

# **Your Border Is Not Mine:**

## **Smugglers, the Legitimation of Authoritarian States and Ecosystems of Discontent**

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## Abstract

*This is Your Border, Not Mine: Smugglers, State Legitimacy and Ecosystems of Discontent* argues that migrant smugglers fill the void left by fragile states, and in doing so, develop enough legitimacy to influence national politics and international relations between states. It draws on over 99 interviews with individuals engaged in migrant smuggling, as well as my own experiences and those of local researchers living and working across three smuggling hubs in Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger. The thesis makes an academic contribution by proposing the concept of “ecosystems of discontent.” This concept describes how quasi formal actors (in this case, migrant smugglers and those who engage with them) contribute to a process in which local community and market dynamics coalesce into stronger informal institutions, at the expense of state legitimacy. It also aims to deepen the policy debate around smuggling by highlighting the political role smugglers and their ecosystems can play both domestically – as governments in Niger and Afghanistan have taken specific actions to address discontent within the ecosystem – and internationally, as these same governments have used migration diplomacy measures to engage with the international system, sometimes at the expense of smuggling ecosystems.

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This thesis is first and foremost for my father. In death as in life, he inspired me and always pushed me to be better.

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I have been incredibly lucky both to have worked in migration over the last decade, and to have had the opportunity to reflect on my work, the dynamics within local communities, and the stories I have been privileged to hear. I hope my thesis at least starts to reflect the sheer wealth of stories and people I have met.

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## 1.0 Introduction

*People smuggling should be viewed as a global security threat similar to terrorism (Sir Keir Starmer, 4 November 2024, quoted in The Independent)*

*In my opinion, the work of a smuggler is noble [and] he's a blessing for the population ... [whereas] government authorities are corrupt to enrich themselves (interview with community member, Agadez, Niger, 10 March 2024)*

In his speech to Interpol in November 2024, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer painted a picture of people smugglers as criminal gangs operating against UK law, international guidelines and moral principles ( United Kingdom Home Office, 2024). Starmer's speech was direct – but it was also a continuation of long-standing policy among Western countries and institutions including the EU and Australia. His words brought to my mind not only a host of news articles that characterise smugglers as abusive, exploitative and threatening (Achilli 2018; Brachet 2018a), but also my own experience: when I lived in Afghanistan, my YouTube feed was filled with advertisements of heavily armed, camouflaged soldiers warning me not to migrate, telling me about the dangers of smugglers, and then showing me images of desperate men and women struggling hopelessly against the overwhelming tides of the Mediterranean.

None of these images – smugglers as terrorists, migrants as unidimensional victims without agency, borders as heavily fortified militarized zones – bore the slightest resemblance to my own experience of smuggling, which started by accident. I have worked in the humanitarian field for over 15 years. In 2011, I took up a management job in Somalia with a small NGO. Expatriate and national staff worked closely together, mainly because the organisation had an extremely limited budget. One day, Ayaan, a Somali colleague, rushed into our office in the middle of the afternoon, apologising profusely for returning late from

her lunch break. “You see, I had to go to the DHL office. They’re at the other end of town! And there was so much traffic.”

“Why did you have to go to the DHL office?”

“Well, I have a brother in the UK, and he looks very much like my brother here. My brother in the UK sent his passport over, so that my other brother can join him. And I had to pick up the passport from the DHL office.”

“Won’t the border guards notice that they are two different people?”

“Ah! White people! We all look the same to them. They don’t see what is in front of their noses!”

A few years later, I started designing and implementing programs to “address root causes of irregular migration”<sup>1</sup> and protect migrants from smugglers and facilitators. As a part of my work, I did some research into smuggling and facilitation. A facilitator is a person who assists in the illegal entry of a migrant into a state for financial or other material benefit (UN General Assembly 2000), and their activities could be considered a violation of international law. In short, people like Ayaan were now considered criminals.

This introduction to the international legal infrastructure around migrant smuggling was jarring – international law seemed to target not terrorists or abusers, but Ayaan, a moon-faced mother of three, playing on the presumed blindness of “white people” to give her brother a chance. As I started working on more migration-related projects, I visited transit points and smuggling hubs. These reminded me less of criminal camps and more of long-ago caravanserais. The city of Agadez, in Niger, has been considered a hub of smuggling masterminds – but it looked more like a dusty desert trading outpost out of the Arabian

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology is used across European donor to refer to programming intended to reduce outbound migration in countries of origins, it is rooted in academic research on why individuals migrate

Nights. I sipped tea on the pier in the town of Obock, and as I looked out at the water it occurred to me that the Obock was simply too sleepy to be a hotbed of criminal activity. In the town of Zaranj, at the border between Afghanistan and Iran, smugglers were more concerned with feeding their families and staying safe than trying to hatch terrorist plots. On a daily basis, the people I interacted with had more in common with fairy tales than Sir Keir Starmer's nightmarish vision of "global security threats".

The contrast between rhetoric about and my own experience of smuggling can be seen as a manifestation of the schism between, on one hand, structures and systems built by states to manage migration flows, and on the other hand, the innovation and initiative of individual migrants which can be described as resistance to the state. Within this context, smugglers are often described in academic and policy literature as playing a transactional role, providing a service that can act as a prerequisite or a support for movement. In practice, however, they may have a wider role: smugglers may play an active part in influencing mobility, the state and even the broader international system. This thesis aims to explore the mechanisms by which smugglers engage with their communities, informal institutions and the state – and thus influence the wider international landscape.

## **1.1 The Question**

I undertook this research with the intention of better understanding how smugglers interact with and influence states, and whether they act as a structuring influence in the relationship between migrants and states. I aimed to answer two questions: first, how do smugglers perceive the state system in which they operate, and what factors influence their perception? Second, how do smugglers and their communities interact with and influence the state system? At the core of my research is the idea of state legitimacy – whether smugglers see the state as legitimate and whether they affect state legitimacy.

My research question arises from my own experience working with irregular migration. As a humanitarian worker for several relatively small NGOs, I lived in Somalia, the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) and Afghanistan, and implemented EU and state funded projects that sat at the nexus between migration and development: they intended to address the root causes of irregular migration, protect the migrants themselves, and strengthen border forces. As I visited border areas, and developed stronger relationships with friends and colleagues, my perceptions of smugglers, their communities and EU policies shifted. The stark line the EU drew between regular and irregular migration, as well as between smugglers and law-abiding systems, became steadily less clear for me. For the last eight years, I have conducted research as a consultant for humanitarian agencies in the field of migration management, often drawing on my networks in border communities and countries of origin and transit. Working on this thesis permitted me to step back and attempt to view the migration landscape with more objectivity; it gave me the space to examine the literature on migration, not only in light of my own experiences, but also those of individuals in smuggling communities.

A wide set of literature argues that smugglers form an intrinsic and inextricable part of their local communities; that they are tied to their communities not only by financial transactions, but also by historical, cultural and normative bonds (Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Achilli 2018; Majidi 2018; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018; Zhang et al. 2018). Another strand of research suggests that community level informal institutions can contribute both positively and negatively to the state's capacity to govern in borderland and peripheral areas (Nugent 2002; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Meagher 2006; Gallien 2024). Studies have also been conducted on the games played by smugglers and states to extract different types of value from enforcement (Gallien and Weigand 2021; Gallien 2024). However, analysis of the ways in which smuggling groups influence national policy debates

and discussions, as well as migration governance, remains relatively limited (Achilli 2024). This thesis aims to support an improved understanding about smugglers' influence on states and governance structures.

I have drawn on a range of literature across anthropology, sociology, political science, criminology and economics to contextualise the relationship between smugglers and states. To better understand how current research can be applied to the specific context of smugglers, I have distilled the literature into three propositions. First, I propose that smugglers see states less through the lens of criminals, and more through the lens of citizens – they see states the way other citizens see states, with expectations about service delivery, security and common ideologies. As such, literature about the function of the state and state legitimacy is key to my thesis. Second, I propose that smugglers see and influence states not alone, but with and through local community structures and dynamics. Therefore, literature on informal institutions and their engagement with states helps me to better analyse my research questions. Third, I suggest that smugglers' influence over states is predicated on the degree to which states see smugglers and their ecosystems as a political constituency. In this context, migration diplomacy literature helps to provide insights into smuggler-state interactions. Each of these concepts sheds light on a specific aspect of the relationship between smugglers, their communities and states.

## **1.2 The Proposed Concept**

This thesis draws on an extensive set of interviews with smugglers across Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger, as well as literature on states, legitimacy and informal institutions to examine smugglers' perceptions of and influence on states. It proposes the concept of an "ecosystem of discontent" to examine the complex and non-linear relationships, alliances and networks through which smugglers and states interact and mutually influence each other, often mediated through informal community institutions.

The term “ecosystem” reflects the range of actors involved in smuggling transactions, and the interdependence of these actors. It was originally developed to describe ecological systems in which different components were interdependent and has been adapted to analyse complex systems, particularly in management and social science (Bogers et al. 2019). Within a smuggling ecosystem, different actors facing conflicting incentives choose to collaborate to facilitate irregular migration journeys; through repeated interactions they jointly create a system in which they create value on a repeated basis. In line with moral economy literature (Thompson 1971; Palomera and Vetta 2016), I propose that the ecosystem is built around a set of shared norms and values. Over time, and in a complex, non-linear fashion, these shared values have grown to encompass not only factors that relate directly to smuggling transactions, but also wider shared perceptions – including perceptions of state performance. The term “discontent” refers to feelings among those in the smuggling ecosystem that the state is not meeting key needs – specifically that the state is not providing adequate levels of services or security and is not adequately representing the interests of people within the ecosystem.

Individuals in the ecosystem demonstrate their discontent with the state through narratives and discussions, but also through their decisions to engage in activities that bypass and subvert the border – a structure that visibly represents the state – on a regular basis. Smugglers also fill gaps in service provision and security left by the state with the primary intention of strengthening their own legitimacy within their community, but in doing so they also strengthen their ability to influence the state as a whole. The degree to which smugglers influence states reflects, to a large extent, whether the state sees smuggling ecosystem as a political constituency. Where this recognition exists, then states make efforts to balance the interests of the ecosystem with those of the international state system, and their own domestic and foreign policy agendas.

In this thesis, I will describe the concept of ecosystems and shed light on why different actors would work together despite the presence of a range of conflicting incentives. The thesis will also help to understand how local level discontent can coalesce into concrete efforts by smugglers to fill gaps left by the state, and thus into legitimacy for smugglers within their own community. The concept provides a lens for understanding complex interactions between smugglers, their communities and states, and for analysing the factors that support or detract from cooperation between these groups. In understanding these reasons, it is also possible to better understand the conditions under which smugglers and states can reinforce each other's goals, and how interactions between smugglers and states can influence not only state-level policies, but also broader relations between states.

### **1.3 The Cases**

Proposing a conceptual framework that describes the relationship between smugglers, communities and states may appear ambitious. This is not only because the relationship between these actors is complicated, but also because engagements between smugglers, communities and states often take place under the radar, and vary dramatically across different locations. To propose the idea of the ecosystem of discontent, I draw on data I collected from three smuggling ecosystems – Agadez in Niger, Obock in Djibouti and Zaranj in Afghanistan. I ground my analysis in my own previous and current professional experience as a humanitarian worker and as a consultant for research in fragile contexts.

Agadez, a city in Niger, is positioned at a strategic point for trade in the Sahara Desert. Migrants have moved through Agadez on their way from West Africa to Libya and Europe for hundreds of years - but historically migrant smuggling formed only a small part of an extensive illicit economy which comprised light arms, narcotics, cigarettes and oil, among other goods (Tinti and Westcott 2016b). As border controls grew tighter, migrant smuggling represented a steadily growing share of the illicit market in West Africa, and between 2010

and 2015, migrant smuggling activities were a key part of the economy of Agadez (Tinti and Westcott 2016b; F Molenaar 2017). During this period, in 2014, I spent nine months working on border management projects in which humanitarian actors collaborated with governments to strengthen border infrastructure with the intention of protecting vulnerable migrants. This type of project ended up forming part of the backbone of EU externalisation efforts.

Following the migration “crisis” of 2015, the EU put in place explicit measures to limit the smuggling economy in Agadez; these included working with the Government of Niger to implement a set of strict anti-smuggling laws. In part to mitigate the risks of these laws, the EU expanded the implementation of development projects that were linked to migration goals – such as the projects I had developed and implemented in 2014. Between 2016 and 2023, the EU and the Government of Niger maintained cooperation on irregular migration issues, and externalisation policies were rolled out. In 2023, a coup took place. The new government explicitly turned away from the EU; one of its first actions was to repeal the EU sponsored anti-smuggling Law 2015/36 (Golovko and Willeme 2024) which served to build bridges with the Agadez community, and in particular those engaged with migrant smuggling.

Obock, located in Djibouti, East Africa, is situated on the Gulf of Tadjoura, an offshoot of the Gulf of Aden. It represents a relatively safe and easy crossing point between Djibouti and Bab el Mendebeh in Yemen. The smuggling economy in Obock serves a population of primarily Ethiopians, but also Somalis and Eritreans, moving towards the Gulf (International Organisation for Migration 2020). I started working in Djibouti in 2018; I conducted research and implemented projects for humanitarian agencies working on irregular migration, and listened to many colleagues explain the dynamics of smuggling in the region. Smuggling, they pointed out, has relatively shallow historical roots in Obock: the town does not have a history of smuggling goods, and migrant smuggling only became significant around 2006 (Tinti 2017; Lauret 2023). Djibouti has received some funds from EU sources to

manage migration, but in general attention from the EU has been relatively limited. In large part that is because migration flows through Obock move not toward Europe, but instead toward Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia (Tinti 2017; UNODC 2023). Migrants passing through Obock receive less attention from the international community – but the challenges facing them are just as dire as those moving toward Europe, with migrants suffering from thirst as they walk through deserts, and experiencing shipwrecks as they cross the Gulf to Yemen (Meraki Labs 2019; UNODC 2023). There are indications that Saudi Arabia, in line with its recent policies on nationalisation of the labour market, has rolled out some externalisation policies and programmes, but information about these is relatively limited (Cortes et al. 2020). My professional engagement with Djibouti has remained relatively consistent between 2018 and the present, and according to individuals in my network, smuggling dynamics in Djibouti have remained relatively constant. Neither the smuggling ecosystem nor the government of Djibouti has experienced major changes since I started engaging with the country – the state is not fragile, and it has made few efforts to disrupt the smuggling ecosystem which continues to grow and develop.

Zaranj, located in the province of Nimroz in south-west Afghanistan, is the third smuggling ecosystem I consider in this thesis. Zaranj hosts one of two formal border crossing points between Afghanistan and Iran: the Zaranj border crossing is known as the primary hub for smuggling people, whereas the Herat border crossing further north is known as the primary hub for smuggling drugs. (Mohammadi et al. 2019; Mansfield and Smith 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). Zaranj serves a population of Afghans from diverse ethnic groups including Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek who move from their country of origin toward Turkey, often with the intention of going on to Europe. I moved to Afghanistan to work for an international NGO in 2015. My colleagues told me many stories about the history of Zaranj: it has been a key crossing point for generations, and has served to support different types of

mobility, including pilgrimages to Shi'a religious sites and trade in goods and livestock (Monsutti 2005; Mohammadi et al. 2019). During the 2015 migration influx, the EU made significant efforts to implement externalisation policies in Afghanistan; I spoke directly with a range of actors about the policy shifts that took place to align Afghanistan's laws to EU standards, and designed projects to better understand migrant flows and risks in the years that followed. In particular, I piloted methods of accessing smugglers and collecting qualitative and mixed methods data on smuggling and with smugglers, together with a close colleague, Abdullah<sup>2</sup>. While Zaranj is a key crossing point, it is remote and often insecure; as a result, while EU externalisation efforts have affected laws and policies at the national level in Afghanistan, they have not resulted in concrete changes at the Zaranj border (Mansfield and Smith 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). Abdullah and I have engaged in regular conversations about smuggling dynamics and the Zaranj border over the course of the last decade.

These three contexts – Agadez, Obock and Zaranj – represent a basis for developing a conceptual framework about how smugglers, communities and states engage. The locations share several commonalities. All three towns serve as critical transit locations for migrants, and in all three locations, the economy is heavily dependent on smuggling. Smugglers are embedded, not only in local economies, but also in local communities in each of the three locations, and local community norms are formed around nomadic and pastoralist traditions. The interdependence between smugglers and local communities takes place at the periphery of the state; smuggling activities are carried out openly and the presence of state actors is relatively low. They are also marked by differences which support a nuanced analysis: two of the three locations (Niger and Afghanistan) experienced violent transitions of power during

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that while other interlocutors and interviewees have been given pseudonyms, Abdullah has not. Abdullah and I have jointly published articles, meaning that it is very easy to trace our relationship. I have requested permission from Abdullah to use his name.

the data collection period, whereas one (Djibouti) had a consistent state government. The EU made significant externalisation efforts in two countries (Niger and Afghanistan) but not in the third (Djibouti). The similarities and differences between the three case studies provided fertile ground for analysis and development of a theoretical framework.

#### **1.4 The Approach**

Researching migrant smuggling is challenging: it can be difficult to gain access to smugglers, and even if access is obtained, smugglers rarely have incentives to speak honestly about their work (Baird and Van Liempt 2016). I drew on my previous experience in all three countries to navigate this challenge, and coupled my pre-existing networks with a pragmatic approach that blended in-person data collection, remote data collection and engagements with key interlocutors, that is, individuals who collected data on my behalf and supported a more nuanced understanding of the context. People's willingness to support my research rested in our former work relationships and the trust I had built with them. It was reinforced by the fact that I am not white; it was therefore perceived that I had a natural affinity with local communities. I also made heavy use of triangulation, not only between the three cases I selected, but also with academic and grey literature.

Practically, my research was conducted in line with two major approaches. First, I ground my methodology in an ethnographic sensibility to gain a more holistic understanding of the distribution and exercise of power, and to better explore the relationship between state structures and marginalised individuals (Schatz 2009; Fleetwood and Potter 2017). While I was not able to directly engage in ethnographic research in all field sites, I worked with interlocutors who conducted interviews on my behalf and who engaged in extensive discussions with me so that I could better contextualise the data. Second, I used an exploratory case study approach which emphasised flexibility and adaptivity; this allowed me to revise questions and analytical frameworks to ensure relevance to my field sites (

Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2018). The use of multiple case studies allowed me to try to identify aspects of the relationships between smugglers, communities and states that were common across different contexts (Small 2009).

As mentioned above, I collected data together with key interlocutors – individuals with strong existing networks in the smuggling community who not only conducted interviews on my behalf, but also engaged with me in repeated dialogue about the ecosystem. This collaborative approach supported extensive collection of quality data with smugglers. When interlocutors from the local community spoke to smugglers and others in the ecosystem, they received more reliable and honest answers than I could have, due to their familiarity with the individuals and the context. Collaboration also supported nuance: regular engagements between myself and my interlocutors gave me glimpses into the complex dynamics between smugglers and their local communities, and this helped me to better contextualise the data. Using this approach, 99 interviews were conducted across all three case study locations with smugglers, local government actors and community members including business owners, traditional elders and migrants. The project underwent an ethics review, and data collection in Niger and Djibouti received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford. I complemented this data with secondary data that my interlocutor Abdullah and I collected in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2025, which received ethics approval from the international NGO I was working for as well as the relevant donor agencies.

## **1.5 Central Arguments**

At the end of a day in Obock, my interlocutor Mohamed took me to a dock that stretched out into the Gulf of Tadjourah. A lady came and served each of us a cup of sickly sweet tea. We stretched our legs and looked out to the point where the sea met the sky. After a few minutes, a bearded man drew up a chair. He said hello, we exchanged some polite

phrases, and then he and Mohamed started talking in Afar. Their conversation grew more and more heated until finally, the bearded man scoffed, clapped Mohamed on the shoulder and walked away. “What were you talking about?” I asked. “Oh, the government. Not that it makes any difference. We can’t really change anything anyways.”

This thesis argues that, even though many actors in the smuggling ecosystem may not feel that they can affect state laws and decisions, their actions can substantively influence state priorities, and that some states will make specific targeted efforts to maintain positive relationships with smugglers and people in the smuggling ecosystem. This argument is made in three steps. First, in Chapter 5, I argue that in my three field sites, migrant smuggling has developed into an ecosystem, in which actors with often competing incentives nonetheless collaborate to protect shared financial value: a shared set of social norms and expectations underpins this organic growth. Second, in Chapters 6 and 7, I argue that one of the shared social norms in the smuggling ecosystems I considered is discontent with the state. State shortfalls with regard to key social expectations – service delivery, security and representation of community norms – have left space for smugglers to consolidate their own relationships with communities and informal institutions. By filling the gap left by states, smugglers gain legitimacy within their communities. Third, in Chapter 8, I argue that states which recognise smuggling ecosystems as political constituencies take measures to balance the needs of this constituency against demands from the international community and other state priorities – that is, I argue that smugglers can and have influenced state actions and structures.

My first claim is that smugglers develop an ecosystem in communities such as Obock, Zaranj and Agadez. Different actors with potentially competing interests engage to maximise financial value, and through repeated engagements, a set of mechanisms emerges to protect this value over time; these mechanisms range from pricing schemes to risk mitigation

mechanisms. Actors with competing incentives thus collaborate to protect financial value, and these collaborations grow organically to respond to changes in the external environment. In line with moral economy literature, this collaboration is built around a shared set of social norms and values. The shared values are significant enough that they absorb external influences: for example, when aid actors intervene with the broad intention of reducing irregular migration, activities and investments are reinterpreted within the framework of social norms prevalent in the smuggling ecosystem. As the ecosystem develops and intensifies, actors within it grow more strongly interdependent.

The conceptualisation of smuggling as an ecosystem has two major implications. The first is that those within the ecosystem – not only smugglers but also community members, business people and local leaders – will collaborate and co-evolve to preserve smuggling activities and to maximise value (Bogers et al. 2019). Because smuggling benefits many people within the community, even those not directly involved with smuggling activities will be reluctant to disrupt activities. The second is that collaboration may extend beyond direct smuggling activities. The smuggling ecosystem engages with traditional justice systems and local government officials, and smugglers make sometimes costly investments (for example construction of a school or payment of a tax) to maintain their relationships with these local informal institutions. Conceptualising smuggling as an ecosystem therefore suggests that smuggler activities and investments should be seen as optimising value across a complex set of interdependent actors with differing incentives and strong self-protection incentives.

My second argument is that one of the shared norms within smuggling ecosystems in Obock, Agadez and Zaranj is discontent with the state, and that actors in these ecosystems coalesce around this discontent. Different types of actors within the smuggling ecosystem – smugglers, businesspeople, traditional elders and even migrants – express discontent with the state around many issues. Three common sources of discontent are lack of service provision,

especially for basic services such as health, education and water; lack of adequate security; and lack of representation – that is, there is a feeling that the state does not represent the priorities, values and norms of those in the smuggling ecosystem. This discontent is deeply rooted – but most importantly, it is not simply verbal. My data shows that there are contexts where, when the state leaves a gap, smugglers and informal institutions step in. In Obock, smugglers have invested in building hospitals and schools for the local community, and in Agadez smugglers have chosen to pay taxes to local authorities; they have also entered into complex alliances with other informal actors to ensure safe passage of migrants. Smugglers make costly investments to fill the gap left by states – but they do not necessarily do so out of altruistic motives. Smuggling activities can disrupt local community dynamics, and when smugglers fill the gap left by states, they also build their own legitimacy and mitigate future risks to their business.

The level of discontent with the state, and with the Western-oriented state system, as well as the measures that smugglers have developed to heighten their own legitimacy, have implications for academic conceptualisations of national and international political systems as well as migration governance. My data speaks to the ways in which dissatisfaction can move from a vague and abstract notion discussed at the community level to concrete decreases in state legitimacy and actions on the part of local and informal governance mechanisms. They also demonstrate how competition within smuggling ecosystems at my field sites – notably, how friction between smugglers and traditional elders – can lead smugglers to invest in measures that support the public good and simultaneously build their own legitimacy. The ways in which smugglers and informal institutions interact, and the ways in which smugglers build alliances within and across communities to overcome practical challenges, can contribute to literature on informal institutions by explaining the ways in which these institutions can adapt to new actors and dynamics.

The third and final argument of this thesis is associated with how smugglers influence states. In two of my field sites – Afghanistan and Niger – violent transitions of power took place between pro-Western governments and governments which are at odds with the international system. The pre-transition governments in both Afghanistan and Niger made few, if any, efforts to engage with smuggling ecosystems. In Niger, the pre-transition government passed a set of severe anti-smuggling laws sponsored by the EU; in Afghanistan, the Ashraf Ghani government had very limited engagement with border areas and appeared to fully support externalisation measures. In contrast, the post-transition governments reached out to the smuggling ecosystems using different techniques. The Taliban in Afghanistan provided services and security in peripheral locations; the post-coup Tchiani government in Niger addressed concerns within the smuggling ecosystem about excessive foreign control of uranium mining and made efforts to align its rhetoric with domestic priorities. Both of these governments are engaged in complex international negotiations: the Taliban, for instance, has a clear objective of gaining international legitimacy, and is willing to impose restrictions on smugglers and to limit the smuggling ecosystem to achieve its goals. To manage such potentially conflicting priorities, both the Taliban and the Tchiani government have developed policy grey zones. The emergence of these grey zones indicates that in both states, smuggling ecosystems have had an influence on national policy and priorities. Smugglers and their communities, in short, have become political actors with national and potentially international influence.

