenced dynamics. The Covid-19 pandemic has severely reduced air travel in the region, creating a resurgence along overland routes. Conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has pushed Eritrean refugees and Ethiopians into Sudan. The UN

mission in Darfur is drawing down, increasing violence and fear in communities, and providing greater freedom for the RSF. Oil prices, which have been a key revenue source for Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) and other armed groups, have decreased significantly, increasing interest in other revenue sources.

These changes have raised the attractiveness of illicit revenues in the region, in particular migration routes, where increased exploitation has compensated for reduced numbers, but also artisanal gold mining, with souks in Dubai ready to purchase regardless of origin. Controlling such flows and revenues directly influences armed groups' strength and thus drives conflict dynamics in the tri-border region.

The remoteness of the tri-border region has made the conflict dynamics less visible and thus they have not been adequately researched. However, conflict in the tri-border area has a significant impact on wider stability, particularly the nascent transition in Sudan, the fragile ceasefire in Libya and now uncertainty around Chad's political future – all of which subsequently have even wider repercussions. This report investigates the dynamics of conflict, migration and gold mining in the tri-border area, investigating the key actors and considering the policy implications for wider stability. The first chapter discusses the conflict dynamics and the key actors involved, before deep dives into migration and artisanal gold mining.



KEY FINDINGS

Conflict

In Sudan, General Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagalo, now head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the government force established to control migration, **has consolidated control over both migration routes and gold mines in Darfur**, generating significant revenue to strengthen his position in Darfur, but also within Sudan's transitional government. Through his role in the transitional government, Hemeti managed to persuade many Darfur rebel groups to sign the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan, despite previously fighting against them while part of the Janjaweed militia. Hemeti's control over revenue sources will be crucial to maintaining support from these groups, as one of the conditions of the agreement is access to revenue sources in Darfur.

In Libya, Saddam Haftar has been tightening his grip on the licit and illicit flows moving through southern and eastern Libya, particularly the flows of drugs and people. He is the son of Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), the Benghazi-based main opposition group to the UN recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). While Tebu groups remain in control of the area between Murzuq and Rebiana in southern Libya, this is part of an uneasy agreement with the LAAF.

In Chad, the government's presence in the north has been focused on repelling Chadian rebel groups currently based in Libya. **Sporadic attacks on gold mining areas have created tensions with the Tebu ethnic groups that control the Kouri Bougoudi mining area.** Government attacks have also caused a stand-off in the Miski gold mining area. The government's patchy engagement in northern Chad has encouraged youth to join rebel groups.

The low level of conflict in the triborder area gives a faulty impression of peace and order.

Instead, this low conflict level comes from a degree of consolidation of who controls the illicit flows, based on competition and conflict that has taken place elsewhere in the broader triborder area. This consolidation could flare up again, but currently the status quo is preferable to the main powerbrokers.

Rent seeking shapes the dynamics between different armed groups. Where there is a clear dominance – LAAF in Libya, RSF in Sudan – there is an unstable accord with the armed groups active in the areas controlled by the LAAF and RSF. But unsatisfied groups will attempt to build their strength to challenge the status quo.

Disruption of the status quo is most likely in Darfur, as groups that are party to the peace agreement are seeking revenue sources and they hold a card in Hemeti's domination as they increase the number of powerholders in Khartoum in Hemeti's alliance. In Libya, the Tebu are unlikely to challenge the LAAF because of previous losses in Kufra and Murzuq, but equally they will not give up their remaining territory easily. In Chad, the cycles of government closures will continue, increasing frustration, particularly if the presence of the Chadian army increases in the wake of President Déby's death. Challenges may arise if large numbers of Sudanese mercenaries depart Libya, but that is unlikely in the short term.

KEY FINDINGS

Migration

Although the number of Eritreans and Ethiopians travelling through Libya has dropped dramatically since the 2015 peak, numbers are on the rise again, driven by both Covid-19 related restrictions on air travel and conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region. The majority of Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants in Libya are clustered along the Mediterranean coast, but this is likely to change as overland flows increase from Sudan and Egypt, driven by reduced air travel, conflict in Tigray, and the increasingly insecure situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Crossing Libya is difficult and time consuming, as many migrants become trapped in slave-like conditions at migrant holding houses in ghetto areas of key inland towns. Ethiopians and Eritreans will likely use the routes favoured by Sudanese migrants, who have continued to cross into Libya in increasing numbers since 2015.

The number of Sudanese migrants moving into Chad and Libya is steadily increasing. Most Sudanese migrants are not seeking onward travel to Europe. They are either circular (temporary) migrants seeking work opportunities, or they are fleeing Sudan but remaining in the region. The pattern of Sudanese migration highlights shifting preferences in border crossings, linked to political and conflict dynamics in Chad, Libya and Egypt.

In southeast Libya, armed, criminal and tribal actors continue to dominate smuggling. The LAAF, allied to the Zway tribe, are consolidating their control of the smuggling networks in this region; any 'anti-smuggling' activities are typically just for show.

The passage through the Tibesti Mountains in northern Chad has grown into a reliable route for migrants hoping to reach Libya. It is cheaper than other routes. It can also be safer, as there are fewer armed groups vying for control of the route from Darfur to the Libyan border. However, there is still little protection for migrants, and the Chadian government's regular expulsion of gold miners from the area also disrupts the migrant convoys.

Increased migration through Chad is reviving tensions between rival smuggling networks. Since the battle in 2015 between two rival tribal groups — the Tebu and the Zway — to control Kufra district in southeast Libya, which ended in defeat for the Tebu, relations between the groups had eased somewhat. However, renewed interest from the LAAF in smuggling revenue, coupled with the Tebu's increased revenue from the Chadian smuggling route, are reviving tensions.

KEY FINDINGS

Artisanal Gold Mining

Artisanal gold mining¹ in the tri-border area differs in type, accessibility, and thus extraction methods and value. A common feature across all mining in the area is competition for control.

Artisanal mining and regional smuggling routes draw in various actors – the state, local militias, tribal groups, migrant workers, people smugglers – angling for profits. However, control of the mining areas rests with the strongest armed group.

Artisanal gold mines have become protection economies. This can involve full state control and protection, as in some parts of Sudan; or an absence of the state, with local militias providing protection, as in Chad and Libya. The involvement of the state is complex: state willingness to break the chain between licit/illicit mining is complicated by political and economic considerations; and the state is not the strongest actor in any of the three countries.

Satellite imagery reveals that mining areas in both Chad and Libya have continued to grow, both in size and the sophistication of equipment used, since gold was discovered there nearly a decade ago. Artisanal mining in Chad is growing despite the regular expulsion of miners by the state. Although the ebb and flow of mining activity is affected by these expulsions, satellite and open-source data shows that other factors play an important role too, including conflict and political dynamics, and the economic interests of the armed forces.

Gold – whether artisanally or commercially mined – is easily smuggled in large volumes. This makes it a popular avenue for money laundering by armed groups, criminal networks, and corrupt actors, who can then disguise its provenance by melting it together with other gold².

The revenue from gold has the potential to shift the balance of power within states. Groups active in each country have used the goldfields to consolidate their power – a trend particularly evident in Sudan and Libya. These groups are linked to larger groups that either operate as a part of the state (RSF in Sudan), as an extension of a competing state formation (LAAF in south Libya), or in opposition to the state, without a close link to it (Tebu, Zaghawa, self-defence militias). In this way, these smaller groups and their shifting alliances have an outsized impact on the power balance at the state level, and so the international level too.

IMPLICATIONS

Conflict

The LAAF seeks continued control over south and eastern Libya, including control of illicit flows (drugs and people) and gold revenues to strengthen their position following defeat against the GNA in Tripoli. While this won't challenge the ceasefire that ended the civil war in Libya immediately, it undermines the aim of conflict resolution in the long-term. But LAAF control through affiliate groups is unstable and increasingly unacceptable to local communities frustrated by high levels of criminality and weak governance.

Although their departure is unlikely in the short-term, the retreat of Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries from Libya in response to the ceasefire agreement will add another actor into the mix in the tri-border area, undermining the uneasy balance and increasing instability. When these groups go on the move, instability may extend to nearby hotspots also, such as mining and smuggling hubs in northern Niger, as well as increasing conflict in Central African Republic.

If Hemeti manages to appease the Darfur rebel groups that are signatory to the Juba Peace Agreement by providing access to revenue sources, his strength in Sudan will be unmatched, he will have managed to translate his informal military and financial power into overt political power, giving him (and his allies, such as UAE) substantial power over Sudan's transition, as well as a likely long-term position as the pre-eminent powerbroker in the country. He will have gained more legitimacy and can even brandish peace brokering credentials by bringing armed groups into the legitimate political fold.

In contrast to Darfur and southern Libya, there is no group in Chad that is more powerful and seeking domination. In northern Chad, the state has effectively been absent, and there are fewer signs of the kinds of alliance networks with stronger groups seen in the neighbouring countries. Clashes continue between Tebu and Zaghawa groups, and the presence of these groups also in Libya and Darfur will influence their strength and objectives in Chad. With the death of Chad's President Déby in April 2021, the transitional government will likely reprioritise northern Chad, which will change the dynamics considerably as the Chadian Army is likely to reinforce their offensive against rebel groups in northern Chad.

If the LAAF and Hemeti are able to keep affiliate groups and the wider community in areas under their control relatively content, the status quo will remain fragile, but in place. However, if they fail to deliver, this will shift the balance, sparking conflict that has the potential to spread across the tri-border area.

IMPLICATIONS

Migration

Measures currently in place to protect migrants are not equipped to deal with shifts in migration routes. Because migrants pass through low level conflict areas, organisations attempting to protect migrants operate at the mercy of powerbrokers at the different levels, some tribal, some proto-state. The EU has reduced migration funding to Sudan, and few NGOs and international organisations are present along the route through Chad. Chadian crackdowns on mining areas increase the risk to migrants along this route by limiting their options.

Competition among armed groups for control of smuggling networks will lead to new outbreaks of violence. Growth in migration increases the revenue available to armed groups. As involvement in the Libyan conflict has decreased, mercenaries drawn back to the tri-border area will be keen to capitalise on migration and other illicit flows, putting them in violent competition with other groups already active in the area. Migrant flows are particularly attractive to weaker armed groups because the flow is mobile, so their predation does not rely on holding territory over time.

IMPLICATIONS

Artisanal Gold Mining

Artisanal gold mining provides armed groups with a stable and substantial source of funding and an opportunity to consolidate their power. This is evident in the control of southern Libya by General Khalifa Haftar's LAAF through local affiliate groups³. In Darfur, artisanal mining has shored up the power of Hemeti and the RSF. It has also strengthened the hand of rebel groups, giving them the capacity to shun the peace process. In Chad, even though the mining is more ad hoc, it still offers revenue for relatively isolated tribal groups with few alternative revenue sources. Continued control and profit rely on continued military strength.

Competition among armed groups for control of artisanal goldfields has the potential to increase violent conflict. In Chad, incursions by the armed forces have encouraged the formation of self-defence groups and increased recruitment to Chadian rebel groups. In Darfur, rebel groups party to the peace process are interested in engaging in mining as a revenue generating activity as their members return from Libya, which may increase tensions if gold revenue is not shared with them. In Libya, the attempts of smaller armed groups to challenge LAAF dominance generally tends to prompt a hard-line LAAF response — as evidenced by airstrikes during the South Liberation and Purge Operation in 2019⁴.

As hubs for migration, gold mines have become synonymous with exploitation. This will only increase as control over mining areas is consolidated by armed groups, because there will be even fewer avenues for migrants to seek assistance. When multiple actors were present, there were instances when migrants were freed by competing groups.

The potential for engagement with Chad, Libya and Sudan on formalising the gold sector to reduce smuggling is limited, but there is scope to strengthen engagement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which imports the majority of artisanally mined gold, to bolster mechanisms on gold imports to ensure the source is identified, in line with recommendations by the Financial Action Task Force⁵.



Conflict Dynamics

The tri-border area between Chad, Libya and Sudan is a nexus for illicit cross-border trade and flows linked to regional conflict. Militants traverse the region, exploiting cross-border flows and the area's gold mining activity for financial and political gain. Migrants are pulled toward the mines and associated services, whether by choice (to fund the next leg of their journey to Europe) or by coercion from armed actors who control territory along their journey, supporting an industry that feeds the war economy. While elements of these dynamics have been well researched, such as migration from the Horn of Africa to Libya, recent changes in the political economy arising from Sudan's political transition, restrictions on border crossings as a result of Covid, fluctuations in oil prices and attempts at a ceasefire in Libya have had a significant impact on gold mining, migration and the war economy which is not well understood.

In all three countries, the tri-border area lacks a credible, permanent state presence because of the distance from capitals. This absence has allowed longstanding trade and smuggling routes to emerge, protected as well as disputed by armed groups. The two main routes are from Agadez, Niger to Sabha, Libya in the west, and through Sudan moving from Dongola to Kufra in Libya. Additional routes cross into and through Chad, from Darfur to Libya, through the Tibesti mountains. These routes are well plied with people, gold, contraband, vehicles and mercenaries. The Tebu,



Arab, Zaghawa/Beri and Tuareg tribes who inhabit these areas control the routes in a practical rather than *de jure* sense, which means they claim the space as a taxable land through either informal taxation or banditry including against illicit goods, or by denying access to others. This dynamic ensures there will always be a certain level of conflict, as transactions are reinforced with military capacity and power.

Layered above these dynamics are major events such as the Libyan revolution of 2011, the subsequent civil war, political transition in Sudan with the removal of President Bashir after 30 years, and most recently the death of President Déby in Chad who had also ruled for 30 years. These events are politically charged because of domestic choices, such as which side to support in Libya, and internationally, as Libya became a proxy war between the two main Middle East/ North Africa camps, with Turkey and Qatar supporting the GNA, and UAE and Egypt supporting Haftar and the LAAF, with additional interest from other major powers. Other influences include the European response to migration across the Mediterranean, concerns of jihadism in the wider Sahara, and gold discoveries in the region.

In recent years, other conflicts have been more prominent in the three countries – including Haftar’s attempt and ultimate failure to take Tripoli; the protests and coup in Sudan, as well as ongoing conflict in South Kordofan and Abyei; and periodic incursions into Chad by Boko Haram. In contrast, the tri-border region has been relatively calm. However, developments in each of the three countries has the potential to shift the balance, resulting in increased fighting and instability. These trends are identified here, drawing on the analysis of conflict events, with a specific focus on migration, gold and the key actors in the tri-border area.

This chapter begins by exploring the key actors active in the tri-border, including the strongmen in Darfur and southern Libya, as well as the more dispersed control in northern Chad. This is followed by an examination of the conflict dynamics in each of the three countries that make up the tri-border, and their interlinkages.

Key Actors: Dominance through military strength and co-optation

In Libya and Sudan, strongmen have capitalised on the presence of gold and the flow of people and other commodities to enrich themselves and bolster their power. But this power is not absolute. In contrast, northern Chad lacks a dominant group with power dispersed among ethnic groups and the Chadian Army. This section discusses the dominant powers in Sudan and Libya and the absence in Chad.

Southern Libya and Darfur cover large tracts of land that are difficult for any one group to control. In both regions, a feudal system has emerged with control decentralised to affiliate groups that have freedom to engage in revenue-making activities to the extent that they don’t disrupt the interests of the overarching power. In Libya, this has been the LAAF’s primary strategy – borrowing from Gaddafi era tactics of ruling through local armed groups.

Operating this way means gambling on which groups to bring in as affiliates. In 2015 in Kufra, the LAAF played two groups against each other to decide, sponsoring both the Tebu and the Zway ethnic groups before deciding to side with the Zway for multiple reasons, and pushing the

Tebu out of the south east corner of Libya. The Zway formed Subol Al-Salam, a militia that has come to control migration routes from Sudan into Libya and north towards Tripoli on behalf of the LAAF.

More recently, the LAAF empowered anti-Tebu groups in Murzuq and Um al-Araneb, including Sudanese mercenaries and Awlad Suleiman groups, to push Tebu groups out of the area. As this strategy began to fail, particularly as Tebu groups retaliated when fighting reached Qatrun, the LAAF took a more conciliatory tone, and instead co-opted Tebu groups.

In Darfur, Hemeti’s involvement in the Juba Peace Agreement has appeased most Darfur rebel groups that formerly fought against the Janjaweed. In the near future, Hemeti will need to satisfy the revenue-generating needs of these groups in Darfur, with some interested in gold mining areas. However, in exchange, these groups will increase Hemeti’s power at the national level. In addition, Hemeti has repositioned his interests in gold on the processing side, which opens space for rebel groups to control the mining operations themselves, while still maintaining his own profits.

Main groups controlling Libya, Chad and Sudan





Hemeti signs the initial agreement for peace talks on behalf of the Sudanese government in Juba
Jok Solomon/ REUTERS ©

The growing power of Hemeti and the RSF

Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagolo first gained notoriety in the mid-2000s when he was part of the most prominent Arab militia (Janjaweed) in Darfur, headed by Musa Hilal. Hilal had always been pro-government, but following the 2003-4 massacres in Darfur where the Janjaweed targeted non-Arab tribes, he was formally brought into government forces – Hilal's Border Intelligence Brigade was integrated into the armed forces and his soldiers were paid by the state.

As he rose in prominence as part of Hilal's forces, Hemeti constantly negotiated with

Khartoum and was ready to cut a deal at any time if the price was right and he had something to gain, being given his own force – the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013 – to maintain his support. Rather than a dependable ally to Khartoum, Hemeti has consistently defected and renegotiated, increasing his patronage network each time and becoming far more powerful. This was particularly evident in the growth and freedom granted to Hemeti's RSF, which first became Sudan's border force, but quickly evolved into a highly mobile and large expeditionary force. The RSF spread into Eastern Sudan to manage migration, and

deployed to Yemen in 2015 in support of Saudi and UAE interests. During this time, Hemeti and the RSF have consolidated control of – and generated significant profits from – migration and the Jebel Amir gold mine.

In Darfur, the RSF has played a dual role in migration – balancing their official role to stop migration and interests in cashing in on migration flows. Gold has also been an important source of revenue. Although Hemeti handed control of Jebel Amir gold mine to the Government of Sudan in 2020, his family company, Al Junaid, maintains control of gold processing at the mine, an activity that has expanded to gold mining areas in South Darfur and Kordofan.

Despite allegations of the RSF's role in killing protestors in Khartoum during the 2018-19 revolution, Hemeti became the Deputy leader of the Sovereign Council. As Hemeti is not from the traditional ruling class, he used the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan, which aimed to resolve the conflict in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, to build a constituency with the Darfur rebel groups, indicating that political patronage continues to hold sway in Sudan. Although previously enemies, both when Hemeti was a Janjaweed leader, and as head of the RSF, Hemeti convinced five Darfur rebel groups to sign the peace agreement, to unite to take power in Khartoum against *Jellaba* elites to stop Darfur being marginalised⁶. Not all groups participated – the Abdul Wahid faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM-AW), which maintains a stronghold in the Jebel Marra (Marrah Mountains) area, generating funding from gold mines, has not participated, although the group is experiencing internal divisions and Abdul Wahid has continued negotiating separately with Khartoum⁷. Abdallah Banda, an ex-JEM commander has been present at Kouri Bougoudi, mining and recruiting. With 45 vehicles, which is a considerable force in that area, Banda has now established a new rebel group – Assembly of the Justice and Equality Movement Forces⁸.

Signatory groups have also displayed some distrust in the agreement. Many rebel groups have had sizeable forces fighting for the LAAF

in Libya. While they are required to return all fighters to Darfur as part of the peace agreement, they are intending to leave a significant force in Libya to maintain a rear base and revenue sources⁹. This is also a breach of the Libyan ceasefire agreement, but as recently as December 2020, the LAAF reportedly promised new vehicles and weapons in addition to regular salaries¹⁰. A key challenge will be satisfying the revenue expectations of the rebel groups, which are beginning to draw up plans for their return, some of which include involvement in gold mining¹¹. Another challenge arises from the ethnic divisions in Darfur, as all signatories are Zaghawa groups, no Fur groups have participated.

If the peace agreement holds, Hemeti's power in Darfur will be unmatched. Sudan's Transitional Partners Council, which was created by decree in December 2020 to direct Sudan's transition is to have 29 members. Hemeti, his brother and nine representatives from the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF)¹, turns Hemeti's immediate alliance into more than a third of the Transitional Council's vote share. The creation of the new council has been criticised by civilian members of the Sovereign Council, and the Prime Minister has refused to join. If the SRF members and their access to revenue in Darfur is assured, and the Council becomes permanent, Hemeti will have established a powerful and viable role for himself in Sudan's transition.

¹The Sudanese Revolutionary Front is the coalition of rebel groups that signed the Darfur Peace Agreement



A LAAF vehicle west of Sirte
Esam Omran Al-Fetori ©

LAAF increasing control through affiliates

Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar had previously served in the Libyan Army under Gaddafi, but after decades in exile in the US, he returned to play a key role in the revolution that overthrew Gaddafi in 2011. He was a commander of the Libyan Army when the General National Congress (GNC) extended their mandate. In response, Haftar launched Operation Dignity – calling for the GNC to step down, while also advocating for the armed forces to be strengthened, giving them 'dignity' while fighting Islamists.

In March 2015, Haftar was made commander of the LAAF by the House of Representatives. When the Government of National Accord (GNA) was appointed in December 2015, the LAAF split from the forces controlled by the GNA. Haftar refused to recognise the GNA, and by mid-2017 took control of Benghazi. Haftar and the LAAF have since expanded their control to much of eastern and southern Libya, and in April 2019 launched a campaign to take control of Tripoli.

