



# The “Transit State”: Migration and Security Intervention in Niger

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### **Thinking of Niger as a "transit" state describes the reality of migrants' mobility through the country, but this way of thinking also shapes security practices in the region.**

Visions of Niger as a major point of passage for West African migration to Europe now feature in dozens of [media accounts](#) of the [smuggling hub](#) of [Agadez](#), the largest city in the centre of the country, and the repercussions of the EU's clampdown on irregular migration there. This impression of a space of passage is not unjustified, and Niger sits at the crossroads of important and deep-rooted regional migration routes involving diverse flows such as herders criss-crossing regional borders and seasonal workers seeking work in Algeria and Libya. Much of this migration through Niger is irregular in that it is not organised or explicitly authorised by the state.

Recent efforts to reduce migration through Niger by international partners such as the EU have [made migration](#) into a more *clandestine* phenomenon. In other words, security measures to reduce the flow of people through Niger have meant a greater need for people on the move to rely on illicit economies, in which [state actors](#) play a permissive and even active role. Niger is a state through which the physical transit of migrants across its territory is a crucial policy issue and a key focus of international intervention. Understanding Niger as a 'transit' state, however, is not just about the *ways* that people move – it is a way of framing the Nigerien *state* itself that marks it out as a recipient of specific migration control practices.

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## The transit state narrative and intervention

The term 'transit' figures heavily in EU understandings of migration, to categorise states said to fall between those of 'origin' and 'destination'. A quick look at recent policy documents such as the EU's Sahel Regional Action Plan [describes](#) Niger as a Niger as "an important hub and transit country for migratory movements through the Sahel". A report on the EU's Migration Partnership Framework [lauds](#) Niger's "efforts to address irregular transit and smuggling of migrants". The EU tends to link the transit country label to irregular passage and the illicit economies that can go with it. This is not only a European labelling process, and Niger's president Mahamadou Issoufou has [called it](#) "essentially a transit country" while lauding plans to "combat illegal immigrants". These local perceptions are in part aimed to position Niger as a reliable partner to the EU and dissociate it 'origin' countries.

These views are rooted in the facts on the ground. Niger's geographical position on the northwards route to post-Gadhafi Libya makes it a seemingly obvious point of passage for migrants. With the relative success of Spanish attempts to shut off migration off the western coast of Africa (accessing Spain via the Canary Islands, notably) it is no surprise that longstanding land routes and smuggling networks would kick into action to bring larger numbers towards Libya's more open borders. While figures are always tentative, the IOM [estimated](#) an 'outflow' of about 70,000 people from Niger in 2017. Yet policymakers' visions of Niger as a transit state play a crucial role in shaping what types of international intervention become thinkable and doable.

First, this understanding enables policy responses that understand transit migration as a broader question of protecting borders against highly mobile forms of transnational crime. This rests, in part, on a preoccupation with 'illicit

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flows' into which irregular migration is blended due to the **criminalised nature** of the networks used by migrants. For example, the German development agency GIZ **says** "Niger has become a transit country for arms and drug smuggling, so border security plays an important role in ensuring internal stability and security". The EUCAP Sahel Niger capacity-building mission, composed of EU civilian staff training and equipping Nigerien law enforcement agencies labels its activities as simultaneously building capacity to fight irregular migration and associated infractions such as transnational organised crime. In response to mobile and interlinking threats, the form of policing itself must, we hear, become more flexible and mobile.

The International Organization for Migration, the largest migration-focused donor in Niger, is working on improving border posts but also on mobile units to enable the police to better sweep the desert, while EUCAP Sahel have developed a **mobile vehicle repair** kit to extend the 'autonomy' of police vehicles. Rapid action groups against transnational crime in the Sahel **are explicitly linked** to the 2015 Valletta summit in their conception documents. All of these interventions link migration to increasingly mobile policing and security interventions which are justified by the understanding of 'transit' which blends together people and goods on the move.

The second main way understandings of 'transit' shape security intervention in Niger is in the formation of new agencies such as the national anti-smuggling agency (or *Agence Nationale de Lutte contre la Traite des Personnes*, or ANLTP). While this agency builds directly on Niger's commitments to stopping human trafficking, it also operates in the blurry area opened up by the hazier meaning of the French word *trafics* which can refer to smuggling and trafficking at once. The agency's work is heavily shaped by the national effort against

irregular transit migration which is primarily a question of smuggling. The understanding of migration in Niger as being one of 'transit' specifically enables the growing mandate of the ANLTP, which is in turn supported by security-focused actors in the country such as the EUCAP Sahel mission and French bilateral security assistance. The anti-smuggling agenda in Niger is buttressed by a sense that if transit migration is primarily linked to the criminality of *traffics* then new judicial and technical agencies and instruments can facilitate its reduction.

## Conclusion

Thinking of Niger as a 'transit' state describes the reality of migrants' mobility through the country, but this way of thinking itself shapes security practices, which are fundamentally driven by the meaning that is attached to the supposed threat. The self-image as a state experiencing migration flows, rather than producing them, enables Niger to position itself as a recipient of security and technical assistance. This assistance emphasises mobile policing and the creation of new agencies echoing external agendas. There are question marks around the sustainability of the practices encouraged by this understanding of migration in Niger, insofar as they can promote a security-centred approach to long-standing mobility patterns.

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