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature associated with states, migrants and smugglers, and further develops the concept of the ecosystem of discontent. Chapter 3 describes the three case studies I have adopted: Obock in Djibouti, Agadez in Niger and Zaranj in Afghanistan. In Chapter 4 I outline my methodological

approach and choices. Chapter 5 makes the argument that smugglers have formed an ecosystem that is self-protecting. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the relationship between the smuggling ecosystem and the state; Chapter 6 focuses on the ways in which smugglers perceive the state and its legitimacy, and Chapter 7 analyses the measures that smugglers take to build legitimacy within their own community, often at the expense of the state. Chapter 8 examines the relationship between smugglers and states, and considers the types of relationships that develop when states consider smuggling ecosystems as political ecosystems. It examines the trade-offs states face between domestic legitimacy and international negotiations; then it considers and the ways in which states develop and maintain a policy grey area to balance the needs of the smuggling ecosystem with those of international actors while furthering their own interests.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

*Mohamed was not imposing. He was short and skinny and all his clothes seemed to hang off his bony frame. But he swaggered through the gates of the local government offices in Obock, nodded cockily to the guard at the front and waved me in too, without asking the guard's permission. We walked into a tiled office with fluorescent lights, and Mohamed turned on the air conditioning with a wave of his hand that reminded me of a magician brandishing a wand. "OK, we are going to meet our first smuggler here!" Mohamed announced with pride. "But ... we're in a government office. Shouldn't we meet him somewhere else? Somewhere safer?" I asked. "Where is safer than here?" Indeed, I couldn't think of anywhere better protected. "But won't they get into trouble with the authorities?" Mohamed didn't bother to respond to me and instead just rolled his eyes. Half an hour later, a smuggler arrived at the government offices. He was clearly taking advantage of the air conditioning and luxuriating in the cool breeze while talking to us. There was not a single sign of discomfort on his face or in his attitude. The reason for his freedom became obvious during the interview, when he said, "Frankly, I've never seen or heard of a society so powerful as the Obockois. They wrest their rights and they demand them loud and clear; they contradict the state and that's why today the city doesn't recognize many investments from the state. And if the state tries to impose itself or cause problems, well, the interests of the Obock region come first."*

Mohamed, the smuggler and I were locked in a curious situation in which the smuggling community in Obock seemed to have appropriated local state structures and co-opted state legitimacy. After my fieldwork was complete, I reviewed interview transcripts, not only from Obock, but also from Agadez and Zaranj. As I did so, the memory of this incident – the smuggler leaning back on the chair and putting his feet up on a government

official's desk, while claiming that the smugglers had the actual power – kept coming back to me. I started to wonder about whether smugglers influenced the state, not only in local backwater offices, but also in national capitals, or during times of transition. This situation – and others like it that arose during my fieldwork and during my experience with the humanitarian sector – gave rise to my research questions: how do smugglers perceive the state system in which they operate, and what factors influence their perception? And how do smugglers and their ecosystems interact with and influence the state system?

My research questions arose not only out of experiences in fieldwork, but also out of a review of literature on irregular migration flows and migration governance. As media and political interest around irregular migration has grown, academics have devoted steadily more resources to conceptualising and theorising both migration flows and policy responses to irregular migration. These two bodies of literature can be described as sitting at opposite ends of a spectrum: literature on irregular migration, notably literature on the autonomy of migration and migration as resistance conceptualises migrants as engaging in individual expressions of agency (De Genova 2020, 2023; Tazzioli 2020, 2015, 2022). Migrant journeys involve subverting the bureaucracy, co-opting bureaucratic procedures, and changing the timing and modalities of their journeys to assure success and developing protection mechanisms along the route (Scheele 2012; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Trimikliniotis et al. 2016; Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Tazzioli 2020; De Genova 2023). These varied approaches and strategies are fluid, unpredictable and “incurable” (De Genova 2020 pp. 162).

State responses to migration, on the other hand, can be considered heavily bureaucratic. Migration governance literature arises from an institutionalist tradition which assumes, to a large degree, that governance occurs primarily through laws, treaties, policies and procedures at the national level (Geddes 2021; Scholte 2021; Koinova 2025). These formal mechanisms are supplemented by efforts to collaborate with other actors at the

international level, leading to a complex set of arrangements in which state actors aim to build a transnational governance system understood as a constellation of policies practices and discourses that steer international mobility (Geddes and Scholten 2015; Achilli 2024). Efforts on the part of international actors to manage irregular migration have taken place through a series of top-down efforts that have met with varying success (Scholte 2021; Koinova 2025).

Scholarship about migration governance has shifted over time to account for the changing and increasingly complex nature of efforts to limit irregular migration. “Bottom up” scholarship has focused on the ways in which migrants themselves, frontline bureaucrats including border guards and non-government actors feed into governance systems, and researchers have also analysed the role of non-state actors such as travel agencies and notaries in migration governance (Hernandez Leon 2005; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Koinova 2025). Specific concepts, including the idea of a migration infrastructure and a migration business have developed to better describe the interactions between different actors engaged in aspects of both enforcing migration rules and supporting migrants in bypassing these rules (Hernandez Leon 2005; Andersson 2014; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). The role of informality has become an increasing focus in migration governance, where informality refers to “rules, norms and institutional structures and procedures that are not enshrined in formally constituted organisations” (Westerwinter et al. 2021 pp.2). Such informality can take place through transgovernmental initiatives, networks that bring together states, communities and non-state actors, and specific decisions on how policies are implemented by, for instance, street-level bureaucrats. Informality has been described by Maria Koinova (2025 pp. 424) as “a structuring force in global governance” that effectively supports rigid institutions in meeting the fluid challenge of irregular migration.

While a substantial amount of literature has been produced on the ways in which migration governance has shifted, and on the role of informality in this shift, less attention has been given to the other side: irregular migration journeys may be diverse and multifaceted, as described by the autonomy of migration literature (Tazzioli 2015; De Genova 2020), but they also move along relatively consistent paths, using a relatively consistent informal infrastructure. Migrants engage heavily with smugglers and facilitators, particularly in situations where greater border restrictions are in place. Data from the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi (no date) finds that 62% of those interviewed used a smuggler for at least some sections of the journey.<sup>3</sup> The Mexican Migration Project has collected longitudinal data on irregular migrants crossing the US-Mexico border, and a UNODC analysis of this data found that the proportion of migrants using smugglers increased from 73% in 1985 to 96% in 2005; smugglers were used in order to navigate the increasing complexity of the border (Kyle and Koslowski 2011 pp. 7). The structures which facilitate migration, ranging from smugglers to semi-formal recruitment agents to bureaucratic support, have received some attention from migration industry and migration systems literature, though the role of smugglers specifically has been harder to pinpoint (Hernandez Leon 2005; Andersson 2014; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Massey et al. 2016; Achilli 2024).

Despite the widespread use of smugglers to facilitate irregular migration, there is a “significant gap in systematic empirical research and theoretical understanding of the role of [smuggling] groups in shaping ‘transnational migration governance’” (Achilli 2024 pp. 5046) and, indeed, in national and transnational governance more broadly. This thesis aims to address this gap, with a particular focus on how smugglers see and influence the states that develop and implement migration governance policies and procedures. To do so, I draw on a

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<sup>3</sup> Add a footnote about this covering all routes, as per later

wide set of literature, with a focus on political science, international relations and anthropology. In this chapter, I outline the key concepts which shape my argument. I frame these concepts within the context of smugglers and their communities in order to support a more nuanced understanding of my research question. Specifically, I put forward three propositions that serve as a basis to examine the relationship between the existing literature and my research question. Following a discussion of these propositions, I propose the concept of an ecosystem of discontent.

## **2.2 Smugglers, States and Citizenship**

My first proposition is that smugglers perceive states primarily through the lens of citizens, rather than criminals or illegal actors. In order to explore this proposition, it is necessary first to explore the concept of the state, and then to discuss what constitutes state legitimacy. I also ask whether and to what degree smugglers see themselves as citizens with legitimate expectations of the state.

The definition of the term “state” has been contested, in large part because states serve both political and social roles. When states pass laws, engage with other states and take actions to protect or preserve the public interest, they do so as independent political entities which are seen as largely unified. Many political science and international relations conceptualisations of the state aimed to understand it as an independent entity: for example, for Weber (1919) and for structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz (2007) and John Mearsheimer (2014b), the state is a unified entity responsible for taking rational and strategic political decisions that serve its own interests. The relationship between the state and citizens, or the state and dissenting actors, is generally not fully addressed through these theories. When states implement laws and engage in processes such as elections, they engage in a social role in which they bring together (with varying degrees of success) intra-state actors who may not necessarily be either unified or cohesive. Several academics have developed

conceptualisations of the state as a fragmented entity (Poulantzas and Poulantzas 1973; Jessop 2013; Matthews 2013). Michel Foucault (1985) argued that different types of power are held by varying stakeholders, and the state reflects a codification of relations between these actors. In that respect, the state is a product of different practices implemented by actors with potentially misaligned incentives. Several theories have developed that bring together these two conceptualisations.

This thesis will adopt Philip Abrams' (1988) concept of a division between the state-idea and the state system, in order to acknowledge the varied roles of the state. Abrams conceives of the state as consisting of two parts: a state-idea arising from a common ideal or vision that is "projected, purveyed and variously believed" and a state-system consisting of a "palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure" (Abrams 1988 pp. 58). The dichotomy between the state-idea and the state-system can be used to analyse perceptions of state legitimacy, or the degree to which the state-projected vision has been accepted, and how these perceptions relate to state-systems, or the ways in which people interact with state processes and representatives on a day-to-day basis.

Conceptualisations of legitimacy, like those of the state, vary; they comprise aspects ranging from acceptance of laws to fair and transparent procedures to belief in obeying authorities (Ly 2025). This thesis adopts the following definition of legitimacy, drawing on Gilley (2006 pp. 500): "a legitimate state is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power". This definition incorporates both the state as a normative set of ideologies and an empirical set of processes and institutions; it also broadly encompasses the varying types of legitimacy discussed in the migration literature ( Gilley 2006; Ly 2025). "Rightful" is, in turn, defined as being in accordance with accepted standards of moral or legal behaviour and/or justice (Beetham 2002; Gilley 2006). State legitimacy should be understood both as resting on a spectrum and as dynamic (Suddaby et al. 2017; Siraz et al.

2023). Ly ( 2025) conceives of legitimacy as consisting of an object (i.e., the state and its institutions), the audience evaluating legitimacy (i.e., primarily citizens including those who participate in smuggling ecosystems and migrants), and the relationship and repeated interactions that take place between different actors taking part in this dynamic. Legitimacy arises from the continued repeated interactions between different actors, including those attempting to define a vision for the state, those rolling out state processes, citizens, businesspeople, migrants and others. Because relationships between these actors are fluid, state legitimacy is dynamic – it can change over time ( Gilley 2006; Dolan et al. 2024; Minatti 2024). The ways in which different actors within a state – including informal institutions and citizens in relatively marginal border areas – interact with and perceive state systems can thus shape the overall degree to which a state is considered legitimate (Scott 1989; Beetham 2002; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Gilley 2006).

Legitimacy can also be conferred at different levels. Abrams' distinction between the state-idea and the state-system indicates that the legitimacy of a national authority might differ from that of a regional or municipal authority; each level relies to varying levels on the state-idea and on the state system. For the purposes of this thesis, perceptions of legitimacy may attach to at least three levels: first, the state as such — the state-idea, including the rightfulness of its borders and of its existence in its current, post-colonial form; second, the national government or regime of the day (the Ghani government or the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Bazoum or Tchiani governments in Niger, the Guelleh government in Djibouti); and third, the local agents of the state-system with whom residents of peripheral communities interact on a daily basis — local officials, police and border guards, whose behaviour is shaped by the discretion inherent in street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010). These levels are related but can move independently of one another: a citizen may accommodate, or even co-opt, local officials while despising the incumbent government, or

may transfer allegiance to a new regime while continuing to reject the borders through which the state-idea is materialised (Levi et al. 2009; McLoughlin 2015).

A legitimate state, at any level, thus theoretically consists of both an ideal and a set of practices which are embraced by citizens and considered rightful. But who exactly are the citizens in this discussion, and are smugglers among those who determine whether a state is legitimate? Academic discussions about state-ideas, state-systems and sources of legitimacy take place with an unspoken assumption that the citizens who are assessing the state are, for the most part, law-abiding. When examining how smugglers see the state, it is important to account not only for different conceptualisations of state legitimacy, but also varying incentives on the part of those judging the state. Smugglers are citizens of their states, but they are also engaged in illicit activity for which they can be punished; are their opinions of the state driven by their role as citizens, or by their desire to evade penalties?

The criminalisation of migration started with shifts and changes to national laws; this was followed by efforts at regional level to reduce migrant smuggling. At the international level, the criminalisation of smuggling occurred relatively recently: states came to a definition of smugglers in 2000, when the United Nations included a definition of smuggling in the Protocol Against Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Air and Sea (2000); this was a part of the Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime. The Protocol against Smuggling defines migrant smuggling as “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into the State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (UN General Assembly 2000). Not only is the criminalisation of smuggling recent; the specific activities that can be seen as constituting crimes remain somewhat vague. The international framework suggests that smuggling is simple: if a migrant pays an individual to transport him or her across a border in a way that evades border controls, then the individual who accepts the money is a smuggler.

In reality, however, the definition of smuggling is much more complex. Legal scholars have pointed out challenges associated with delineating procurement and facilitation (Gallagher 2001; Aljehani 2015). The definition included in the protocol includes no useful distinction between the organiser of an irregular migration journey, the driver who follows the instructions of the organiser and the worker who fills the petrol tank of the car; all three actors receive a financial benefit from procuring illegal entry of a person into a state, and thus could be subject to prosecution under the Protocol. For example, is a bus driver who transports a migrant without knowing his or her intentions, but receiving a fee, a smuggler? Similarly, is a gas station employee who refuels a car driving a migrant over a border a smuggler? In short, the specific activities that are associated with breaking laws remain unclear, even after international efforts to clarify the crime of migrant smuggling.

As international frameworks around migrant smuggling are rolled out, significant confusion still remains at the national level about what precisely is illegal and how laws should be enforced. This has led to a range of scholarship on the ways in which European externalisation laws have manufactured smugglers – that is, illegalised activity that has historically not been a state focus, while being relatively well accepted at the community level (Brachet 2018a; Augustova et al. 2023). If externalisation laws are manufacturing smugglers, they are doing so using the raw material of citizens – that is, individuals who have clear views and expectations of the state. Anthropological descriptions of smuggling businesses across different locations, including Agadez and Zaranj, generally depict individuals as engaging in smuggling, not as a major criminal enterprise, but rather as an addition to daily life: as a way to make ends meet financially, or to continue pre-existing traditions (Mohammadi et al. 2019; Richter 2019b). Smugglers are therefore likely to view the state not primarily as criminals, but instead as citizens – as individuals who expect to receive some

benefit, whether security, services, economic resources or cultural strengthening – as a result of their engagement with the state idea and/or the state system.

For the purposes of this thesis, a legitimate state is thus a state that purveys an idea and deploys a set of processes that are considered rightful and justifiable by citizens, who are a set of people which include smugglers. But what does look like in Obock? If Mohamed and I interviewed a smuggler in a government office, and the government had passed laws stating that smuggling was illegal, was the government illegitimate? And what factors had rendered the government illegitimate? Chapter 6 of this thesis will examine the specific factors and complaints underlying Mohamed's perceptions of state legitimacy – but broadly speaking, his perceptions, and those of other smugglers, seemed to correspond with three broad sets of argument that are prevalent within international relations, political science and anthropology about the function of a state and the ways in which the state idea and state system can achieve legitimacy. These are: (1) the state as a monopolist over the use of force, (2) the state as an optimiser of economic resources, and (3) the state as an expression of historical, cultural and social bonds between individuals and communities.

Max Weber wrote that the state is “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber 1919 pp. 78). In developing this definition, he inspired generation of political science and international relations theorists such as Hans Morgenthau (2006) and Kenneth Waltz (2007) to place a strong emphasis on territoriality. The state's primary incentive, according to realist theorists, is to maintain its monopoly on force and limit the security threats facing both itself and its population (Runciman 1978; Morgenthau et al. 2006; Mearsheimer 2014b; Walzer 2015). For those who believe that a state's legitimacy is rooted in its monopoly on force, the idea of sovereignty – or a state's right to govern itself within its territory – is paramount. However, state sovereignty is increasingly under threat from a variety of factors, ranging from

transnational political agreements that can erode sovereignty (e.g., regional defence arrangements) to the power and influence of global financial markets (Keohane and Nye 1977; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2012). Globalisation has also made it more challenging for states to manage security outcomes (Sassen 1996; Bigo 2002; Urry 2012; Wendy Brown 2017). A state that can assure the security of its citizens is thus likely to need not only a monopoly on the use of force within its borders, but also the ability to manage the diverse ways in which these borders are challenged – that is, when sovereignty is contested. states have an incentive to double down, and to engage in measures to demonstrate sovereignty and consolidate legitimacy (Bigo 2002; Wendy Brown 2017). These efforts to demonstrate that sovereignty may be performative – for example, building border walls whose effectiveness at deterring migration is unclear (Wendy Brown 2017) – but they serve to demonstrate that states are making efforts to maintain security within and through borders. For those living within Agadez, Obock and Zaranj, securing the border is less likely to be associated with legitimacy, as all three towns are located on borders which have historically been porous (Molenaar, et al. 2019; Abeshu 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). However, assuring protection and security against armed groups and different sources of violence within the state is still likely to be a critical part of state legitimacy, given the relatively high levels of insecurity within these areas (Bazie and Diallo 2025; Bereketiab 2020).

A second major function of the state, and source of legitimacy for the state, is as an optimiser of economic resources. In this framework, the state is a predominantly economic actor whose primary aim is to support improved production and allocation of resources. While economic conceptualisations of the state generally hold that the state has a role in regulating the economy, the precise way in which the state engages with markets can differ strongly. Public goods theorists argue that the role of the state is to coordinate to prevent or mitigate the risk of market failure (Mueller 2010; Coase 2013); institutional economists

frame the state as an enforcing agent for good behaviour and a driver of growth (North 1990; Williamson 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson 2013); and Marxists point out that the state is a tool for extracting resources and reinforcing existing power structures (Amenta et al. 2012). In a framework where the state derives legitimacy from its ability to regulate economic activity and allocate resources, globalisation has strong effects on state legitimacy. Several of the challenges facing economic productivity transcend borders (Sassen 1996; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2012). Simultaneously, global economic forces have generated increased inequality, consolidating and amplifying the wealth of the top 1% (OECD 2003; Milanović 2012). If smugglers perceive that the role of the state is to optimise economic resources, this is likely to mean that they are looking for economic growth, employment options for youth and availability of public services; some research conducted by international organisations and think tanks indicates that these expectations are prevalent in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj (Fransje Molenaar et al. 2017; Fransje Molenaar 2018; Asia Foundation 2012, 2019; République de Djibouti 2021).

A third conceptualisation of the state involves the idea that it is a “representation of the natural connections of communities through a homogenous deep historical time that is entangled in the metaphors of biological life and kinship” (Bear 2014). In this conceptualisation, states gain legitimacy through the development or reinforcement of shared norms within their populations. Institutions of the state mediate divergent representations and norms over time; that is, they engage with different groups, interests and perspectives to form and consolidate common ground (Mitchell 1991; Bear 2014; Das and Poole 2009; Crampton 2021). In order for the state to fulfil its functions, it must have a governance role over a long enough period to allow it to broker consensus between different interests, and formal and informal institutions must be present (Bear 2014; Bianchi et al. 2021). The concept that state legitimacy derives from social and historical bonds inherently incorporates the idea that laws

and policies will be rolled out unevenly, as a function of the strength of bonds present within a specific community (Dolan et al. 2024). This framework is built on the idea of complexity: states may set laws and policies to reflect an ideal, or a perfect norm, but in practice, the interpretation of these laws and policies depends not only on processes and systems, but also on the specific communities in which implementation takes place, and the individuals responsible for implementation (Teisman and Klijn 2008; Lipsky 2010; Cairney 2012). As such, the concepts of street level bureaucracy and borderland economies – which present a challenge to state legitimacy when conceived in terms of force or economic regulation – are encompassed within the concept of a state as an evolving set of cultural bonds.

This thesis thus defines a state as having both a political role of developing and disseminating a “state idea” and a social, process-oriented role of bringing different actors together and fulfilling various functions through a “state system”. It posits that legitimacy, or the perception that a state exercises its power rightfully, is a fluid concept that arises from interactions between different actors, ranging from state leaders to elders in informal systems. The thesis focuses on interactions between actors in marginal and peripheral locations in which smuggling takes place to draw out factors that affect states’ perceived and actual legitimacy. It focuses on three primary sources of legitimacy: the monopoly over the use of force, the capacity to optimise resources and provide or govern the provision of public goods, and the set of common historical and cultural bonds that contribute to social linkages and ties. It assumes that smugglers and those within smuggling communities see themselves as citizens, and thus have clear ideas about the legitimacy of both the state idea and the state system.

### **2.3 Smugglers, Communities and Informal Institutions**

My second proposition is that smugglers engage with states not only directly, but also through a web of community networks, and more particularly through a set of informal

institutions. This engagement is underpinned by a shared set of norms and values, described through literature on the moral economy.

Anthropological literature aims to draw a picture of smugglers – their relationships with migrants, with their own communities, with their history and with the legal structure that surrounds them. Research into the relationship between smugglers and their communities arose in response to the concentration of scholarship produced on smuggling from a security viewpoint, and aimed to examine smuggling in the context of indigenous narratives at home, as well as communities formed while on the move (Majidi 2018). One of the key takeaways from this area research was that trust between smugglers and migrants is often high, and that it is frequently cemented by kinship and a web of social norms (Koser 1997; Spener 2004; 2010). Stone-Cadena and Alvarez Velasco (2018), for instance, described the ways in which migrant smugglers in Ecuador (called coyotes) respond to a social and cultural migration demand for movement. They operate within the same structural constraints as migrants and adhere to specific communal norms and principles. Many researchers have discussed the ways in which migrant smuggling constitutes a form of knowledge about safe passages, risks and mitigation measures. Communities are created along the route and smugglers and migrants interact and align to form community protection mechanisms ( Achilli 2018; Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Zhang et al. 2018). Nassim Majidi, in her discussion of the community dimensions of smuggling in Somalia and Afghanistan, made efforts to situate smugglers' communities within a broader context: she explicitly discussed the role of family, service providers, public and private structures, and political and social context in the home country when analysing smuggling. Majidi found that local-level ties played a dominant role in the migrant-smuggler relationship (Majidi 2018). Judith Scheele (2012) conducted a comprehensive study that placed smuggling and smuggling communities in the Sahara within geographic and historic context. She paid attention to the historic roots of trans-Saharan

connectivity, ranging from the need for moneylenders to assure trade between oases to the changes caused by French rule to current government structures. Scheele (2012) also examined religious, moral and social factors that feed into smuggling economies, as did Julien Brachet in the case of Niger-Libya economic links (2007; Brachet and Scheele 2019). Anthropological literature on smuggling within communities is extraordinarily diverse, but it helps to identify some of the key social dynamics underpinning smuggling networks, notably the importance of community and kinship in migrant smuggling.

The heavy focus on community and kinship ties in anthropological literature points to an important characteristic of migrant smuggling operations. Smugglers provide services to migrants through a web of community networks (Achilli 2018; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018; Zhang et al. 2018). This is particularly the case for smugglers who support migrants by, for example, navigating through the migration infrastructure by completing paperwork or facilitating the provision of real or false documentation (Hernandez Leon 2005; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). In order to successfully facilitate migration journeys, either physical or through the migration infrastructure, smugglers require not only relationships with migrants, but also relationships among one another and with border authorities. The decentralised and community-oriented organisation of migrant smuggling can be seen in literature on the organisation of smuggling networks. Literature on this subject is relatively sparse, but it indicates that in several geographic areas,<sup>4</sup> smuggling is loosely organised and decentralised (United Nations 2018). Paolo Campana developed a network model of migrant smuggling, demonstrating a prevalence of “localised and rudimentary hierarchies” that are linked through relatively autonomous actors; this model broadly conforms to insights developed by international organisations such as UNODC (Campana 2018, 2020; United

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<sup>4</sup> *Exceptions include South-East Asia, where a more recruitment agency-oriented model is used, and China, where the hierarchical “snakehead” approach, in which migrant smuggling takes place through a multi-layered network that is carefully organised, is used.*

Nations 2018). There is also some research on the specific ways in which smugglers develop relationships with border guards and employ corruption and bribery as tools to support migrant journeys; academics have studied the ways in which this relationships develop, and policy actors have outlined the prevalence of corruption in migration journeys (United Nations 2018; Augustova and Suber 2023; Suber 2023; Mixed Migration Centre no date).