In eastern and southern Libya, Haftar has long had a strategy for the LAAF to operate through proxy armed groups. This was evident in 2015, when the LAAF backed the Zway ethnic group in Kufra, resulting in the formation of Subol Al-Salam. Subol Al-Salam has successfully taken over control of smuggling routes from Sudan to Kufra or Tazerbo, undermining profits from people smuggling that previously accrued to Tebu ethnic groups as they controlled the movement of people from the Sudanese border towards Sabha. In August 2018, the LAAF officially incorporated Subol Al-Salam into their command structure, and gave them responsibility for policing the border area. Recently, Khalifa Haftar's son Saddam has taken an increasing interest in Subol Al-Salam, using its strength to reinforce his interests in drug trafficking in the area surrounding the Sarir oil fields. Saddam Haftar is also the primarily interlocutor for Sudanese groups active in Libya, and fighting on behalf of the LAAF¹².

Saddam Haftar plays a significant role in revenue generation. In 2018, Saddam Haftar took control of the Benghazi branch of the Central Bank of Libya, accruing of large amounts of money and silver. Saddam is also linked to Turkish intelligence, where he has transported gold in exchange for fighters, weapons and cash. More recently, he has been implicated in cocaine trafficking through eastern Libya.

The LAAF has also sought to increase control over southern Libya through an offensive in early 2019 – South Liberation and Purge Operation. This was an attempt to increase LAAF control of the Fezzan region, premised on the grounds that they were the only actor that could provide law and order to communities in the region¹³. The Tebu were the primary target of the 2019 operation conducted mostly through anti-Tebu groups, following on from Haftar's denouncement of the tribe as Chadian rebels¹⁴. Although not a well unified group, with some being pro-LAAF and others anti-LAAF, different Tebu groups have controlled the area between Murzuq and Rebiana, including the gold mining areas. Tebu groups haven't controlled mining itself, they have controlled checkpoints on the Chad/Libya border, as well as the notoriously violent checkpoint into Kilinje mine. Management committees were set up in the mining areas to charge miners for access to the sites.

While the Tebu gave up their positions in Sabha relatively quickly in response to the LAAF operation, they fought back against attempts to take Murzuq and Qatrun. Airstrikes in and around Murzuq in early 2019 resulted in civilian casualties, and the ground offensive involved Awlad Suleiman and Zway members, groups that have generally been opposed to the Tebu presence in Libya, as well as Sudanese fighters that were hostile to the Tebu. The result was ongoing violence between Tebu groups and others. By late 2019, LAAF leaders sought to repair the relations with Tebu leaders in Murzuq and Qatrun, in part because of their weakened stance after the

LAAF's defeat in Tripoli. While checkpoints near Sabha were dismantled, Tebu controlled checkpoints south and southeast of Sabha remained in place¹⁵.

This suggests that a co-optation arrangement has been reached with Tebu groups, whereby Tebu groups can continue their revenue generating activities, including checkpoints and taxation in gold mining areas, but they need to comply with and accept the dominance of the LAAF. For the Tebu, this has revealed that their tribal affiliations override all others, such as alignment with the LAAF, and with Tebu groups on both sides of the Libyan conflict, it means the tribe can position itself to appease the major power – whoever that is at a given time – to maintain control over key territory, in this case the area between Murzuq, Rebiana and the Chad border. The arrangement between the Tebu and the LAAF appears to be providing more predictability and stability in the mining areas, which has allowed them to grow, with more sophisticated equipment being present in mining areas. In addition, as all gold must be transported north, the traders in major cities will be aligned with, and will pay taxes to the LAAF.

One of the commitments of the Libyan ceasefire agreement signed in October 2020 was the demobilisation of armed groups, a commitment reiterated by UN Security Council Resolution 2570 agreed on 16 April 2021. This was a response to Haftar's demands for pro-GNA groups around Tripoli to be disbanded. It is not clear whether this applies just to the GNA, or also LAAF affiliates in southern and eastern Libya¹⁶. But working through affiliates provides the LAAF an element of deniability. More recently however, this strategy has been challenged by local communities as the LAAF has not followed through with their promise to improve law and order. Continued criminality and poor governance is disrupting the fragile basis for LAAF supremacy in the Fezzan, which may result in increased support for alternative powers¹⁷.



Dispersed power in Northern Chad

Compared to Darfur and southern Libya, in northern Chad, control has been more dispersed. The Chadian government has regularly expelled miners from the gold mines, but has not yet imposed any form of control as it is more concerned with preventing incursions from Chadian rebel groups. As in Libya, the gold mining areas have traditionally been controlled by Tebu groups. But these groups have expressed anger at the numbers of foreign miners and the encroachment of Zaghawa miners and smugglers. Some areas have also been targeted by Chadian forces. For example, Miski experienced heavy clashes, air strikes, and a blockage by Chadian forces beginning in November 2018, lasting until late 2019 when an agreement was signed and the self-defence committee began to disarm. However, many Tebu youth and members of self-defence militias joined armed opposition groups¹⁸.

The main challenge arises from tensions between different tribal groups, most notably the Tebu, Zaghawa/ Beri and the Dazagada/ Goran. These groups have historically occupied separate areas of northern Chad with some overlap. However, increasing engagement in illicit flows has brought them more into contact. The Zaghawa have played a key role in people smuggling, as they have been able to recruit migrants in Darfur and Eastern Chad, and facilitate their transportation to the Tibesti goldfields. For example, ex-JEM commander Abdallah Banda was a prominent Zaghawa people smuggler, who had established considerable control in areas of Kouri Bougoudi, where he transported Darfuris to work in the mines¹⁹. His base was attacked by government forces in March 2019, as he was perceived to be linked to Chadian rebels even though he was establishing a new faction of JEM.



Chadian rebels from UFDD
Finbarr O'Reilly/ REUTERS

Another threat emerges from Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries returning home from Libya – additional armed actors vying for access to revenue in the border areas. While the openness of the gold mining areas has generally provided space for multiple groups, the growing consolidation of self-defence groups would oppose a significant influx of outsiders. As other Sudanese mercenaries have used Kouri Bougoudi as a recruitment base, such as the example of ex-JEM commander Abdallah Banda mentioned above, Hemeti will also be looking to minimise their presence as it threatens the balance emerging in Darfur.

In Northern Chad, rebel groups that have been based in Libya have been launching attacks in Tibesti. This was most pronounced around the election on 11 April 2021, which renewed Déby's leadership for a sixth term. Front pour l'antennance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT) fighters took control of key towns in the area, with ensuing clashes resulting in the death of Déby. Ongoing fighting against FACT and other

rebels in northern Chad may reinforce the presence of the Chadian army in the region, challenging the dispersed power that currently exists.

Tebu groups will be threatened by the return of Sudanese mercenaries in particular, as many of these mercenaries are Zaghawa, the tribe that has repeatedly clashed with the Tebu²⁰. Darfuri groups present in Libya have also defended Darfuri miners active in northern Chad. In January 2019, a convoy of 70 vehicles bringing together several Darfuri rebel groups travelled from Jufra to Kouri Bougoudi after Zaghawa miners were targeted in clashes²¹. Although as noted above, the return of Sudanese groups is unlikely in the short term.



Interconnected Conflicts across the tri-border

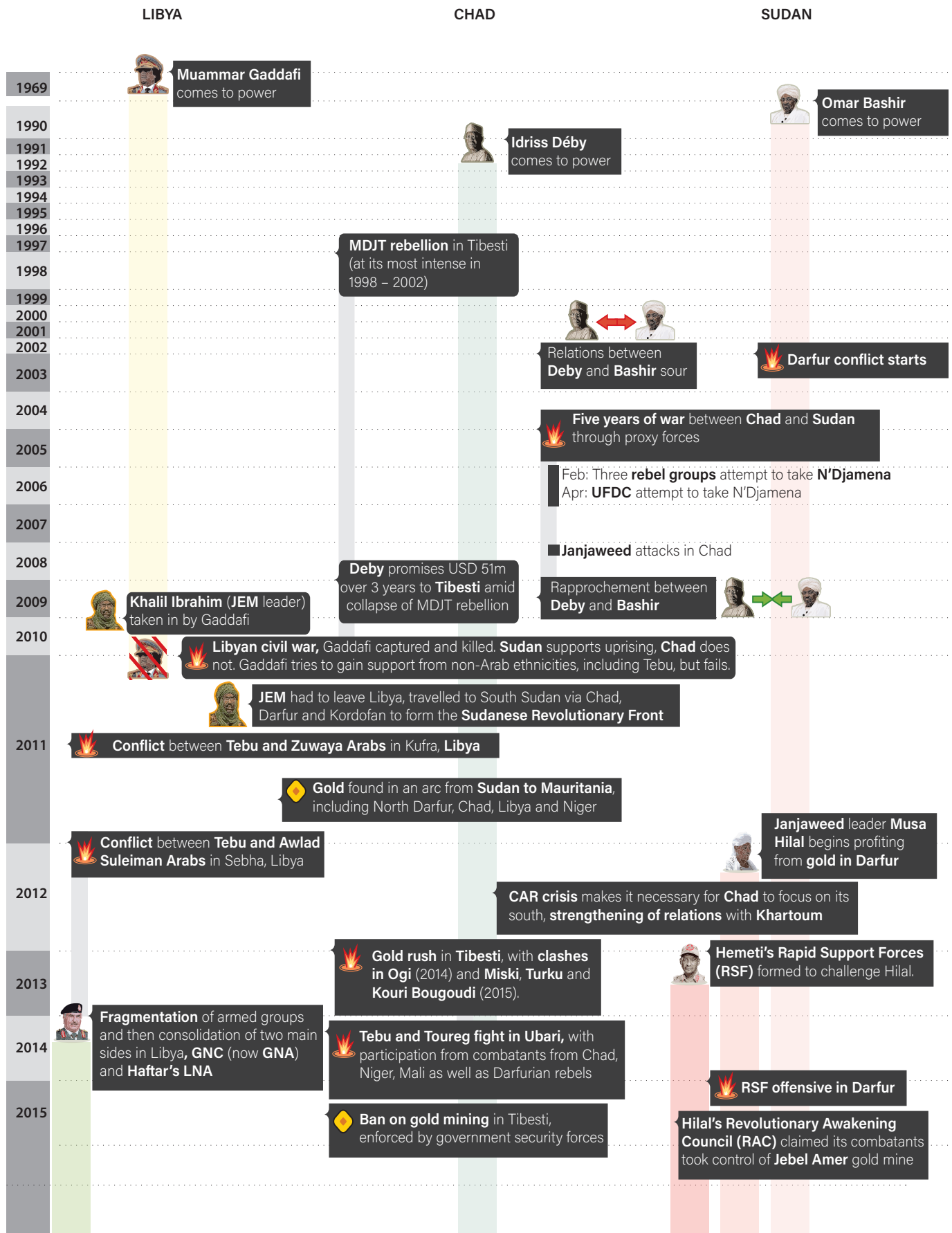
Chad, Sudan and Libya each have their own conflict systems. Until recently President Déby's fear of rebel attacks in N'Djamena to overthrow his leadership informed many policy decisions and it is likely the transitional government will take an even more heavy handed response to rebel groups in northern Chad; the transition in Sudan is still underway, with a peace agreement reached in Juba to resolve the situation in Darfur (although it does not include all rebel groups); and the LAAF and GNA have signed another ceasefire in Libya, with a new Government of National Unity (GNU) coming into power.

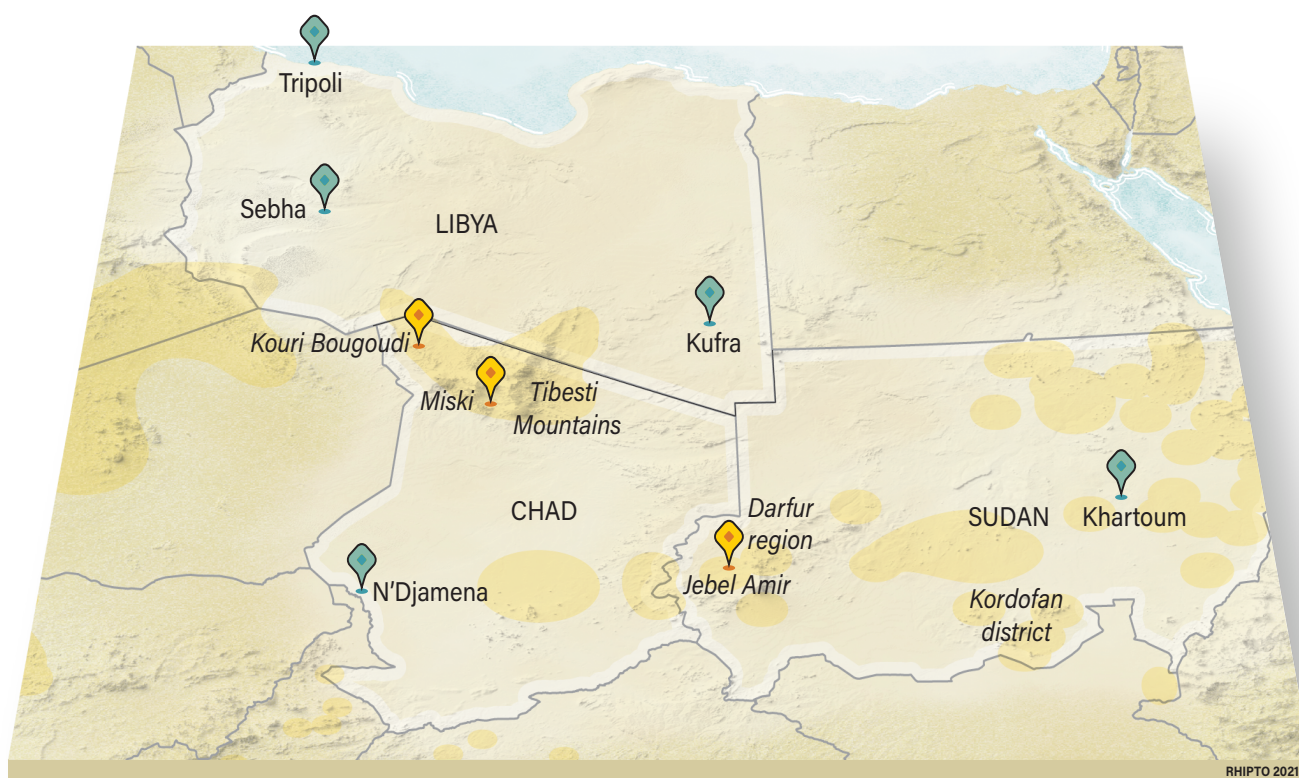
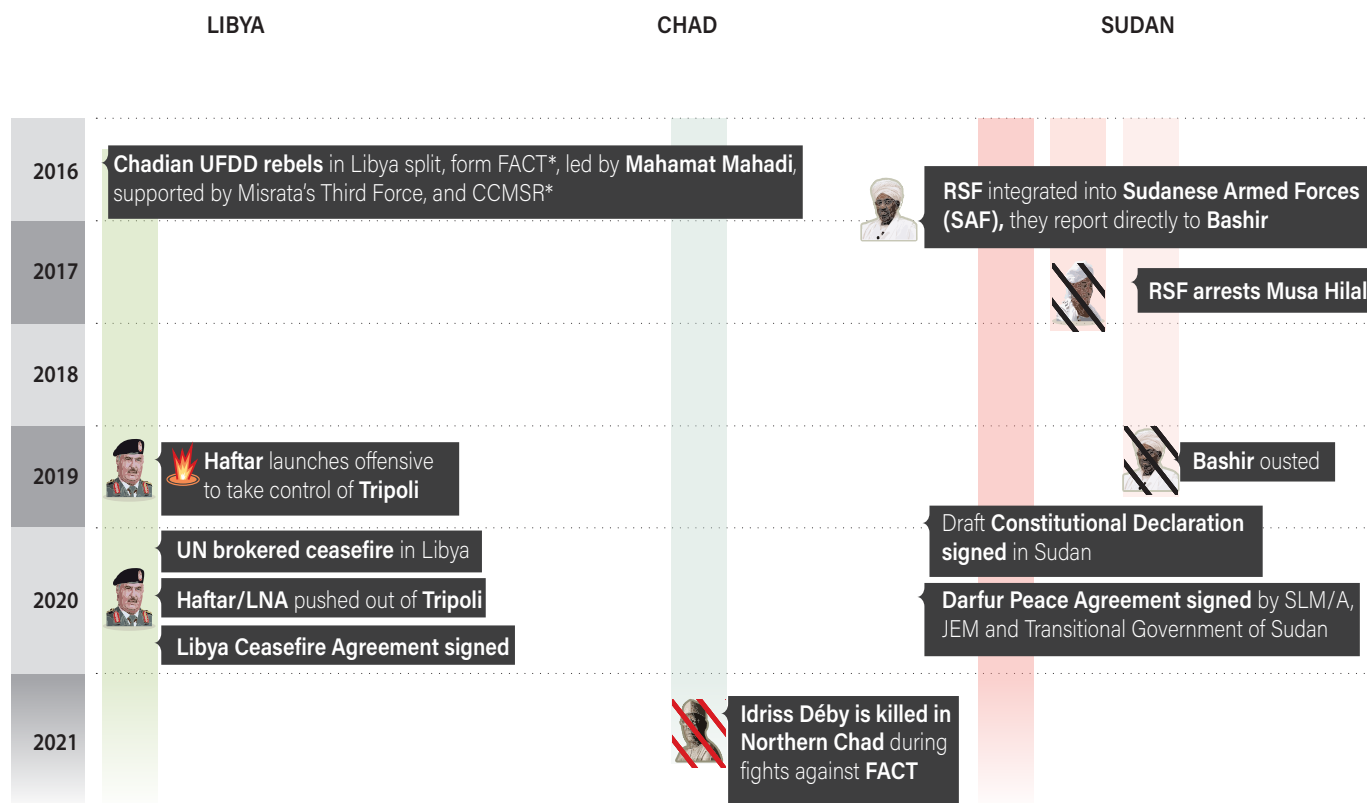
However, conflicts in the three countries are inherently interlinked, with leaders providing and withdrawing support for different groups in the other countries. In the 1990s, President Déby was on good terms with both Gaddafi in Libya and Bashir in Sudan. While the relationship with Gaddafi was maintained until the revolution in 2011, the relationship with Bashir has oscillated, which has influenced the support each leader provided to rebel groups from the other's country, as set out in the timeline below. This section sets out the conflict system within each state and how they each affect the wider tri-border.



Nomadic Tebu village, northern Chad
Hemis/ Alamy©

Conflict and the struggle for power and gold





UFDD - Union of Forces for Democracy and Development
 FACT - Front pour l'antennance et la concorde au Tchad
 CCMSR - Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la republique

Chad: protecting Déby's power

Chad is concerned with conflict on its borders, which in recent years has come from Sudan, Libya, Nigeria and Central African Republic. Aside from Nigeria, these areas provide a haven for Chadian rebels, although the majority have been fighting with the armed groups in Libya. The border areas within Chad have limited state presence, and heavily armed communities, which the government wants to disarm. Gold mining areas in particular present a security challenge as sporadic evictions by Chadian forces have created distrust and violence with local communities, which have formed self-defence militias. This is especially the case for the Tebu who were previously empowered by N'Djamena to protect the border with Libya, but have since been targeted by government forces.

Falling oil prices have renewed state interest in the gold reserves. The Chadian government has previously signed contracts with mining companies for concessions in Batha, Kebbi-Est, Mayo Kebbi Ouest, but instability has prevented this in Tibesti. Quastec Gold African Resources was contracted in 2016 to formalise the gold sector and build a gold refinery, and Tibesti has seen increasing government interest. Self-defence groups will resist moves to formalise mining, given their efforts to control the area. The result will be increased clashes between government forces and self-defence groups, increasing the potential for local youth to be recruited by rebel groups based in Libya.