The decentralised organisation of migrant smuggling networks indicates that they rely heavily on pre-existing community governance structures. The relationship between smugglers and these types of structures has been delineated in several contexts. Paul Nugent's study of the Ghana-Togo borderlands, for instance stressed the role of chiefs, local traders and low-level bureaucrats in sustaining border economies and developing social norms and rules around these economies (Nugent 2002). Scheele (2012), similarly, suggested that smuggling economies in the Sahara take place within a local framework of rules and norms that are rooted in religion and kinship systems. Max Gallien (2024) also examined North African borderlands to better understand the informal institutions that regulated local trade: he found that these systems are highly structured, characterised by strong enforcement mechanisms and economically rational. Smugglers thus operate within a local system of rules and regulations; these rules and governance systems are clear for local community members even if they are disconnected from state actors (Campana and Varese 2018; Achilli 2024).

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) define informal institutions as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels.” Informal institutions can take many forms, from appointment of presidents by their predecessors, to informal local justice systems, to self-help groups (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Jutting et al. 2007). They function on the basis of trust, often underpinned by kinship networks and traditional codes of conduct (North 1990); actors in informal institutions engage according to a shared moral code (Thompson 1971; Palomera

and Vetta 2016). Informal institutions stand in contrast to formal institutions, which create, communicate and enforce their demands through official channels such as the court system and state-enforced rules (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). The existence of informal institutions has historically been considered a challenge to the state. In Somalia, for instance, the federal government has had challenges in establishing a monopoly over the use of force over several decades; one of the main challenges to the state is the presence of a strong network of informal institutions known as the clan system. The clan system effectively wields more influence and a greater capacity to deploy force, thus undermining state building efforts (Meraki Labs 2023; Beyene, no date). Similarly, a body of literature exists demonstrating how patronage systems and clientelism can erode state structures and confidence in the state (De Waal 2015; Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci 2017; Veenendaal and Corbett 2020; Moldogaziev et al. 2023).

Informal institutions operate outside the state, but they do not necessarily detract from state legitimacy. In fact, under certain conditions, they can enforce state legitimacy and reinforce the legitimacy of the border. Paul Nugent (2002) demonstrated the ways in which informal institutions and revenue from smuggling served to reinforce the border between Ghana and Togo. Smuggling arose from divergent taxation regimes between the English and the French in colonial times; local chiefs would broker smuggling operations, thus building networks, norms and rules. Following the independence of both countries, smuggling continued, as it offered resources and leverage for local leaders. The set of norms around smuggling, or the informal institutions that governed it, remained in place – participation in illicit trade was only legitimate under certain circumstances where it sustained livelihoods thus supporting citizens' access to economic well-being and meeting community need for economic resources to be optimised. Nugent's study was a starting point to understand the interactions between informal institutions and the state in border areas.

The conditions under which informal institutions can support the state were drawn out by Helmke and Levitsky (2004). Where formal institutions are effective and share compatible goals with informal institutions, the two can act in complementarity, whereas when formal institutions are ineffective and do not share goals with informal institutions, the two are likely to compete and to work in diametrically opposite ways. The dynamic nature of the relationship between formal and informal institutions has been considered specifically in the context of smuggling. Florian Weigand and Max Gallien (Gallien and Weigand 2021) drew out several patterns that play out repeatedly between smugglers and state representatives at borders, based on data from the Tunisia-Libya border and data from the Thailand-Myanmar border. Informal institutions and formal institutions merge most completely, they argue, when state officials derive financial benefits directly from the sale of illicit goods – that is, when officials are themselves a type of smuggler. They diverge most completely in situations of genuine enforcement, where the state and smugglers as well as their institutions have limited contact, and both sides have clear information about the negative consequences of smuggling.

In the context of smuggling, informal institutions form around financial transactions. When smugglers arrange irregular journeys, they are providing a service in return for a material benefit; others who participate in the process, such as those who provide smugglers and/or migrants with food, shelter and transport also engage in transactions that are primarily financial. Where financial markets develop, however, actors are likely to also share norms and values. The idea of a moral economy arose from historian E.P. Thompson's argument that economic activities are underpinned by a set of traditional moral rules that are shared by actors who are on opposite sides of a transaction. Specifically, actors within a moral economy are likely to share beliefs and norms about fairness, and are likely to believe that specific actors – elites, merchants and states – have a responsibility to protect the community, maintain norms and punish violations. It can thus be argued that the ways in which informal

institutions operate, and the standards they enforce, represent the norms that are shared by a broad set of actors within communities participating in smuggling markets.

## **2.4 Are Smugglers Political Constituencies?**

My third proposition is that state recognition of smugglers takes place on an instrumental basis: smugglers and their communities are effectively political bargaining chips for states. The degree of influence smugglers and their communities can exercise on political systems thus depends on their domestic and international political value; domestically, smugglers often bring relatively little perceived value, but they form an important part of international engagements. This proposition rests on literature about the centre and the periphery, as well as on literature about migration diplomacy. The literature suggests that smugglers form a part of a group that has been marginalised; in my field sites, they are marginalised in part because they are located in borderlands and at the periphery of states. The priorities of marginalised groups are not likely to be represented domestically, but as migration becomes a more pertinent global issue, smugglers are likely to become a significant part of the international relations strategies of states.

### *2.4.1 Smugglers at the Edge of Domestic Politics*

As a part of this thesis, I examine smuggling activities in Agadez, Niger; Obock, Djibouti and Zaranj, Afghanistan. Each of these towns is located at the edges of the state; they are far away from capital cities and have historically been alienated from state-building processes. The interactions between these towns which host smuggling activities and the state can be described through centre-periphery models. The centre-periphery model was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein to explain interactions between developed states with advanced industry, high wages and technological dominance, semi-peripheral areas with intermediate economic development, and peripheral areas characterised by resource extraction, weak governance and low wages. Stein Rokkan adopted a similar approach to

explain the relationships within a state. He argued that political power is consolidated at a central level, with a concentration of political elites and national institutions. Outside central locations, culturally distinct regions are likely to have relatively low levels of integration and economic alignment with the centre, though they may have vivid and independent economies and political dynamics that can influence dynamics in the centre (K. Meagher 2014; Nugent 2002; Spener 2010) .

This model describes all three of the smuggling communities I engaged with. All three towns that form case studies are located at a distance from the capital city and are culturally distinct from the capital. In addition, all three towns have relatively limited infrastructure, and economic growth remains limited. Rokkan's analysis of the centre-periphery model at the domestic level focused on European states; while the states I engaged with are not in Europe and have distinct governance structures, the ways in which colonial powers have engaged with local society could reinforce centre-periphery dynamics (Moctar 2024). Locations at the periphery are unlikely to have significant influence over domestic priorities or to shape policy and approaches, according to the centre-periphery model – lack of cultural integration and relatively limited economic power limits their ability to advocate effectively within the political system.

#### *2.4.2 Smugglers at the Centre of International Politics*

The peripheral locations of Agadez, Obock and Zaranj might have limited ability to negotiate for their priorities based on their own relationships with the centre – but as externalisation policies and practices have strengthened, it has become increasingly important for capital cities to engage with peripheral areas. The success of externalisation policies depends on policies and programs which are developed at the capital being effectively rolled out in peripheral border communities. As such, externalisation policies and organisations which promote them, ranging from the European Union to the International Organisation for

Migration, have effectively strengthened the political importance of periphery locations. To better understand this dynamic, it is helpful to examine the international policy environment around migration and smuggling, and how they translate into policy priorities at the national level in countries of origin and transit.

Alexander Wendt (2016) argued that states develop shared understanding with other states through a process of negotiation and engagement; these norms strengthen over time as states engage in repeated interactions. Since World War II, a range of international institutions have developed to support international cooperation: these institutions can be seen through the lens of realist actors, as a method of mitigating transnational threats, or as social actors, as a forum to develop norms between states with divergent incentives (Keohane 2005; Keohane and Nye 1977; Niezen and Sapignoli 2017). For example, organisations such as the International Labour Organisation can set norms with regard to treatment of migrant workers, whereas the OECD can encourage specific practices and conceptualisations of the economic benefits associated with migration, and the International Organisation for Migration can influence the ways in which border management measures are carried out. While these actors work in different spheres, each plays a role in setting and influencing norms between states (Ganguly 2010; Parks and Morgera 2015). There has been a push by both some of these institutions, as well as countries and/or regions with significant resources, to globalise migration management. This push consists of several elements, two of which are: (1) the development of an ever expanding set of policies and protocols to manage migration and outline expectations of migration management, and (2) the establishment and empowerment of institutions to support migration management (Lavenex and Piper 2022; Bradley et al. 2023).

The migration policy environment has become denser in recent years, as instruments such as the Global Compact for Migration have been negotiated and ratified, and migration

has been streamlined into the Sustainable Development Goals (Gisselquist and Tarp 2019; Kainz and Betts 2020). It is also, however, fragmented: while some states and institutions, primarily in the Global North, propose a migration management approach in which regional and informal approaches provide states with some flexibility to manage their migration goals, others push for an approach in which global norms and standards are developed (Lebon-McGregor 2020; Pécoud 2021). The EU provides an example of the complex and shifting policy landscape which aims to regulate migration: the Tampere Summit, held in 1999, marked a shift toward a more unified approach. It outlined four key pillars, including partnerships with countries of origin and migration management. To consolidate and build consensus around the Tampere Summit, other policy initiatives took place, including but not limited to the 2002 Seville summit and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The policies are supplemented by a range of bilateral engagements, including the EU-Turkey Migration Agreement of 2015/16 which affected migration from Afghanistan to the EU, the EU Sahel Strategy which integrated security, development and migration control and covered Niger and Mali, and the EU Trust Fund for Africa, which blended development and migration management programming across different areas of Africa including both the Sahel and the Horn, with specific large scale initiatives in Niger and small-scale initiatives in Djibouti (European Union, no date; Boersma et al. 2021; Will Brown 2024; Frowd 2018; Cova 2022). Navigating through these policy arrangements, and ensuring coherence, can be difficult in part because different states within the EU have conflicting incentives, and in part because the process of negotiating with “unstable and unreliable” (Tsourdi et al. 2024) third country partners can be complex (Tsourdi et al. 2024; European Parliament Briefing 2025).

States hosting smugglers, such as Niger, Djibouti and Afghanistan, face a complex international relations challenge associated with irregular migration. European states advocate for the enactment of externalisation policies to bolster their own borders and

strengthen their sovereignty – but in strengthening the sovereignty of destination countries, these policies effectively undermine the sovereignty of specific partner states. Border externalisation refers to policies in which states act outside their own national borders and enlist the support of third countries to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from reaching the borders of wealthier countries (Stock et al. 2019; Crisp 2020a; Nicolosi 2024).

Externalisation measures often involve one state co-opting the military force of another to restrict population flows: that is, one state might strengthen the border infrastructure of another state or support stronger border patrols. While border externalisation helps to preserve the sovereignty and sanctity of borders for wealthier nations by preventing people from moving through borders, it does so in a way which threatens the sovereignty of less powerful nations by influencing the ways in which they exercise force and form their priorities about borders (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 2016; Stock et al. 2019; Nicolosi 2024).

For example, EU investments in the Libyan coast guard were undertaken to reduce migration flows, but took place in a context where the Libyan government had insufficient legitimacy to guarantee its own monopoly on force (Crisp 2020b; Achtnich 2023; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025). Similarly, in Niger, the EU played a heavy role in developing and supporting anti-migration legislation, and its interference threatened the legitimacy of the Nigerien state.

When externalisation threatens sovereignty, it often takes place in ways that affect peripheral locations disproportionately: the anti-smuggling laws, for instance, had a more significant impact on Agadez than areas close to the capital of Niamey.

Challenges to the sovereignty of less powerful states have been met by changes in inter-state diplomatic relations. Less powerful nations have responded to efforts to externalise borders by engaging in migration diplomacy; that is, they leverage their power as sending or transit countries to achieve other national interests, using a strongly realist perspective (Greenhill 2010; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Cold-Ravnkilde 2022; Tsourapas 2025).

Arguments have also been made that migration and displacement have been weaponised by less powerful states; for example when Spain exhibited reluctance to support Morocco's autonomy plan on Western Sahara, Morocco relaxed border controls, allowing the entry of up to 10,000 migrants per day and effectively forcing Spain to change its stance (Cassarino 2022; Andersson and Keen 2023). This example demonstrates that externalisation is a double-edged sword: externalisation measures are designed to support destination states' sovereignty, but can be instrumentalised by home and transit states. In this context, peripheral areas that host smuggling activities, such as Agadez, Obock and Zaranj, can be considered as bargaining chips in migration diplomacy negotiations.

## **2.5 The Ecosystem of Discontent**

When smugglers interact with states, they do so not as criminals, but instead as citizens who have a set of (often unfulfilled) expectations. When expectations are not fulfilled, smugglers often engage with informal institutions and community governance mechanisms, and these mechanisms, in turn, allow them to influence the state. The degree to which smugglers can influence states depends, to a large degree on their political value. Externalisation efforts have resulted in a situation in which peripheral locations and smuggling communities have become bargaining chips between states, and thus the capacity of smugglers to influence states has increased. Various sets of literature elucidate different aspects of the links between smugglers, communities and states – but researchers could perhaps benefit from a single framework that draws together these different strands.

This thesis proposes the concept of an “ecosystem of discontent” to examine the complex and non-linear relationships, alliances and networks through which smugglers and states interact and mutually influence each other. The proposed concept is based on an analysis of an extensive set of interviews with smugglers across Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger, as well as literature on states, legitimacy, and informal institutions.

Migrant smuggling in Niger, Afghanistan and Djibouti operates, not through a clear and hierarchical organisation, but instead through a loose set of networks (United Nations 2018). The nodes of these networks are strongly rooted in local communities (Campana 2018, 2020). The relationship between smugglers and local communities is based in financial transactions – smugglers not only transport migrants but also provide customers for businesses engaged in provision of diverse goods, ranging from food to mobile phone credit to shoes. The value associated with these transactions is significant enough for two dynamics to play out. First, smugglers and others within their community experience tensions and conflicts; these often revolve around factors such as territory, division of profits and power dynamics. For example, two smuggling groups may fight for control over the same territory, or tensions might arise between smugglers and local businesspeople providing food and water. Second, different actors within the community develop risk mitigation mechanisms and actively make efforts to ensure the continuity of the trade despite conflicting incentives – that is, they develop risk mitigation mechanisms that are appropriate for the conflicts and tensions that arise within the ecosystem. The market for smuggling develops from the bottom up, and in line with moral economy literature, is built around a shared set of norms and values. Conflicting or contradictory actors enter into the community, such as aid organisations who intend to reduce the flow of irregular migrants, and their entry and activities does cause friction, often accompanied by violence. However, through an organic (but not necessarily peaceful) process, they and their resources are nonetheless integrated into the community through different approaches including appropriation of foreign resources into local power structures and stratification of markets into, for example, more and less respected smuggling groups. This intersection of different types of interests can be described as an ecosystem, or “an independent network of self-interested actors jointly creating value” (Bogers et al. 2019).

The term “ecosystem” was developed in the natural sciences to describe interdependence between different organisms; it describes a system in which different organisms interact with each other and their environment more broadly (Bogers et al. 2019). The term was adopted by those examining systems and businesses in large part because it helped to describe situations in which components were interdependent and connected through a series of feedback loops (Jacobides et al. 2018; Moore 1993). In business, the term ecosystem was used to describe contexts in which collaboration and competition co-exist, leading to co-evolution (Jacobides et al. 2018; Moore 1993). The term “ecosystem” implies interdependence, organic growth over time, shared value creation, and integration of different components which do not necessarily have congruent goals. The term “ecosystem” does not necessarily imply smooth and peaceful relations; competition and predation can be present, but is bounded by mutual self-interest. These elements – organic growth, shared value creation, competition, friction, and also integration of different interests – are all present among smuggling networks and communities and in fact can be considered to characterise these communities, as described in Chapter 5.

The term “discontent” has been used by political scientists to describe situations where citizens have low trust in political institutions and elites. Discontent arises in situations where populations are marginalised, or where states have failed to deliver services; for example, in periphery communities, discontent can grow due to alienation with the state. Similarly, and in situations where informal institutions conflict with state priorities, discontent can grow due to this conflict. According to Albert Hirschman (2004), discontent can spark specific reactions on the part of citizens, including exit (e.g., party switching), voice (protest or advocacy), loyalty (passive endurance) or neglect. Discontent is thus a social factor that can arise in response to state policies and presence (or lack thereof) and can feed into political action.

In the context of smuggling ecosystems, discontent may be one of several shared norms and values holding different actors together – but it is also the value that forms and shapes the relationship between smuggling ecosystems and the state. Discontent manifests in two forms within the smuggling ecosystems of Agadez, Obock and Zaranj. First, those within smuggling ecosystems feel dissatisfaction with states at various levels, and they express this discontent regularly, stating clearly that the state is not meeting their expectations and that they do not trust local and national authorities. Verbal expression of discontent takes place through emphatic statements and dramatic pronouncements – but the core issues generating discontent are lack of service provision, lack of security and a feeling that the state does not represent its citizens. These expressions of discontent are described in Chapter 6. Second, smugglers leverage discontent against the state to build their own legitimacy – smugglers fill gaps left by the state to strengthen their relationships with community institutions. This serves not as an active protest against the state, but as a way in which smuggling ecosystems co-opt and use the gaps left by the state to better express and serve local needs. Discontent with the state, in short, gives rise to a situation in which collaboration between smugglers and other actors in the ecosystem grows and strengthens as people strive to meet their own needs.

The implications of the ecosystem of discontent may be wide ranging. If this lens is applied to Paul Nugent's research on, for example, the Ghana-Togo border, then it can be assumed that discontent has the effect not of undermining the state, but rather on strengthening its borders. Similarly, if this lens is applied to Max Gallien's research on smuggling in the Maghreb, then smuggling networks effectively serve a state function of supporting stability and predictability in border areas – of managing discontent or potential discontent in border areas. Among my field sites, the ecosystem of discontent in Obock, Djibouti bears strongest resemblance to these two examples: the state tolerates smugglers and adopts some specific measures to appeal to those in the smuggling ecosystem. In both Zaranj,

Afghanistan and Agadez, Niger, the relationship is more contentious. Violent transfers of power took place in both countries, and those who took power made efforts to reach out to the smuggling ecosystem – they treated this ecosystem as a political constituency that could support their own domestic legitimacy, and further their international relations priorities. To manage the potential for conflict between domestic and international goals, both the Tchiani government in Niger and the Taliban government in Afghanistan created a grey area. This process is described in Chapter 8.

The ecosystem of discontent can be useful as an analytical concept because it provides a lens to analyse and interpret the interactions between irregular or criminal actors such as smuggling networks, communities and the state, not only at the local level, but also at the national level and beyond. The concept demonstrates the ways in which local alliances and allegiances can influence perceptions of and actions toward the state, and how the state can respond to these changes at the local level and balance the interests of the local level and the international level. This concept provides room for analysis of non-linear relationships, unintended consequences and complex feedback loops that take place between criminal actors and states, with the mediation and strong involvement of local communities. Concretely, the concept of an ecosystem of discontent aims to provide a lens to better understand (1) how individuals in smuggling ecosystems assess the options facing them, (2) the incentives facing informal institutions when they engage with both smugglers and state actors and (3) the factors which determine the degree to which actors in smuggling ecosystems and informal institutions can influence state legitimacy.

## 3.0 Case Studies: Smuggling Communities in the Horn of Africa, West Africa and Central Asia

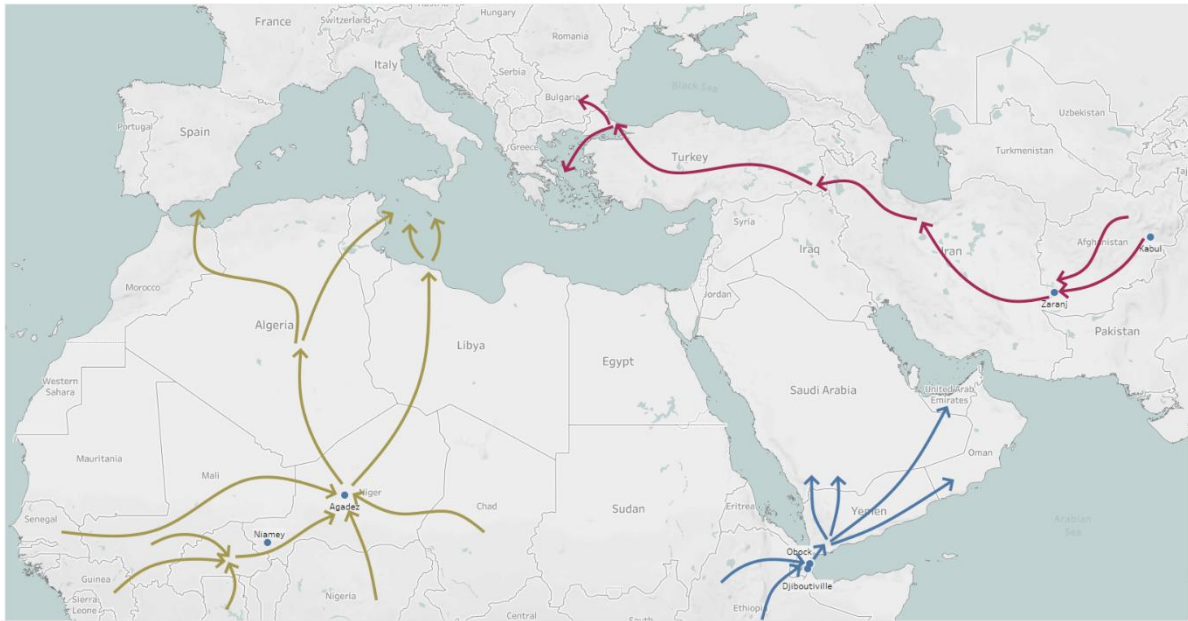
### 3.1 Introduction

*The ferry carrying passengers from Djiboutiville to Obock is flat bottomed and sturdy. I nonetheless felt a thrill as I boarded it. I was going to a town I had never visited before, I was going to meet smugglers, and I was going by myself. I had visited several smugglers and smuggling towns over many years, including Agadez in Niger, Nimroz in Afghanistan, and a range of tiny towns in Somalia and Yemen. However, I had done so as the employee of a humanitarian organisation. In that role, I was either bound by or trying to evade excessive security rules. But on my trip to Obock I was unfettered, except by university ethics and travel guidelines. I found a hard-backed plastic seat, secured my luggage between my legs and looked around. Mothers hugged babies to their breasts as toddlers raced around, old men with hennaed beards chewed qat, and a military officer fell asleep on a luggage rack. Outside, big ships squatted in the harbour, and tiny little pirogues danced around them. In the distance, I thought I could see the Yemeni port Bab el Mendeb – translated as the Gate of Tears, a Yemeni colleague had told me, and named for the ships that had been wreck on its shores. As I looked out at the horizon, the heat seemed to blur my vision, and for a moment I imagined I could see the Red Sea as it had been centuries before: with spice traders making fortunes from precious cargo and pirates staging daring maritime raids. Then a nearby cargo tanker let out a loud, ugly sound – between a belch and a honk – and I came back to the present. I spent the rest of the trip musing on the thought that although migrants were a new type of cargo, they were being transported using routes, systems and networks that had developed over centuries.*



*Figure 1: Military officer asleep on a luggage rack.*

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between smugglers and the states through three case studies: Obock, in Djibouti, East Africa; Agadez, in Niger, West Africa; and Zaranj, in Nimroz, Afghanistan. Each of these locations is a central node on a different migration route. Obock is located on the route from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf, whereas Agadez supports the flow of migrants from West Africa to Europe. Nimroz is a transit point on the route from Afghanistan to Europe. Within each location, the role of trade, borders, and smuggling has evolved over generations, and is deeply rooted in local communities, conflict resolution mechanisms and grassroots governance systems. Evolving state structures, influenced by colonial dynamics in all three contexts, have also played into the evolution of these smuggling hubs. Figure 2, below, shows the geographic position of each of the three smuggling routes, and shows the movement of migrants from their home locations to their final destinations.



*Figure 2: Map showing 3 case study locations and associated migration flows.*

In this chapter I introduce each of the case studies included in this thesis. For each case study, I first explain the migration flows and, and the information available on migrant smuggling dynamics. I then discuss local governance systems – that is, informal institutions – operating in the locations. Following this, I summarise aspects of state legitimacy that are relevant to this thesis, notably the history of the state governance structure, as well as key political and economic characteristics. After describing the case study locations, I provide an overview of their similarities and differences, as well as an analysis of how these cases, in particular, can support a robust analysis.