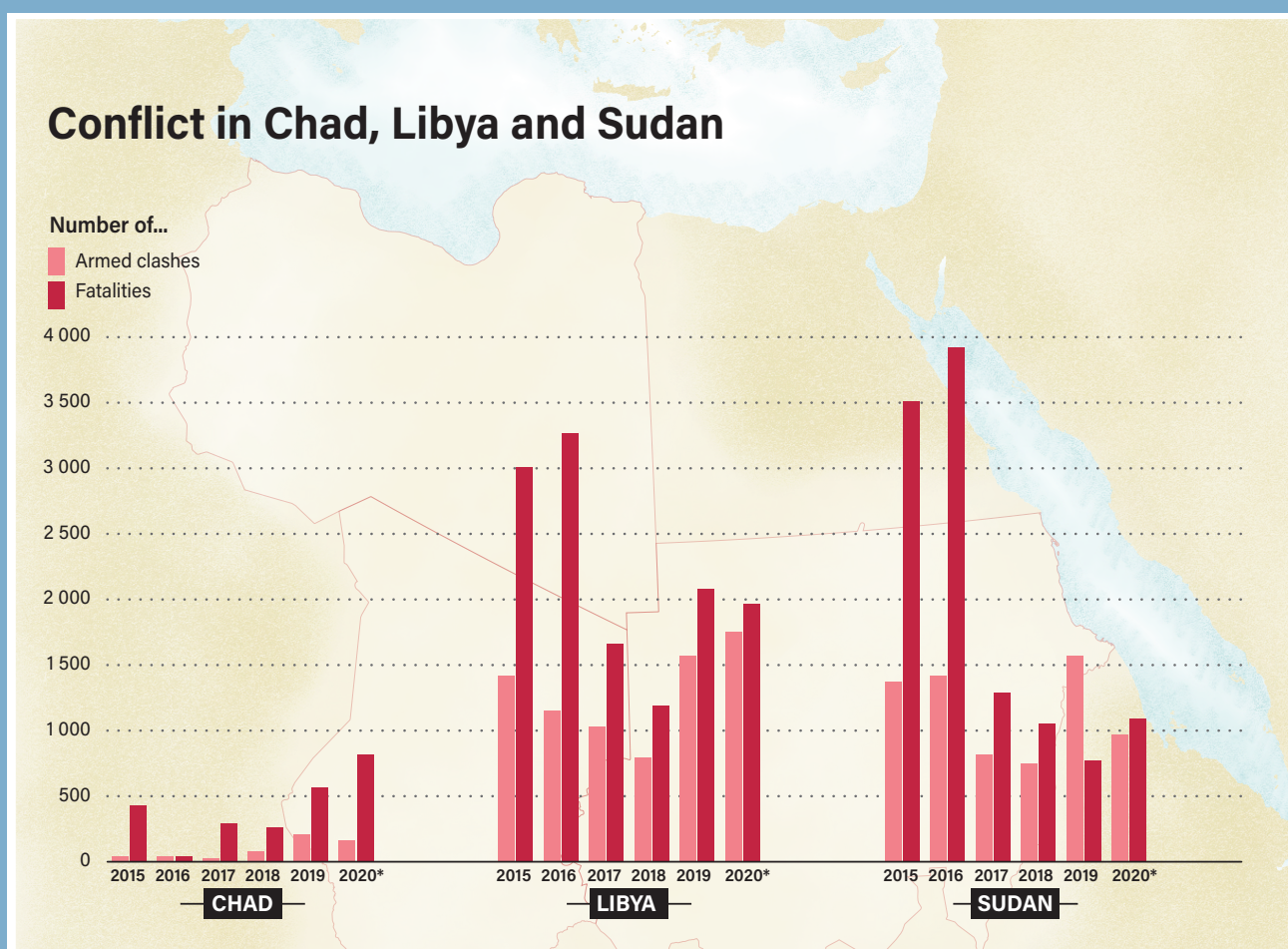
President Déby's death in northern Chad facing rebels that operate from Libya will with certainty renew the focus of Chad's transitional government on the tri-border area to restore order and credibility, which will have implications for illicit activity. Despite being linked to illicit economies in Darfur and southern Libya, particularly people smuggling and artisanal gold mining, the lack of a dominant actor in northern Chad compared to neighbouring regions has hitherto created an open market, and with it the potential for violence to escalate. As such it has been an issue that Chad's government has allowed to evolve more out of lacking capacity than deliberate tolerance. And that inattention is likely at an end now.

In recent years, Chad has experienced much lower levels of violence than its neighbours. However, it is highly likely that the transitional council, currently led by Déby's son, Mahamat ibn Idriss Déby Itno, soon will attack the rebels in the north to gain credibility. The council already declared victory against the rebels in early May 2021, but fighting continues. The ongoing offensive will likely have the size and duration to disrupt the gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi, Miski and Ezri gold fields. Furthermore, if there is a transition, as required by the constitution, the new administration will need to clarify their relationship with the two strongmen and their armies in the border areas of Libya and Sudan – Haftar and the LAAF, and Hemeti and the RSF – to gain support

and access for their fight against Chadian rebels, either through evictions or some discretion to operate freely in the border region.

The Libyan and Sudanese sides of the tri-border with Chad have already seen consolidation of power between Haftar and Hemeti, who have set the terms for both illicit flows and which armed groups are allowed to operate freely in the area. The anticipated arrival of Chadian forces in strength in the region means there will be three powerbrokers effectively at the

state level active in the tri-border, which will either coalesce into stability with interlocking deals, or risk flaring up to a bigger fight. Both Haftar and Hemeti are preoccupied with stabilizing their respective situations in the interior of their countries, however, so their preference for stability increases its likelihood in the short term. But as both Chad and Sudan are governed by transitional councils, this is not necessarily a long term trend.



Sudan: political patronage still dominates

The transition in Sudan, while ostensibly intended to bring stability and democracy to the country, raises concerns for Darfur and the wider tri-border area. Through 2019 and 2020, the Government of Sudan continued to transfer weapons to Darfur, justified by saying the impending drawdown of the United Nations – African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) makes them responsible for protecting civilians. Yet both the Sudanese Armed Forces and the RSF have been involved in numerous attacks against civilians, which have only increased²².

The key role of Hemeti in the Juba peace process also presents a challenge to democracy in Sudan, and a return to political manoeuvring. As Hemeti is not from the traditional ruling class, he has successfully appealed to rebel groups to unite to take power in Khartoum against 'Jellaba' elites to stop Darfur being marginalised. Given Hemeti and the RSF's role in violence in Darfur, the fact that the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF)²³ is willing to work with Hemeti is evidence that political patronage remains important. Abdul Wahid Al Nur, the leader of a faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM-AW) that is not part of the peace agreement, may be taking a moral stance, demanding more for Darfur, or may see it as more valuable to remain outside of the process for now. The Transitional Military Council's earlier appeal to assist the LAAF puts Hemeti on the same side as many Darfur rebel groups in Libya, and also shores up support in the southern border areas of Libya.

While the groups involved in the SRF have signed the peace agreement, all groups continue to have an active presence in Libya, where they have been fighting alongside the LAAF in exchange for salaries and equipment, which ensures they remain active, generate revenue from smuggling and as mercenaries, and maintain a stock of vehicles and weapons. This suggests they don't genuinely believe the peace agreement will hold, or they feel the need to maintain their forces just in case. The presence of these fighters in Libya, as well as continued smuggling of arms, vehicles and other commodities back to Darfur means that the Darfur peace process will not address instability in the tri-border area as a whole, particularly if these groups retreat to the tri-border area because of the ceasefire agreement.

Levels of violence in Darfur remain high. Tribal conflict is common, as is the presence of arms, and retaliations result in high levels of violence. The Masalit and Falata tribes in South Darfur engaged in a peace accord in July 2018, which resulted in the release of prisoners. However, many other groups have continued to clash. Herder/ farmer conflicts are also common, with many farmers attacked for clearing animals from their farms. In exchange, cattle and camels have been looted. There are also reports of herders raiding police stations, stealing weapons and ammunition. Attacks against civilians are also common, a result of the high level of lawlessness. Commercial vehicles are a particular target with looting a key aspect.

Libya: ceasefire agreement requires departure of mercenaries

While Tripoli has been the epicentre of conflict in Libya since April 2019, Haftar's defeat and the expulsion of the LAAF from Tripoli creates uncertainty for the Chadian and Sudanese groups that have been fighting alongside them, particularly as the ceasefire agreement requires foreign fighters to leave Libya. Rather than depart completely, Chadian and Sudanese groups will likely retreat back towards the tri-border area if the ceasefire holds. This area is not governed by the central state, and it will be easy to leave quickly to either Chad or Sudan, as well as to return with ease. Straddling the border areas will remain attractive for these groups, even after an eviction. The LAAF certainly has an interest in keeping these forces close enough to call on if needed. But

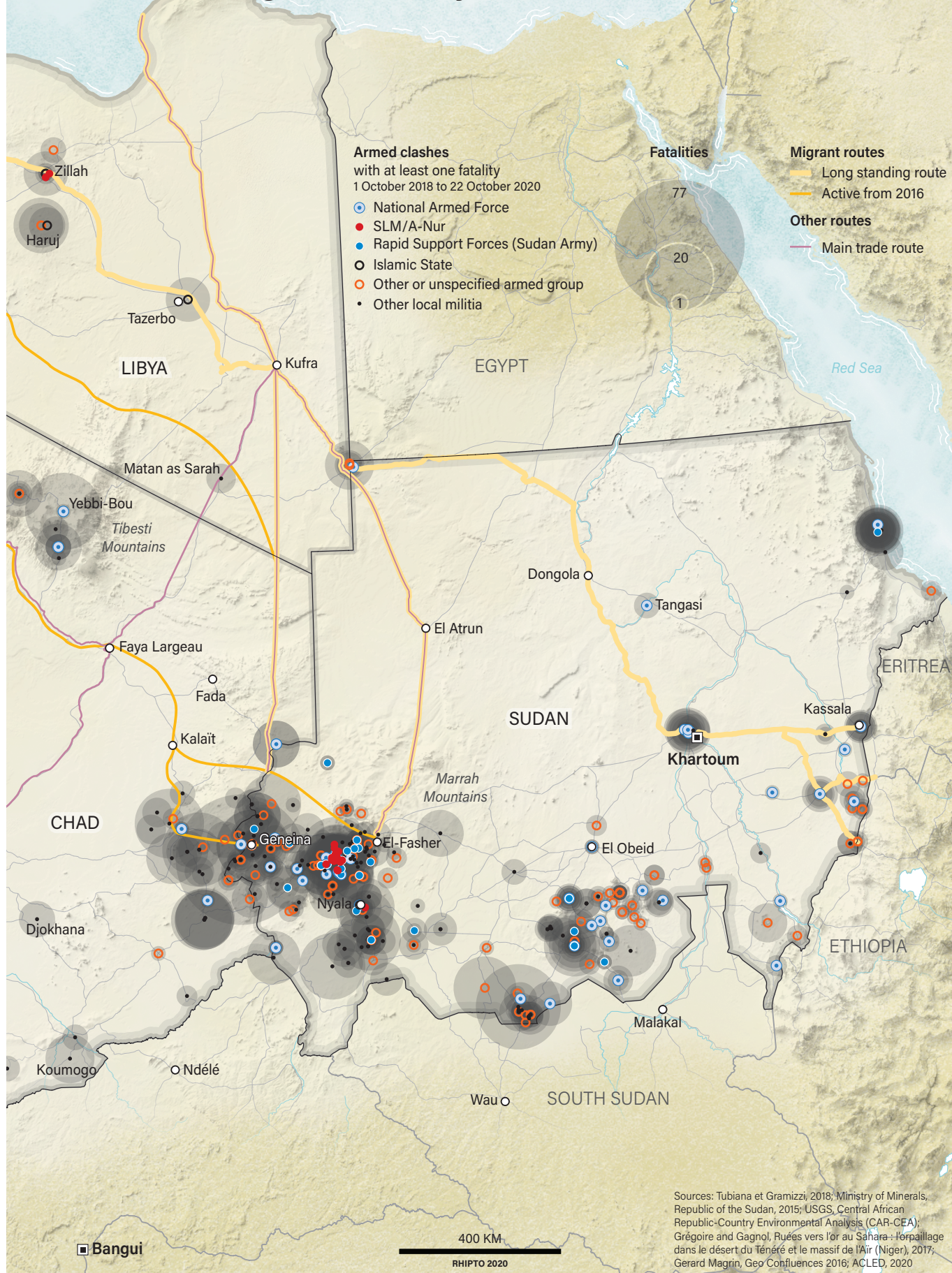
this mobility will create further instability as groups will continue to – or increase - the use of their military strength to target goods and convoys moving through the region. Trade and smuggling routes may be displaced as a consequence, or new alliances may emerge between criminal actors and armed groups, resulting in a similar dynamic to northern Mali, where the large number of groups makes stability unlikely.

Underpinning the strongmen and conflict dynamics in the tri-border area is access to and competition over lucrative revenue from migration flows and artisanal gold mining – revenue that continues to strengthen the groups with the power to control it.



Oil refinery at Ras Lanouf in eastern Libya has been subject to fighting for years
AP©

Conflict and migration in Libya, Chad and Sudan





Migration and route dynamics

The Central Mediterranean migration route has long been one of the most active in the world, drawing migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and beyond through North Africa to Europe. Whether escaping persecution and violence or seeking economic opportunity, migrants routinely fall prey to exploitation, violence, criminal activity and conflict along the route.

The revenue available from smuggling migrants, or extorting them, particularly through kidnap for ransom, has become an important funding source for groups active in the tri-border. This includes the RSF in Sudan, LAAF affiliates in Libya, and Tebu and Zaghawa ethnic groups. In addition, migrants have sought work in artisanal gold mines along the way, resulting in high levels of exploitation.

Since its peak in 2015/16, the flow of migrants on the Central Mediterranean route has decreased year on year²⁴. A fall in the number of migrants from the Horn of Africa is a key factor. For example, the number of Eritreans entering Europe fell from 39,534 in 2015 to just 592 in 2019.



Migrant truck, Chad
yoti4nn ©

Sudanese migration is a different story. Unlike the drop in Eritrean and Ethiopian migration, the movement of Sudanese nationals into Chad, and of both Sudanese and Chadian nationals into Libya — much of which is circular migration — has persisted. Migrants change their preferred routes depending on the political and conflict conditions in the border regions.

Understanding the changing dynamics along the routes provides insight into the financial benefits flowing to the different groups active along migration routes, and thus the potential for the revenue from people smuggling to finance conflict. This chapter tracks the changing dynamics along each leg of the central Mediterranean route and the armed groups involved at each stage.

The original route: flows from the Horn through Libya

The fall in the number of Eritreans and Ethiopians crossing Sudan and Libya to use the Central Mediterranean migration route since 2015 is partly due to growing awareness of predation in Libya, which makes the journey longer and more violent.

In 2015, Eritreans were the main nationality migrating along the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe, with 39,534 migrants

moving through Sudan and Libya, along with a significant number of Sudanese (5852) and Ethiopians (4647). However, since then these numbers have reduced significantly (see Figure 2 below). For all those who have successfully crossed the Mediterranean, many more have become stuck in Libya or been resettled in Niger or Rwanda²⁵.

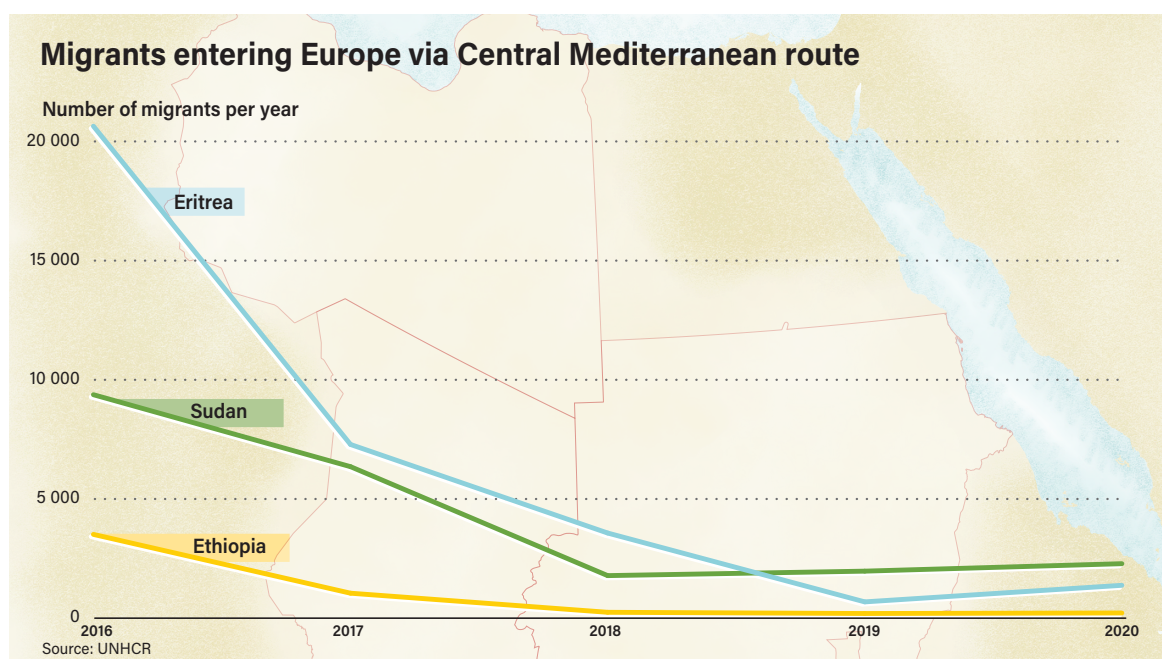


Figure 2: Number of migrants entering Europe via Central Mediterranean route (Source: UNHCR)

Since 2018, the number of registered migrants inside Libya has also decreased. Figure 3 (below) shows the downward trend in the number of Eritrean, Somali and Ethiopian migrants in Libya²⁶. However, it does not capture the high levels of Sudanese and Chadian migrants travelling into Libya as part of circular migration trends. Chadian migrants are present in the greatest numbers, with 93,000 recorded in 2018, 103,000 in 2019,

and 92,000 in 2020. The Sudanese presence is lower, but still high: 77,000 (2018), 75,000 (2019), and 81,000 (2020).

Growing threats to migrants in Libya have — at least in part — deterred Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants from making the journey. Migrants have been detained, kidnapped and subject to extortion and ransom, adding months, sometimes years, to journeys. In 2016, refugees

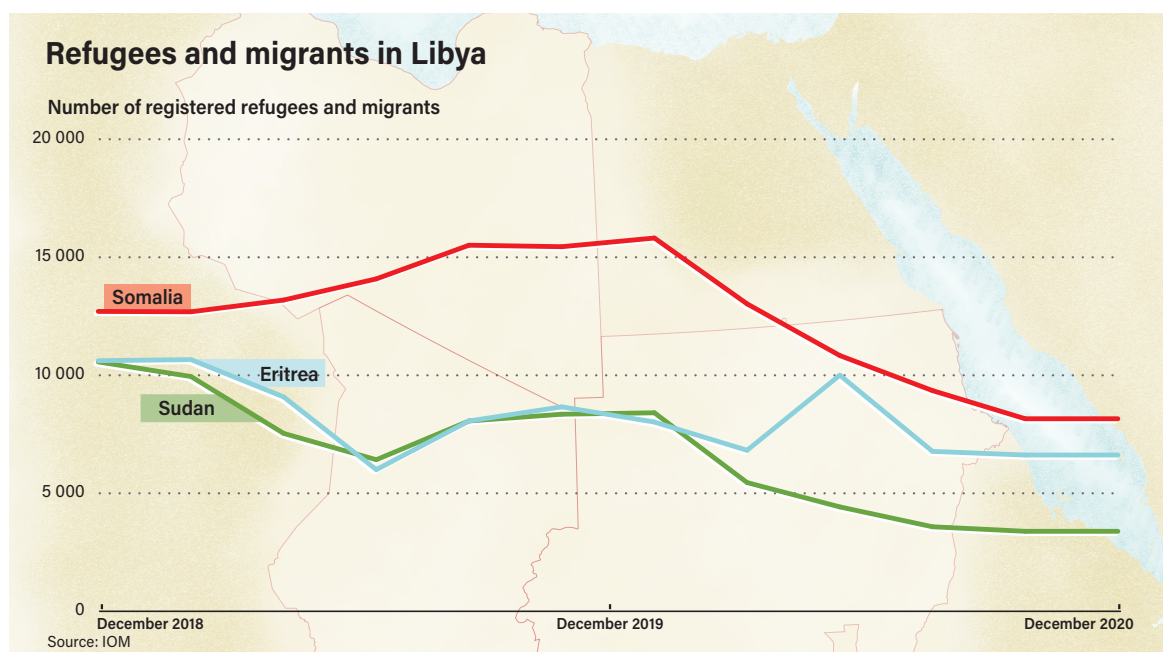


Figure 3: Number of registered refugees and migrants in Libya (Source: IOM)

and migrants from East Africa spent as little as a few weeks crossing Libya. Two years later, the journey to the Libyan coast often took up to two years²⁷. By 2019, Eritrean refugees in northern Ethiopia were seeking alternative routes — including air routes from Addis Ababa. The potential risks of travel through Sudan and Libya did not deter all migrants, as some saw the Eritrean diaspora as gatekeepers, who did not want others to share their success²⁸.

Social media analysis found limited evidence of Eritreans seeking advice on routes through Libya²⁹. This may be because they are more reliant on smugglers than Sudanese migrants and entrust their route decisions on them from eastern Sudan. There are active Facebook groups among Eritreans already at the Libyan coast, as the journey across the Mediterranean is usually separate from the journey to the coast.



Libyan armed groups profiting from smuggling and anti-smuggling

Throughout Libya, armed groups have switched from being the smugglers to stopping the smugglers. But in the southwest and southeast, armed, criminal and tribal actors continue to dominate the migration business. In the Kufra region in the southeast, elements of the LAAF are consolidating their control of the smuggling networks through Zway affiliate Subol Al-Salam. Here, any 'anti-smuggling' activities are typically just for show and involve targeted attacks on rival smuggling groups.

The switch from smuggling to stopping smuggling began with an intervention by the Italian government in Sabratha, near the Libyan coast³⁰, in October 2017, in which Italy backed a plan to pay an armed group to stop people smuggling. Over the next few years, incentives of this kind were replaced by UN

sanctions on prominent smugglers, and a push for Libya to increase its interception of migrants departing from the coast. The international crackdown, accompanied by significant inflows of security assistance, propelled armed groups to pivot into joining anti-smuggling efforts, particularly in central and northern Libya. As attention shifted from the lucrative trade of smuggling migrants towards stemming the flow, protections for migrants on their journeys diminished, exacerbating the abuse of migrants stuck in Libya.

But beyond focused anti-smuggling efforts, the smuggling trade continues to be dominated by armed, criminal and tribal actors. It is impossible to conduct smuggling without the acceptance and protection of the armed groups who control terrain³¹. This has resulted in



clashes to determine control. For example, the Tebu — a tribe centred in the Tibesti ('Rocky') Mountains in northern Chad, but also spread across Libya, Chad, Sudan and Niger, and who are often involved in cross-border trade and smuggling — were involved in clashes around Sabha in southwest Libya in 2013, 2015, and 2018 to maintain control of smuggling routes. Fighting between the Tuareg and Tebu in this region in 2014 to 2015 brought migration along the Tuareg-controlled route from Algeria — via the border town of Ghat and nearby Ubari — to a standstill.

In southeast Libya, in the Kufra area, the Tebu tribe had previously controlled smuggling networks. However, in 2015 the LAAF chose to ally with the Zway tribe, bombing the Tebu to remove them from the area. The Zway formed a group named Subol al-Salam ('Ways of Peace') to take over the smuggling networks³². LAAF protection allowed this group to co-opt most of the small groups in Kufra, including some prominent smugglers whose allegiance to Subol al-Salam eradicated competitors. In

August 2018, the LAAF officially incorporated Subol al-Salam into their command structure and gave them responsibility for policing the border area. Now that the LAAF controls southeast Libya, there has not been a fall in smuggling, but instead a consolidation of the smuggling network within selected tribes and groups over others.³³ After the LAAF failed to take Tripoli in 2020, consolidating power in the south became an increasingly important goal — evident in the LAAF's efforts to control smuggling routes for people, drugs and cigarettes.

To this end, any anti-smuggling activities in the Kufra region are mere posturing. What has changed here is that the LAAF now conducts selective anti-smuggling operations — targeting groups, ethnicities, tribes or nationalities that they are not allied with or directly in conflict with, while the LAAF's allies are protected and their journeys facilitated smoothly, albeit in exchange for payment.

Migrant smuggling routes in Libya, Chad and Sudan



Sources: Tubiana et Gramizzi, 2018; Ministry of Minerals, Republic of the Sudan, 2015; USGS, Central African Republic-Country Environmental Analysis (CAR-CEA); Grégoire and Gagnol, Ruées vers l'or au Sahara : l'orpaillage dans le désert du Ténéré et le massif de l'Air (Niger), 2017; Gérard Magrin, Geo Confluences 2016; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime

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RSF celebrates interception of migrants near Libyan border
Ashraf Shazly/ AFP©

Changing routes from Sudan

For East African migrants, the most popular point to cross the Sudan–Libya border remains the unofficial set of crossings near Al Awaynat. Increasing numbers of arrests in this area by Sudanese forces have pushed people towards alternative routes — first into Egypt via Dongola in northern Sudan, and more recently through Chad from Darfur.

While the movement of East African migrants through Sudan and into Libya has decreased in the past few years, the numbers of Sudanese recorded as present in Libya has steadily increased, from 64,000 in early 2018 to 81,000 by the end of 2020. This is partly linked to the uncertainty of Sudan's transition to democracy, the continued violence in Darfur, and longstanding circular migration for work — a need exacerbated by weather patterns and flooding. While overall migration numbers have remained high, routes and costs have changed.

The route from Sudan to Libya through unofficial crossings near Al Awaynat remains the most well-travelled, but it has come under increasing pressure from Sudanese security forces. On 25 September 2019, the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) announced it had arrested 138 people (Sudanese, Chadians and Ethiopians) trying to cross from Sudan into Libya³⁴. On 26 September 2019, Sudan closed its border with Libya (and the Central African Republic) citing security concerns³⁵. In June 2020, 122 Sudanese migrants were arrested and reported to be mercenaries, although the group included women and children³⁶. A further 240 people were arrested in February 2020. It should be noted that this is more likely to be an RSF move to stop armed groups from Darfur building up bases in Libya than a concerted attempt to stop migration.

Flows through Egypt increased from 2016 as it became more difficult to pass through Libya. However, the proportion moving from Sudan into Egypt — travelling via Wadi Halfa north of Dongola (see the map, page 42) — has remained small. Migrants turned to the route to Egypt to avoid RSF and Libyan predation. However, on this route they are not protected by the powerful armed groups that control routes through southern Libya, and instead rely on small autonomous Darfuri or Arab

militia groups. These militias are mostly young men, and some members could be moonlighting from larger armed groups, conducting smuggling part-time, in the same way they take up mercenary activity in Libya or banditry in the border regions formerly controlled by the Tebu.

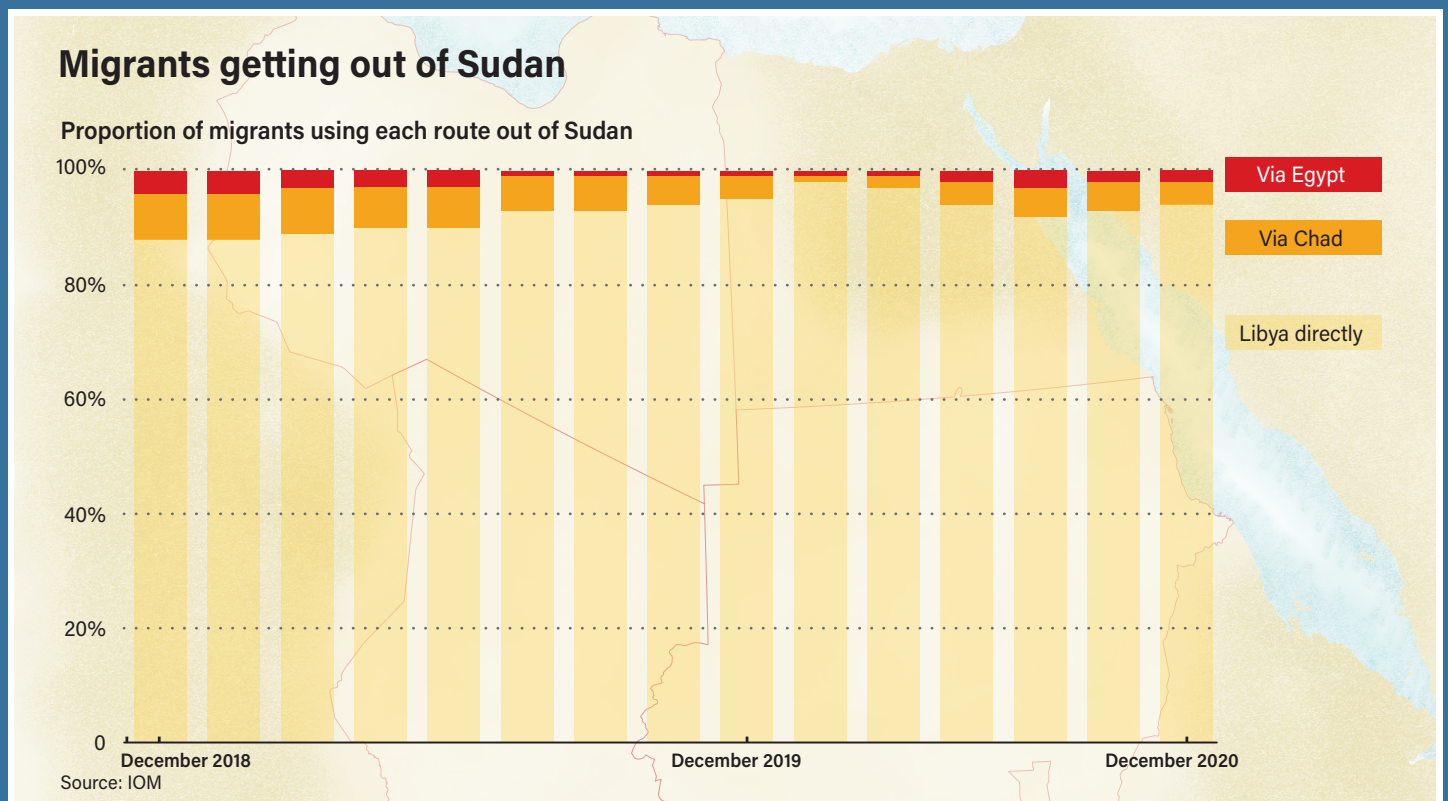


Figure 4: Proportion of migrants using each route out of Sudan (Source: IOM)

Flows to Libya via Chad

The passage through the Tibesti Mountains in northwest Chad has grown into a reliable route for migrants seeking to reach Libya. It is cheaper than other routes. It can also be safer, as there are fewer armed groups vying for control of the route from Darfur to the Libyan border, although there is still little protection for migrants, and the regular expulsions of gold miners also affects the migrant route. The number of migrants moving from Sudan into Chad — typically crossing at Tiné and facilitated by Zaghawa and Tebu smugglers — remains small.

The migration route from West Africa through Agadez, Niger, and into southwest Libya was, until 2016, the main migration and trafficking corridor to the coast of Libya. However, the passage through the Tibesti Mountains in northwest Chad has grown into a reliable alternative to the Niger-Libya route, as well as for those coming from Sudan, with the gold mining areas serving as stopover points for migrants, and places where smuggled goods — including weapons and drugs — can change hands.

The shift towards the route through Chad paralleled the increase in effective anti-migrant smuggling efforts in Niger and Sudan from 2015. The price of the Agadez to Libya corridor, for example, increased five-fold from 2016 to 2018. The Tibesti area of northern Chad has not been a priority for humanitarian assistance, which has typically focused on the Lake Chad area in the southwest and the refugee camps in Eastern Chad. Given the reduction in migration funding in Sudan mentioned earlier, there will continue to be little humanitarian protection afforded to migrants using this route.

While the proportion of migrants moving from Sudan into Chad remains small, social media discussions indicate that traveling through Chad has grown in popularity among Sudanese

migrants in 2020. Discussions on Facebook groups comparing three routes from Sudan to Libya identify the Sudanese town of Tiné along the Sudan/Chad border as the preferred crossing point, in part due to the limited presence of border officials. The limited state presence in eastern Chad has made Tiné a lawless haven for smugglers and traffickers operating from Chad.

One social media post claimed the journey from Khartoum to Tripoli could be done in 10 days via Tiné and the Kouri Bougoudi gold mining area, costing 50,000-60,000 Sudanese pounds (SDG), or £800, for the entire trip. Compare this to travelling through North Darfur, which reportedly costs 150,000 SDG (over £2,000)³⁸.



Sudanese migrants on Facebook

These two posts are seeking advice on which route to take: via Tiné into Chad, via Al Maliha in North Darfur, or through the Triangle (mouthalthal), the border area between Sudan and Libya, with most responses advising travel via Tiné.



Those controlling migration through Chad, particularly Zaghawa and Tebu smugglers and the Chadian security forces, view it as a revenue generator. Sudanese and East African migrants travelling through Chad begin their journey in the hands of smugglers from the Zaghawa tribe, a largely pastoralist tribal group that straddles the tri-border area. From abandoned buildings along the Sudan-Chad border, the migrants are shuttled to Faya Largeau in central Chad. The security forces extract profits at every step of the journey. For example, along the main road from Abeche in the southeast to Faya Largeau, there are eight checkpoints, where convoys are charged anywhere between 500 and 5,000 Central African Francs (FCFA) or £0.7 - 7³⁹.

At this point, the migrants are handed over to Tebu smugglers for the journey to the Libyan border through Chad's Tibesti Mountains — a trip of roughly 500 kilometres. They are transported northwest to Zouar, and then either to the gold mines in Tibesti or to the Libyan border via the Kouri Bougoudi gold field (site 1 on the map above). The journey to Kouri Bougoudi from Abeche in the southeast costs 125,000-175,000 FCFA (£240), but most migrants travel on credit to the gold mines, where they go into debt bondage until they pay off their debt, which typically ends up being double the cost of their journey, equating to roughly 10 grams of gold⁴⁰. For the smugglers, an escort expedition can generate £1,300 to £4,000 per person⁴¹.

Crossing into Libya near the gold mines at Kouri Bougoudi avoids the area of Libya — to the east — where most of the violence and extortion targeting migrants has occurred. As the Tebu's strength decreased following their defeat to the LAAF and Zway in Kufra in 2015⁴², and their alliance with Sudanese mercenaries and facilitators collapsed, the route from the Sudanese border westward to Sabha in southwest Libya became a target for bandits, particularly the Chadian Mourdia clan⁴³. The route passed the Kilinje mines, notorious for forced labour and the exploitation of migrants, an area with the highest number of reported incidents of violence towards migrants. While the Tibesti route from Kouri Bougoudi to

Exploitation in gold mines

As with other parts of Chad, rule of law is non-existent in the Tibesti mines, making migrants vulnerable to their debtor. There are reports of miners being killed or tortured when they don't find enough gold or are accused of theft. Sudanese migrants have posted on Facebook about others who were dragged behind vehicles.

On 8 October 2020, the Chadian government once again announced the closure of the mines, and the expulsion of foreign miners. Many have moved to mines across the border in Libya, or to Faya Largeau, south of the Tibesti mountains in Chad. Those indebted must remain with their 'master' (GI-TOC, October 2020).

Qatrun in southwest Libya is not risk free, recent posts on Facebook groups indicate that it is safer than other routes — although with the caveat that these posts could just be promotional material put out by smugglers. In addition, the regular expulsions of gold miners by Chadian forces also puts migrant convoys in danger.

A more reliable revenue stream for armed groups on the Chadian route

The Zaghawa tribe and Sudanese security forces control people smuggling into Chad. Within Chad, there are few attempts to stop or control migration: periodic expulsions of miners in northern Chad are aimed at keeping Chadian rebels out, not at controlling migration. The shift to the Tibesti route in Chad has led to tensions in southeast Libya around Kufra, where Tebu and Zway smugglers compete for dwindling revenues.

The Zaghawa control people smuggling from Sudan into Chad in cooperation with Sudan's RSF. The RSF and the Zaghawa are linked through the appointment of a Darfur rebel commander from the Zaghawa tribe as an RSF colonel in 2016/17 — an arrangement geared towards extending RSF control over Zaghawa-held areas in northwest Darfur leading up to the Chad/Libya/Sudan tri-border⁴⁴. This expands the RSF's reach, as they already cooperate and coordinate with the LAAF-affiliated Subol Al-Salam smuggling group on the Libyan route.

As discussed above, co-opting tribal groups is typical of the way the RSF — and LAAF — operate. As RSF leaders publicly highlight the forces' anti-smuggling efforts, sub-units are free to continue smuggling, so long as they respect the command chain and present this as a private self-funding activity. To maintain the public impression that they are regulating the smuggling and to ensure the deniability of their involvement, the RSF and LAAF — every tier of which are known to be involved in smuggling — carry out some interceptions⁴⁵. They typically target the competition, such as when Eritrean

and Ethiopian smuggling networks were dismantled in late 2016, which shifted some flow from Dongola into Egypt.⁴⁶

In Chad, there are few attempts to stop or control migration, aside from bribes demanded at checkpoints. Even when COVID-19 restrictions banned travel between cities, migration continued from the Sudanese border west to Faya Largeau and on to Tibesti. The primary challenge arises from the Chadian government's periodic expulsions of miners in northern Chad — not as a result of concern over the presence of migrant workers, but of concern over incursions from Libya, which is seen as providing a safe haven for Chadian rebels. These actions have prevented the entry into Chad from Libya of groups who might have tried to profit from migrant smuggling. But it has also had the effect of disrupting migrant convoys from Sudan.

Shifting migration routes have led to changes in revenue streams, stoking tensions between rival smuggling groups. As migration flows have shifted towards Chad, with fewer migrants crossing from Sudan into Libya near Kufra, the groups that had been profiting from this latter route — from the Sudanese border west to Sabha, and from Kufra up to Tripoli — have seen their revenues fall. This has led to tension over control of the remaining smuggling routes, especially between the Zway and Tebu tribes. The Subol al-Salam group is reportedly looking to revive people smuggling in areas under its control, with renewed interest from the LAAF in this revenue stream⁴⁷.



Effect of the pandemic on flows of migrants from the Horn

There is likely to be an increase in overland flows northward from the Horn of Africa, despite likely price hikes for smuggling, as a result of: reduced air travel due to COVID-19 restrictions; the ongoing conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia; and the increasingly insecure situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.

Developments since the COVID-19 pandemic suggest the Central Mediterranean route will draw increasing numbers of migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia toward the Libyan and Tunisian coast. The reduction in air travel due to the pandemic is pushing migrants overland. Despite closures of land borders due to CO-

VID-19, smugglers are still able to traverse areas of weak border control or bribe officials at crossing points, albeit for a higher cost. By the summer of 2020, up to 30 migrants and refugees were crossing into Sudan each day from Ethiopia⁴⁸.

Conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has also increased migration flows northward through Sudan. By early 2021, over 62,000 Ethiopians had crossed into Sudan, many seeking shelter in camps near the border⁴⁹. There has been limited reporting on the status of Eritrean refugees in Tigray province, other than noting that fighting had come close the Shi-



Hitsats refugee camp in Tigray province, Ethiopia
Tiksa Negeri/ REUTERS®

melba camp. Of the four camps, Shimelba had the lowest rate of onward movement because of close ties with the local community. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies were denied access to Tigray province from November 2020, but were allowed to return on 18 March 2021. Both Shimelba and Hitsats refugee camps had been destroyed, with supplies looted and buildings burned down. While some refugees had relocated to the remaining two camps, many were unaccounted for.

These developments only worsen an already deteriorating situation for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. The legacy of the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict has ensured that Eritrean refugees have never felt at home in Ethiopia, and especially not in Tigray province, where the majority of refugee camps are. Even before the recent

Tigray conflict, the Ethiopian government announced in early 2020 the closure of Hitsats camp, which hosts 25,000 Eritreans⁵⁰. Moreover, in January 2020, Ethiopia quietly revoked its longstanding policy of automatically granting refugee status to Eritreans arriving in the country, removing protections against refoulement⁵¹.

These developments will likely increase the trend toward migration northward.



West African migrants travelling to Libya
Mauritius Images©

Lack of protections; increased profit

Protections for migrants along the Central Mediterranean route from the Horn of Africa have dwindled, particularly with the suspension of EU funding to Sudan through the Khartoum Process because of concerns surrounding continued RSF involvement in smuggling, as well as the security forces' violence against protesters during civil unrest⁵². Although the migration programming initiated by the Khartoum Process (also known as the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative) was not intended to support the RSF, as head of the RSF, Hemeti had positioned the RSF as Sudan's border force, allowing

it to benefit indirectly from funding directed toward the government to contain migration⁵³. While EU funding was reduced to prevent the RSF from benefiting, at a time of increasing migration, this reduces the protection available to migrants. Shifting routes into Chad make protection for migrants even less likely. Without protection, the freedom for armed groups to exploit migrants and profit from the movement of people can continue unchecked. With no overarching power in northern Chad, this has the potential to increase conflict between rival groups, particularly Zaghawa and Tebu tribes.



Artisanal gold mining

Although gold is of growing economic importance in Chad, Libya and Sudan, the informality of artisanal gold mining and trading means it contributes very little to state revenue. Low state presence in the artisanal mining areas has given way to protection economies.

Across the tri-border area of Chad, Libya and Sudan, artisanal gold mining areas have become protection economies. This may entail state control and protection, as in Sudan, where the state (or its actors) seeks to be the primary buyers; protection by state security forces; or an absence of the state, with local militias providing protection⁵⁴. In all three countries, hundreds of millions of dollars in gold revenue end up in the hands of armed groups, fuelling conflict and affecting national and regional stability and migration flows.

While people smuggling has garnered some response from governments in the region because of donor concerns, gold has many more vested interests. For example, until US sanctions were lifted in 2017, Sudan used gold to evade sanctions, with exports becoming a strategy to access hard currency. Similarly, in the financial crisis that followed the Libyan revolution, gold was a financial instrument. Chad seems the least interested in intervening formally in its gold sector, but it has become an export hub for gold; although little of this is taxed, it means remittances are coming back



Gold miners climb out of an artisanal mine, Sudan
Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/ REUTERS©

through N'Djamena. Accordingly, there are few attempts to stop the illicit trade in gold, although governments would prefer to do so.

Generally, governments across the wider Sahel have relied on a combination of laissez-faire and military responses to artisanal gold mining outside government control. Crackdowns by military forces took place in Djado, Niger, in February 2017, and by the Algerian security forces in early 2019 between Djanet and Tamanrasset in southeastern Algeria. The Chadian army have attacked both Kouri Bougoudi and Miski in the Tibesti area regularly since mid-2018⁵⁵.

This chapter considers the main artisanal gold mining hubs in the tri-border area, their implications for both conflict and migration and how mining has evolved, particularly in Chad and Libya.

Sudan: the state trying and failing to control flows

Following the division with South Sudan in 2011 and the reduction in oil revenues available to the Sudanese government, gold became the primary commodity in Sudan, with heavy government controls. The government fixed gold prices above international rates to entice local miners to sell within the country and discourage cross-border smuggling. By 2014, bullion sales were 70% of Sudanese exports⁵⁶.

Despite the government's attempts to control gold mining revenue, smuggling of gold remained commonplace — in the first three quarters of 2017, the Ministry of Minerals estimated that 63 tonnes of gold were

produced, but only 32 tonnes of exports were reported by the Central Bank of Sudan⁵⁷. The UN Panel of Experts for Sudan found that nearly 97 tonnes of gold were smuggled from Khartoum to the UAE between 2010 and 2014, estimated to be worth \$4.6 billion⁵⁸. This means that gold revenue becomes private revenue, funding armed groups and political elites rather than providing a much needed boost to Sudan's economy.

While the Sudanese government has attempted to control all gold mining areas, in Darfur this control has been maintained by the RSF. While ostensibly a state force, the RSF in effect operates as an independent armed group.