### 3.2 Obock, Djibouti – The Road from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf



Figure 3: Obock and the Route from the Horn of Africa to Gulf States

Guma is from Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia. He left home with the intention of working in the Gulf – Saudi Arabia, Oman or the United Arab Emirates; he knew that many of his fellow Ethiopians took jobs as construction workers, agricultural workers and even brewers of alcohol in Gulf states. He hoped to make as much money as possible in the Gulf and then return home and use his savings to buy a house. Guma is from the Oromo ethnic group, which is a minority in Ethiopia. He does not believe that he has access to chances or to employment opportunities at home, so he seeks to make money outside the country. Guma's history is representative of migrants moving through Obock. Historically, Ethiopians and Somalis are the two major nationalities travelling through Obock to Gulf countries, with Ethiopians dominating the route and comprising over 90% of the migration flow over several years (International Organisation for Migration 2020, 2025b; Meraki Labs 2019). The flow consists of people from several ethnicities divided into two major groupings: the

‘Northerners’ refer to the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups from Ethiopia and Eritrea, whereas the ‘Southerners’ refer to the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups from the south of Ethiopia and Somalia. Those who travel through Obock are predominately migrating for economic reasons: they aim to seek work in the Gulf and send money home through remittances (Meraki Labs 2019; Schewel 2018, 2022). Over 70% of migrants are men, aiming to work in construction; women who move aim to be integrated into the market for domestic work (International Organisation for Migration 2021; Meraki Labs 2019).

Guma kept telling Mohamed, my interlocutor, that he was just passing through Obock and that he would leave soon. He had travelled by foot from Addis Ababa, spending the morning looking for food and water before setting off, and often sleeping in the heat of the day. He did not know exactly how many days he had spent moving between Addis and Obock; it seemed that the days had merged into a haze. But he knew that he needed to go through Obock, located in Djibouti on the Gulf of Tadjourah, to go to Yemen. For people like Guma from the Horn of Africa looking to take up jobs in Gulf states, Obock represents a relatively safe and easy crossing point between Djibouti and Bab el Mendebeh in Yemen (Meraki Labs 2019; International Organisation for Migration 2020). Obock is one of two routes to Yemen: the other departure point, Bossaso, is located further south in the Somali state of Puntland. Guma wanted neither the extra journey to Bossaso nor the perceived risks associated with moving through Somalia.

After migrants arrive in Bab el Mendebeh, they cross Yemen by foot or vehicle, and when they have reached the province of Sadaa they enter into Saudi Arabia. Entry points here are dangerous, as the Saudi military controls the formal border crossings, but informal routes are hidden throughout the natural landscape (Meraki Labs 2019; International Organisation for Migration 2020; UNODC 2023). This last bit of the journey, through Yemen, is the most dangerous. Guma was worried about the Houthis, both because the route through Yemen was

unsafe, and because the war between the Houthis and the West made the sea journey more perilous. The balance Guma made between risk and reward was visible in the overall migration flow. Before the conflict in Yemen that started in 2014, approximately 75,000 people per year transited through the town (Horwood 2015); during the conflict this number rose to roughly 120,000 (Meraki Labs 2019; International Organisation for Migration 2020). The increase in the number of migrants passing through Obock is likely to be linked to the war economy in Yemen; as the war dragged on, different factions made use of revenue extracted from migrants to continue their operations (Botti and Phillips 2019; Meraki Labs 2019). During 2020 and 2021, due in large part to COVID, numbers fell sharply to 27,000 people in 2021; this corresponds to the increasing border restrictions that were instituted worldwide (Meraki Labs 2020). Recent years have seen a sharp increase in the number of arrivals. In 2024, more than 350,000 outbound migrants were recorded in Djibouti, with a noticeable increase in those passing through Obock (International Organisation for Migration 2025b).

Even though Guma did not want to be in Obock, he was stuck. He needed to make enough money to take a boat and cross to Yemen, meaning he needed to take daily labour jobs in Obock. Guma worked for a smuggler, hoping to use his labour to pay for passage; he was one of many migrants seeking out smugglers. Over 50% of migrants interviewed in Djibouti by the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi project used smugglers (Mixed Migration Centre no date). Existing research also indicates that there has been an increase in the demand for smugglers in recent years; this is likely to be linked at least in part to the dramatic increase in the number of migrants passing through Obock looking to reach the Gulf (International Organisation for Migration 2025b; UNODC 2023).

What will happen to Guma after he (finally) leave Obock to make the journey to the Gulf? While he himself is very positive about his prospects, existing research indicates that

he might face challenges. The dynamics of human movement on the Eastern route fall on a spectrum between smuggling and trafficking: migrants consistently choose to move and engage voluntarily with smugglers to move to the Gulf. However, upon arrival, many individuals face a range of human rights violations. One of the most common of these is the denial of freedom of movement and access to passports; this is often combined with different forms of abuse (Meraki Labs 2020; International Organisation for Migration 2025b; UNODC 2023). Smugglers are aware that these dynamics are likely to take place when migrants reach the Gulf and organise their activities to increase their profitability, which can exacerbate trafficking dynamics (Meraki Labs 2019; Hussain and Bonfiglio 2024). For example, smugglers often prefer to move women, because women are considered more profitable; this in turn is because women's passports and wages can be taken away from them when they have reached the Gulf. In large part due to these exploitative dynamics, levels of migrant trust in smugglers appears to be very low: an MMC study found that only 2% of migrants trusted their smugglers (Hussain and Bonfiglio 2024).

Mohamed, my primary interlocutor in Djibouti, sat at the edges of Obock's smuggling networks; his family was involved in smuggling activities in part because they owned land on which smuggler conducted operations. While Mohamed did not participate directly in smuggling activities, his family members and others did participate in smuggling. Mohamed's engagement with smuggling, and that of his family's, reflects the nature of the smuggling market in Obock, which operates through a mixed network model. Loose networks form, often around kinship groups, to support the smuggling of migrants (Hussain and Bonfiglio 2024; Meraki Labs 2019). The degree of formalisation and hierarchy among these networks differs: many individuals participate in smuggling in an ad-hoc way, but more organised cross-border also takes place. The US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report (2024) found an observed increase in the capacity and sophistication of migrant

smuggling operations in Obock; this includes increased use of mechanisms such as debt bondage and indentured servitude as a part of the smuggling process.

Mohamed's family was from the Afar ethnic group, and were very proud of it. I met several members of his extended family on a trip to see mangrove forests; when his three relatives discovered that I was a researcher, they demanded immediately that I study the Afar people. The Afar were truly unique, they cried, as they rolled down the windows of the car and turned up the volume on their favourite traditional music. Mohamed and his family made many claims about the uniqueness and the downtrodden nature of the Afar; those which can be substantiated with secondary data are outlined below. The Obock community consists primarily of people from the Afar ethnic group (Easterly 2021). This group is traditionally pastoralist, and is divided into several sub-groups. Conflicts over grazing lands, access to water and trade routes have arisen over many generations, both between different groups of Afar people, and between Afar populations and neighbouring groups (Easterly 2021; Talachew and Habtewold 2008). In part because of the regularity with which these conflicts arose, the Afar have developed strong traditional justice mechanisms. Within a community, the dispute resolution mechanism is known as the "mada'a". This varies from tribe to tribe and has complex rules. The primary arbiter of disputes may be the clan leader – but given the complexity of the system as a whole, it is equally possible that another individual, known as the "father of the law" or the mada'a abba, will resolve a case. There is an extensive body of informal legal institutions that involve separation between the judiciary, the legislative and the executive (Talachew and Habtewold 2008).

Intra-clan disputes are negotiated using one set of laws called the maal designed specifically for insiders. In contrast to this, disputes between clans and groups are negotiated through a separate process known as the dadar. This involves engagement between elders of different clans, as well as prayers and rituals. Islamic leaders often participate in the dadar

process and religious elements have been incorporated into it; this helps to provide the informal justice system with more weight. Blood compensation, or financial restitution paid to the family of a victim, is a feature of Afar mediation mechanisms (Alo and Debele 2024; Talachew and Habtewold 2008). The use of this set of tools – councils of elders, religious influencing and blood compensation, helps the Afar people negotiate not only between their own clans, but also between themselves and Somali clans, who live in areas around the Afar people. These dispute resolution systems have developed over many generations, for both the Afar and the neighbouring Somali (Talachew and Habtewold 2008).

The Afar people are, according to Mohamed's relatives, underdogs. They never had the opportunity to be in power, and as a result, they never had a fair chance. They Afar people could rise up for a stronger Djibouti – if only they had the opportunity. Mohamed's relatives might be excessively emotional – but their stories reflect a strong underlying understanding of Afar history. The Afar people have been fractured across different states and administrative groups through many centuries. They were first mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Ibn Said, and they consider themselves one of the longest-established culturally homogenous groups in Africa (Abeshu 2021). Historically, the Afar were organised into independent sultanates; different colonial powers entered into agreements with the sultanates to gain control of territory in the Horn of Africa. Today they are split between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti (Abeshu 2021; Yasin 2008). In Djibouti, the process of colonisation started in 1862 with an agreement for the French to take over the port of Obock from the Afar tribes. Although the port was strategically important, the French seemed not to fully recognise the worth of their territory: while the French acquired control over Obock in 1862, they first sent a French resident to their new colony in 1881 – 19 years after acquisition of the colony (Brunschwig 1968). Despite this unpromising start, the French empire maintained a foothold in Djibouti, in part because this supported geostrategic interests and an equitable distribution of power

between different colonial interests (Shehim and Searing 1980). However, in part because of the need to position their port as effectively as possible, the French moved the bulk of their activity from the Afar-dominated port of Obock to the Somali-dominated port of Djibouti (Shehim and Searing 1980). This laid the foundation for a Somali-dominated state after the French gave up their colonial interest in Djibouti in 1977, following a series of three referendums (Shehim and Searing 1980).

Following independence, the Somali group gained political dominance, generally at the expense of the Afar group (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). The balance of power in Djibouti has been primarily with the Issa since the country's formation; the position of President has historically been with the Issa, and while the position of Prime Minister has gone to Afars, the first two Afars in the position either resigned or were dismissed due to complaints about tribal politics (Shehim and Searing 1980). The dominance of Somali interests was so strong in Djiboutian national politics that shortly after independence, one study commented that the "Issas [Somalis] have not attempted to hide their sympathies for pan-Somali nationalism and their desire to incorporate Djibouti into a greater Somalia" (Shehim and Searing 1980). Both before and after independence, there were sporadic incidents of ethnic tension between the Afar and Somali people. In 1991 this dynamic escalated. The primarily Afar Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy launched a guerrilla struggle against the government, generating a low-intensity conflict between 1991 and 1994; final hostilities ended in 2001 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). A power-sharing agreement was brokered between the Somalis and the Afars, with the French acting as a mediating party (Shehim and Searing 1980). Mohamed's relatives made many references to the strong moral fiber of the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy; for them, the Front continues to represent the best chance for the future of the Afar people – even if the Front has a reduced political presence (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b).

Mohamed's relatives might wish for an Afar revolution – but as of early 2026, their wishes seem more like dreams than realisable political propositions. Djibouti is relatively stable, under the rule of President Ismael Omar Guelleh, from the Somali ethnic group. The Afar group has a strong presence in the minority political party, but is fragmented and considered unlikely to gain power. Some insurgent activity continues in the Afar dominated Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et de la Démocratie Arme (FRUD – Arme) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024), but this activity is relatively minor and is unlikely to disrupt current power dynamics. Power is centralised in the capital, Djiboutiville, in part because of structures developed by French colonial authorities. The legal system acknowledges Islamic law, though it does not make explicit room for customary justice systems (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b; Shehim and Searing 1980). The central government also established a ministry devoted to decentralisation in 2016; this ministry has supported the creation of regional development plans. It is also tasked with transferring tasks to local authorities and supporting local taxation and implementation. The degree to which effective decentralisation has been achieved is, however, minimal (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). Corruption is considered to be widespread, as are mismanagement of funds, and trust in public institutions is relatively low (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). Public funds and resources, according to Mohamed's relatives, flow to the south and to the Somali people, bypassing Obock and the Afar people and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities.

One of the most notable ignominies of the current government, according to Mohamed's relatives, relates to investments. Djibouti's well-being is supported by foreign engagement and investment in military and logistics installations – but these investments have never been made in Obock. The country is a bridge between Africa and the Middle East, and derives value both from the activities of its ports and from the fact that it hosts at least five military bases for China, France, Japan, the US and NATO (Masuda 2023; Okewoye

2025). Both of these forms of activity have generated significant economic dividends in recent years, with GDP growth rates of 6.8% in 2024 and 7.1% (estimated) for 2025 (World Bank 2025d) . Despite this positive economic activity, poverty rates in Djibouti are at more than 20%, and more than 40% of people live on less than 4.2 USD per day (World Bank 2025b). The national unemployment rate is at almost 50%, with spikes in peripheral areas such as Obock (International Monetary Fund 2024). The state has challenges in providing basic infrastructure in Djibouti; in 2020 37% of the population had access to sanitation and 61% had access to electricity (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). This, in turn, limits economic growth capacity.

In Djibouti, interactions between smugglers, informal institutions and the state remain somewhat under the radar: the government of Djibouti has been in power for a long time and has developed a reputation for stability in a region characterised by fragility, with Somalia and Ethiopia as next-door neighbours and Sudan close by. Although its control over force is strong, the Djiboutian state faces cracks with regard to other facets of legitimacy: service provision and economic wellbeing is relatively poor outside the centre and, as noted, there is a deep rift between the Somalis and the Afars. In this context, the smugglers of Obock have rooted themselves in the Afar community, and in associated long-standing informal institutions. The economic resources brought into the country through the facilitation of irregular migration are thus being channelled to communities that see the government as having relatively low levels of legitimacy. However, the government of Djibouti also has other priorities, notably the presence of foreign military actors and large-scale port activities. As such, the relationship between smugglers, informal institutions and the state can be characterised by friction – but this friction has thus far remained contained; it seems to have had few negative repercussions and limited effects on state legitimacy.

### 3.3 Agadez, Niger – The Road from West Africa to Europe

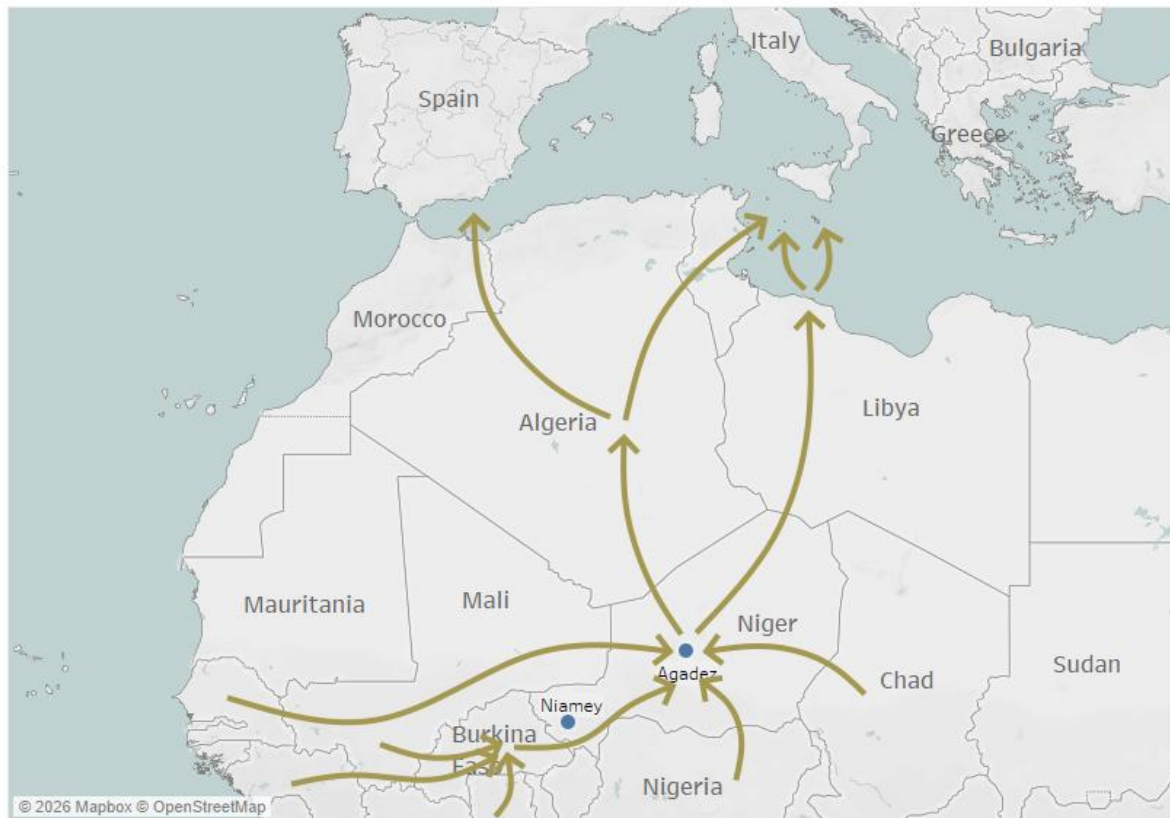


Figure 4: Agadez and the Route(s) from West Africa to Europe

Mahamadou is from Senegal and for him, Agadez is a transit city. He lives a peripatetic life – for 12 years he has been moving, sometimes aiming to earn money in West Africa, sometimes aiming to make the journey to Europe. He has passed through Agadez so many times that he has developed roots; he has gotten married to a Nigerien woman in Agadez and has a daughter. Mahamadou is a migrant, but also describes himself as “working in immigration – I smuggle people in and out”. Mahamadou expects that the city of Agadez will continue to form a touchstone in his nomadic life. Mahamadou’s perception of Agadez as a crossing point is common. Indeed, the migration route through the Sahara has taken place over decades and followed a trade route that was developed over centuries (Brachet 2007). Nomadic groups such as the Tuareg have been called the first Saharan migrants, but as an oil economy developed in Libya and motorized transport became more common, migration became more prevalent among other ethnic groups and nationalities (Brachet 2007).

Historically, migrant smuggling took place between West Africa, Libya and Europe, but formed only a small part of an extensive illicit economy which comprised arms, narcotics, cigarettes and oil, among other goods (Tinti and Westcott 2016b).

More recently, migrant smuggling has become one of the most lucrative markets in West Africa (Tinti and Westcott 2016b). People smuggling takes place along three routes, two of which are relevant to this case study<sup>5</sup>. The Western Mediterranean route refers to journeys from West Africa toward Morocco and Algeria, and from there to Spain. Entry into Algeria often takes place through Agadez. The Central Mediterranean route refers to journeys from West Africa to Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, and from there to Italy or Greece (UNHCR 2019). Within this migration map, Agadez represents on a crossroads – it sits on both routes and from Agadez it is possible to travel both to Libya and to Algeria. Mahamadou experiences this crossroads as a part of his everyday life: “when I wake up, there are often certain people, friends who call me from the other side to tell me that their child, their friend, their wife wants to go to Libya [or Algeria].”

Over the years, Mahamadou has witnessed major changes in the number of people passing through Agadez, and he attributes these changes to political factors: “you know what discouraged a lot of people here was the 2015 law on migration ... and on the other side, in Libya, things aren't working like they used to. Now people prefer to go through Gambia, Tunisia, Senegal, but it's starting to be blocked there too”. Mahamadou’s impression of trends cannot easily be verified using secondary data; IOM does not publish annual numbers. However, an analysis of monthly flows is interesting: in April 2024, IOM recorded 109,297 migrants leaving Niger, most of whom passed through Agadez (International Organisation for Migration 2024). In contrast, in May 2017, shortly after the migration “crisis” and the

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<sup>5</sup> *The Western African route crosses Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania and Morocco, with entry to Europe achieved through the Canary Islands. As this route does not cross Agadez, it is excluded from this analysis.*

implementation of externalisation policies, the number of migrants was at a record low of 3,387 people per month (International Organisation for Migration 2017). As laws grew stricter, data indicates that the composition of the flow through Agadez also changed. In early 2016, the flow consisted of high proportions of people from many countries in West Africa (Nigerians, Gambians and Senegalese), but in contrast, in early 2017, the flow consisted predominantly of people from Niger itself (IOM 2022). Today, citizens of Niger are the primary (internal) migrants recorded as passing through Agadez, but high proportions of individuals from neighbouring Nigeria are also moving. Flows from Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Cameroon are also present and increasing (International Organisation for Migration 2025c).

In other respects, the profile of migrants passing through Agadez is generally consistent over time – and many migrants look very much like Mahamadou. Most migrants are male (between 66% and 77% of the flow, depending on which source is used), and most are travelling for economic reasons; their reasons appear to be linked both to higher levels of income and strong aspirations (International Organisation for Migration 2025c). 4Mi data reports that over 70% of migrants in Niger were unemployed before leaving home, and of those who were employed, 46% relied on small businesses for their income (Mixed Migration Centre no date).

Migrants passing through Agadez do not necessarily want to go to Europe. When Mahamadou spoke about receiving calls from potential clients in the morning, he talked about a variety of destinations. “it's not always that people immigrate to go to Europe, it's not necessarily..., there are those who just want to go to Algeria or Libya to work” Before the repeal of anti-smuggling legislation, the majority of migrants in Agadez sought to migrate within the West Africa region, with only 10% seeking to migrate to Europe, according to IOM DTM data (International Organisation for Migration 2017, 2024). Today, according to

both IOM DTM data and 4Mi data, a higher proportion of individuals in Agadez are looking to migrate to Europe (International Organisation for Migration 2025c; Mixed Migration Centre no date).<sup>6</sup>

Within Agadez, the line between smugglers and others is thin. Mahamadou, for instance, chose to use a smuggler to move to Europe on his first journey, but he got stuck in Agadez due to lack of funds. He started working with the smuggler he used to make money – and through this experience, he gained enough skills to start working in smuggling, or “immigration”, as he calls it, himself. Mahamadou’s story, and his closeness with smugglers, is not uncommon. 60% of migrants interviewed in Agadez through MMC’s 4Mi project used a smuggler (Mixed Migration Centre no date). There is by now a substantial amount of formal and grey literature on smugglers, migrants and the relationships between them in Niger and the wider region (Brachet 2007, 2018a; Richter 2019b; Hoffman et al. 2017; F Molenaar 2017; Fransje Molenaar 2018). The line between smuggler and migrant is loose, and several smugglers are earning money in the hope of travelling themselves along migration routes (Richter 2019b). The smuggling economy in Agadez has been characterised as a social enterprise that represents a market for mobility; it has been argued that migrants in this market do not consider themselves as victims, and smugglers perceive themselves as providing a social good (Maher 2018; F Molenaar 2017). Despite these apparently good relations, many abuses take place, perpetrated by smugglers toward migrants (IMREF 2020)

Historically, movement of people into Libya and Algeria has been perceived, not as illegal, but as a form of grey trade that took place with limited oversight from authorities, and in congruence with historical practices of hosting (Brachet 2018b; Richter 2019b). Smugglers

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that stated intentions do not necessarily reflect actions and more people generally intend to migrate than actually do so. The 4Mi questionnaire asks about intentions, but public data is not available on whether individuals have taken concrete steps to migrate.

in Agadez generally are organised, similarly to Obock, in informal, loose networks. Individuals frequently participate in the smuggling economy on an ad-hoc basis, often in specific low-level positions such as *coxeurs*, who recruit migrants and link them to smugglers, or spotters. Migrants who work directly with smugglers often take some of this low-level work in part to earn money to pay the way for the next part of their journey; this is how Mahamadou made the transition from migrant to smuggler (Richter 2019b). Despite the flexibility of the smuggling economy at the lower levels, the higher levels are governed by a stricter hierarchy, which in turn links strongly to informal authorities, hierarchies and clan dynamics which are reflective of Agadez' specific history (Tinti and Westcott 2016a; Fransje Molenaar, Ursu, and Tinni 2017).

The history of Agadez is strongly linked to migration and trade. Agadez was founded by the Tuareg ethnic group before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Tuareg are semi-nomadic and have been responsible for both licit and illicit trade through the Sahara (Claudot-Hawad 2006; Krätli and Lydon 2011). Starting in the 1960s, Tuareg caravan movements brought together populations from south Algeria, North Niger and central Niger. Courtesy of first the expansion of the oil economy in Libya, and then Moammar Ghaddafi's move to extend his networks with other African states, the network of nationalities converging around Agadez grew significantly. The Tuareg played an essential role in the growth of trade routes, as well as the entrenchment of migration routes around Agadez (Brachet 2018b; McDougall and Scheele 2012). The historic strength of the Tuareg is visible when Mahamadou talks about the social dynamics of Agadez: when we ask him who is the most influential in the town, he replies with a short answer: "the Tuareg are the most influential economically."

Perhaps because the Tuareg have conducted trade and consolidated their wealth in Agadez, they have also developed local dispute resolution mechanisms. The Tuareg social system is extremely stratified, with different castes including nobles, vassals and artists

(Prasse 1995). The governance system is broadly speaking consensual, revolving around community assemblies and mediation by trusted elders – but it is characterised by internal diversity and division, since different federations of Tuareg groups are held together under a loose governance structure, but nonetheless compete with each other for resources and power (Ananyev and Poyker 2023; Paradela-López and Jima-González 2024). Conflict resolution systems are based on the traditional hierarchical system, with local elders being expected to play a major role in resolving disputes. Conflict resolution mechanisms involve consultative councils, dialogue and long consensus-building processes designed to restore social harmony. Religious norms and Islamic leaders are also often involved in conflict resolution forums (Kifle and Mekonnen 2025; Paradela-López and Jima-González 2024; Ananyev and Poyker 2023). These mechanisms are also relatively widely known and respected; Mahamadou interacts with a different group, the Tebu, for his day-to-day work and the Tebu are often in conflict with the Tuareg – but when we ask Mahamadou how disputes are resolved, he refers immediately to Tuareg systems.