Chad: burgeoning formalising of gold sector, but remains artisanal in Tibesti

For Chad, gold has become an important commodity in recent years, particularly as oil prices have fluctuated, but mining has been limited by a lack of technical capacity. In 2018, Chad exported \$137 million of gold⁵⁹. The lack of technical capacity has prompted the government to pursue contracts with mining companies — a strategy also employed in the oil sector. The Chadian government has previously signed contracts with gold mining companies for concessions in Batha in central Chad, and in the regions of Kebbi-Est and Mayo Kebbi Ouest in southern Chad. However, instability has prevented this in Tibesti in northern Chad, close to the Libyan border, meaning that mining here remains artisanal, and the situation more volatile and conflict-prone, with the presence of the state relatively limited.

In 2016, the government contracted Quaestec Gold African Resources to formalise the gold sector and build a gold refinery, and there are indications that Tibesti is of increasing interest⁶⁰. Quaestec's role is to ensure that artisanally mined gold is sold to them to ensure the Chadian government profits. Currently, the Tibesti mining area is seen to be more connected to Libya — which is the hub for equipment and sales, as well as hosting Chadian rebels — than Chad⁶¹. This is because the routes to the north of Kouri Bougoudi — one of the main Tibesti mining areas — are much easier to traverse than moving south through the Tibesti Mountains towards N'Djamena.



Libya: where the strongest control gold mines

Although Libya is estimated to have large gold reserves, their location in the tri-border area has made them difficult to access for the state, private companies or even the main armed groups, such as the LAAF. There are reports however, that Libyan gold is exchanged by Saddam Haftar — the son of Khalifa Haftar, chief of the LAAF — for weapons, mercenaries and dollars in the UAE and Turkey⁶².

The Libyan Government of National Unity minister of economy has recognised that

gold and iron ore mining may generate much needed revenue, given the continued low oil prices⁶³ — oil accounts for 69% of Libya's export earnings⁶⁴ — but no attempts have been made to access it as yet. As the LAAF has been consolidating its hold on southern Libya, gold mining is unlikely to be viable for the new Government of National Unity in the near term. Instead, it is likely that revenues from artisanal gold mining will continue to fund armed groups.

Main gold mining areas in the tri-border area

Gold mining in Darfur has a longer history than in Chad and Libya. However, increased levels of conflict in Darfur have pushed miners into neighbouring Chad and on to Libya.

Subsequent gold finds in Chad and Libya are increasingly contested by various armed groups and their state-level sponsors, as well as tribal groups or criminal networks.

Darfur: where it all started

Taking control of Jebel Amir gold mine has provided significant revenue for Hemeti and the RSF. Although these mines have now been formally handed over to the Government of Sudan, Hemeti still profits by controlling the processing of gold.

In Sudan, the mining of gold — discovered in 2011 — ranges from industrial mining (involving foreign capital) to artisanal mining and the processing of mine tailings (residues left behind after initial processing).

Across the whole of the tri-border area, Darfur has the richest gold seams, with alluvial deposits in the desert of north Darfur. The mines at Jebel Amir stretch along a 10 kilometre area, and are accessed in pits no deeper than 10 metres. By 2012, the mine had 100,000 gold miners, but it soon became a major centre in the Darfur conflict.

Control of this area has rested with the strongest armed groups: Jebel Amir was taken over by Musa Hilal in 2013 when he was a leader of the Janjaweed militia; and subsequently in 2017 by Hemeti, head of the RSF and now Deputy Chairman of the Sovereign Council. Musa Hilal was arrested by the RSF when they took over the mining area. This is set out in the timeline on page 60.

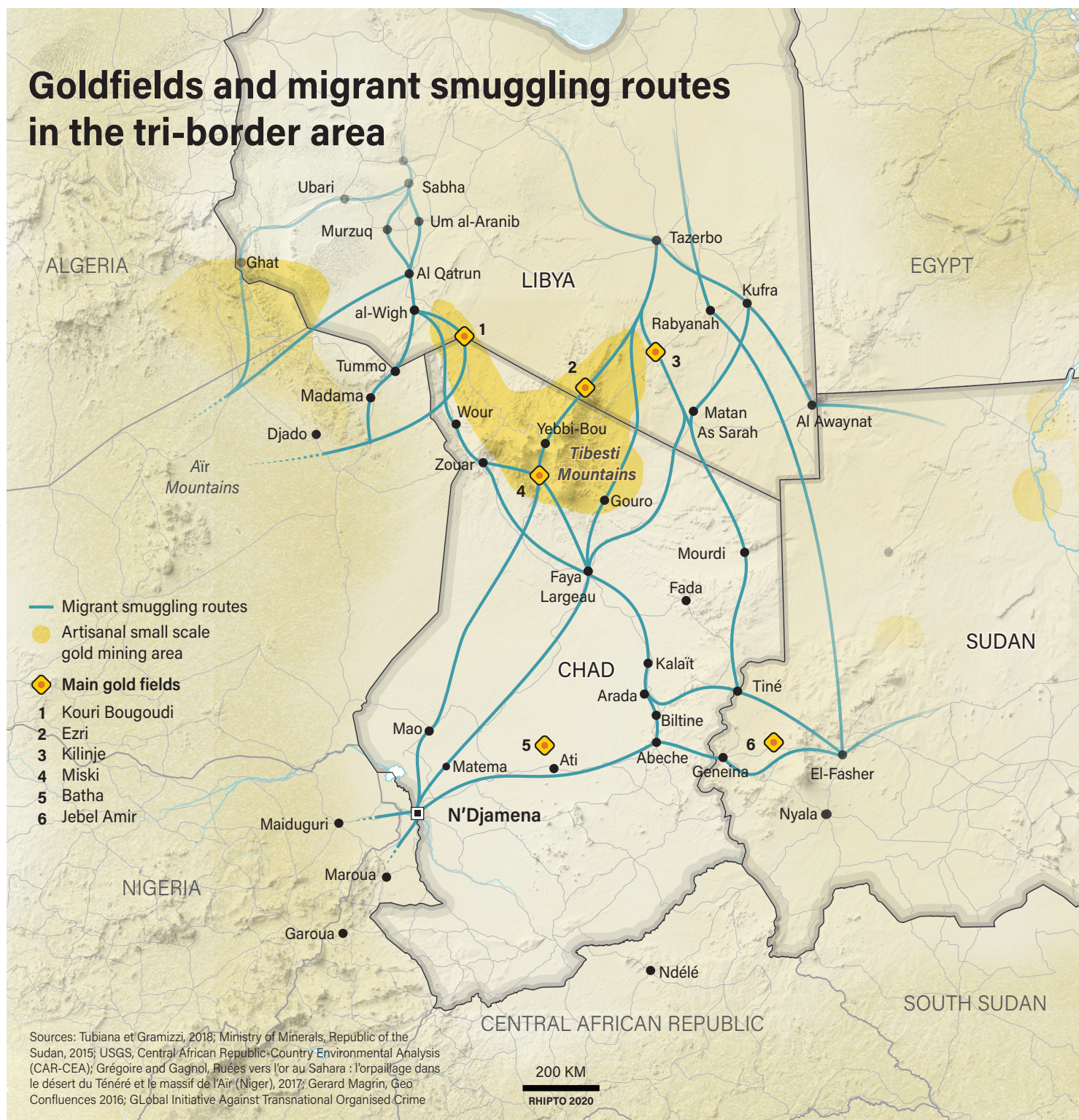
While Hemeti formally handed control of Jebel Amir back to the Government of Sudan in mid-2020, he and his family are still profiting. Al Junaid (also known as Al Jineid/Juneid/Gunade), a huge conglomerate owned by Hemeti's brother Abdul Rahim Hamdan Dagalo

— deputy commander of the RSF — manages the processing of gold from Jebel Amir, and has expanded with processing plants in South Darfur and South Kordofan⁶⁵. Other family companies, Tradive General Trading LLC and GSK Advance, facilitate payments and overseas procurement, including with the UAE⁶⁶.

Involvement in processing allows predatory actors to derive substantial profits from gold mining without taking on any of the risk associated with actual mining⁶⁷. By processing the tailings (for a high fee), more sophisticated methods can up to double the yield of gold. By stepping back from direct control of the mine but operating and expanding processing sites in Jebel Amir, South Darfur, South Kordofan and Northern State through Al Junaid⁶⁸, Hemeti can maintain the revenue from gold mining with less human resources, as he is no longer managing the mining itself, and he has less exposure, while allowing him to protect his new political reputation and consolidate political power. Hemeti will continue to profit from Jebel Amir gold mine, but no longer needs to risk his political capital by visibly controlling the gold mine itself. This creates an opening for rebel groups party to the peace process to be involved, without challenging Hemeti's profits.

There are also extensive alluvial deposits in Jebel Marra, another area in Darfur that has been heavily contested, and is currently the base for one of the Darfurian rebel groups, SLM-AW⁶⁹, that did not join the peace process in 2020.

Goldfields and migrant smuggling routes in the tri-border area



Chad's Tibesti goldfields: an ebb and flow of Sudanese prospectors, local self-defence groups, and Chadian army evictions

With increased conflict in Darfur, Chad's Tibesti Mountains experienced an influx of Sudanese miners after gold was discovered there in 2012. The Chadian government has responded with the sporadic expulsion of foreign miners, which has descended into indiscriminate attacks against local tribes.

When violence in Darfur — particularly in the Jebel Amir gold mine — escalated, many experienced miners fled to Chad and then to Libya and Niger, taking their equipment and expertise with them. They found gold in the Tibesti Mountains of Chad (see map, page 57) — that could be excavated with relative ease, triggering a gold rush in 2012. Small groups were able to set out to find gold independently with a vehicle, driver and a few metal detectors⁷⁰. But the surge in the number of miners created tensions over access to certain areas. While much gold could be found on the surface with metal detectors, metallic materials from earlier conflicts in some areas made this more difficult, resulting in deeper strip mines.

The informal nature of mines in the Tibesti area of Chad means that the state does not accrue any revenue and most profits go to miners, drivers, processors and local traders (Figure 6). The Chadian National Army (ANT) has repeatedly expelled gold miners, resulting in tension and open conflict with local militias and self-defence groups⁷¹.

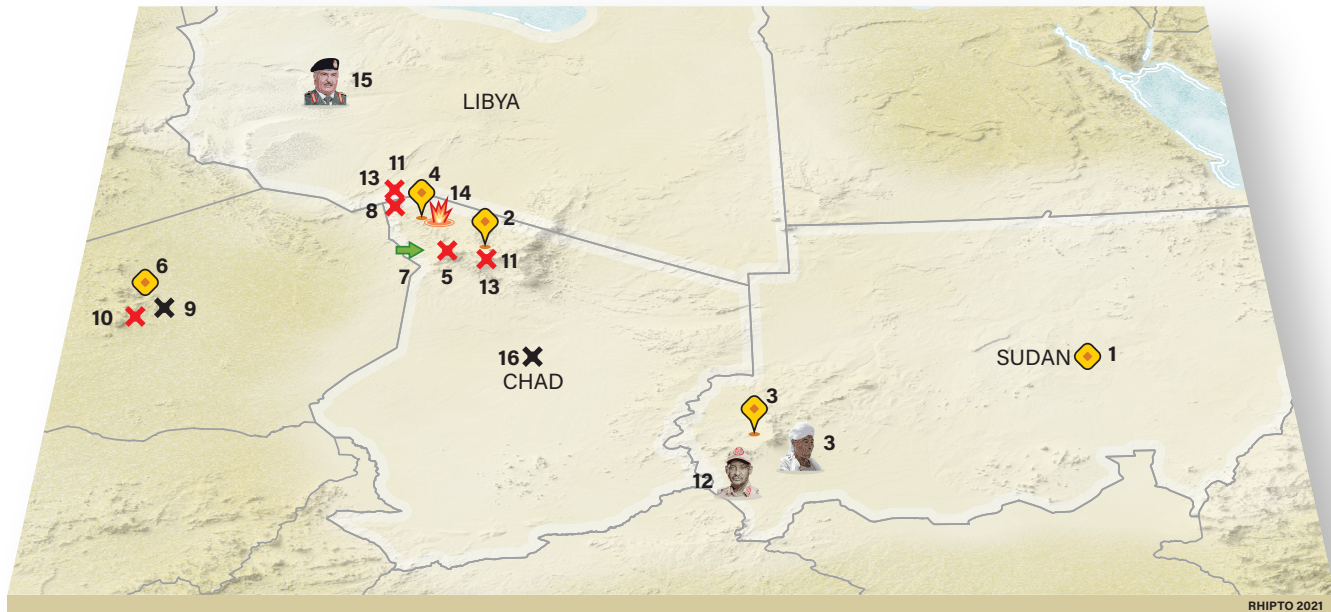
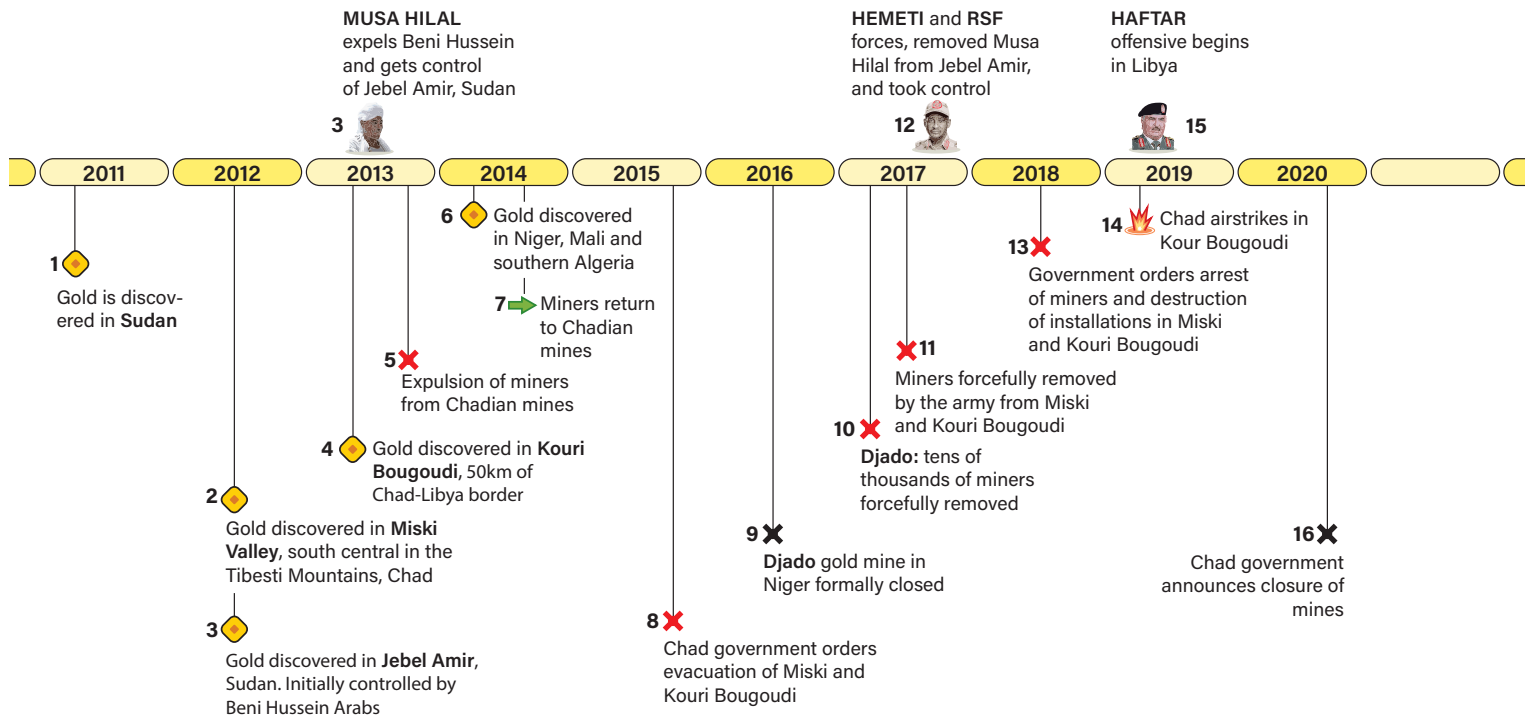
Localised conflict between local communities and tribes against gold miners prompted the first expulsion of gold miners in late 2013 and early 2014. However, with limited enforcement of the mining prohibition, miners returned and clashes continued, most notably in the village of Ogi in August 2014; Miski in July 2015; Turku in July 2015; and Kouri Bougoudi, which by August 2015 had 40,000 miners. Following these clashes, the Chadian army again expelled gold miners, but they were back within months. The lack of government or military support resulted in the local community rejecting the authority of the Chadian state and creating self-defence groups.

By mid-2017, the number of miners again reached 40,000 in Kouri Bougoudi, and the army again expelled large numbers — this time also seeking to gain control of the border because of fears that disgruntled communities in northern Chad would join Chadian rebels in southern Libya⁷². After Chadian rebels attacked Kouri Bougoudi in late 2018, the Chadian army targeted the local Tebu community as well as gold miners. In addition, the Chadian army clashed with a self-defence militia in Miski. The army retreated to an outpost 100 kilometres away and attempted to isolate the town — controlling the main roads, preventing supplies reaching the town and closing wells⁷³. Despite this, mining has continued, with activity increasing across all mining areas.



Gold miner uses metal detector
Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/ REUTERS©

Gold in Chad, Libya and Sudan, a timeline



Libya: banditry and exploitation in Kilinje and apparent stability in Ezri

While Chad has had some engagement from the government, the lack of state presence in southern Libya has meant the mines have become hubs of exploitation, particularly of migrant workers.

Libya's gold is more laborious to excavate than Chad's or Sudan's. Easily accessible surface gold has been depleted, which means bulldozers and chemicals are required to extract gold from deeper deposits⁷⁴. This is a much more resource intensive approach, with a heavier and more stationary footprint, which requires the involvement of larger groups to transport equipment and ensure these investments are not stolen or appropriated by competitors.

Of all the mining areas in the tri-border area, Kilinje has the worst reputation. Tebu militias have played a role in controlling mining areas, but it is also notorious for bandits (some of whom are also Tebu), who control some of the main checkpoints. Bandits tax migrants moving through the checkpoints⁷⁵ and are extremely violent; they have been linked to forced labour and torture in the gold mines⁷⁶. While it is likely that the level of exploitation has decreased because fewer migrants are moving through southern Libya, there are still reports of exploitation and mistreatment in Kilinje. Despite the reputation of Kilinje⁷⁷,

satellite imagery indicates it is still the largest area of gold mines.

Much less is known about the Ezri goldfield, located between Kouri Bougoudi and Kilinje, on both sides of the Chad–Libya border but mostly accessed from the Libyan side. Gold discoveries were made here following the growth of Miski and Kouri Bougoudi in Chad. Satellite imagery shows relatively established areas since 2015, although they were less populated than other areas.

A Tebu group, Katiba Shuhada Gatrūn (battalion of the martyrs of Qatrūn), has previously controlled checkpoints near both Kouri Bougoudi and Ezri, but was unable to control the actual mines⁷⁸. Mining activity has been consistent in the Ezri mining area, and there are indications of increased sophistication. Satellite imagery from 2017 shows heavy machinery present to excavate the surface layer, but by January 2021 there is evidence that some of the more sophisticated processing structures from Kilinje are being created (Figure 5). There have been fewer people present here than in the Kilinje mining area, suggesting it may be less important; however, a supporting settlement has emerged on the Chad side of the border, indicating that enough revenue is being generated to justify continued activity.

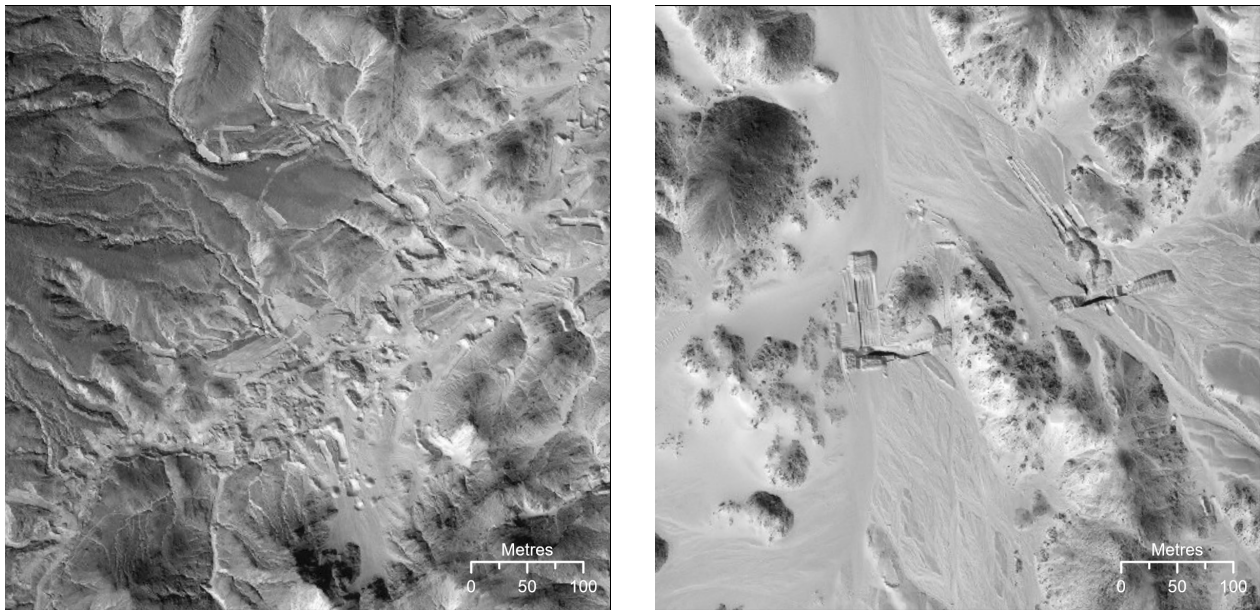


Figure 5: Ezri goldfield, 2017 that shows the use of bulldozers to process the surface layer (Satellite Images © Maxar Technologies, 2021).