Tuareg dispute resolution mechanisms were shaped by similar forces compared to those developed by the Afar: they were developed by nomadic societies with the aim of resolving disputes associated with grazing and water. These types of disputes are regulated through inter-clan gatherings and engagement between elders from different clans. Dispute resolution mechanisms between clans are flexible and negotiable; they reflect a complex web of social reputation, trust and kinship ties. These mechanisms have been adapted to more recent dynamics in the Sahel; disputes between smugglers about territory and behaviour are regulated through these traditional justice systems (McDougall and Scheele 2012; Scheele 2012; Brachet and Scheele 2019). The system encompasses, not only migrant smugglers, but also smugglers of other goods including drugs, arms, gasoline, cigarettes and fabrics, as well as businesses managing irregular mining operations (Lucht 2012, 2022).

The local conflict management systems developed by clans such as the Tuareg were, effectively, leveraged by the French when they colonised Niger and the surrounding Sahelian states (Mali, Burkina Faso) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. France established a military base in Zinder, Niger in 1900, and officially created the Colony of Niger in 1922 (Fuglestad 1983; Turner 2017). The French empire developed and rolled out a governance system in West Africa that built on traditional hierarchies and thus was extremely heterogeneous; in the context of the area around Agadez, this included engaging directly with high-caste leaders among the Tuareg (Fuglestad 1983; Turner 2017).

The French colonial system relied so much on pre-existing governance structures that it did little to construct a fully viable state. Upon independence in 1960, Niger found itself with limited administrative infrastructure. The newfound country's ability to manage administrative infrastructure was so limited that it imported civil servants from Benin (Mann 2021). The new country also faced challenges with regard to composition, as the population in the South has a higher proportion of agricultural ethnic groups (e.g., the Hausa and the Songhai) whereas the population in the North is dominated by the Tuareg (Mann 2021; Fuglestad 1983). The tensions between these groups led to a series of Tuareg rebellions; these included major pushes against the central government between 1990 and 1995, as well as in 2007 – 2009 (Molenaar, et al. 2019). Each of these two rebellions was followed by peace deals negotiated by regional actors; the peace deals, in turn, involved successive efforts to integrate clan dispute resolution and governance systems into formal mechanisms. The 2009 deal involved some political concessions on the part of the central government, including commitments on the part of the government to provide infrastructure, water and education. The peace deal also involved a commitment to expand Tuareg participation in national and local governance, thus effectively putting more power in the hands of traditional governance mechanisms and informal institutions (Molenaar, et al. 2019). Today, Mahamadou may not

appreciate the Tuareg – especially given his alignment with the opposed Tebu ethnic group – but his acknowledgement of their power arises in part from their alignment with government actors and their capacity to represent local interests in the state system. It is notable that the terms of the peace deal were supposed to be overseen by Libya. The overthrow of Qadaffi thus had implications for state stability in Niger (Lacher 2012).

The engagements between Libya and Niger stretch beyond the political, and comprise smuggling networks as well. Specifically, while the Tuareg have been the dominant actors in migrant smuggling over many years, the Tebu ethnic group has also started to play a key role over time, in part due to dynamics of the trade route and engagements between Niger and Libya (Hoffman et al. 2017; Tinti and Westcott 2016a). The Tuareg and the Tebu groups are at odds with each other; Mahamadou, for example, is aligned with the Tebu for his work, and describes the Tuareg as “people who aren’t much [caring about] life, who don’t care what happens to them.” The Tuareg have historically held control of trade and smuggling routes in northern Niger, but the Tebu have held control of the routes into southern Libya. A small proportion of Tebu also live in Agadez, creating opportunity for friction. Between the Tuareg and the Tebu, there is a dynamic of both competition and collaboration across the route, with continual volatility with regard to power and control. The fall of Libya’s Qadaffi and changes in border security in Libya led to a situation where the two groups came into increasing conflict over migration routes and control. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms were used to negotiate agreements and settle the situation. Today the Tuareg generally take control of migrant journeys until the Dirkou area and the Tebu taking control for the Libyan portion (Tinti and Westcott 2016a; Hoffman et al. 2017).

The state of Niger, in short, faced a complex challenge: local conflict resolution mechanisms were developed over time and were co-opted by French colonial systems; in part because of the strength of local systems, relatively little investment was made into building

strong state structures. Simultaneously, trade flows with neighbouring countries, and notably with Libya, necessitated the continuation and strengthening of these mechanisms. To successfully navigate these challenges, a strong state would be required – but the state of Niger has historically had democratic institutions which could best be described as weak. Between 1960 and the present, Niger experienced only one peaceful transfer of power. The governments that have held power include both democratically elected leaders such as the first president, Hamani Diori, and representatives of military juntas (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). Mahamadou Issoufou, a Hausa, took power in 2011 through a democratic process; he governed until 2021. Issoufou transferred power peacefully to Mohamed Bazoum, an Arab, in 2021, and Bazoum held power until the 2023 coup, conducted by the Presidential Guard (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). Following the coup, the leader of the Presidential Guard, Abdourahamane Tchiani was sworn in as President for a period of five years (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). Following the coup, Bazoum was placed under house arrest, where he remains until today.

A key challenge facing successive governments in Niger is the maintenance of a balance between a focus on the domestic population and the need to negotiate with international actors. The needs of the domestic population are acute and relatively straightforward: Niger's performance on the Human Development Index is at 0.4, the lowest in the world apart from South Sudan and Chad (Tuki 2024). 45% of the population is in a situation of extreme poverty and an estimated 4.8 million people require humanitarian assistance (World Bank 2025c; OCHA 2024).

The needs of foreign powers – notably France – are also relatively straightforward. France continued to be actively involved in Nigerien economics and politics from independence until an anti-Western coup overthrew the Bazoum government, in line with its general policy in West Africa (Taylor 2019). Components of France's engagement with Niger

have been structured specifically to protect French interests. For example, French industries active in West Africa use the common West African currency, the CFA (Taylor 2019). The value of the CFA is fixed and pegged to the euro, meaning that “French interests are effectively protected from common currency depreciations, while the convertibility and free transfer principles facilitate their repatriation of profits out of the continent” (Taylor 2019, pp. 6). France has similarly made investments to protect its security interests through the establishment and operation of military bases in the Sahel. Between 1960 and the mid-1990s, France averaged one military intervention in West Africa per year (Tardy 2020). More recently, France’s military operations have been consolidated. Operation Serval took place between 2013 and 2014 and aimed to respond to the Islamist offensive in Northern Mali; it involved large-scale deployment of military operations. It was followed by Operation Barkhane, a region-wide counterterror operation, which had a budget of nearly 600 million EUR per year (Roca 2012; Vargas 2023). When Tchiani assumed power, he also effectively ended France’s military presence in Niger. While Operation Barkhane was already closing, the change in government in Niger—together with coups in Mali and Burkina Faso—led to a clear and formal ending of France’s military engagements in the Sahel, together with a restructuring of power dynamics in the region (Will Brown 2024). France’s involvement in uranium mining holds particular importance for the stability and legitimacy of the Nigerien state. Uranium was discovered in Niger very shortly before Nigerien independence (Martin 1989). Following this discovery, French companies started mining, and they have maintained active operations for over 50 years. The Accord, and the nature of France’s engagement in uranium mines, was perceived as disadvantageous from the beginning by Nigerien politicians; the first President, Hamani Diori, pushed for a more favourable deal, but to no avail (Martin 1989). The early agreements that governed investment in the mines – and were heavily dominated by the French government – also granted tax exemptions and subsidies to

French mining companies, thus lowering the resources available to the Nigerien government to provide public services, both in the centre and in more peripheral locations such as Agadez. This took place alongside terrible health conditions for Nigerien workers in the mines, including drinking water that was likely contaminated with uranium (Keenan 2008). “This asymmetric position has led some in Nigerien civil society actors to explain the country’s persistent poverty via a powerful narrative that France has maintained its neo-colonial authority over Niger for its own economic benefit.” (Volberding and Warner 2018)

There are interesting similarities between Niger and Djibouti: in both countries, smuggling activities are centred in a location which has been marginalised, and in communities which have historically been opposed to the state. Smuggling ecosystems in both countries engage heavily with traditional justice and governance systems. In both countries, the state has had limited success in providing services and building bonds with peripheral areas and smuggling ecosystems. However, whereas in Djibouti smuggling is a marginal issue, and issues have been contained at the national level, in Niger smuggling has become a flashpoint in national, regional and even global politics. Issues with state legitimacy in Niger are strongly linked to the perception of foreign influence: the heavy role of the West in Niger has affected the degree to which states can build legitimacy along force, economics or cultural lines. EU decisions to implement externalisation policies in Agadez strengthened the perception that the state was influenced by foreign actors and may have further eroded legitimacy. The context in Niger can thus be summarised as follows: smuggling ecosystems are strong and have intense engagement with informal institutions; this alliance exists within a national context characterised by low state legitimacy, high fragility and volatility, and shifting levels of influence.

### 3.4 Zaranj, Afghanistan – The Road from Afghanistan to Europe



Figure 5: Zaranj and the Route from Afghanistan to Europe

Zaranj is located on the border between the Afghan province of Nimroz and the Iranian province of Sistan (Mansfield and Smith 2021). Like the Red Sea and the Sahel, this location has a long and storied history: the great Persian hero Rustam was said to come from Sistan and in the Persian epic tale the *Shahnameh*, the region was a crossroads between Persia, India and China. Over time, the Sistan region and Zaranj in particular has continued to form a vital part of trade routes, with China investing in the Sistan port of Chabahar and Iran and Pakistan vying for influence in the area. Zaranj links Iran to Afghanistan but its ties to the Afghan state are somewhat tenuous as it is located nearly 1,000 kilometres away from Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan (Mansfield and Smith 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). The relative informality of the border allows relatively safe land crossings between the two countries. Zaranj supports primarily Afghan migrants from Hazara and Pashtun backgrounds. It is one of two routes into Iran; the other, located in the north of the country in Herat

province, is used primarily for smuggling of goods such as drugs, rather than human smuggling (Mohammadi et al. 2019). Migrants travelling along this route generally aim to go from Iran to Turkey, and then to cross to Europe by either the Western Balkans or the Western Mediterranean routes.

Movement trends through Zaranj have been volatile. In 2015 a large upsurge of Afghans moved through Zaranj on the way to Europe, and while the subsequent years (2016 – 2021) saw a decrease, there was still a large outflow from Afghanistan through Zaranj (Ehsan and Rezay 2023). During the Taliban takeover in August 2021, there was a spike in individuals leaving Afghanistan through Zaranj, with up to 5,000 migrants per day leaving through the town, according to 4Mi data (Mixed Migration Centre no date). Recent years have seen more complicated migration flows. Large-scale return operations from Iran, where Afghans are pushed over borders back into Afghanistan take place alongside irregular migration out of Afghanistan back into Iran. Outflows were estimated to be critically high between January and May 2025, with over 450,000 Afghans moving through borders into Iran during this time (International Organisation for Migration 2025a). The majority of Afghans are estimated to move through Zaranj, as security at the Herat border crossing is tighter.

IOM DTM data finds that 63% of people moving in the first quarter of 2025 are migrating for economic reasons; this corresponds to findings from 4Mi data collection (International Organisation for Migration 2025a; Mixed Migration Centre no date). A significant proportion of migrants moving to Iran are not looking to make the journey to Europe, but instead aim to find work in Iran; this has become more complex in 2025 due to the forced return operations, and due to the volatility of the situation in Iran. Interestingly, the return operations have created a churn: in Q1 2025, 16% of outbound migrants surveyed at the border crossing points to Iran had only been in Afghanistan for a short time; that is, they

had been returned through forced deportation operations (International Organisation for Migration 2025a).

The use of smugglers is strongly prevalent along routes out of Afghanistan. Smugglers provided border crossing services to over 90% of those who had reached Türkiye (Mixed Migration Centre no date)<sup>7</sup>. Their level of trust in smugglers among those who had reached Türkiye was relatively high, with 51% of 4Mi respondents stating that smugglers helped to achieve migration goals (Mixed Migration Centre no date). The quantitative data corresponds with qualitative data about trust between migrants and smugglers. Research has been conducted that shows strong kinship and ethnic bonds between migrants and smugglers in Afghanistan; smugglers have also, in the past, been governed by social rules and regulations (Mohammadi et al. 2019). As the volume of migrants has increased, the rules are seen to have become looser, however, and rights violations are prevalent for migrants in Afghanistan (Mixed Migration Centre n.d.).

In Zaranj, smuggling takes place through loosely organised networks; smuggling is so ingrained in local communities that it is possible simply to catch a taxi that crosses into Iran through an unofficial border point. Crossings take place both through the border and informal crossing points; some individuals with cars take migrants over informal crossing points without connections to higher level networks, whereas others receive groups of migrants in a semi-organised fashion and transport them according to a set of rules. (Pool 2025; Mohammadi et al. 2019). However, higher-level networks also exist, and are generally organised around ethnic structures. It is notable that migrant smuggling networks have taken explicit measures to remain separate from drug and arms smuggling networks, especially

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<sup>7</sup> This data is from MMC's 4Mi data set. The data set does not collect data directly within Afghanistan, but survey responses from Türkiye indicate that over 70% of migrants in Türkiye, many of whom are Afghan, used smugglers to support their journey (Mixed Migration Centre no date).

through use of different crossing points: migrant smugglers concentrate in Nimroz, whereas drug and arms smugglers concentrate in Herat<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly, there are fewer reports of debt bondage and indentured labour in Afghanistan compared to Niger and Djibouti.

Just before the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the population of Nimroz was estimated at 320,000, the majority of whom were Baluch. There is a growing number of Pashtuns in the province, as well as Tajik, Uzbek and Brahui minorities (Mansfield and Alcis 2024). The Baluch, like the Afar and the Tuareg, is a pastoral community in which kinship links are key to managing social relations. Social norms around kinship links have been developed around pastoral issues such as water and grazing rights. The tribal chief is essential in negotiation of disputes, together with community councils known as jirgas (Aḥmadzā'ī Balūč and Axmann 2023). This general structure strongly resembles the social structure among the Pashtuns. Both ethnic groups are strongly cohesive, and they have similar social systems (Boedeker 2013).

Both the Baloch and the Pashtun dispense intra-group justice through strong and well-understood social codes; the Baloch code is known as the Balochi Mayar, and the Pashtun code is known as the Pashtunwali. Both codes consist of parallel key principles, including hospitality, refuge, loyalty and honour (Aḥmadzā'ī Balūč and Axmann 2023). These codes are still strongly prevalent in Baloch and Pashtun society, according to some of the most recently available analysis (Boedeker 2009; Aḥmadzā'ī Balūč and Axmann 2023). The social code of Baloch society in particular, as the majority in Zaranj, is dominant and can be imposed on other ethnic groups. In one account, a Baloch family holds a traditional trial for an Uzbek accused of theft; another Uzbek is called on to help. “He did not feel in any way

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<sup>8</sup> *This data is primarily from interviews my interlocutors and I conducted in Afghanistan from 2018 until 2026. Migrant smuggling is considered relatively safe and harmless, whereas drug smuggling is considered to be more dangerous and violent; drug smuggling is also under more scrutiny than migrant smuggling.*

responsible for the defendant, which the Baloches considered unsuitable behaviour towards a tribal brother” (Bodecker 2009). The Baloch justice system was imposed on the Uzbek; the system was merciful (the man was found guilty of theft but was set free), but it was understood that the Baloch imposed their form of justice on others. This form of engagement contrasts with the more consensus-based systems prevalent in both Niger and Djibouti.

In cases of community conflict, the jirga is used to mediate between different groups. Jirgas, or community councils, bring together elders from different Baluch and/or Pashtun groups (Barfield 2023; Aḥmadzā'ī Balūč and Axmann 2023). Different communities are represented by their elders in the jirga, and decisions are made on the basis of principles outlined in the Baloch Mayar and the Pashtunwali, which are treated as a form of legal code used to resolve cases and mediate disputes. Compensation forms a key part of inter-group dispute resolution mechanisms. Social cohesion forms a key part of justice resolution mechanisms (Barfield 2023). This system remained relatively prevalent through the colonial period, during which the British and the Russians drew the borders of Afghanistan through a long-standing fight for control over India and Central Asia (Hopkirk 1993; Barfield 2023). Afghanistan was never formally colonized, but instead acted as a buffer zone between the two empires; the process of drawing borders took place through a mixture of engagement between different colonial actors as well as engagement between colonial actors and local leaders. This complexity led to a situation in which communities such as the Pashtun were split between different countries; simultaneously, the colonial dynamic also contributed to reinforcing the power of specific ethnic groups within Afghanistan. The British strengthened Pashtun rulers, notably the Durrani dynasty; their financial and military support enabled policies such as “Pashtunization”, in which Pashtuns relocated to areas traditionally belonging to other ethnic groups. State law was also blended with traditional Pashtun conflict resolution mechanisms during the colonial period (Barfield 2023).

During the colonial period and following its conclusion, Afghanistan had a tumultuous political history, with many rapid changes in power. During the Cold War, the country oscillated between monarchy and communist rule. The USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support the communist government; they faced strong resistance from the mujahideen, which were funded by the US. The Communist government-controlled cities, but the mujahideen controlled the rural areas. The USSR withdrew in 1989, and the communist government collapsed in 1992. A period of civil war followed the withdrawal of Soviet troops; power was consolidated under the Taliban in 1996 (Barfield 2023).

In 2001, the US used military force to invade Afghanistan, following 9/11 and the presentation of evidence that Osama bin Laden had been based in Afghanistan. The US installed Hamid Karzai as president in 2001. Karzai gave up power to Ashraf Ghani in 2014. Ashraf Ghani was seen as closely allied with the US (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024a). His government was, however, riven and there were widespread reports that Ghani's election had been due in large part to fraud and corruption (Ghiasy 2017). The US mediated a solution in which Ashraf Ghani became the President of Afghanistan and Abdullah Abdullah, one of his main opponents, became the Chief Executive Officer of the country. The position of CEO was exceptional as it acknowledged Abdullah Abdullah's informal power and ability to influence – but did so through a position which had no constitutional status or powers (Ghiasy 2017).

The Afghan government's ability to provide services was limited throughout both Karzai's and Ghani's governments. Hamid Karzai had limited financial capacity, though one of his major successes – with Ashraf Ghani as the Minister of Finance – was the widespread adoption of the Afghan currency. Karzai expanded enrolment in primary education and, together with international donors, established basic health services. However, capacity to improve public services was limited by security issues, unrest and corruption (Special

Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) 2022). Ghani was hampered by these same structural factors, as well as his poor relationship with Abdullah Abdullah. Relations between Ghani and Abdullah were strained for multiple reasons, including differing policy priorities and arguments over division of power (Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) 2022; Ghiasy 2017). Lack of effectiveness at the national level resulted in fragmented and limited-service provision, as well as high and persistent levels of corruption. Many of these power games were played in capital cities; as the two factions in the government quarrelled over resources and political position, the Taliban gained an increasing hold in rural areas and the countryside (Sharifi and Adamou 2018). As such, much of the power of the formal state was centralised: the Ghani government lacked both the resources and the political power to effectively decentralise.

In line with this dynamic of a government which consolidated its support in the city, during the Ashraf Ghani regime, local dispute resolution mechanisms prevailed in Zaranj (Kumar 2018). This was in large part due to the remote nature of the province and the challenges associated with providing public services in the periphery. Unlike the central government in Niger, the Ghani government did not make a clear decision to engage with local dispute resolution mechanisms, although several international agencies such as the US Institute of Peace made deliberate efforts to build on these mechanisms (Coburn and Dempsey 2010). During the Ghani regime, the Taliban began building its legitimacy in part through engagement with informal justice systems in remote areas such as Nimroz. This has led to a clearer and more explicit link between the Taliban and local governance systems in more recent years, and especially since the Taliban takeover (Kumar 2018).

The Taliban came to power in August 2021, as US troops were withdrawing from Afghanistan. There had been a broad, long-standing international recognition that the Ghani government was weak and susceptible to internal insecurity, but the speed at which the

Taliban took over – and the fact that they effectively took power before US troops completed their withdrawal – was surprising to most international commentators (Lynch 2022; Council on Foreign Relations 2025). Zaranj was the first province to fully cede power to the Taliban, on August 6, 2021. The Taliban took control of Kabul on 15 August 2021, and announced a leadership structure on 7 September (The Guardian 2021).

The Taliban are fundamentally Pashtun. Most leadership positions are occupied by Pashtuns and very few representatives of other ethnic groups have power in the government. It governs according to Sharia law, and at a national level a Supreme Leader is advised by a leadership council and a council of ministers. Local governance is however an underlying core principle of the Taliban government: local religious councils are the first port of call for disputes, and the Taliban negotiate ad hoc agreements with local communities. Religious and tribal mediation are commonly used for dispute resolution.

Economically, Afghanistan has experienced significant volatility. Under the Karzai regime, the economy of Afghanistan experienced high levels of economic growth of between 6% and 11% (World Bank 2025d). This growth was driven by international assistance, with booms in the construction industry, as well as good harvests (Haque 2020). After 2012 economic growth slowed; during the Ghani regime, the economy was stagnant with growth rates between 1% and 3% (World Bank 2025d). This decline in economic growth was due in part to lower levels of international aid, but also due to worsening security, corruption and weak private sector development (World Bank 2025a). When the Taliban government assumed power, international sanctions were placed on the country and aid was stopped, causing an economic contraction. However, GDP growth has recovered and in 2025 and 2026 is at levels similar to those achieved under Ghani, due primarily to agriculture, mining and construction (World Bank 2025a, 2025d).

The economic vagaries of the Afghan state have somewhat muted effects in Zaranj. In part because of its position between states, Zaranj has developed a strong position as a trading hub. Prior to 2005, Zaranj had no border with Iran, so goods and people flowed freely; since the development of a border, trade with Iran forms the predominant form of economic activity taking place in the province (Mansfield and Smith 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). Illicit trade has taken place over a long period of time; a survival economy based on smuggling of drugs, petrol and people grew up over decades. The strength and nature of the trade activities that take place in Zaranj are dependent on geopolitical movements; after sanctions on Iran were lifted in 2016, Iran and India made an agreement to invest in a port in the south of the country, and the resultant legitimate throughfare of goods in Nimroz resulted in higher levels of growth (Shukla 2024). Conversely, in 2010, the Government of Iran took closer control over cross-border activities in 2010, including building a wall and instituting more stringent border controls, resulting in reduced trade and growth in border areas (Ghanbari et al. 2019). The migration inflow into Europe in 2015 – and the heavy proportion of Afghans in this flow (with Afghans constituting the second largest nationality of asylum seeker arriving in Europe in 2015) – also had implications for cross border trade and economic well-being in Zaranj (Foschini 2021).

The smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj, similar to those in both Agadez and Obock, is based in a community which has limited ties to the state; smugglers rely heavily on informal institutions within their communities rather than on state structures and processes. State legitimacy in Afghanistan, similar to the situation in Niger, is strongly affected by foreign influence in the country. Whereas in Niger the foreign influence was constant, with the French acting as a dominant force over generations, in Afghanistan several different actors have vied for influence. The Afghan state under Ashraf Ghani had little ability to use force, service provision was low and the government was not considered representative. The

Taliban have a monopoly over the use of force, but its ability to build cultural bonds and deliver services is less clear. The situation in Afghanistan can thus be characterised as one in which community structures and systems, including those that govern smuggling, have maintained stability and constancy, despite overhauls in state structure, governance and processes and associated volatility with regard to state legitimacy.

### **3.5 Conclusion and Basis for Comparison**

This thesis aims to examine the ways in which smuggling ecosystems view and influence state actors, using Obock, Agadez and Zaranj as case studies. Broadly, I adopted an exploratory case study design; I selected cases to better understand the relationships between smuggling ecosystems and the state, and to map the types of impact ecosystems can have on state legitimacy. The scope of my case studies was, however, bounded by both practical factors and comparative factors. Gaining access to smugglers and smuggling communities is fraught with difficulties. I have access to some of these communities because I have worked on migration issues in countries of origin and transit, as a humanitarian worker, for over ten years. My case study selection process was thus bounded by practicality – I selected from a set of locations and communities with whom I had strong pre-existing links, and from whom I could collect data in a safe and ethical manner.

I also limited my case selection to smuggling communities that were relatively isolated: I chose towns and communities that depended on smuggling for their well-being and that were located in the periphery. This is despite the fact that capital cities (e.g., Tehran, Istanbul, Tripoli, Addis Ababa, Sana'a) play a major role in some smuggling routes. I selected independent communities (not capital cities) primarily so that the interactions between smugglers, informal institutions and state actors could be seen more clearly. Negotiations around anti-smuggling laws and policies, provision of state services and operation of informal institutions and governance systems are relatively clear in remote areas; I was able

to draw on pre-existing literature and some government and World Bank documents to support my argument. These factors are harder to isolate in capital cities: data on provision of public services by neighbourhood in Tehran, for instance, can be very difficult to find.

The communities I selected were similar with regard to several key characteristics. Each community had strong pastoral and nomadic traditions, and social relations were determined by kinship and ethnic links. They also all made regular use of informal justice systems and governance systems that were linked to these traditions. All three communities were also heavily reliant on smuggling for their well-being: smuggling forms a significant proportion of local productivity and employment in all three areas. The three towns are all located in the political, economic and geographic periphery of the state; all three locations have also hosted efforts to rebel against the state.

While the communities that I have chosen are relatively similar, the states in which they are situated are not, as we have started to note in the sections above. Djibouti is a semi-authoritarian regime whose president has been in power since 1999; in contrast, both Niger and Afghanistan have experienced violent transitions of power within the time period when this thesis developed. The capacity of each state to regulate economic activity and provision of public goods also differs: Djibouti has demonstrated the ability to support specific policies and growth, whereas Niger always had low levels of government resources and low capacity. Afghanistan had high levels of resources, especially during the Ghani regime, but low capacity.

Similarly, international engagement with all three states differs. The Taliban regime is nominally strongly opposed to the Western state system; it has not been recognised by most Western states, has been under strong sanctions and has received cuts in aid and support. However, it is courting the international community to gain acceptance, including through

collaboration in anti-smuggling efforts. In contrast, the Tchiani government in Niger is taking deliberate steps to turn away from the international community after a period of strong collaboration with Western externalisation and counterterror efforts. Djibouti engages strongly with the regional and international community, and is generally accepted.

The role of EU externalisation policies within each country's foreign affairs agenda also differs. In Niger, externalisation was a strong priority under the pre-coup Bazoum government, and was publicly reversed by the post-coup government. Similarly, in Afghanistan, EU externalisation policies informed Ghani's approach, but were less of a focus for the Taliban. Djibouti represents an interesting contrast: Gulf states undertake few visible externalisation efforts, and the EU has only a limited engagement with Djibouti on externalisation efforts.

The case studies I have selected thus provide a strong basis for exploring the ways in which smuggling communities and states interact; they help to understand how marginalised communities with strong traditional governance structures can interact with states struggling to obtain legitimacy with their domestic populations and internationally. The communities themselves are similar, and can thus be considered to represent a certain type of smuggling community. They engage with states which are fundamentally different; this allows me to better understand what processes are common for smuggling communities across different state contexts, and which differ due to state restrictions. Finally, the differing roles of EU externalisation policies in all three contexts allows me to analyse the possible implications of external engagement for the relationships between smugglers and state legitimacy. Over the course of this thesis, I will use these case studies to draw out the ways in which smugglers and informal institutions engage in mutually reinforcing relationships that help them to fill gaps in state service provision and build legitimacy with their communities. This thesis will then contend that smugglers and informal institutions engage with states – especially

authoritarian states such as the Taliban and the Tchiani government in Niger – in ways that can both bolster the position of the smuggling ecosystem and strengthen the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes.

## 4.0 Methods

### 4.1 Introduction

*Mohamed, my key interlocutor in Djibouti, was volatile. He had two modes: either he was too wired to work, or he was too tired to work. This unpredictability led to a somewhat fraught relationship between us. I had gotten in touch with Mohammed through a close connection; he had been eager to participate in my research, and it was clear that he had a range of relevant skills and networks. We met in person and developed a friendly rapport. But in the next video call I held with Mohammed, he was lethargic; almost comatose. I soon learned that Mohammed was unpredictable, so I did my best to keep a close eye on him. After a couple of months, Mohammed told me he had reached the total number of interviews I had requested. When I went back to review, I realised that he had sent the same interview several times, in several batches. We had a serious conversation, and in this conversation we set out a schedule and agreed on deadlines and targets. After the conversation, Mohamed hit every target. He sent interviews on time, and each interview was clearly unique. I was pleased – I was convinced that we turned a corner in terms of our work relationship and hoped he had become less temperamental. In fact, I was so pleased that I did not quality check as stringently as I should have. I did my in-person field work, and then I re-reviewed the interviews. I started to notice tics: for all the later interviews, but none of the former interviews, respondents were very positive and energetic, regularly using phrases such as “Bien sur!” and “Mais c’est un plaisir!”. Many of the answers were anodyne – they were simply too boring to add anything to my conclusions. And, buried in the middle of one interview, was a telltale sentence; “Please remember that this is a fictive set of interview notes generated by artificial intelligence.” I thus assumed that all of the interviews that took place after our Serious Conversation were fake, and I removed all of them from the total tally of transcripts.*

Researching migrant smuggling is challenging. Baird and van Liempt (2016) describe the process as being characterised by a “double disadvantage”. The first disadvantage relates to sources: much data on migrant smuggling is unclear or incoherent, in large part due to reticence on the part of smugglers to speak to researchers. The second disadvantage is associated with previous studies, in which researchers use incomplete data to develop concepts and analyse trends. Because existing concepts and trend analyses are based on incomplete data, they often generate conceptual ambiguities and misleading information, which can further muddy the waters. This thesis faces the same constraints and limitations as other research on migrant smuggling; the challenges I faced in obtaining quality data from Djibouti, represents the situation not only for me as a DPhil researcher, but for researchers of smuggling more broadly.

To navigate these complexities and contextual challenges, I took a heavily pragmatic methodological approach. I used my positionality to gain entry into smuggling ecosystems: I have long-standing professional experience in each of the sites selected for the case studies in this thesis and I used pre-existing networks both to identify individuals to support data collection process and as a source of triangulation. In addition, I used a highly flexible research approach. Over the course of my DPhil, several major external events took place that changed my approach to data collection: the most significant of these was the coup in Niger, but others included changes in the Taliban’s approach to border controls and shifts in local economies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to these challenges, I adapted my data collection methods (e.g., collecting data solely through an interlocutor in Niger) and sampling strategies. In part to compensate for potential lack of comparability in my data collection, and in part to account for the “double disadvantage”, I relied heavily on triangulation. This helped to mitigate some of the bias and unclarity associated with collecting data from smugglers who were highly likely to have biased perceptions about state

performance. My triangulation efforts consisted not only of choosing multiple case study locations, but also of cross-checking between various types of primary data (interviews, interlocutor discussions, participant observation) and secondary data (from academic and grey sources). I also incorporated political events that took place after the period of my field work into the analysis through secondary data collection and supplementary discussions. Finally, in the case of Djibouti, I validated the results of my primary data collection in Obock with some supplementary data collection through another interlocutor in a nearby area; this helped to mitigate the risk of interlocutor bias.

In the following section I will first describe the overall methodological approach in more depth. I will then discuss the approaches I used to collect data: these are strongly rooted in my positionality. I will conclude with some reflections on the limitations of this study, as well as the risks and ethics associated with studying migrant smuggling and state legitimacy.

## **4.2 Methodological Approach**

The risks and difficulties of researching migrant smuggling have been described in detail in the literature. Researchers often rely on legal and administrative data such as court proceedings to analyse irregular markets. While this is a valuable source of data, it is subject to bias since individuals' statements to courts and administrative officials are often rehearsed and intended to portray a specific image, especially in light of ongoing court proceedings (Potter and Potter 2020). Little research on smugglers is based on interviews or participant observation with smugglers themselves, although there are some notable exceptions (Sanchez and Natividad 2017; Achilli 2018; Zhang et al. 2018). Collection of data from smugglers is challenging because smugglers are often difficult to access, and even when physical access is possible, they are often reticent about speaking openly, especially with people who are not from their communities (Baird and Van Liempt 2016; Potter and Potter 2020). When data is collected directly from smugglers, it is often limited to only one location, thus limiting

broader applicability and wider conceptualisations (Baird and Van Liempt 2016). To account for at least some of these myriad difficulties, I developed a methodological approach which relies on two pillars: the first is the use of ethnography to analyse political and criminal dynamics, and the second is the use of an exploratory case study approach. In this chapter I focus on the wider methodological decisions (i.e., why I adopted each approach); discussion of why specific cases are chosen takes place in Chapter 3.

#### *4.2.1 Political and Criminological Ethnography and Complementary Approaches*

This thesis strives to better understand the interrelationships among smugglers, their communities and state legitimacy. The majority of these interrelationships take place not through formal channels and documented communication, but instead via conversations and negotiations held off the record (Majidi 2018; Achilli 2024). Collecting data on this nexus thus posed a dilemma: on the one hand, I had limited ability to directly access two of the three sites (Agadez and Zaranj) due to security considerations, but on the other hand, direct access to conversations and interactions was necessary to shed light on my research subject. To navigate this situation, I adopted an approach characterised by “productive complementarity” in which there is a synergistic value in combining methods (Wedeen 2010; Cornwall et al. 2025). Interviews formed the bulk of my data, but I aimed to approach analysis with an ethnographic “sensibility”, and to contextualise the interviews in terms of participant observation undertaken both within the scope of the fieldwork and through my previous humanitarian work.

The grounding of my methodology in an ethnographic sensibility took place in large part to support a more nuanced understanding of legitimacy. A core of scholarship in both political science and criminology advocates for more extensive use of ethnographic methods, including in fragile contexts such as Niger and Afghanistan (Krause 2021; Okcuoglu 2025). In political science, some researchers have argued that ethnography can be uniquely useful to

gain a holistic understanding of the distribution and exercise of power, and to better understand the ways in which ordinary experiences of unbelief and resistance manifest themselves (Schatz 2009; Wedeen 2010). In criminology, ethnographic approaches allow exploration of the relationship between state structures of control and marginalised individuals and communities who may be responsible for criminal actors (Fleetwood and Potter 2017). The major added value of ethnography in both fields is thus its nuance and its capacity to improve understanding of how power is experienced, and how individuals and communities react to power and/or control. It should be noted that in the context of criminological ethnography, immersion can come with risks; there are incidents of criminological ethnographers who have been prosecuted for committing crimes with their research subjects, accused of making up data and served prison time for refusing to give contact details of informants to state actors (Fleetwood and Potter 2017).

There were clear limits, however, to my ability to conduct ethnography in my case study sites. I could not directly visit Zaranj or Agadez during my field work because of security conditions, though I had visited previously in my role as a humanitarian worker. I thus built an ethnographic sensibility on the basis of both my previous experience in both areas and regular discussion with key interlocutors, whom I hired to support data collection. I engaged in regular discussions with these interlocutors about context, in part to help to better situate and triangulate my results. The limits of my ability to conduct ethnographic research were defined by both practical and theoretical considerations. Ethnographies aim to holistically represent cultures, societies or groups, but my research – including my participant observation and discussions with key interlocutors – focused on power, states and legitimacy (Schatz 2009). This decision to narrow scope was taken in part because of the nature of my research question, and in part because those in smuggling communities are strongly reticent

about fully engaging and opening their cultures to outsiders, but are more willing to speak about power dynamics and state legitimacy.

#### *4.2.2 Exploratory Case Studies*

The subject of this thesis – smuggler perceptions of state legitimacy, and ways in which smuggling communities can affect state legitimacy – has not been the subject of significant academic attention. While some research has taken place on the relationship between smugglers and the state (Achilli 2024), there is significantly more room to explore the dynamics between these actors, and to conduct research that accounts for and helps to address the double disadvantage associated with migrant smuggling.

Exploratory case study approaches are often appropriate when studying ambiguous phenomena: according to Robert Yin (2018), they can be used when (1) a researcher faces a “how” or “what” question in a domain with few established theories, (2) the boundaries between a phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined, and (3) the case is context dependent. My research question meets these criteria. I seek to understand “how” smugglers engage with and influence state legitimacy. However, I recognise that state actions can influence those of smugglers, and vice versa. Finally, the ways in which smugglers operate, and the dynamics between smugglers and states, are dependent on many contextual factors, including but not limited to externalisation policies, political changes, historical governance and informal governance mechanisms, and pre-existing levels of state legitimacy.

The use of an exploratory approach is particularly pertinent for the migrant smuggling context. Research on and conceptualisations of migrant smuggling are often context-dependent, and conceptualisations of smuggling evolve along with changes in migration flows and policy dynamics (Baird and Van Liempt 2016; Zhang et al. 2018; Carrasco-Granger et al. 2025). Similarly, data on smuggling is often challenging to obtain, and requires

use of flexible methods. Exploratory approaches emphasise flexibility and adaptivity; this allows for revision of research questions, analytical frameworks and units of analysis (Yin 2018). In the case of my research, I added Afghanistan as a case after completing data collection in Niger and Djibouti because my pre-existing interviews from Afghanistan seemed to shed light on the research question. The exploratory approach also undergirded my use of different data sources, including my previous experience in the case study locations and my conversations with key interlocutors as evidence (Yin 2018).

A second important aspect of my approach was the use of multiple case studies. I decided to examine the relationship between smugglers and state legitimacy in several smuggling communities to better understand the degree to which my results could be replicable (Small 2009). Concentrating on one case study would have allowed me to draw out the dynamics between smugglers and state legitimacy in greater depth, but there would also have been little, if any, reason to assume that the result was generalisable to other contexts. This is particularly due to the fact that irregular migration routes do not necessarily share common political or social dynamics. By developing and analysing multiple case studies, I could start to understand whether smugglers were likely to influence state legitimacy in different contexts, and to analyse the factors that could affect this influence.

#### **4.3 Data Collection**

Gaining access to smugglers is notoriously difficult, not only because they are involved in illicit activities, but also because they are deeply ingrained in local communities, who will often protect smugglers whom they see as their own, from external risks. In addition, smuggling communities and markets are often overwhelmingly male spaces; toughness, risk taking and economic provision are some of the masculine ideals around which smuggling markets are formed. These masculine expectations shaped not only participation in

smuggling but also interactions with researchers and other community members – in part by making it more difficult for me, as a female researcher, to gain access.

My positionality was key to gaining access: I have a background in humanitarian work, and as a humanitarian I designed and supervised data collection efforts focusing on irregular migration and smuggling for the route from Afghanistan to Europe. However, my positionality also limited the degree to which I could collect data; humanitarian agencies are seen as separate and distinct from local communities and often as having relatively greater power. They are also seen as being aligned with the interests of Western states. Gender also shaped my fieldwork and my methods: to account for the gendered nature of smuggling markets, and to the challenges I face in accessing these markets directly, I worked through male interlocutors.

For this thesis, I replicated data collection mechanisms which had generated meaningful data for me as a humanitarian actor. I had started researching smugglers together with a colleague, Abdullah, in 2018. We developed questionnaires and approaches to engage with migrants and smugglers in transit communities, and we worked together to obtain ethical approval for our research from the international NGO we worked for as well as the relevant donors.<sup>9</sup> This research yielded interesting insights into the dynamics of smuggling communities in Afghanistan. The data collection modalities I developed for this thesis – engagement with interlocutors and the use of an exploratory approach – are rooted in this experience with Abdullah.

I identified interlocutors through my pre-existing networks in smuggling communities. These networks were an essential part of gaining access: I often started talking to a former colleague or a friend, who put me in touch with someone from a local smuggling

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<sup>9</sup> *Our data collection exercise was funded by the UK government (FCDO) as well as the European Union.*

community, who put me in touch with a smuggler. People's willingness to support my research rested in our former work relationships and the trust I had built with them. It was reinforced by the fact that I am not white; it was therefore perceived that I had a natural affinity with local communities. In the eyes of some of my key interlocutors, and some wider community members, I could be a diaspora Afar or a diaspora Pakistani. While my positionality helped me to access networks within smuggling communities, and gain trust within these networks, it also limited the degree to which I could use these networks. While I might be associated with local communities, I clearly was not from the communities. Individuals from my network knew me in a professional context where I usually had management responsibilities, and this placed a further distance between us. While they would put me in touch with their networks, they would also tell people that I had previously been management staff, and I currently own a consulting company that could offer future employment. My background was likely to create a distance between me and smugglers. In addition, I am female, and most (though not all) smugglers are males. Men are usually reluctant to talk to women about the details of their work, particularly if the work is in an illicit sector.

To access smugglers and navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by my own positionality, I worked extensively with three key interlocutors. For the purposes of this thesis, I define a key interlocutor as a person with strong ties to the smuggling ecosystem who engages in repeated dialogue with myself, and who conducts extensive engagements, including interviews, on my behalf (Leve 2022). I engaged with interlocutors for several reasons. The first concerned data quality and analysis: when interlocutors from the local community spoke to smugglers and others in the ecosystem, they were likely to receive more reliable and honest answers. It would not be possible for me to achieve this degree of familiarity, regardless of the amount of time I spent in country. The second concerned

nuance: I could better understand the ways in which the smuggling ecosystem worked through both my discussions with interlocutors, in which they explained local dynamics to me, and through my interactions with interlocutors – which were sometimes tense but which nonetheless shed light on local dynamics. The third reason for engaging with interlocutors involved building access and trust. I identified interlocutors through my networks, developed over years of humanitarian work. Individuals in my network trusted me, and they communicated this trust to their communities, which in turn found trusted interlocutors for me. Using my existing networks to identify interlocutors both helped to ensure clear and more open conversations between smuggler and interlocutor, and also helped to assure communities' trust in me as I had arrived courtesy of the recommendation of an individual they knew well. All the interlocutors were male, as this allowed for greater access to smuggling networks.

In specific cases, working with interlocutors offered additional practical and logistical advantages. First, for the Afghanistan case, I had a long-standing relationship with Abdullah, whom I knew well and trusted highly; the relationship was reciprocal rather than extractive. Second, my engagement with my interlocutor helped to manage security issues in Niger. During the course of my research there, a coup and a change of government took place. If the research had relied on my long-term in-person presence, it would not have been possible to complete data collection. However, my engagement with my trusted interlocutor allowed for continued data collection (though it should be noted that the lack of in-person fieldwork during the thesis period has meant that there is less depth to the Niger case compared to Afghanistan and Djibouti). In the case of Djibouti, working with interlocutors offered both advantages and disadvantages. I was able to access a wide range of individuals through Mohamed, my interlocutor in Djibouti, but Mohamed was also highly biased and rooted within the smuggling community. As such, he had a strong desire to present smugglers in a

positive light. In terms of assuring the validity of my data, I managed Mohamed's bias by collecting supplementary data from a second, nearby site with a different interlocutor to verify my results and by triangulating against my own experience and those of other colleagues in Djibouti. The process of engaging with Mohamed and trying to understand how his bias affected his actions also provided specific analytical insights about some of the narratives smugglers propagate within their communities, the value smuggling is perceived to provide (and the efforts people will make to protect this value) and the assumptions that are prevalent within the smuggling community, explained in the vignette in Chapter 9. My relationship with each interlocutor evolved over the course of the research as a function of many factors, including the interlocutor's personal characteristics, the context in the country, and my own logistical and administrative constraints. In Afghanistan, my interlocutor Abdullah and I met when I was still fully engaged in humanitarian work. Abdullah is an Afghan who studied demographics and who is strongly engaged in student networks and Hazara kinship circles. He and I were colleagues, and jointly set up EU- and UK-funded projects to monitor mixed migration flows from Afghanistan to Europe. Abdullah and I have co-authored several research papers, and we have a regular long-standing collaboration. In Djibouti, I met my interlocutor Mohammed through my network of contacts; I have worked in the capital, Djiboutiville, on migration-related projects since 2018 and I have a reasonably wide network of contacts, but most are from the Somali ethnic group which is less engaged in migrant smuggling. When I mentioned my studies to one of my contacts, he asked friends from Obock for contact points who would introduce me to smugglers. His friends put me in touch with Mohamed both because Mohamed spoke several languages (not only Somali, Afar and French, but also Amharic and Oromifa, the languages of migrants passing through Obock), and because Mohamed was from a family which held significant influence in Obock. However, as was seen in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter and others throughout

this thesis, Mohamed was significantly biased; to account for his bias, I took several steps. These included collecting data from a supplementary site (Tadjourah) using a different interlocutor, triangulating my analysis against different sources of literature and verifying my analysis with my own past experience in Djibouti and that of colleagues. My interlocutor in Niger, Marwana, was also a part of the humanitarian community; I had worked in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in 2014, and had maintained a network of contacts in the region. These contacts put me in touch with Marwana; while Marwana was from the south of Niger (i.e., he had fewer ethnic connections with smugglers), he had already conducted data collection for several think tanks and NGOs about migration-related subjects and had an extensive network in Agadez. I should perhaps note at this point that, between my three primary interlocutors (Abdullah in Afghanistan, Mohamed in Djibouti and Marwana in Niger), Mohamed showed the most bias both toward the process of data collection and toward the subject matter of the thesis. My alignment with Abdullah was significantly stronger due in large part to our many years of collaboration in both humanitarian work and research, and our common interest in better understanding the ways in which migrant, smugglers and states interact. My engagement with Marwana was built, not only on previous data collection exercises, but also on the norms and standards prevalent in the humanitarian sector; this involved explicit discussion of how to manage bias, how to incorporate the viewpoints of different community members, and how to work with different individuals within the community to collect balanced and robust data.

Despite the fact that each relationship was unique, I developed a common approach to conducting data collection through all three interlocutors. I developed an interview questionnaire to support semi-structured engagement between interlocutors and interviewees based on a literature review, and refined the questionnaire with interlocutors. Each interlocutor conducted interviews on my behalf, and I had regular discussions with each

interlocutor about the situation in his country, in the smuggling community and in the international system. I developed the engagement plan for key interlocutors on the basis of my experience working with research assistants both as a humanitarian actor, and as a part of a research consultancy firm focusing on co-authorship with migrants and refugees. Through these experiences I have developed a series of good practices which support trust-building and open collaboration, which helped to develop my relationship with interlocutors.

Table 1 below provides a summary of the data collection approaches used in each context; it should be understood that even where participant observation took place, it was facilitated by interlocutors. In Afghanistan, the data used in this thesis is considered as secondary data, as ethical approval was received from the international NGO I worked for as well as the relevant donors (the UK's FCDO and the EU). In Djibouti and Niger, CUREC approval was received before participant observation, interviews and discussions took place.

|                                                                      | <b>Afghanistan</b>                                                                           | <b>Djibouti</b>                       | <b>Niger</b>                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prior Engagements</b>                                             | Concentrated over a period of 3 years                                                        | Sporadically over a period of 3 years | Concentrated over a period of 6 months                |
| <b>Time Period of Prior Engagements</b>                              | 2015 - 2017                                                                                  | 2019; 2021 - 2022                     | 2014; 2023 - 2024                                     |
| <b>Current Participant Observation</b>                               | --                                                                                           | Concentrated over 2 months            | --                                                    |
| <b>Interviews conducted by interlocutors</b>                         | 26                                                                                           | 42                                    | 31                                                    |
| <b>Interviews conducted by DPhil Student within thesis timeframe</b> | 0                                                                                            | 20                                    | 0                                                     |
| <b>Discussions with interlocutors</b>                                | Yes                                                                                          | Yes                                   | Yes                                                   |
| <b>Time of Interviews &amp; Discussions</b>                          | 2018 (10 interviews);<br>2019 (8 interviews);<br>2022 (6 interviews);<br>2025 (2 interviews) | 2023                                  | 2023                                                  |
| <b>Triangulation</b>                                                 | Secondary literature<br>Colleagues<br>Past experience                                        | Secondary literature                  | Secondary literature<br>Colleagues<br>Past experience |

|  |  |                                                                  |  |
|--|--|------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
|  |  | Two interlocutors <sup>10</sup><br>Colleagues<br>Past experience |  |
|--|--|------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

*Table 1: Summary of Data Collection Modalities*

In total, 99 interviews were conducted by interlocutors and I conducted another 20 interviews (that is, this thesis is informed by 119 interviews in total). All interviews in Djibouti and Niger were conducted within the time frame of this DPhil (2021 – 2026), and specifically with the intention of delving into this research question. Interviews in Afghanistan were conducted longitudinally; four rounds of interviews were conducted in 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2025. The Afghanistan interviews were conducted in the context of data collection for other research, but given that one of the research projects was about the legitimacy of borders, there was significant overlap with this research. Interviews in Djibouti and Niger were held in local languages by key interlocutors.