Revenue from gold: margins decreasing but absolute profits increasing along the supply chain

The profits available from gold mining increase along the supply chain, with different actors vying to generate as much as possible at the mine site. Armed groups and criminal actors have invested by providing machinery and other equipment and supplies to miners, which is rented in exchange for gold. The involvement of criminals in providing mercury for gold extraction helps keep the illicit financial cycle isolated from formal financing. Gold is smuggled out of the region — often by hand — eventually reaching buyers in Dubai.

Most gold mining itself is not illegal. Most gold miners are artisanal, working at a small scale to earn an income. Generally, they sell what they find locally to buyers who then take it to capital cities, such as N'Djamena, or regional trading towns, like Qatrun in Libya, and across borders to avoid taxes, as in Sudan, or straight to Dubai. Where it moves into the illicit is when major dealers become involved in smuggling

large quantities of gold out of the region, political actors engage in grand corruption, and armed groups use the revenue to fund their activities⁷⁹.

The amount made by individual miners differs depending on the arrangement at the mine site. It is rare for miners to work independently, as too many actors want to cash in. Migrant workers who travel on credit earn the least. Their debt is bought by a pit owner or boss, and around double this value needs to be earned to repay the debt. For example, migrant workers travelling from Eastern Chad to Kouri Bougoudi will have their debt bought for five grams of gold but will need to find 10 grams before they start earning for themselves, and this is in addition to paying for food and accommodation⁸⁰. The top level of Figure 6 highlights the various ways that gold finds are split by miners.



At the mine site, gold is bought for a percentage of the London Bullion Market price (LBMA). At Chadian mines, the rate has been 70 to 87% of the LBMA rate; in Sudan it has been as high as 93%; and in Libya it may be as low as 66%⁸¹. In Dubai, traders buy the gold for close to the LBMA rate and sell it on to refiners⁸². The profit here is in the scale of purchases. The percentage of the LBMA is included underneath each buyer in the gold supply chain in Figure 6.

Even when earning for themselves, miners only receive a small percentage of the profits. In 2014 to 2015, at the height of the artisanal gold rush in Chad, groups operating in Chad would typically have 10 to 20 miners in a vehicle. The driver receives a third of any gold found, as does the owner of the metal detectors and other equipment; the remaining third is split between the miners⁸³. In the more organised mines, where heavy equipment is required or there is a larger power in control, small businesses emerge. In this model, the local authority takes 10% in taxes, the pit owner responsible for the equipment takes 25%, and the pit boss takes 10%, leaving 20% split between the miners (around 10) and another 20% split between the processors (2)⁸⁴. As mining in Chad has become busier, the latter model is more common.

In the settlements that develop to support mining, taxes are also paid to the local authority. For example, when former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal controlled Jebel Amir in Darfur, people running wells, washing troughs, grinding mills, stores and restaurants

all paid a monthly fee, as did gold vendors and traders⁸⁵. Similar practices are common in most gold mines (discussed below in relation to Jebel Marra).

To facilitate mining, armed groups and criminal actors have invested by providing machinery and other equipment and supplies to miners, which is rented in exchange for gold. This is particularly relevant in Libya due to the more complex mining operations there: armed Tebu groups tend to operate as facilitators and rarely control gold mining areas, but they manage the supply of equipment and are used as guides because of their familiarity with the desert areas. At the outset of artisanal mining in southern Libya, the Tebu also brought in many Sudanese miners with experience of gold mining to create a profitable business.⁸⁷

Criminal actors provide the mercury used to extract gold from ore; these criminals have monopolised the market and may offer mercury for free, forcing miners to turn to them for sales as well. This keeps the illicit financial cycle isolated from formal financing. Every action in the mining industry is a calculated move to control more of the revenue, particularly as the large profits are made in the points on the supply chain between the purchase of gold finds from miners and sale to regional traders. While profits are relatively small at the individual level, more revenue can be generated further up the supply chain because of the greater quantities involved, in addition to payment for services and equipment.

How is the revenue from gold generated

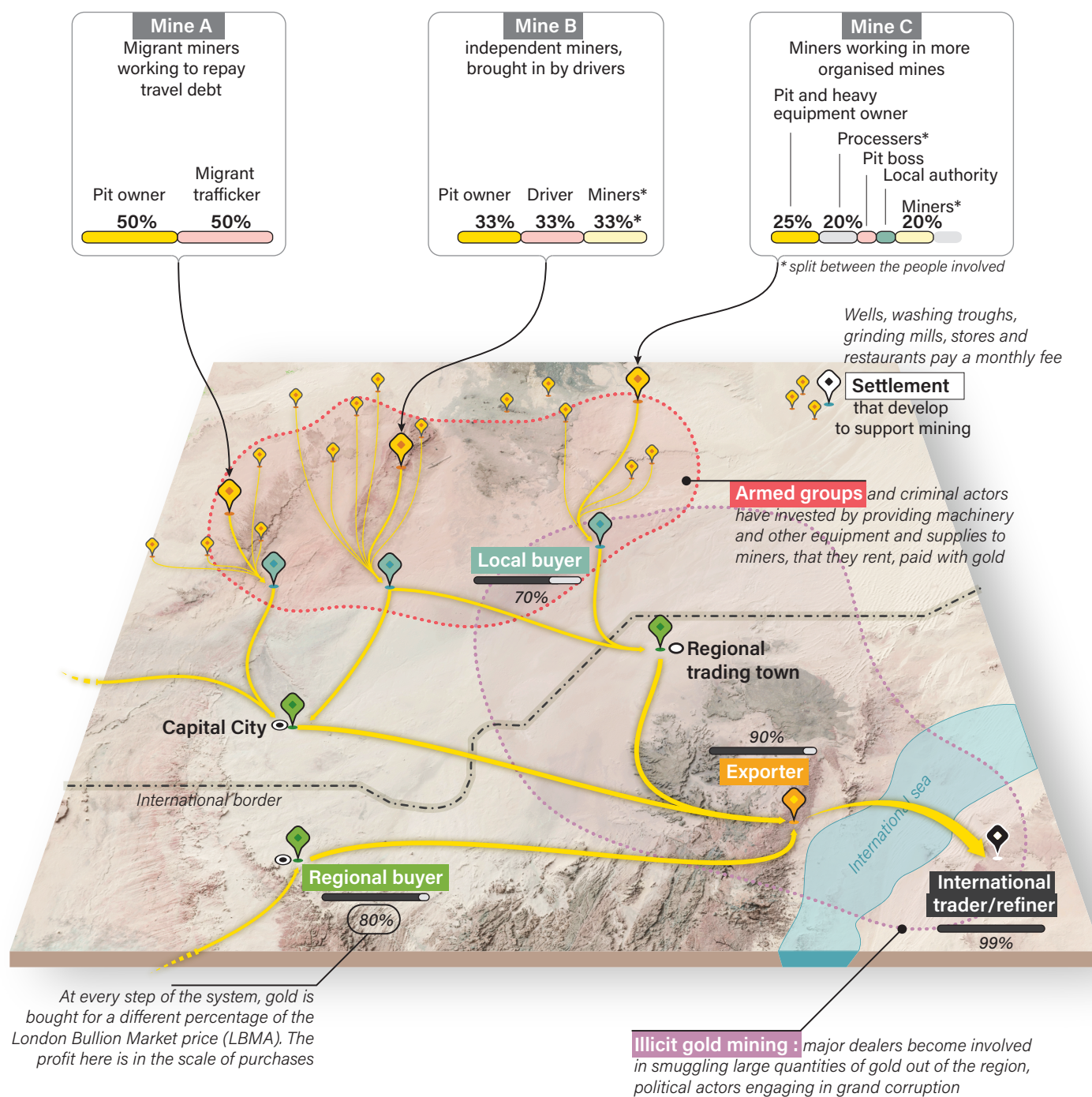


Figure 6: Gold revenue actors involved in artisanal gold mining and share of profits at each stage (RHIPTO 2021).

Migrants in gold mines; degrees of exploitation

Migration routes overlap with gold mining areas. Many migrants work voluntarily in order to fund the next leg of their journeys. The growing power of armed groups in mining areas will likely make migrants more vulnerable to exploitation.

The map on page 57 shows how migration routes link to gold mining areas. Gold mines attract labour migrants from nearby areas, including neighbouring countries, as the mines are close to the borders. Many migrants seeking onward movement have chosen to work in gold mines, as they are seen as a lucrative way to earn enough money to fund the next leg of their journey. However, as discussed above, these migrants may end up in debt to mine managers who provide food and accommodation in the mining camps, with migrants forced to work until they have paid off their debt.

There are reports of explicit exploitation. Migrant smugglers have 'sold' migrants who travelled on credit to mine bosses, and they are effectively held in debt bondage until the mine boss decides they have earned enough to repay the debt⁹⁴. In Sudan, there are reports that the RSF has intercepted migrants enroute to Libya and transferred them to mines in Darfur⁹⁵. In Libya, the Kilinje mines have been particularly notorious for exploitation, and are labelled the 'field of slaves'⁹⁶.

Kilinje grew in popularity as Kufra became more dangerous as a waypoint. Migrants could also travel on credit to the mines and repay their debt or earn enough to pay for the next phase of their journey. Kilinje soon became notorious for forced labour and violence by Tebu militias and bandits⁹⁷. Tibesti has since become more popular with migrants stopping to work but reports of exploitation have been increasing.

The ebb and flow of gold mining activity on the Chad–Libya border

An analysis of violent events affecting mining sites in the Chad–Libya border area, and satellite data on mining activity, reveals that there is an unexpected degree of complexity in the link between conflict and the ebb and flow of mining activity. The fact that the Chadian army has a controlling stake in some mines is a factor. In Libya, meanwhile, a decline in conflict events in 2020 and 2021 suggests that LAAF affiliates have consolidated their control of southern and eastern Libya and its mining sites, albeit indirectly – bringing more predictability and stability to the sites, enabling them to grow.

For this research, RHIPTO worked with Satellite Applications Catapult to identify and analyse various mining sites, examining their growth and decline. These sites are shown in the map on page 69. It should be noted that the selected sites are not indicative of all mining sites present. **But the analysis revealed how stable the conflict situation must be in southern Libya to facilitate mining with heavy machinery, whereas in Chad the situation is much more unstable.**

Chad

Despite regular expulsions of miners from the gold mines in Chad, mining areas have continued to grow overall, with short periods of limited activity. For example, in sites 02 and

03 of Kouri Bougoudi, near the Libyan border, there has been an estimated 30% expansion in mining activity between 2017 (blue) and 2020 (red) – see Figures 7 and 8.

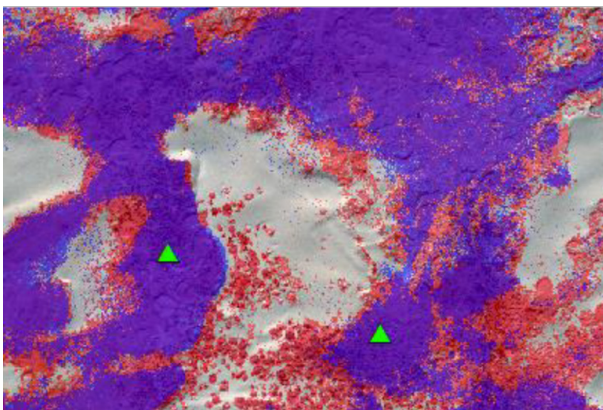


Figure 7: Site 02, Kouri Bougoudi, Chad. Image shows change in mining activity from 2017 (blue) to 2020 (red). (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)

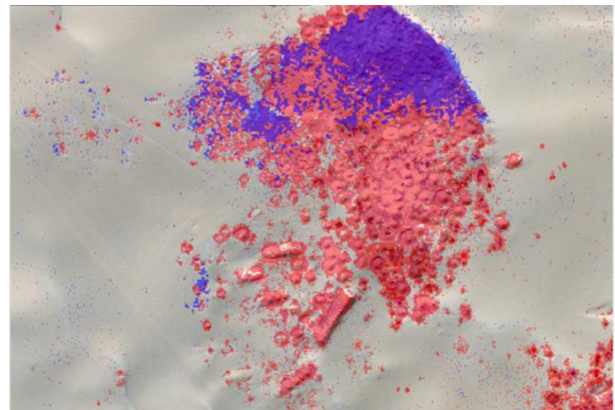
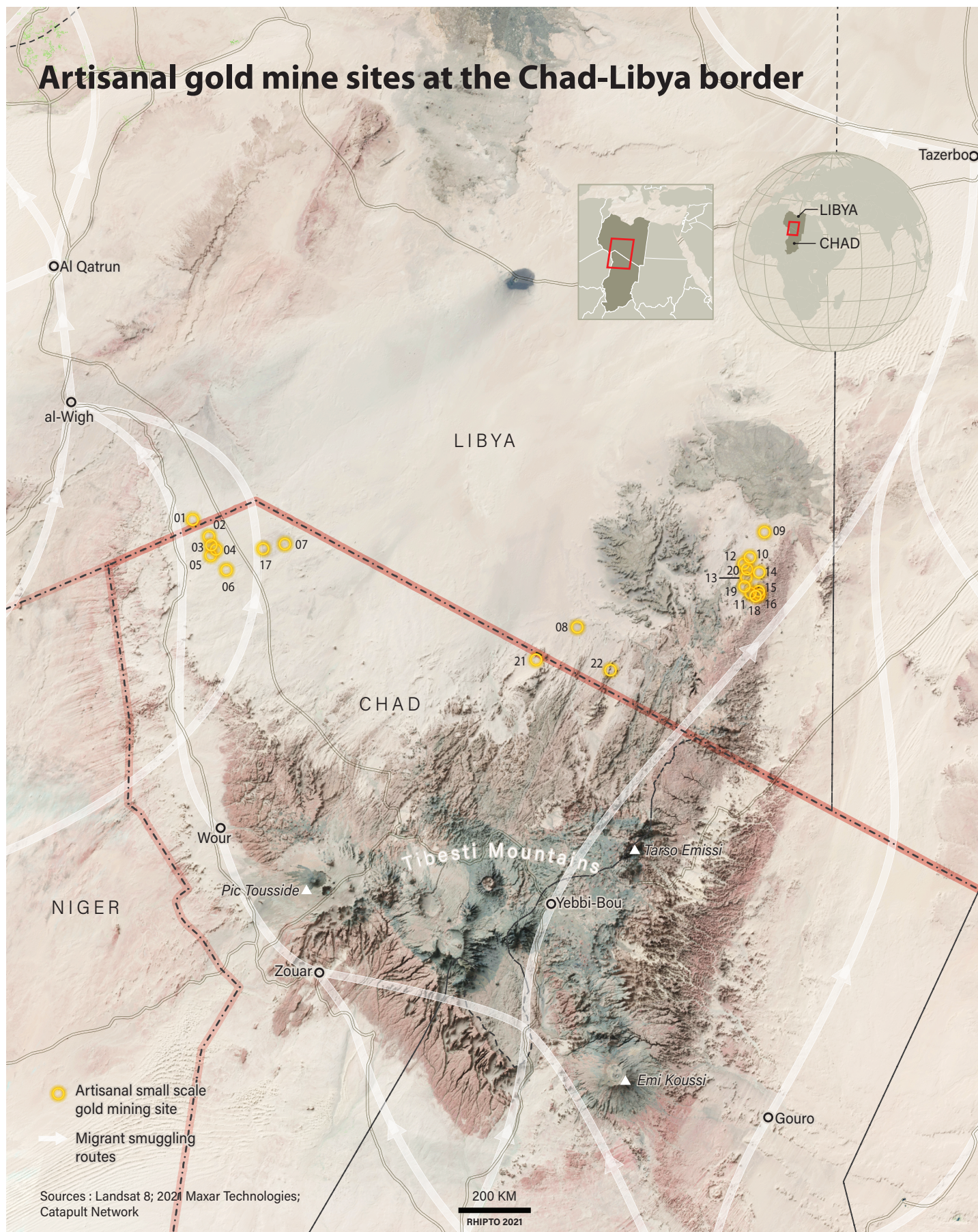


Figure 8: Site 03, Kouri Bougoudi, Chad. Image shows change in mining activity from 2017 (blue) to 2020 (red). (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



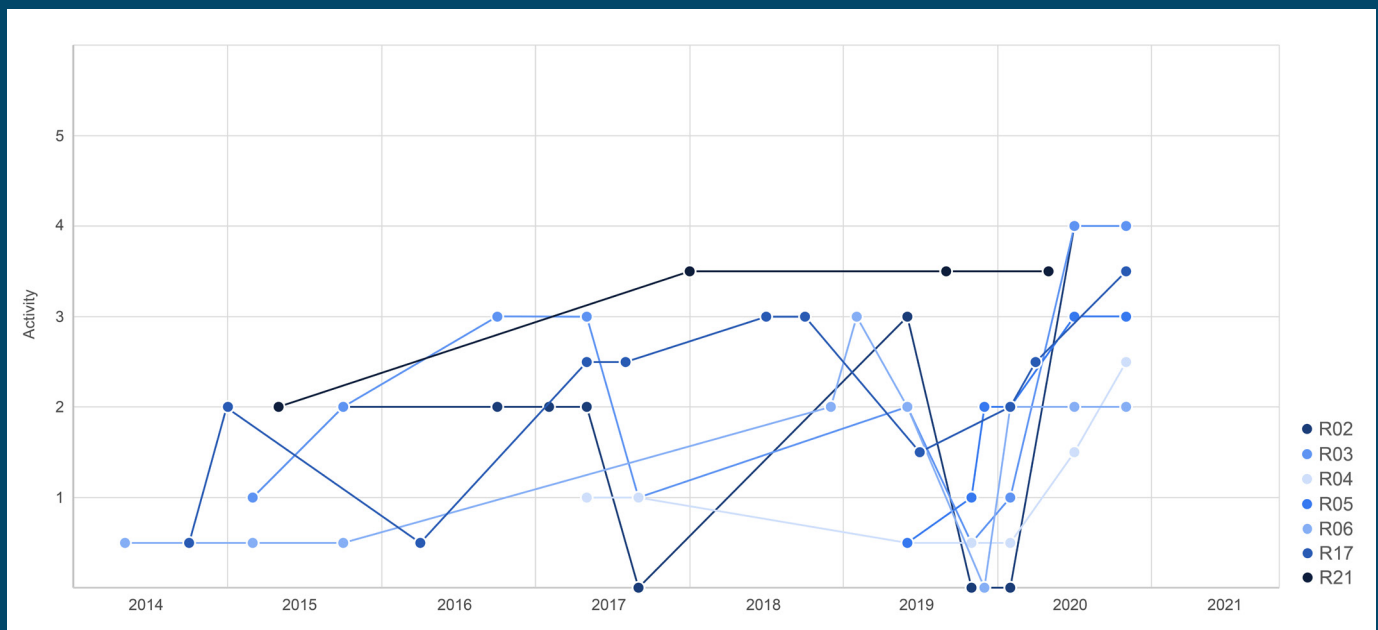


Figure 9: Level of mining activity at selected Chad sites. The graph shows when activity has increased or decreased, suggesting expansion or temporary shutdown in individual gold mining sites.

The growth of gold mining areas appears at first glance to correspond to the key events outlined in the timeline above (p. 60), with most areas experiencing a decline in 2017, following the expulsions, and again following airstrikes in 2019. This can be seen in Figure 9, below, which shows the level of mining activity at selected sites in Chad

However, upon closer inspection, the ebb and flow of mining activity is more complex: while activity levels at some sites correlate with violent incidents in or near the site, in other sites – for example Sites 02, 03 and 05 – this trend is not seen. In addition, each time mining activity resumes, it does so at a higher level than previously (Figure 9).

Chad has higher quality surface gold than Libya, which means mines do not need to be as sophisticated or established. This is

evident in the lower amount of equipment and structures in most of the mining areas (see Site 07 in Figure 10), where the surface layer is manually processed without the need for equipment. Camps may be temporary, partially because of the insecurity linked to the regular expulsions, but also because there are fewer pit mines than in Libya. Other sites in Kouri Bougoudi show evidence of more sophisticated processing techniques, using water beds and mechanised processes to concentrate gold particles (see Site 05 in Figure 11), suggesting that miners are not concerned about being expelled from that particular area any time soon. This could be because the area is not a target for either the armed forces or other groups, or perhaps more likely that there is adequate protection to deter an attack.



Figure 10: Site 07, Kouri Bougoudi, Chad, November 2020. Image shows unsophisticated surface processing. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



Figure 11: Site 05, Kouri Bougoudi, November 2020. Image shows evidence of more sophisticated processing techniques. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)

The Kouri Bougoudi mining area shows the complexity of the factors driving mining activity. For example, the Chadian army's enforcement of a ban on gold mining in Tibesti in 2015 resulted in a fall in activity at mine sites 02 and 03 (see graph in Figure 9 above). A similar enforcement operation was attempted in May to June 2017, in part to oust Chadian rebels from the mining areas, where around 40,000 miners were evacuated; this was despite the ANT itself being involved in the mining. In one site (04), there was an immediate halt in activity. However, in others (02, 03 and 05), the decrease in mining activity came a full three to four months after the expulsion. A potential reason for this difference of compliance could be that the ANT was involved in the mines at site 02, 03 and 05, but not in site 04. Attacks by local groups also may have influenced the eventual departure from sites 02, 03 and 05 – there is precedent here: in 2015 a Tebu wangada (committee) was formed and attacked foreign miners. At the time of the expulsion, other inter-communal conflicts, such as the flare up between Zaghawa and Beri in December 2017, may have been brewing at the time also.