Key interlocutors identified interviewees through their pre-existing networks, and all interviews in Djibouti and Niger were conducted in person. In the case of Afghanistan, Abdullah reached out through family and student networks to smugglers, and conducted 16 interviews in person and 10 via messaging service (WhatsApp, Vibr, etc). The first two rounds of data collection (2018 and 2019) involved smugglers drawn more from student than family networks, and interviewees represented different ethnic groups and ages. In the last two rounds of data collection, as security conditions grew worse, Abdullah relied more on family networks than student networks. In the case of Niger, Marwana has long-standing contacts in Agadez, and has collected data on smugglers for NGOs and think tanks over many years. At the beginning of the data collection process, we broke down the two primary groups

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<sup>10</sup> Please note that although the majority of my research was conducted with Mohamed, I also engaged with another interlocutor and visited another nearby field site (Tadjourah) to verify my findings, especially in light of Mohamed's bias. This process included a visit to the manager of the territory's smuggling activities as well as three supplementary interviews. I have not included extensive details about the number of interviews and conversations, as these were conducted less formally, primarily for the sake of ensuring that Djibouti data was valid. The visit to the manager of the territory is however extensively used within the thesis.

of respondents (smugglers and community members) into sub-components. With regard to smugglers, I wanted to speak with drivers, coxeurs (people who recruit migrants into smuggling networks) and local organisers of networks. With regard to local community members, I wanted to speak with community elders, local businesspeople (with a focus on those providing food, shelter and mobile phone credit) and those with minimal contact with the smuggling economy. Marwana was able to access the types of respondents I was looking to interview, so we did not need to adjust the sample significantly during the data collection process. Although Mohamed and I discussed the respondents I was looking to target, it proved significantly more challenging in Djibouti to ensure that the sample was broken down into the sub-groups I had initially specified (for example, Mohamed included interviews with government officials and staff of international agencies in Obock although I was not initially planning to interview these groups, and there were no interviews with providers of shelter). The vast majority of individuals who were interviewed for this thesis were men: all interviews in Afghanistan took place with men; only 3 interviews took place with women in Niger (2 of these were community members, and 1 was a restaurant owner), and only 2 interviews took place with women in Djibouti (both of these were with community members). My dataset is thus not an adequate reflection of the dynamics of migrant smuggling communities, as women do play roles in smuggling – for example, women acted as lookouts in smuggling markets in Djibouti (that is, they were positioned to identify potential threats to the smuggling market such as police, and if they saw such a threat they would inform managers within the smuggling network), and in all three locations women played roles as caretakers. However, the interviews that took place indicate that there is a strong reluctance on the part of community members to involve women in smuggling, and there is a stigma associated with women who work. In Niger, two respondents stated that women from the local community were not involved in the smuggling market because their

job was to support their husbands and families, and to be treated like “queens”. In this context, women who were involved in smuggling were unlikely to want to speak, particularly to men, about their activities. My own positionality formed an interesting point here, as two aspects of my position were in conflict. While there was a greater possibility that, as a woman, I could empathise with women involved in smuggling, I was also a foreigner. I could only approach women through my male interlocutors and translators – but also, through years of humanitarian work, I knew that foreign women are often perceived as having different standards compared to women from local communities, and thus women could feel more embarrassed, and feel that they were attracting more stigma, if they spoke to me. It should also be noted that data on gender is particularly lacking in Afghanistan; not only is migrant smuggling perceived as a male activity, but collecting data on gender in the Afghanistan context has unique difficulties, which have only increased after the Taliban took power.

With all key interlocutors, we had engaged in extensive discussion prior to the interview process to ensure that they would obtain informed consent from the interviewees. Interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity. They were sent to me on a semi-regular basis (monthly for Obock, and at the end of specific exercises and processes for Agadez and Zaranj). Interviews were not recorded electronically, but handwritten notes were taken and then typed up. To the degree possible, the interlocutors noted down the exact words of the interviewees, so the interview notes sometimes bore a strong resemblance to transcripts. Interviews were categorised by interviewee type, that is, whether they are “smuggler”, “government” or “other community member”; this categorisation was developed around the research questions and literature review. The focus on smugglers, rather than other actors, in Afghanistan reflects the longitudinal nature of the engagement with the interlocutor, and the specificities of our overlapping interests. Similarly, in Niger, formal interviews with government actors did not take place because of the political uncertainty and changes in

government. The details of the interviews conducted through interlocutors and kept within the dataset are included in Table 2. It should be noted that in Djibouti, all 42 interviews were conducted by Mohamed; he also submitted another 15 transcripts which I excluded due to the high likelihood that they were produced by AI. In addition to the interviews listed in the table below, I conducted 20 interviews with smugglers and government officials in Djibouti.

|                                       | <b>Afghanistan</b> | <b>Djibouti</b> | <b>Niger</b> | <b>TOTAL</b> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Smugglers<sup>11</sup></b>         | 26                 | 14              | 7            | 47           |
| <b>Government Actors<sup>12</sup></b> | 0                  | 5               | 0            | 5            |
| <b>Business owners</b>                | 0                  | 6               | 6            | 12           |
| <b>Migrants</b>                       | 0                  | 10              | 10           | 20           |
| <b>Other Community Members</b>        | 0                  | 7               | 8            | 15           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                          | <b>26</b>          | <b>42</b>       | <b>31</b>    | <b>99</b>    |

*Table 2: Interviews Conducted through Interlocutors*

The level and depth of interviews varied depending on the character of the interviewee. The interview questionnaire included questions about perceptions of the state and perceptions about who held power. In some cases, interlocutors were uncomfortable asking these questions and so skipped them; in others participants provided vague or evasive answers, and in still others participants chose not to answer. There was a higher likelihood of building trust with interviewees if key interlocutors conducted interviews. Interviewees were also relatively open about their smuggling activities because migrant smuggling had largely been normalised in all three case study contexts. Key interlocutors also made decisions about how to phrase questions and what type of engagement to conduct; they had flexibility to engage in a way they thought would be most conducive to participant comfort.

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<sup>11</sup> *The smugglers we spoke to can broadly be broken down into three groups: drivers, recruiters and other. In Djibouti we spoke to 6 drivers, 2 recruiters and 6 others; in Agadez, we spoke to 3 drivers, 2 recruiters and 2 others. In Afghanistan the balance was more strongly toward “others”; these individuals also had more managerial responsibility.*

<sup>12</sup> *We only spoke to government authorities in Djibouti, and these individuals were representatives of the local government.*

In addition to the 99 interviews conducted by key interlocutors, I conducted 20 interviews during my visit to Djibouti. These interviews were generally conducted with low-level smugglers such as boat drivers, taxi drivers; community members, including those with limited engagement with smugglers as well as those whose businesses engaged with smugglers; and government officials. During these interviews, it became clear that the decision to work with key interlocutors had reaped advantages. My positionality had a strong effect on the quality of data obtained in several ways. Some individuals were reluctant to talk about their work because they perceived me as an outsider; others tried to inflate their own status during the interviews. The fact that I represented the University of Oxford played into and heightened the dynamics. Some interviewees appeared reluctant to discuss aspects of smuggling with a female researcher, particularly activities that were framed as men's affairs. In my field sites, women were more commonly described as occupying supporting or facilitating roles than as directly managing smuggling operations, and rarely as direct drivers of the business, and respondents seemed uncomfortable to talk about men's affairs with a woman. In addition, several male interviewees appeared to perform status, authority and expertise during interviews. These performances reflected not only strategic self-presentation toward an external researcher but also broader masculine norms within smuggling economies in which reputation and perceived competence constitute important forms of social capital. a dynamic I return to in Chapter 7 in relation to status and provision.

It should also be noted that while my data collection took place, by and large, in 2023, my analysis includes political events that took place after the period of my data collection. The engagement between smugglers and states has evolved rapidly, especially in the Niger and Afghanistan contexts; excluding events that took place after data collection would have substantially affected the validity of my analysis.

The analysis and conclusions presented in this thesis draw from 119 interviews, as well as an extensive literature review and triangulation process with my own experience and that of colleagues. Quotes from 64 interviews are included in this thesis; the interviewees that were quoted were able to articulate specific aspects of their communities, and relationships between their communities and the state. Interviewees whose accounts are not quoted directly often provided concise, factual responses that informed the analysis but did not lend themselves to illustrating the broader social and contextual processes explored in this thesis. Quotations were selected because they illustrated themes that emerged across multiple interviews rather than because they were particularly dramatic or unusual. Where striking quotations are used, they are intended to illustrate broader analytical patterns identified through coding and triangulation.

My analysis also drew on my engagements with my key interlocutors. Whereas the engagements with Abdullah in Afghanistan and those with Marwana in Niger are relatively straightforward, those with Mohamed are often characterised by bias and extremity. There were some advantages to engagement with him: through our repeated engagements I gained a greater understanding of some of the assumptions underlying smugglers' engagements with authorities and with actors they consider to be foreign. However, while Mohamed's observations informed my understanding of local political dynamics, the arguments presented in this thesis are derived primarily from the wider interview corpus and triangulation with participant observation, secondary literature and supplementary interviews in Tadjourah. Mohamed's interpretations are discussed where analytically useful, or they represent a broader trend, but are not treated as representative unless supported by other evidence.

**I have relied, not only on quotes, but also on several respondent stories – their own life histories and my engagements with them. Nine stories (both life histories and stories of engagements between the respondents and myself) recur several times through this thesis. These stories and engagements were illustrative of multiple themes that are relevant to the thesis. They provided novel insights into smugglers’ relationships with their communities, the state and the international community. Their recurrence should not be interpreted as indicating that their experiences were more typical or more important than those of other participants. Rather, their accounts provided particularly rich illustrations of analytic themes that were identified across the wider dataset. The purpose of focusing on these stories is to provide sufficient narrative depth to demonstrate the processes, decisions, and social contexts underpinning the engagements between smugglers, their communities and the state.**

#### **4.4 Reflections on Risks,**

#### **Limitations and Ethics**

My relationship with Mohamed, encapsulated in the vignette at the start of this chapter, encapsulates some of the key ethical dilemmas, limitations, and risks presented by my fieldwork. These risks were (1) the risks of misleading or false data, (2) the risks associated with conducting dialectic fieldwork processes in fragile contexts, and (3) the risks that I would unintentionally exploit interviewees or interlocutors, or contribute to the exploitation of others, especially given that power imbalances are acute in the situations where I collected data. The below section should be read with the following in mind: with all my interlocutors, I clarified regularly through the research process that they should not engage in situations that they thought were dangerous. I was open to changing phrasing and wording, to changing target numbers, and to speaking not to smugglers but to other individuals in local communities. In both Afghanistan and Niger, I had clear and open

discussions about these issues with interlocutors, and implemented at least some of these mitigation measures through the research process.

Self-perception and self-interest are always important factors to consider in qualitative data collection, but these issues are even more significant when researching smuggling, given the illicit nature of smugglers' work (Baird and Van Liempt 2016; Fleetwood and Potter 2017). Smugglers can also have a significant amount of economic and physical power over other members of the community; their presence in the community can thus bias responses. If I as a researcher pushed too hard for interviews, I would get false responses, or responses generated by AI. In this context of hidden layers, complex social structures, and unwieldy bureaucracies, it was impossible to expect perfect information. Instead, I needed to reframe my expectations, and work to understand the common threads that ran through the variety of individual interviews, as well as the discussions with my interlocutors. I worked to triangulate the data for each location against academic and grey literature, and then I aimed to draw out similarities and differences between the three locations. I aimed to form a picture of each location, not only through the interviews, but also through my engagement with the interlocutors, and with other individuals and organisations operational in each location.

Within this context, it is also important to mention that many of the claims smugglers made about their own conduct — that they rescued stranded migrants, treated customers well, or refrained from the violence they attributed to rivals and to other categories of smuggler — could not be independently verified. Migrant perspectives on smuggler conduct are present in my data but comparatively thin, and I did not systematically collect migrant testimony about the specific individuals or networks quoted in this thesis. Where such claims appear in the empirical chapters, I therefore treat them as evidence of how smugglers seek to present themselves and to allocate legitimacy — that is, as evidence of narratives and norms — rather than as findings about actual conduct, and I flag the distinction in the text where it bears on

the argument. The same principle applies to claims about the conduct of the state. Smugglers have a structural interest in narrating state weakness: as Chapter 7 argues, they derive legitimacy within their communities from filling gaps left by the state, and the existence of the gap is the premise of that claim. Quotes about the failure or absence of the state are therefore treated, by default, as evidence of the narratives circulating within the smuggling ecosystem, and as descriptions of reality only where they are corroborated by respondents outside the ecosystem — community members with minimal engagement in the smuggling economy, migrants or government officials — or by survey data, national statistics and secondary literature.

The relationship between a researcher and his or her interlocutor has received a significant amount of attention in academia. A range of authors have written about collaboration, contestation, language and tension in this relationship in both academic and non-academic contexts (Rabinow 2016; Leve 2022; Zenker and Vonderau 2023). Paul Rabinow's (2016) description of his interactions with an interlocutor, Ali, in Morocco are perhaps most relevant for my research. Rabinow pushed back against Ali, thus also challenging the idea that the informant is always right, and it is essential for the anthropologist to suspend disbelief. The pushback had the possibility to end the relationship between Rabinow and Ali – but the two re-established the relationship, according to the social terms in use in the town. In standing up to Ali, Rabinow found that not only had he communicated his point of view, but he had also acknowledged Ali as a person and demonstrated that the relationship was one of equals and of respect. After this, Ali opened up further to Rabinow – and these engagements provided critical anthropological insights. In all of my relationships with my interlocutors, we have navigated some tensions. I have pushed back, both in person and over distance, but have always sought to re-establish the relationships in accordance with the interlocutor's norms. These interactions – the continual

breaking and re-forming of our relationships – gave me more insight not only into my interlocutors, but into their communities, and how their communities interacted with the wider world. These insights have directly influenced both the overall argument and some of the specific examples provided in this thesis. The interaction Rabinow describes between himself and Ali is also characteristic of my relationship with Mohamed: by navigating the tensions and continually re-forming our relationship, I was able to better understand Mohamed's own norms and his methods of relating to power structures and authorities. In doing so, there was a risk that I also took on some of his bias: I worked to try to minimise this risk by collecting data at a second site with a different interlocutor in Djibouti, as well as by testing my results and conclusions with colleagues and friends who had more balanced points of view.

Edward Said noted that the term “interlocutor” is fraught, and is linked with colonial ideas of compliance (Said 1989). In making this argument, he encapsulated the ethical and moral risks associated with power dynamics. In all the relationships between myself and my interlocutors, I held a significant amount of power. The power manifested itself in many forms. First and most direct, I paid two of my three interlocutors for their time and their effort. In paying my interlocutors, not only did I place myself above them in a hierarchy (i.e., I became their boss), but I also made use of a tool (money) that could be used to incentivise certain behaviour. The threat of non-payment could obviously generate biased results. Second, I was a representative of the University of Oxford. The prestige of Oxford helped me to gain acceptance; interlocutors had a higher level of respect for me because of the institution. However, they also assumed that because I was at Oxford, I had access to significant amounts of money and political influence – neither of which is true. My own professional background also contributed to power dynamics. I own a company that conducts research into migration and displacement issues; as such, I was not only a source of current

income for interlocutors, but also a potential source of future contracts. This gave me still more power over interlocutors – not only in the present, but also in the future. All my interlocutors worked to develop an egalitarian relationship with me, as I did with them – but the underlying power dynamics remained and influenced our relationships. They also led to a number of insights which were relevant, not only for interpersonal relationships, but also for understanding how smuggling ecosystems relate to the state.

My engagements with smugglers had ethical implications. In general, due to my engagement with interlocutors, I remained a step away from day-to-day smuggling activity. I did observe migrant crossings, efforts made by smugglers to bypass border authorities, and corruption on the part of border authorities. I did not, however, directly witness any abusive behaviour by smugglers toward migrants in this research. I have encountered such situations before; it is generally not possible to prevent abuse, but I ensure that I have contacts in international agencies and providers of first aid and assistance in case I encounter someone who is extremely vulnerable and in need of care. I also ensured that my interlocutors had access to this information to support referrals and provision of assistance if and when needed.

Finally, I would like to note that I complied with University of Oxford ethics guidelines throughout this project. I received CUREC approval in 2022; there were delays in data collection due to personal issues, and I received an extension of CUREC approval until January 2025. All travel was conducted in line with the University of Oxford's travel risk assessments and associated protocols.

## 5.0 Smuggling Economies and Ecosystems

### 5.1 Introduction

*Mohamed revved his tiny 80 cc motorcycle and cranked up the Tupac Shakur as he sped through the outskirts of Obock. I clung to my seat behind him as we drove past decrepit buildings, stretches of desert, an IOM office and a vast black expanse of burning trash. We turned off the main highway onto a dirt road, and I bounced around helplessly until we passed the skeleton of a tree. Mohamed finally slowed down and shouted a greeting to two women squatting under the bare branches. “See them? They’re the reconnaissance. They will notify the site manager that we are here. He is from a different family from mine, so we need permission to go into the market.” We drove for a few more minutes before a cluster of ramshackle wooden huts appeared. Just past the huts, people gathered at random spots in or around an open field surrounded by trees. Mohamed finally turned down the music, and we drove into the field. Each knot of people – whether under a tree or in the open field – was engaged in intense discussion. “There’s a different smuggler under each tree. Migrants go to the different smugglers to negotiate prices.” The conversations were in Amharic, Tigrinya and Oromo for the most part; there were smugglers from three Ethiopian ethnic groups, and migrants sought out smugglers with whom they had cultural connections. Discussions sometimes reached an intense pitch, and when a deal was struck, migrants would move in the direction of the huts. I peered into one hut and saw a man doling out food from a large vat. “His father owns a restaurant business in Obock. They feed hundreds of people a day. I tried to get an interview with his father, but the man is very busy.” One man sat at the edge of the market, hawking jerry cans of petrol. Another flogged shoes. Some Obockois squatted quietly under trees; Mohammed told me that they were boat drivers, checking the likelihood that they would have cargo that night.*

Smuggling is, first and foremost, an economic activity – and in Obock, deals take place in a literal marketplace. Representatives of smuggling groups accept money or goods to move migrants across international borders; this exchange comprises the purchase of a service from the smuggling group to the migrant for a financial or other material benefit (Salt and Stein 1997). Transactions between migrants and smuggling groups are often small-scale, since services are generally tailored to local conditions and individual circumstances (Majidi 2018; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018; Richter 2019a; Achilli and Tinti 2022). But the volume of transactions taking place is so large that in 2016 the economic return from the migrant smuggling economy was estimated at 5.5 -7 billion USD (United Nations 2018). Indeed, there is an increasing recognition not only that migrant smuggling is a large self-sustaining economic market, but also that it can affect broader economic dynamics (Bruns, Miggelbrink, and Müller 2011; Richter 2019; Campana 2020). This is especially true in borderlands, where smuggling activities of various kinds often form a significant proportion of local economic activity (Scheele 2012; Hüsken 2017; Sarkar 2017; Brachet and Scheele 2019).

The layout of the market in Obock demonstrates the variety and range of actors involved in migrant smuggling. In order for migrants to make journeys, they of course require the services of a facilitator to take them across a border, but they also need a restaurateur to make food, a hotel owner for shelter, a well owner for water, a mobile phone credit provider to call their families at home, and countless others. Still further, these migrants require backing by the greater community to permit all of these interactions. For instance, they need families who own the land to allow migrants and smugglers set up camp, and they need access to the and markets and informal governance systems which regulate disputes between different smuggling groups. In other words, for the migrant smuggling market to function, a range of different individuals and businesses need to either explicitly or implicitly acquiesce

to the presence and growth of the migrant smuggling economy. Such acceptance is likely to be rooted in financial self-interest: when the market is functioning, smugglers make money, but so do all the other actors involved in the economy. If the economy persists over time and generates benefits for both migrants and a range of actors within the community, then it creates value.

The trip Mohamed and I took to the Obock marketplace indicates that the smuggling economy has persisted over time and created value, and that thus community acceptance has been developed – but this acceptance appears to have been hard-won. Alongside alignment and shared value creation, the data I collected also point to real and unresolved friction: rivalry between smuggling networks over migrants and territory, status distinctions that established smugglers draw against newer entrants, and ambivalence within host communities toward both smugglers and the migrants who pass through. I treat these tensions not as noise that obscures an otherwise cooperative system, nor as evidence that the ecosystem concept has broken down, but instead as a fundamental part of the dynamic: an ecosystem includes competitive relationships as well as cooperative ones, and integrates this antagonism through conflict resolution structures and mechanisms.

This chapter argues that in all three of my three field sites, a smuggling ecosystem has developed in which many actors with diverse interests work together to maximise their own frequently competing self-interests, and through this process, they end up jointly creating value. This value is sufficiently important that communities choose to develop structures and systems to mitigate risks, including the risks and realities associated with conflict and tension between different actors in the ecosystem, as well as those associated with engaging state actors. In the following section of this chapter, I describe the range of actors involved in the economy: I explain the types of conflicting incentives that exist within communities, and the mechanisms communities have built to mitigate risk. In section 5.3, I explain the ways in

which state actors – notably border guards and local government officials – interact with migrant smugglers. I argue that these actors may be employed by the state, but that they are still a crucial part of the smuggling ecosystem, and that their individual incentives align strongly with those of actors in the ecosystem. In section 5.4, I outline some international interventions in my field sites and describe the ways in which these interventions were integrated into the smuggling ecosystem. The chapter concludes with some reflections on markets, systems and ecosystems: in my field sites, actors who participate in the smuggling market might have conflicting incentives at an individual level, but their shared norms and values were sufficiently strong to integrate investments and initiatives designed by the state and the international system.

## 5.2 Aligning Diverse Community Incentives

*People in Zaranj are totally living off the migrant smuggling. Ordinary people, shop keepers, taxi drivers, government officials, criminals, beggars, everybody's livelihood here is depending on two things: Opium and migrant. If you take these two from Zaranj, the city will become a desert in a month. (Smuggler 1, Nimroz, Afghanistan, 2022)*

The most visible link between actors in the smuggling ecosystems I researched consists of financial flows between migrants, members of smuggling groups, businesses and communities. Money acts as the glue that binds together these actors, with one smuggler describing the situation as follows: “[We] say, ‘If there is no money no funny’, and it is key to whatever you need, even the border guards need it.” (Nimkar and Angulo Molina 2025). Financial links may, at first glance, seem ephemeral. In Mohamed’s market in Obock, for example, one-off deals are struck under trees, in a market that exists for only a limited time: when Mohamed and I visited the same site the next day, all traces of smugglers, migrants and businesspeople were gone. However, different actors within smuggling ecosystems in

Afghanistan, Niger and Djibouti have strong incentives to ensure that ecosystems self-perpetuate over time. The smuggling economy consists of a wide range of diverse actors whose interests do not necessarily always correspond with each other – but who take active efforts to align, and to build mechanisms that support alignment and risk mitigation.

The most direct economic interactions in smuggling ecosystems take place between migrants and smuggling groups, each of whom has a clear incentive to engage. Migrants buy travel and facilitation services from smuggling groups; their immediate aim is to move to the next stop on the journey, and their long-term aim is to reach a different country.<sup>13</sup> Countries of destination are often selected at least in part for economic reasons: 71% of irregular migrants interviewed by the Mixed Migration Centre from 2019 to 2024 selected their country of destination for economic reasons (Mixed Migration Centre no date).<sup>14</sup> Much has been written about economic drivers for both regular and irregular migration in both academia and the press; these depictions sometimes conjure visions of large-scale payoffs for migrants. While some migrants do indeed dream of becoming rich, others are content with much less, and their motivations for migrating are driven by contextual factors. West African migrants from Ghana, for example, have adopted migration as a strategy to manage economic hardship associated with dwindling fishing stocks, which in turn are caused by intertwined large-scale climatic and commercial developments (Lucht 2012). The perceived economic benefits of migration also interact with factors such as social status and family obligation (Kleist and Thorsen 2017). Among the migrants interviewed for this thesis, several described the

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<sup>13</sup> *The currency of the transactions depends both on the location and the level. Migrants from countries with relatively stable currencies (e.g., Ethiopia) often pay smugglers in local currency, whereas those from more volatile contexts (Somalia, Afghanistan) often pay in US dollars. Transactions between smuggling groups, and between smuggling groups and border officials, often take place in US dollars. These observations are based both on my experience working with irregular migration as a humanitarian worker, and on data from fieldwork. They can be broadly corroborated by examining data and research from the Mixed Migration Centre.*

<sup>14</sup> *Please note that MMC data spans several routes: they have collected data across Asia, East Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, North Africa, Southern Africa and West and Central Africa. The statistic provided here reflects all routes; the results are also similar across all routes.*

economic and social factors that led to their departure. For instance, a Cameroonian migrant named Peter, whom we interviewed in Agadez, Niger, had chosen to leave home because he had failed the entrance exams for the police force. He perceived his employment prospects in Cameroon to be close to non-existent, so when he heard his brother talking about Europe, he decided to move. He was not aiming for riches or savings – just for a job. Having a job was important not only for money but also to alleviate boredom: Peter mentioned several times throughout the interview that his biggest challenge was having “nothing to do”. This, too, corresponds with ideas of migration as adventure, and as providing a way for young men to seek success (Ali 2016; Bachelet 2019a, 2019b).

The smugglers with whom my interlocutors and I spoke were driven by incentives that are familiar to everyone: the desire to make enough money to support their families. The pilot of a Djiboutian smuggling boat, Bashir, explained his motivations to me as we drank tea and Cokes at a table covered in dust at a ramshackle hotel. Bashir had been unemployed for several years and he needed to make money to look after his family. He was a fisherman, but he rarely caught enough fish to consistently feed his family. When he looked at the jobs available, smuggling was the most lucrative: “I saw that there was a lot of money in the sector, and it paid better than other activities.” It was also more flexible, and it gave him time to spend with his family. “My day is purely that of a father to feed my family, and my activities as a smuggler at night vary [on the nights when I work].” Like several smugglers we spoke to in both Djibouti and Niger, Bashir looked up to the leaders of smuggling groups, admiring the businesses they built and the resources at their disposal, and hoping that he could one day provide his family with similar levels of security. Across all three field sites, smugglers spoke about the importance of their work in assuring their family’s livelihood, but in Afghanistan, smugglers’ need to support their families took on a particularly acute edge. One person we spoke to discussed the dangers associated with his work when Iranian

authorities increased patrols at the border. He was afraid of being shot and he would have chosen another line of work – but could find nothing appropriate, and nothing that paid sufficiently for him to meet his family obligations. When smugglers spoke of their incentives and needs – to keep their families fed, to ensure that their children were looked after – they were speaking, not only of their households, but also of broader social dynamics; in looking after their families they were conforming to expectations that, as the male head of household, they would be primarily responsible for earning money – even at great risks to themselves. Expectations were thus strongly gendered and perceptions of masculinity reinforced incentives to participate in the smuggling market, even where individuals realised that their engagement posed physical risks.