Local outbreaks of violence may have more effect on mining activity than government actions. In December 2018, intercommunal violence broke out at Kouri Bougoudi among tribal groups from different areas of Chad, leading to 30 people being killed and a further 200 wounded. This violence is reflected in the timing of the shutdown of all mining activity in sites 01, 02, 03 and 04, indicating that significant eruptions in local violence could have a stronger effect on the sustainability of mining than government actions.

Incidents between rebel groups also correlate with shutdowns, but not as conclusively. In March 2019, Sudanese rebels – either the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) or Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – ambushed Chadian rebels, killing seven. This incident correlates with the shutdown of sites 01, 02, 03, 04, but not site 06, which saw a spike in activity leading up to the incident and lasting throughout 2019.

The failed Chadian rebel attack in February 2020 on a Chad army position in Kouri Bougoudi — where 40 rebels and three soldiers were killed — is a good example of how violent incidents can have mixed and unexpected impacts on mining sites. The attack closely correlates with a shutdown of site 01 in Libya that same month, which lasted until June 2020; however, it appeared to have no impact on sites 02, 03, 04 and 06 in Chad, where activity picked up in June 2020. One possible reason for this is that the Chadian military have a controlling stake in these mines, with the failed attack leading to a consolidation of power for the army as the 'protector' of these sites.

The insecurity of the mining areas in Kouri Bougoudi is evident in the expansion of a settlement on the Libyan side of the border, close to the goldfield. The settlement, pictured in 2017 in Figure 12, was originally a people smuggling hub. Since then, it has expanded considerably, with gold processing sites established (Figures 13 and 14). This fits with

reports that when the Chadian army threatens to expel them, miners carry sacks of sand taken from mining sites in Chad across the border to Libya, to be processed to extract the gold (evident in the sand piles in Figure 13). They would rather do this than risk processing at the gold site in Chad and being forced to leave before finishing. The implication is that mining in Libya is considered safer, from a security perspective, with a lower likelihood of losing investments into equipment due to surprise expulsions, as discussed in the next section.

From the sites examined, the only site in Chad where mining activity has remained relatively constant is in Ezri goldfield (Site 21, see map on page 69). This is because Ezri goldfield is less accessible from Chad — even though mining area 21 is on the Chad side of the border — and so it is more difficult for the Chadian army or other groups to launch attacks.



Figure 12: Site 01, Kouri Bougoudi, December 2017. Image shows settlement on the Libyan side of the border. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



Figure 13: Site 01, Kouri Bougoudi, December 2020. The site of the original settlement in Figure 12 can be seen in the arc of the sand dunes in the NE area. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



Figure 14: One of the processing sites that emerged in site 01, Libya, by June 2020 (area in blue box in figure 13) (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)

Libya

The continued increase of mining activity in Chad is not surprising, given the availability of surface gold, and mining in Libya continues steadily too⁹⁸. Rather than mirroring the changes in the Chadian mines – which would see a rise in Libyan mining while mining is

restricted in Chad, and a fall in Libyan mining when miners return to Chad – activity at mining areas in Libya has remained fairly consistent (see Figure 15. Indeed, activity at most mines has increased, particularly in the last year.

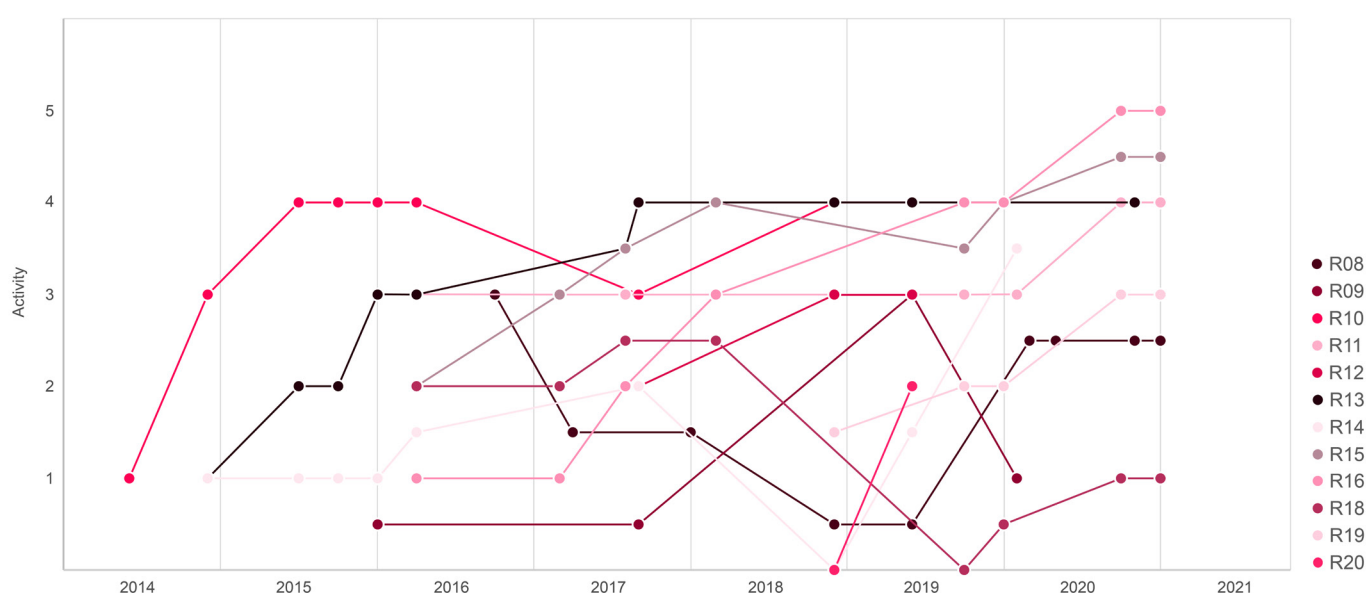


Figure 15: Level of mining activity at selected mining sites, Libya. The graphic shows when activity has increased or decreased, suggesting expansion or temporary shutdown in individual gold mining sites.

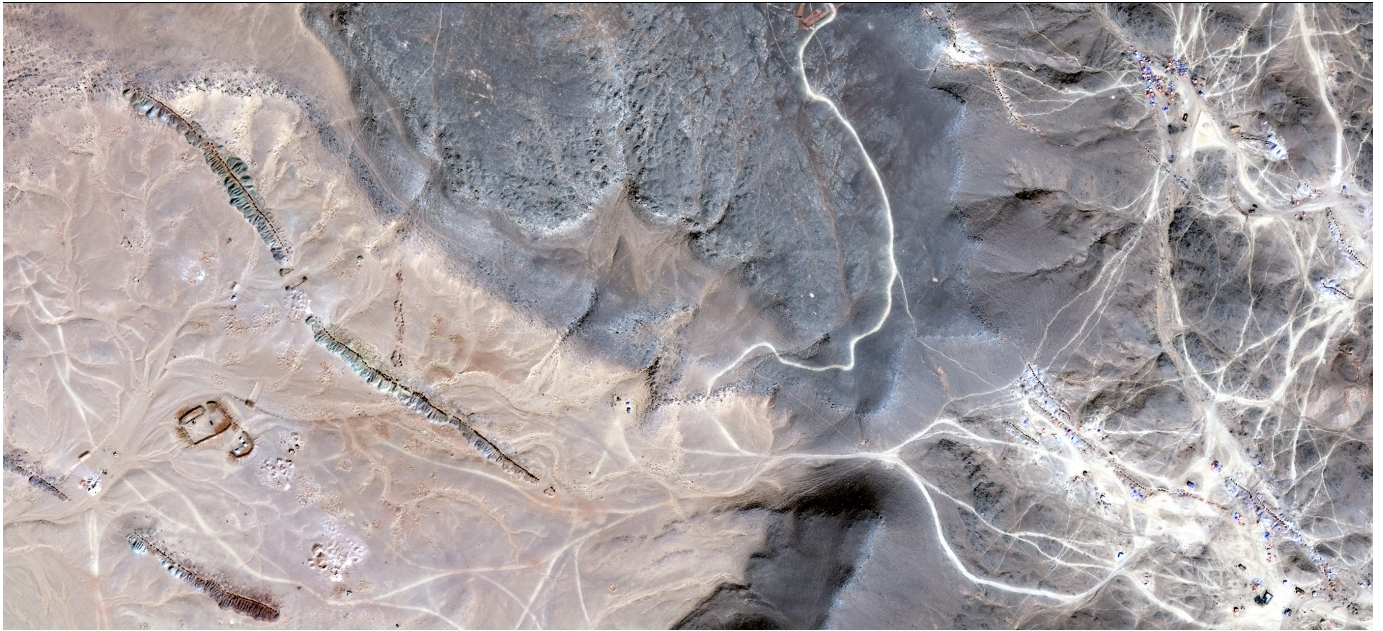


Figure 16: Site 18, Kilinje goldfield, Libya, October 2020. The mining pits to the west were active until October 2019, but, from early 2020, the activity to the east appeared, signalling that gold in the original location had been depleted. (Source: Maxar Technologies 2021)

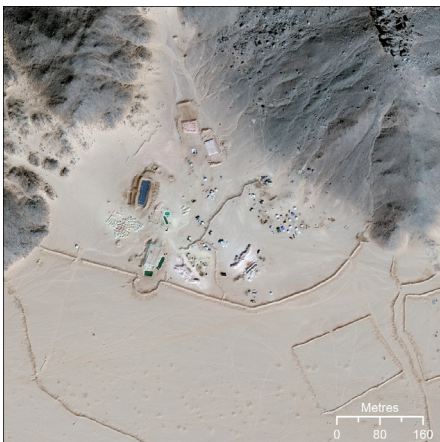
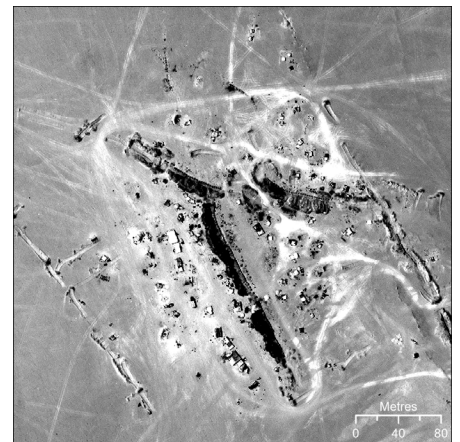


Figure 17: Site 15, Kilinje goldfield, Libya. Image shows processing site near major mining areas. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



Figure 18: Site 20, Kilinje goldfield, Libya. The left image, from January 2019, shows processing of the surface layer with bulldozers. The right image, from June 2019, shows that deeper pits have been dug, and supporting structures built. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)



Reductions in one area typically correspond to a shift to a new area that has emerged nearby. For example, at Kilinje goldfield (Figure 16), the mining pits to the west were active until October 2019, but, from early 2020, the activity to the east appeared, signalling that gold in the original location had been depleted. Thus, gold depletion at each mine site is also a factor contributing to the ebb and flow of activity in the Chad–Libya border area.

Because Libyan gold requires heavy equipment to access it, mining requires a larger investment, which would create a reluctance to abandon sites. This is evident in the imagery of major mining sites in the Kilinje area, where the amount of equipment and thus the level of sophistication of mining and processing has increased over time, with imagery indicating a shift away from simple processing techniques, to rudimentary forms of heap leaching. For

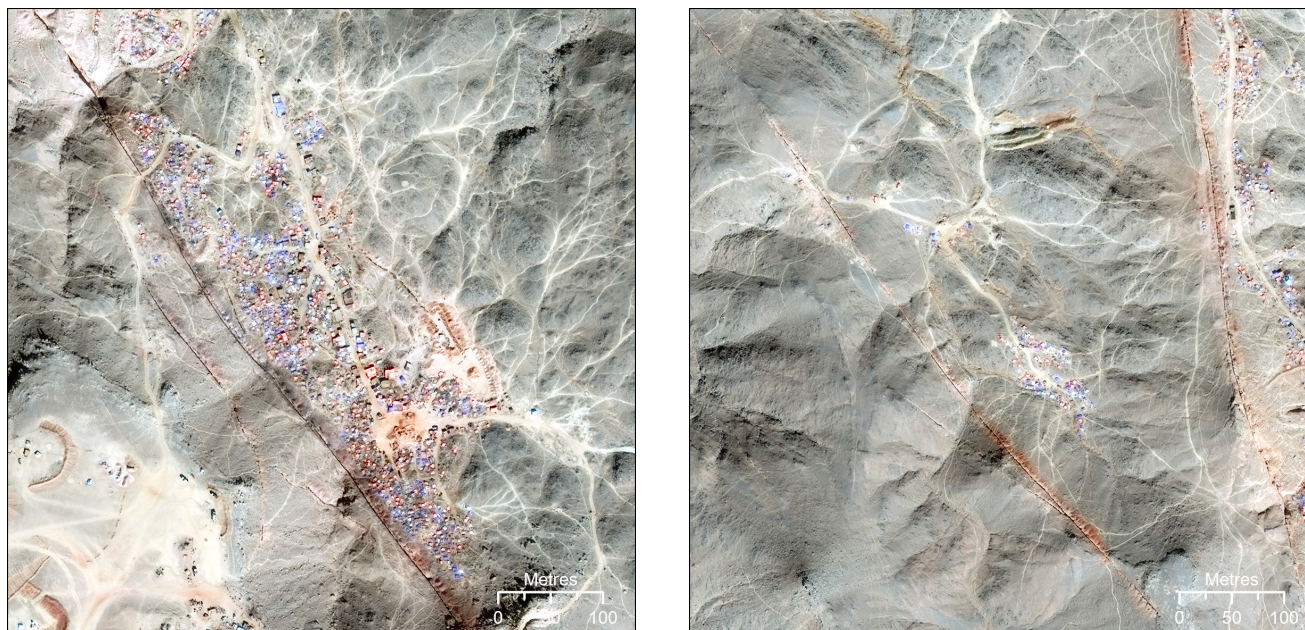


Figure 19: Site 16, Kilinje goldfield, Libya. Left image, 2017, shows an established mining area. The right image, January 2021, shows the addition of further pit mines in the same area. (Satellite Image © Maxar Technologies, 2021)

example, Figure 17 shows a processing site near major mining areas in Kilinje. Also, in Kilinje, Site 20 (Figure 18) shows that mining in January 2016 only involved surface layer processing using bulldozers (left image), but by June 2019, larger pits had been dug and supporting structures built (right image).

Other areas have grown even more substantially. The mining area in Figure 19 (in Kilinje) was already well established in April 2014, but its size increased substantially by 2017 (left image) and has expanded even further (right image, January 2021), with additional mines present.

These mines have been able to grow because there has been a measure of stability in the region. The southeast region of Libya has, since 2018, seen a consolidation of power by militias that are part of the LAAF's command chain, creating more stability for the mining areas – particularly Kilinje – and allowing them to grow. In 2019, the LAAF went on a nationwide offensive, which in the south included the South Liberation and Purge Operation in

January to March 2019. The LAAF's failure to take Tripoli only reinforced their need to consolidate control over their strategic rear area and trafficking flow from the southeast, and airstrikes in the south continued throughout 2019.

Before the LAAF's main offensive, there were signs of a gradual eviction of rebel groups from the southeastern area⁹⁹. This is consistent with satellite imagery that shows mining sites in Libya showing signs of a much larger and more permanent presence than those in Chad, including in terms of size as well as the existence of heavy and expensive machinery. There are reports of LAAF-affiliated groups clashing with Chadian gangs in the area throughout 2018.

The Tebu have ostensibly controlled the area between Murzuq and Rebiana, including the areas around Kilinje and Ezri, with a management committee charging miners for accessing the site. The Tebu also brought Darfuri miners to the area and facilitated the movement of equipment to the mines.



In recent years, however, the Tebu have been continually squeezed. To the west, the LAAF recruited anti-Tebu mercenaries as part of their operation, and airstrikes between January and August 2019 sought to push the Tebu out of Murzuq and Qatrun. However, the Tebu kept fighting back, resulting in mediation between LAAF forces and Tebu groups. To the east, the Tebu lost control of the corner of the tri-border up to Kufra and Tazerbo in 2015, when the LAAF supported the Zway. Saddam Haftar, son of LAAF chief Khalifa Haftar, has taken an increasing interest in Subol Al-Salam — the LAAF-affiliated, Zway militia — to consolidate smuggling interests in southeastern Libya.

As there have been few conflict events in 2020 and 2021, this suggests that LAAF affiliates maintain control of southern and eastern Libya. While Tebu groups remain in the area, they likely have to fall in line with the dominance of the LAAF groups. Accordingly, the LAAF is creating more predictability and stability as protectors of the mining sites — even if this

is indirect — which has allowed the areas to grow. In addition, as all gold must be transported north, the traders in major cities will be aligned with — and will pay taxes to — the LAAF.

The ebb and flow of mining activity in Chad and Libya revealed unexpected trends. In Chad, the army's expulsions are not the most significant disruption to mining. Attacks by rival groups and intercommunal violence have also been a factor – highlighting the instability caused by the lack of a dominant force. It was expected that volatility in Libya would encourage miners to be based in Chad whenever it was feasible. However, all of the mining areas in Libya have continued to grow. This indicates the area is not affected by wider conflict. This is taken as a sign that Tebu groups are allowed to continue managing operations through some form of agreement with the LAAF. Accordingly, these dynamics point to the emergence of protection economies on all sides of the tri-border.



Gold mine, north Sudan
Maciek67©

Armed groups + gold mines = protection economies

The state response to artisanal gold mining has been limited, primarily because there is little state presence or control in the mining areas. This creates space for the establishment of protection economies. With much of the revenue from artisanal gold mining bypassing host states, armed groups accrue most of the profits, enabling them to further consolidate their control and power over the mining areas.

Although there is little state presence in the goldfields of the tri-border area, these are not ungoverned spaces. Protection economies have emerged, with goldfields controlled by quasi-state actors in Libya and Sudan, and by local militias in Chad. These economies result in hundreds of millions of dollars in gold revenue ending up in the hands of armed groups, fuelling conflict, affecting migration

flows, and impacting national and regional stability.

In Sudan, gold revenue has strengthened Hemeti's control of Darfur, and his political power in Sudan's Sovereign Council, with the potential to undermine civilian stakeholders in Sudan's transition. In Libya, the LAAF has sought to control the south through affiliate groups and maintains control over the primary gold trading towns. The Tebu do not act as a unified group, but Tebu groups control gold mining areas in Libya. While reluctant to fight stronger groups, they are unwilling to relinquish control of the area between Murzuq and Rebiana. In Chad, control of mining areas is more dispersed, but most mines are in Tebu-held areas, generating conflict with other ethnic groups.

Sudan: gold helps consolidate a parallel security structure

In Sudan, control of artisanal mining has become centralised: first by former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal, who taxed miners and associated services; then it was taken over by Hemeti, commander of the RSF. Although the RSF is part of Sudan's armed forces, it generally acts independently; profits from illicit activity in Darfur — whether from gold mines or people smuggling — benefit individuals and factions within the RSF, and ultimately Hemeti directly.

In mid-2020, Hemeti handed control of the mines over to the Sudanese government, but his family's company, Al Junaid, still controls processing. Revenue from Jebel Amir gold mine has allowed Hemeti to consolidate power, buy equipment and vehicles, and further his ambition to strengthen his power in Darfur through the peace process.

Combining gold and other income sources, Hemeti's finances have given him significant power throughout the transition period. For example, it would be difficult to remove him from Sudan's Sovereign Council¹⁰⁰ as he would maintain military strength and financial income through direct or family control of both RSF's command chain and income flows from gold.

Other groups in Sudan are also benefiting from gold finds. The Abdul Wahid faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM/AW), a rebel group in western Sudan, has relied on gold mining in the Jebel Marra region of Darfur, using revenue to buy weapons and ammunition, recruit new fighters and bring back former members from Libya. They have been taking 25-30% of gold finds, estimated to be 5-6kg per day (although this increased to 10-15kgs a day when the government of Sudan banned processing of Jebel Marra gold at nearby sites in October 2019, which shifted processing to the mine site¹⁰¹). In addition, SLM/AW generates tax revenue: each lorry leaving the mining site is charged 20,000 Sudanese pounds (SDG), and each miner has to pay 150 SDG¹⁰².

Darfurian rebel groups who participated in the peace process have been presenting projects to build revenue streams to support their constituents, as per the commitments made in the peace agreement of 2020, with several expressing interest in gold mining¹⁰³. This will generate renewed tensions between the different groups, Hemeti and SLM/AW if revenue is not shared.

Chad: hesitant military partially on the take divides tribes

In Chad, mining is more dispersed. Committees have been created locally in most of the mining areas to manage the area, reviving traditional *wangada* structures¹⁰⁴. However, the intermittent government expulsions since 2015 have created unrest.

Despite these expulsions, in general the Chadian military are not motivated to attack the gold prospectors in Tibesti – in February 2019, a colonel was dismissed for his refusal to do so¹⁰⁵. This is perhaps the reason why Chad has relied heavily on air strikes in the area, because the armed forces present in the area are refusing to engage. This is supported by the fact that the expulsions that have occurred rarely target all mining areas. At the same time, there are reports of military personnel working in security roles for prospectors, which boosts their income in a time where they are severely underfunded, in part because of low oil prices. Such moonlighting undermines the military forces' will to intervene and reinforces the local power balance.

Military attacks have also targeted specific groups or actors, which affects control of particular areas. In early 2019, Zaghawa¹⁰⁶ smuggler Abdallah Banda controlled significant areas in Kouri Bougoudi, undisturbed by Chadian forces based nearby in Wour and Tanoua. Banda had transported hundreds of Darfuris to work in the mines. In March 2019, his base was attacked by government forces, with supplies, equipment and water wells destroyed. This was a scorched earth tactic to prevent a Chadian rebel group from using the area as a supply point, as two weeks previously

the group had come to the area from Libya, but had been pushed back by French airstrikes¹⁰⁷. This highlights how the Chadian government is more concerned about the strength of Chadian rebels than artisanal mining, which amounts to a dangerous failure to recognise the extent to which gold mines are used by armed groups.

The attacks on the gold mining communities have created a poor relationship between these communities and the Chadian government, creating fertile ground for rebel groups to recruit new members and for self-defence groups to form. For example, in Miski, self-defence groups have fought back against the Chadian military.

President Déby's death in northern Chad, facing rebels that operate from Libya, will certainly renew the focus of Chad's transitional government on the tri-border area, to restore order and credibility. For this reason, an offensive can be expected in the border area, which will almost certainly be large enough and long enough to disrupt the gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi, Miski and Ezri goldfields. The anticipated arrival of Chadian forces in strength in northern Chad potentially complicates political and conflict dynamics, as powerbrokers from all three states will now be heavily engaged in the tri-border area. They will either find a stable political settlement through interlocking deals, or a bigger fight will flare up. Both Haftar and Hemeti are preoccupied with stabilising their respective situations in the interior of their countries, however, so stability remains the most likely outcome in the short-term.

Libya: LAAF subsidiaries fend off foreign mercenaries

In Libya, while the mining areas have historically been in Tebu-controlled territory, the LAAF has been increasing its control over southern and eastern Libya. The Tebu have been squeezed by LAAF-affiliated groups from both the west (Murzuq, Qatrun) and the east (Kufra). While the Tebu have fought back to a certain extent against airstrikes to the west, there is a reluctance to engage in full conflict against the LAAF following the Tebu's serious defeat in Kufra in 2015 against what is now Subol Al-Salam, a group formed by the Zway tribe to control smuggling networks.

The increased LAAF control of southern Libya has also made the situation in the gold mining areas more predictable and stable. However,

there are reports of growing numbers of Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries seeking access to the mining areas. Where these groups concede to the power hierarchy, they will be allowed to establish mining operations. However, if they seek to build their power base, this is likely to be quashed by the LAAF, in a similar vein to earlier attacks against Chadian rebels in the Kilinje area in October 2018.

Even more so than migrant flows and other revenue sources, artisanal gold mines are consolidating the power of the groups in control, and entrenching a protection economy in the tri-border area that is not contained by borders.



Outlook

The current centre of gravity for conflict dynamics in the whole region is still Libya. Libya has had a profound effect on security policies, both regionally in the tri-border area, between neighbours Sudan and Chad and for both vis-à-vis Libya, and by implication also EU, Russia, UAE, Egypt, Qatar, and lately also Turkey. The ceasefire evictions of foreign fighters are likely to push conflict back to southern Libya and the tri-border area. These groups will cause increased instability as they seek new revenue sources, with increased banditry to capitalise on gold, migration and even drug and weapons trafficking.

For Chadian groups, this will draw out Chadian forces keen to protect the northern border, likely with renewed government focus in the north, in turn potentially inciting a revitalised rebellion against the transitional government in N'Djamena. The dissatisfaction in Tibesti has created fertile recruitment ground for the rebels.

For the Sudanese rebel groups, a retreat will remove their rear base, which weakens their position vis-à-vis the Darfur Peace Agreement. This can only strengthen Hemeti's rapprochement and power. As Abdul Wahid's faction of the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA-AW) has retained a strong presence in Darfur, and has established businesses operating out of Libya and South Sudan, the group will be the remaining challenge for Hemeti in Darfur.



Plane load of gold being smuggled from Khartoum airport intercepted by RSF
Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/REUTERS®

If the LAAF and Hemeti can keep affiliate groups and the wider community in areas under their control relatively content, the status quo will remain fragile, but in place. However, if they fail to deliver, this will shift the balance, sparking conflict that has the potential to spread across the tri-border area.

Although many of the clashes in the tri-border region are small scale, they create a context where control is linked to kinetic strength rather than rule of law. This means the strongest groups control the commodities available or moving through the area they control. The importance of strength has encouraged groups to seek out rear bases - building up loyalty with groups in neighbouring countries with the expectation that support will be returned when needed.

Looking at the situation in the triborder with a conflict level lens, the area appears quiet and not particularly rife with tensions. And there is a risk that conflict incident sources like ACLED, which relies on open-source reporting of incidents, underplays actual violent incidents. But it is unlikely that this selection bias generates a picture several orders of magnitude away from the truth, especially given the information from other methodologies.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that like in other types of protection economies, typically mafia-controlled areas, violence, and competition only needs to take place until the criminal marketplace becomes consolidated, and it is clear who is in control where. At that point the conflict level reduces, such that the situation appears calm, since violence is no longer necessary. Secondly and relatedly, the competition and violence that sets the terms for control of the triborder area does not need to happen at the triborder, but rather where the boundaries of the competing groups clash. This can be geographically, such as inside Libya where LAAF and Tebu have clashed over control to end up with a kind of fragile settlement, or in commodity terms, where there may be different settlements for each flow, such as for migration, where subsidiary groups such as Subol al-Salam are given opportunities to tax flows in certain areas, and likely with time constraints too, compared with drugs or gold, where the strongest groups set other conditions.

Yet while the control of flows are at times consolidated, the situation is also affected by links to the lowest local level, where new conflicts can emerge such as arising from intercommunal tensions, and the higher national and international levels where the making and breaking of settlements and alliances, such as the political transitions currently ongoing in all three countries or their links with outside powers like Turkey, Russia and France, directly impact the balance of power, the strength of the main powerbrokers, and the access to resources.

In Libya at the local level LAAF dominance in the south has not translated into improvements in law and order, while at the same time GNA is resurgent militarily and politically. The Tebu will be following this situation closely looking to reassert their position, and given recent hostility with LAAF, do so most likely in alignment with GNU¹⁰⁸.

In northern Chad government presence is haphazard and weak and the balance of power is between tribal groups, and the tribes' relative control of illicit flows, particularly migrants, gold, and drugs. Chad's government's engagement in the tri-border area is reactive and premised on avoiding problems, in the form of rebel presence, as opposed to proactively wanting to shape developments or extract resources.

In Sudan the national level politics centres around power divisions in the Transitional Council, with Hemeti's key role as the main figure representing real military and financial power outside of Khartoum's elites, and in particular the Darfuri powerbrokers who are riding on his ability to secure their continued access to revenue sources. Almost regardless of what happens further at the national level, Hemeti's position outside Khartoum, and increasingly in terms of international aspirations, will be secure. This could mean further assertiveness of RSF in the tri-border area, with an obvious temptation for RSF and LAAF to align, which would likely have a stabilising effect, which in turn would consolidate illicit flows through Sudan and Libya, as opposed to Niger and Chad.



Methodology

This report is the culmination of research carried out between September 2020 and June 2021 layering multiple methodologies to understand the dynamics of conflict and illicit activities.

Quantitative data: Specific data sets were accessed for the thematic areas, including ACLED data on conflict events in the relevant provinces/ regions of Sudan, Chad and Libya, and migration data compiled by UNHCR and the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix.

Social Media Analysis: The RHIPTO team worked with Bellingcat to identify and analyse social media discussions of migrants to identify shifts in migration routes among key nationality groups.

Satellite Imagery: The RHIPTO team identified the locations of mining sites in Darfur, Tibesti and southern Libya using open-source satellite imagery and key informant interviews (KIIs), and worked with Satellite Applications Catapult to procure high resolution imagery of these sites over the last 5 years to identify trends in mining activity. Satellite Applications Catapult also used Shortwave Infrared (SWIR) false colour composites that enhance the mineral spectra to identify additional mining sites.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Interviews were conducted with key contacts in the regions. These interviews were purposive – designed to answer specific questions related to gaps identified from the other methodologies. Interview responses have been kept anonymous given the sensitivity of the subject matter, and responses were used to confirm or add detail rather than being the primary methodology employed.

Literature review and media monitoring: As a final form of triangulation, the RHIPTO team reviewed existing analysis and media reports on the region to consider the likelihood and consistency of findings.

All of the methodologies employed had limitations. ACLED data relies on reported incidents, and parts of southern Libya are far removed from anyone outside of the immediate community. Migration data is notoriously difficult to gather, and UNHCR and IOM rely on the input of migrants themselves, who may avoid sharing full details of their journey or identities.

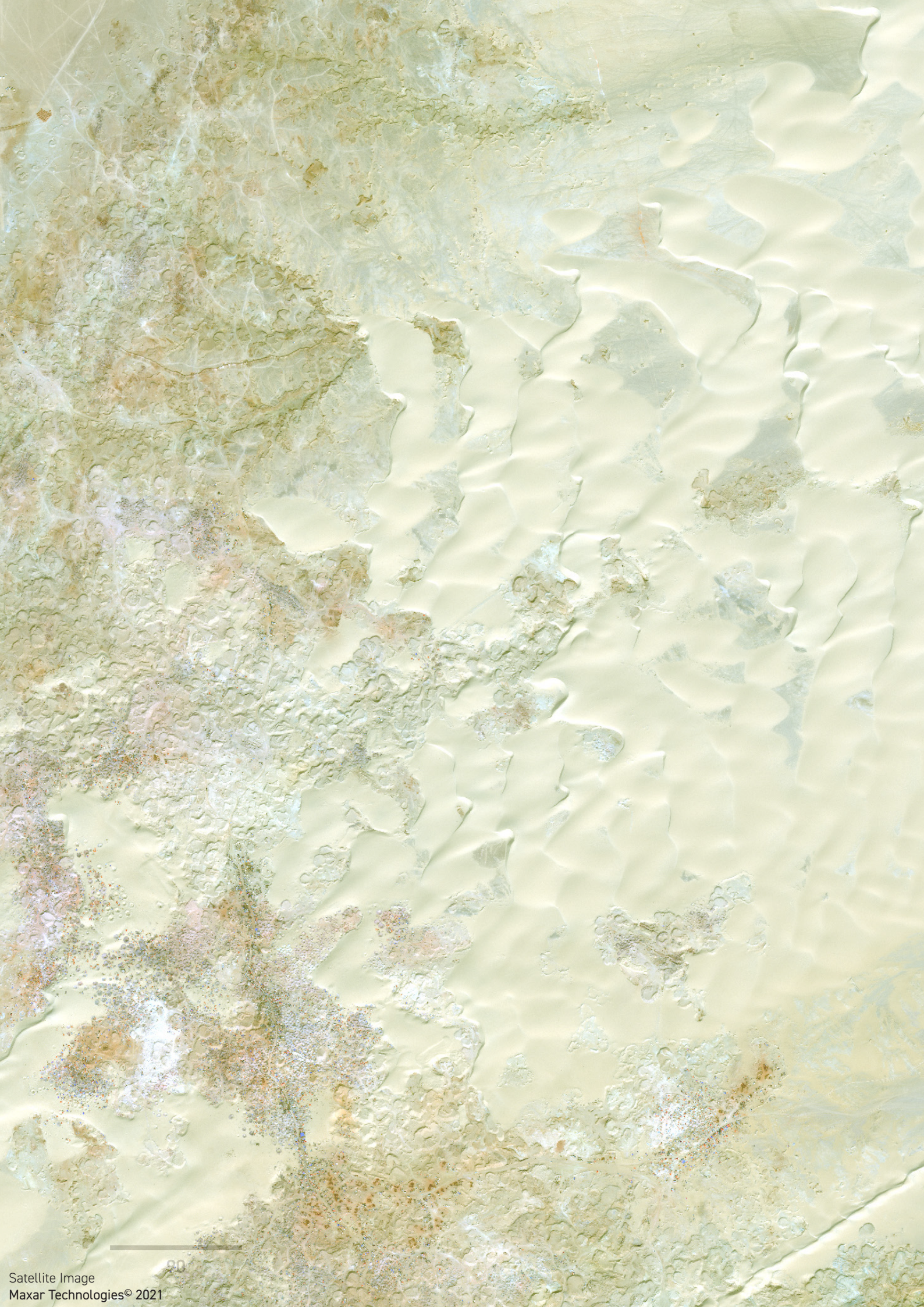
The social media analysis identified more online activity from Sudanese migrants, while all activity from Eritrean migrants was from individuals already on the Libyan coast. This may indicate far fewer are enroute to Libya, but it may also be a sign of limited access or lower reliance on social media.

Satellite imagery was useful in identifying activity at the mining sites, but the regions being analysed are not systematically captured by satellites, limiting the scope for systematic analysis of rise and fall of activity.

Because of Covid-19, interview respondents were travelling less within the region, which impacted on their broader knowledge of the changing dynamics. A frequent challenge with interviews on migration, particularly involving migrants, is they do not always have specific details on who was involved in their transportation, exploitation or the networks that facilitate movement.

To overcome these limitations, the various methodologies were combined with key findings tested based on previous literature and media reporting to assess feasibility. In addition, clarification interviews also tested findings.

A final challenge emerges in that the dynamics in the tri-border are not static, but are continuously affected by new developments, most recently the death of President Déby in Chad. Accordingly, the focus has been on identifying interests and aims of specific actors and considering how they may evolve in future.



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Endnotes

1. Both Chad and Sudan have commercial gold mines in other parts of the country. However, the focus of this report is on small-scale artisanal mining in the tri-border area
2. Lezhnev and Swamy (2020), 'Understanding Money Laundering Risks in the Conflict Gold Trade'
3. The LAAF is also known as the Libyan National Army (LNA). It opposes the Government of National Accord, and controls much of southern and eastern Libya
4. An operation launched by the LAAF to target smugglers and bandits in southern Libya
5. FATF (2020), 'Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures'
6. Signatory groups include Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minnawi (SLA/MM), Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF), Sudan Liberation Army/Transitional Council (SLA/TC), Sudanese Alliance. S/2020/36
7. UNSC (2021), Panel of Expert report on Sudan S/2021/40
8. UNSC (2021), Panel of Expert report on Sudan S/2021/40
9. UNSC (2021), Panel of Expert report on Sudan S/2021/40
10. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, December 2020'
11. UNSC (2021), Panel of Expert report on Sudan S/2021/40
12. This includes SLA/MM, GSLF, SLA/AW, SLA/TC, SRAC. UNSC (2021) Panel of Expert report on Sudan S/2021/40
13. Tossell (January 2020), 'Libya's Haftar and the Fezzan'
14. Tossell (January 2020), 'Libya's Haftar and the Fezzan'
15. Eaton et al. (March 2020), 'The Development of Libyan armed groups since 2014'
16. International Crisis Group (2020), 'Fleshing out the Libya ceasefire agreement'
17. GI-TOC (2021), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, January 2021'
18. Tubiana and Gramizzi, (2018), 'Lost in Trans-Nation'
19. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm: Organised crime across the Sahel-Sahara'
20. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, December 2020'.
21. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2021)
22. Tubiana (2021), 'Darfur is Bleeding Again'
23. Signatory groups include Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minnawi (SLA/MM), Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF), Sudan Liberation Army/Transitional Council (SLA/TC), Sudanese Alliance. S/2020/36
24. Frontex (March 2020), 'Risk Analysis for 2020'
25. While resettlement is the desired solution of many refugees, the resettlement of migrants already in Libya in countries such as Niger and Rwanda was intended to deter migration to Libya. Mixed Migration Centre (18 July 2019), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update — East Africa and Yemen Q2'; Mixed Migration Centre (17 October 2019), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update — East Africa and Yemen Q3'
26. Figure 2 shows IOM data. 4Mi and IOM use different recording mechanisms, but both show a downward trend in migrant numbers.
27. UNHCR (June 2019), 'Mixed Migration Routes and Dynamics in Libya in 2018'
28. Mixed Migration Centre / Reach (October 2019), 'Outspoken but unheard'
29. Bellingcat investigation in late 2020 of Facebook groups where migrants are discussing routes and options
30. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm: Organised crime across the Sahel-Sahara'
31. Jespersen et al. (2019), Human Trafficking: An Organised Crime?
32. GI-TOC (2019), 'Predatory Economies Eastern Libya'

33. GI-TOC (2019), 'Predatory Economies Eastern Libya'
34. Africanews (25 September 2019), 'Sudan force arrest 138 Africans trying to enter Libya 'illegally''
35. The Defense Post (26 September 2019), 'Sudan closes border with Libya and Car citing security concerns'
36. Associated Press (28 June 2020), 'Sudan says over 120 arrested before going to fight in Libya'
37. Associated Press (28 June 2020), 'Sudan says over 120 arrested before going to fight in Libya'
38. Bellingcat investigation (2020).
39. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, September 2020'
40. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, September 2020'
41. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm: Organised crime across the Sahel-Sahara'
42. Prior to 2015, the Tebu had controlled the area from the Sudanese border, along the Chadian border to Sabha. In 2015, although initially supporting both the Zway ethnic group, which resides in Kufra, and the Tebu, the LAAF sided with the Zway, which defeated the Tebu and pushed them back towards Sabha, and areas near the Nigerien border and into Chad.
43. GI-TOC (2019), 'Predatory Economies Eastern Libya'
44. Clingendael Institute (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'
45. Clingendael Institute (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'
46. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm'
47. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, October 2020'
48. Mixed Migration Centre (25 October 2020), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update – East Africa and Yemen Q3'
49. UN News (5 Jan 2021), 'UNHCR Relocates victims of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict to new site in Sudan'
50. Mixed Migration Centre (22 April 2020), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update – East Africa and Yemen Q1'
51. Mixed Migration Centre (20 July 2020), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update – East Africa and Yemen Q2'
52. Mixed Migration Centre (17 October 2019), 'Quarterly Mixed Migration Update – East Africa and Yemen Q3'
53. The funding also contributed to protection programmes.
54. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
55. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm'
56. African Economic Outlook (2021), 'Sudan'
57. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
58. Enough Project (2017), 'Sudan's Deep State'
59. International Trade Administration (2020), 'Chad – Country Commercial Guide – Mining and Precious Metals'
60. Solomons (2017), 'SA-based company partners with Chad to develop country's nascent minerals sector'
61. Ranieri (2020), 'Gold Mining in the Sahara-Sahel'
62. Libya Alahrar (2020), 'RFI: Haftar is using his private jet for money laundering, gold smuggling'
63. Galtier (2020), 'With its oil terminals under siege, Tripoli considers mining'
64. OPEC. 'Libya facts and figures'
65. UNSC (2021), S/2021/40.
66. Global Witness (2019), 'Exposing the RSF's secret financial network'
67. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
68. African Business (2019). 'Sudan's Gold'
69. The Abdul Wahid faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM-AW) is generating significant revenue from mines near Jebel Marra, which contributed to the group's abstention from the peace process.
70. Tubiana and Gramizzi (2017), 'Tubu Trouble'

71. Tubiana, Warin and Saeneen (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'
72. Tubiana, Warin and Saeneen (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'
73. International Crisis Group (ICG) (2019), 'Chad: Avoiding Confrontation in Miski'
74. International Crisis Group (ICG) (2017), 'How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border'
75. Tubiana and Gramizzi (2017), 'Tubu Trouble'
76. Tubiana, Warin and Saeneen (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'.
77. GI-TOC (2021), 'Monitoring the Political Economy', February 2021.
78. Tubiana and Gramizzi (2017), 'Tubu Trouble'
79. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
80. GI-TOC (2020), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, September 2020'.
81. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
82. Hunter (2019), 'Pulling at Golden Webs'
83. Tubiana and Gramizzi (2017), 'Tubu Trouble'
84. O'Neill and Telmer (2017), Estimating Mercury Use and Documenting Practices in Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining
85. Elhashmi (2017), 'The Politics of Mining and Trading of Gold in Sudan'
86. ICG (2017), 'How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border'.
87. ICG (2017), 'How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border'.
88. CG (2017), 'How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border'.
89. Grynberg, Nyambe and Singogo (2019), 'Trade and Smuggling of African Gold to UAE'
90. UN COMTRADE data, UAE import data for HS7108 from Libya
91. UN COMTRADE data, UAE import data for HS7108 from Chad
92. UNSC (2015), S/2015/31
93. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm'
94. Tubiana, Warin and Saeneen (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'.
95. Jespersen et al. (2019), Human Trafficking: An Organised Crime?
96. Tubiana, Warin and Saeneen (2018), 'Multilateral Damage'.
97. Tubiana and Gramizzi (2017), 'Tubu Trouble'
98. ICG (2017), 'How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border'
99. ACLED data
100. This was earlier mooted as a possibility because of the RSF's role in the shooting of protestors in June 2019
101. UNSC (2021), S/2021/40
102. UNSC (2021), S/2021/40
103. UNSC (2021), S/2021/40
104. A wangada is a customary committee that monitors the community and is considered its protector, monitor or guardian. Although traditionally armed with sticks and spears, the wangada monitoring gold mines were often demobilising fighters, equipped with cars, satellite phones and weapons (Tubiana and Gramizzi 2017)
105. Wahili (2019), 'Tchad: un colonel de l'armée radié pour refus de participer au combat'
106. The Zaghawa tribe are present in Darfur and eastern Chad and have played a key role in people smuggling from Darfur to Tibesti
107. GI-TOC (2019), 'After the Storm'
108. GI-TOC (2021), 'Monitoring the Political Economy, January 2021'



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