The core of the smuggling market – the relationship between migrant and smuggler – is heavily influenced by local social norms and expectations, particularly around gender and ethnicity. The irregular migration flows across all three routes, according to IOM DTM data, is strongly male: approximately 80% of migrants travelling the Afghanistan to Europe route are men, as are over 70% of migrants travelling from West Africa to Europe, and from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf (IOM 2022; International Organisation for Migration 2025a, 2024, 2021, 2025c). In a similar vein, most research on migrant smuggling has assumed that the dynamic is heavily male, though Sanchez (2016) provides a more nuanced look at the role of women in the facilitation of migration in the US South West. The predominance of men in the irregular migration market, and as smugglers, is also associated with gendered expectations surrounding authority, provision, risk-taking and status. These can shape the dynamics of migrant exploitation, especially of women. On the Horn of Africa to the Gulf route, for instance, women form a small proportion of migrants on the route, but they are also more “valuable” than men, because their passports can be kept and their wages can be garnished for longer (Meraki Labs 2019). Similarly, men in charge of smuggling networks can reinforce

their power by objectifying female migrants, to the point that some smugglers will offer others gifts of female migrants (Meraki Labs 2019). Ethnicity and local social dynamics can also play a role in this exchange, as outlined in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. Along the Horn of Africa route, Ethiopian migrants from the Tigray and Amhara ethnic groups are perceived as richer and also more valuable than their Oromo counterparts; in Afghanistan, dynamics between Hazara migrants, who are Shi'a Muslims, and Pashtun migrants, who are Sunni, can be tense. Gender, religion and ethnicity can influence the specifics of market operations – including the interactions between smugglers and migrants, and the interactions between different groups of smugglers – in each of the three locations included in this thesis.

In the smuggling markets I researched, migrants are the buyers and smugglers the sellers – and in light of this relationship, there is clear communication about prices. Across all the interviews conducted in Djibouti, Niger and Afghanistan, members of smuggling groups were remarkably open about the routes they offered, rates they charged, and the amounts they earned. This openness was visible not only when representatives of smuggling groups were negotiating with migrants in marketplaces such as the one in Obock, but also in formal interviews both with interlocutors and directly with me. In all three locations, smugglers quoted prices to me and to interlocutors during interviews, and I triangulated these prices against both interviews with migrants and research conducted by other organisations.<sup>15</sup> Information about prices was close to perfect but information about the journey and supplementary costs was not: other research has found that not all migrants are fully aware of

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<sup>15</sup> *Fares in Agadez were generally quoted per migrant, with a smuggler charging approximately 10,000 FCFA (20 USD) for a single migrant's fare in a small vehicle to cross the border with Libya. In Obock, a boat driver earns 200,000 DJF (1120 USD) per boat trip from Djibouti to Yemen (boats can take up to 25 people). In Zaranj, smugglers quoted prices to cross the border between Afghanistan and Iran across several rounds of interviews that took place between 2018 and 2022; quotes went up and down over time, in line with changes in domestic politics and border authorities.*

the risks and potential violations they experienced along the route, and that risk is perceived differently (Bogdan 2023; Hinsch and Bijak 2023; Tjaden 2023). Migrants are also often subject to extortion by other smuggling groups later along the route, so the costs they are quoted are reflective only of up-front costs, rather than overall costs (Mixed Migration Centre no date). In this respect, the relationship between migrants and smugglers resembled the purchase of services: a builder, for example, may quote a clear price for a renovation, but may not be clear about the risks of delays or changes in the cost of raw materials.

Within the smuggling market, in a dynamic similar to that of a homeowner purchasing services from a builder, conflict arises between buyer and seller about the cost of the work, the necessity of supplementary costs, delays and the quality of the service provided. These types of conflicts are often characterised by inequality, as migrants have little power after the journey has commenced and are, to a large degree, reliant on smugglers. The migrants we interviewed in Agadez, for instance, made regular reference to smugglers “swindling” migrants by increasing prices midway through the route, using poor quality vehicles which broke down and acting aggressively. However, if conflicts arose, they generally appeared to resolve in favour of smugglers, because smugglers had power and “carry a lot of weight for the majority of migrants”. One migrant in Agadez described the relationship as follows: “without [smugglers] life would be impossible”. Within this power dynamic, it is difficult, if not impossible, for migrants to assert themselves and their needs; it should also be noted that within this dynamic both gender and ethnicity play a role, with women being less likely to be able to resolve issues compared to men.

If the relationship between migrant and smuggler is that of a buyer and a seller, then the relationships between smugglers and others in the ecosystems I examined form an effective supply chain: different types of inputs are required for smugglers to be able to provide the service of facilitating irregular movement across borders. Businesses thus sit

outside the core transaction between migrant and smuggler but are a crucial part of the ecosystem. Smuggling groups need to buy goods from local businesspeople, including but not limited to food, water, petrol and phone credit, to provide services to migrants. The relationship is symbiotic: if businesspeople are essential to smuggling groups, smuggling groups are also essential to businesspeople. One restaurant owner in Obock described his dealings on days with large-scale arrivals: “We pack meals in plastic, and we go to the boats to deliver the meals to the migrants. On some days there are 100 or 200 mouths to feed.” On these days when a large transport comes in, the restaurant owner employs four or five people only to feed migrants and receives 500,000 DJF (2,800 USD) in revenue. Smuggling groups either paid local businesspeople in advance, or paid them upon delivery of goods. The restaurant owner had started supplying to smuggling groups in 2015, and profit from serving migrants was much higher than profit from serving local customers. The restaurant owner had already saved enough money from his engagement with smuggling groups to buy a car – thus cementing both his wellbeing and his status in the community.

As a part of this thesis, and together with interlocutors, I collected data from business owners who provided different types of services – food, water, shelter and mobile phone credit – in Djibouti and in Niger. Across both locations, businesspeople perceived smugglers as driven primarily by economic motives: one businesspeople in Agadez recognised that smugglers could extort migrants, but excused this behaviour “because they are dissatisfied with what they earn from passengers.” Businesspeople similarly were willing to accept “crooks” among smugglers because “it’s a job that has an impact”. Specifically, businesspeople saw smugglers as “contributing to reducing unemployment” and “making a positive contribution to the city’s development”. Businesspeople did not refer to conflicts between themselves and smugglers about revenue and payment – but this is likely because there are many providers of basic services (food, water, shelter, phone credit) and given the

large impact of smugglers on the economy, businesspeople view smugglers as an important customer base which should be maintained. One credit seller in Agadez referred explicitly to the need to foster good relationships with smugglers to maintain business: “Initially, you can identify two sides to the smugglers: the side of trust and the side of lack of trust [and over time it has been important for me to build trust for my business]” The migrants, smuggling groups, businesspeople and local communities I spoke to all had strong incentives to collaborate to facilitate irregular movement. Many of these incentives were individual in nature – revenue and profit accrued to a single business, rather than to a community as a whole. Simultaneously, there was competition – many individuals and businesses can provide services (piloting a boat, cooking food, offering shelter) to migrants, and migrants were not always satisfied with the services of smugglers. Most competition was resolved through recognisable market mechanisms – migrants would talk to several smugglers and negotiate before settling on a price, and smugglers would discuss with several suppliers before developing a relationship with one supplier. Tensions were also mitigated by power dynamics; smugglers had more physical power and knowledge than migrants, and more economic power than businesspeople. But larger-scale disputes could also arise, both within the migrant smuggling market and within related markets also operating in similar geographic areas.

Across all three of my field sites, several migrant smuggling networks operated in close proximity, and conflicts could emerge between and within these networks. My fieldwork indicates that conflicts between smuggling networks arise for two primary reasons: the first is associated with ethnic and social disputes, and the second is associated with competition over territory and associated revenue. Smuggling networks often develop around kinship ties, with Amhara and Tigray migrants choosing smugglers from their ethnic group in Djibouti, and Hazara and Pashtun migrants behaving similarly in Afghanistan. Long-standing

political and ethnic tensions have existed between the Amhara and Tigrayan communities, contributing to the outbreak of the Tigray War in 2020 (Tronvoll 2022), and the Hazara ethnic group have experienced targeted attacks at the hands of the Pashtun in Afghanistan (Monsutti 2005). Underlying social and political tensions between different ethnic groups can emerge both at the level of migrants – who may enter into conflict to divide scarce resources – and at the level of smugglers. In the Obock marketplace, for instance, there were significant tensions between the Amhara and the Tigray over access to water, and active conflict broke out between migrant groups. These difficulties in turn caused challenges and uncertainties with local community members in Obock; these were resolved by co-opting international resources, as described in Section 5.4. In Afghanistan my fieldwork and interviews suggest that tensions between Pashtun and Hazara groups were resolved in part through dividing routes: “Hazaras went to Iran and they had to pass through Herat...Most were Shiites. Sunnis went to Pakistan because there we a lot of Pashtuns there.”

Alongside long-standing ethnic tensions, reflective of cultural ties and links, migrant smugglers also entered into conflict with each other over territory and revenue. The manager of a smuggling group, Abdul, described the growth of the Djiboutian smuggling market, and its engagement with the wider community, as he fed his goats which were grazing on hilltops far away from roads and border patrols. According to Abdul, the smuggling market started to boom in 2006. Prior to 2006, the flow of migrants from Ethiopia to the Gulf was small, but as more people started to travel to the Gulf for work, the profitability of migrant smuggling increased, and the first “generation” of smuggling groups started operating. This generation was, according to Abdul, not particularly “educated”: they were effectively in the business to make a quick buck. Smugglers were responsible for transporting migrants through a specific geographic area, but during this initial period (approximately 2006 – 2012), the rules were not well defined. Some smugglers would take the money and fail to deliver the migrants, thus

harming the reputation of all smugglers in the area. Others would create conflicts with smuggling groups in neighbouring territories, including quarrelling about who was responsible for specific payments and for which territory along a route. In still other cases, within a single territory two smuggling groups would vie for control of the area. The types of conflicts Abdul described in Djibouti have also been documented between smugglers in Niger and Libya (F Molenaar 2017; Fransje Molenaar, Ursu, Tinni, et al. 2017; Molenaar, et al. 2019; Fransje Molenaar 2018). According to Abdul in Djibouti, to resolve these conflicts, smugglers – especially those in the first generation – turned toward traditional elders, and used the mada'a dispute resolution mechanism discussed in Chapter 3 (Talachew and Habtewold 2008). After several rounds of dispute resolution, norms developed that have carried forward until today. Abdul, for instance, takes pictures of the migrants he transports when they reach the boundary of his territory to provide evidence that he has completed his work in case a dispute arises. In doing so, he adheres to a norm that the wider community developed together with the smuggling market – that is, to a norm characteristic of the smuggling ecosystem in Obock. Along the Sahara route, similarly, local elders and councils are the primary form of dispute resolution when smuggling groups enter into conflict over territory and revenue (Molenaar, et al. 2019).

A third source of tension arose between migrant smugglers and other smuggling groups. Across all three of my field sites, smuggling activity was not linked to migrants; Agadez for instance has long been a trading site for goods ranging from cigarettes to arms, and Afghanistan has been a crucial part of drug smuggling for many years, as discussed in Chapter 3. Over the course of my fieldwork in Obock, I met other members of Mohamed's family, some of whom were gun smugglers trading between Djibouti and Yemen, and hiding weapons caches along the coast. Mohamed whispered the details of their trade to me at the start of our trip, and as the day wore on, I saw the gun smugglers – relatively large and

aggressive men – treating Mohamed with condescension and disdain. There appeared to be a hierarchy between different types of smuggling, and people smuggling was on the bottom. Later, Abdul explained his own transition between smuggling khat – a relatively light stimulant drug that is common in the region – and migrants by saying that it was less dangerous to smuggle migrants compared to drugs. For him, smuggling migrants represented fewer risks and greater profit; his family’s treatment of Mohamed suggested that smuggling migrants also had less value with regard to masculinity and status than smuggling drugs. Efforts to differentiate and make a hierarchy between smuggling of migrants and illicit goods were also visible in Afghanistan, and these are discussed further in Section 7.4.

In Djibouti, Abdul could explain how dispute resolution mechanisms came into being because the history of smuggling is short. In both Niger and Afghanistan, dispute resolution has become integrated into smuggling operations over generations. In both of these contexts, smuggling ecosystems are older: as we have noted, the history of trade in the Sahara through Niger spans several centuries (Scheele 2012; Brachet and Scheele 2019), and Afghan cross-border movement also has deep roots (Monsutti 2005; Mohammadi et al. 2019; Monsutti and Camiller 2021). We asked one smuggler in Afghanistan to explain how he got involved in the business, and he responded by explaining his family’s history: “For many years, my dad with my uncles travelled to Iran several times and were familiar with routes, especially to Mashhad.” Dispute resolution was, for him, a normal part of life, and processes for negotiating with local leaders and elders had developed over decades. “During the civil war years ... every part of the country was divided between different parties and you had to [negotiate with local leaders to get] many movement permissions.” Norms around dispute resolution and alignment of conflicting incentives have thus developed over generations, and have become integrated into kinship networks and social relations; they represent a symbiosis between smugglers and local communities.

Traditional justice systems are used to resolve clear conflicts between different actors in the smuggling system – but as actors have engaged with each other over time, they have developed a variety of other mechanisms to avoid conflict and mitigate risk. These mechanisms increase profitability, spread risk and build trust between different actors within an ecosystem. Actors have actively built and maintained these risk mitigation systems, which suggests both that they are deriving enough value from the smuggling economy to continue to invest in it, and that they anticipate continuing to jointly derive value from the smuggling economy in the future. These systems also continue to evolve organically, as smugglers and others including migrants and businesspeople tweak systems to respond to changing contextual factors.

Smugglers in Zaranj developed one measure that aimed to mitigate two risks: first, the risk to migrants of failing to pass borders, and second, the risk of disagreements between smuggling groups which cooperate along different parts of the route. In Zaranj, both migrants and smugglers referred to package deals: migrants would pay smuggling groups not for a successful border crossing, or for a single try, but rather for three tries. The use of this strategy represented a clear acknowledgement from both migrants and smuggling groups that uncertainty and risk were involved in the smuggling process. As such, it mitigated the risk associated with unexpected border control measures between a supplier (the smuggler) and a customer (the migrant). It also helped to ensure clarity between different smuggling groups. Migrants across all of my field sites enter into a smuggling route through one smuggler; this smuggler passes the migrants on to others in his network. If migrants are disappointed at the border crossing point, disputes could arise between the smuggling group responsible for recruitment and the group responsible for border crossing. By clarifying that payment was associated with attempts at the border, rather than successful crossings, smugglers reduced friction between themselves.

A second measure aims to reduce the risk of the smuggling group absconding with the migrant's money. In Afghanistan, we conducted an interview with a hawala agent who played a role in building trust between actors in the ecosystem. Hawalas are informal, trust based systems of transferring money; they often grow out of kinship networks, sometimes to a size where they can affect monetary policy and exchange rates (Qorchi et al. 2003). Hawala systems are operational in Afghanistan, Niger and Djibouti, and are often based on the same kinship systems that underpin smuggling ecosystems. The hawala agent we spoke to did not consider himself a smuggler, but instead an intermediary. He considered himself to be a neutral broker between the smuggling group and the migrant, and to perform an essential role in building trust between different parties. The hawala agent was an outside actor who played a prescribed role: he acted as an escrow agent who held money in case there were disputes.

*Usually those who want to travel to Iran, Türkiye or to Germany come to us [money transfer agents] with some smugglers and put their money in our hands. We usually know the smugglers so we know what to do. The work is in this way that the migrant give[s] us the money for the travel and then we give him a code which only me and the migrant knows. After the smuggler takes them to their destination safely, they call us and I talk to the migrant and he says the code to me. Then I know that he's at his destination. At that time, I gave the money to the smuggler or his colleagues and take my commission from them. If the migrant cannot reach the destination or the travel fails, I won't give the money to the smuggler, and the migrant should come to me personally to take his money. (Smuggler/Hawala 11, Nimroz, Afghanistan, 2018)*

The smuggling groups I interacted with also adopt measures to mitigate against contextual risk. In Djibouti, smugglers made conscious choices about currencies to mitigate contextual changes. The rapid devaluation of the Yemeni rial increased the risk associated with both purchasing from Yemen and using the rial on a regular basis. The Djiboutian franc

is also perceived to be volatile, despite the fact that it is pegged to the dollar. The revenue provided by smuggling is independent from national governments, and thus provides people with the capacity to diversify income streams; this is valuable in a context characterised by uncertainty. The fact that the primary currency in use in the smuggling economy is either dollars or euros also helps to safeguard against risks, as explained by a local business owner: “Their [smugglers’] money is not Djiboutian francs but dollars, and that's why they [have independence and] don't submit to Djiboutian politics and their money” (local business owner 2, Obock, Djibouti, 2024).

The relationship between migrants, smugglers and businessmen is relatively structured, and is also suited to the uncertainty of the context; risk mitigation mechanisms evolve and adapt organically over time. Despite significant efforts on the part of all actors to ensure that relationships are smooth, some issues remain outstanding and cannot be resolved. One such challenge is associated with demand shocks, which can put pressure on the overall ecosystem and especially on dispute resolution mechanisms. This was most visible in Afghanistan. The number of people wishing to leave Afghanistan grew exponentially during the Ashraf Ghani regime, and as a result, several newcomers entered the smuggling market. Smugglers who had historic familial ties to the industry called themselves “rahalabad” or guides, and the new entrants “qachagbar” or smugglers of contraband goods; these terms have specific social connotations and are further discussed in Chapter 7. One interviewee who referred to himself as a rahalabad explained the qachagbar as interlopers: “Many qachaghbars in Pakistan and Iran are misusing the migrants, treating them bad, robbing them and all these are making our names bad. I know many smugglers who talk about how they beat or harass men and women en route and they talk about it with pride.” These accounts of qachagbar cruelty were notable because they set boundaries and hierarchies: by attributing violence and greed to new entrants, the rahalabad defended their own status against their

competition and built their market position at the moment when rising demand and an influx of new suppliers threatened both.

Social cohesion was another contextual factor which had the potential to threaten the smuggling ecosystem, according to some interviewees. In Agadez several community members expressed an opinion that migrants, and the migrant trade, brought youth delinquency and narcotics addiction as well as economic growth. Social tensions were also discussed; while Agadez residents were proud of the city's history as a welcoming town, they also felt that migrants were not respecting some social norms. Migrants, in turn, felt lack of sympathy from residents, especially regarding their inability to meet social norms. For example, one respondent who had been forcibly returned from Algeria when trying to cross the border irregularly commented on the expectation that migrants fit with local dress codes as follows: "How can you expect someone who [was forcibly returned from] Algeria with just a pair of underpants and no money to put on a boubou?" Incentives for local community members to accept smuggling ecosystems and their role in it were thus mixed; economic and employment prospects warred against fears of foreigners and worries about social structures. This tension does not appear to have been resolved during the period I conducted fieldwork. Migrants who could not, for reasons of poverty or forced return, present themselves in ways that met local expectations continued to describe feeling unwelcome, and residents continued to hold both views — gratitude for the income migration brought, and resentment at the disorder they associated with it — simultaneously, rather than settling on one.

The smuggling ecosystems considered in this thesis consist of a broad range of actors. Within a single community, migrants, smugglers, businessmen, traditional elders and others interact to facilitate irregular migration journeys. This diversity of actors has a wide array of incentives; while many of these are financial, social status and legitimacy also play a role. Dissent does arise between different actors diffuse tensions between smugglers, migrants,

businesses and host communities appear on a regular basis, and encapsulate power hierarchies and imbalances that could pose genuine risks to the functioning of the smuggling market. Perhaps because the potential risk associated with these conflicts is so significant, the ecosystem has developed conflict resolution measures, indicating that social norms around the acceptability of smuggling are strong enough to prop up the economy. Similarly, actors have developed mechanisms to protect the future value of the ecosystem; these collaborations are also underpinned both by future expectation of profit and by strong social norms. Actors within the ecosystem clearly derive enough value from their work to protect their current and future profits – but they also acknowledge that there are some shocks and some risks which continue to pose a threat to their activities.

### **5.3 Navigating Overlapping Roles and Responsibilities**

Smuggling ecosystems are built around smugglers' provision of a service – bypassing national borders – to migrants. The transaction at the core of smuggling ecosystems takes place between the smuggling group and the migrant, but the core of the service involves the state. Smuggling groups are more likely to be able to transport migrants across national borders if they engage actively with state actors, for example if they bribe border guards to support passage (Kim and Tajima 2022) and navigate local and national border enforcement practices (Gallien and Weigand 2021). As such, border guards and state actors form a part of the smuggling ecosystem – but how do their incentives align with those of other actors, and how are the risks associated with engagement with the state managed?

I gained insight into smugglers' perspectives on the dynamics governing the relationship between them and states during a late-night visit to the manager of a local smuggling ring in Djibouti, Abdul. A key interlocutor introduced me to Abdul in the hope that he would allow me to travel with a migrant van through a checkpoint. Abdul's headquarters was located just opposite the gendarmerie base. Occasionally a gendarme passed through the

compound, and Abdul or one of his associates gifted him some qat. I had a strong feeling that wads of cash were sneaked in with the green leaves. Later, Abdul and I accompanied a van of migrants crossing a military checkpoint. As we drove to catch up with the van, Abdul made several stops at local shops and houses, making sure to buy petrol, water, cigarettes, firewood and other supplies wherever we stopped. We also stopped and talked to some border guards along the way; the conversations were amicable with many jovial comments and handshakes. It was as if Abdul had already greased the wheels to ensure our passage and the passage of the van of migrants.

To move migrants through borders, smugglers must either (1) make sure that migrants are not seen by border guards or (2) ensure that border guards do not question, detain or request official documents from migrants. They can achieve this outcome in one of two ways. First, smuggling groups can pay bribes to border officials to cross checkpoints or borders. Second, smuggling groups can take measures to avoid checkpoints or patrols. In these situations, smuggling groups do not directly engage with border officials during a crossing, but they interact with the officials to gain information about checkpoints or patrols and how to bypass them. In both of these cases, smugglers pay border guards to ensure safe passage; a specific sum is paid to border officials for each migrant who crosses. This basic dynamic is present, and was described, in Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger.

Border guards thus play a part in smuggling ecosystems: smuggling groups who can engage more effectively with border guards to either cross or avoid checkpoints can provide more reliable services to their migrant customers. An individual border guard faces a conflicting set of incentives when deciding whether or not to collaborate with smuggling groups. On the one hand, the border guard is employed by the state: he or she receives an income as well as social status from a long-term fixed job. On the other hand, border guards can earn a significant amount of income through collusion with smuggling groups; they may

also be encouraged to collude with smuggling groups through social structures and networks. Border guards are therefore likely to participate in smuggling ecosystems if both the financial and social incentives are adequately strong.

The smugglers we interviewed were well aware that border guards' participation in smuggling ecosystems was dependent on both financial and social factors. Many explicitly referred to the amounts they paid to border guards, and some expressed frustration at the amounts they paid; this is further discussed in Chapter 6. Smuggling groups also played on social connections to build relationships with border guards in several ways. My Afghan interlocutor sent me a set of transcripts which included questions about how smuggling groups engaged with the border; several of the transcripts included the word "salehi". I asked Abdullah what this word meant and he hesitated before answering. "Well, it's kind of like a bribe. But it isn't. A bribe is bad; you shouldn't really be paying it. But salehi is just ... kind of ... courtesy. It's customary. It's what we do." Similarly, smugglers in Djibouti discussed their perception that border guards were more open to collaboration at certain points of the year. During Ramadan and Eid, border guards were more likely, according to smugglers, to collaborate to assure irregular crossings; the Muslim religious holidays are strongly associated with mercy, compassion and good works.<sup>16</sup> The exchange of gifts and bribes is thus reflective of a social norm that is present, in different forms, across all three of my field sites.

The decision to participate in smuggling ecosystems is taken not only by individual border guards, but also by representatives of the local border management apparatus. In all three of the locations included in this thesis, smuggling groups engaged in repeated

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<sup>16</sup> *During Ramadan and Eid, Muslims are required to give "zakat", a donation that aims to help the poor. Both as a humanitarian and during this research, many colleagues and collaborators sent me requests to donate to various causes specifically during the Ramadan and Eid periods.*

interactions with border guards; these interactions were strongly systematised. In both Djibouti and Afghanistan, the relationship between smuggling groups and border officials was organised and systematised to the point that it constituted an infrastructure. Smuggling groups and border guards exchange repeatedly and systematically, with interviewed smugglers in all three countries referring to their interactions with border guards as “contractual”. In Djibouti, negotiations did not take place at the level of individual drivers or boat pilots and border guards; instead, higher-level arrangements were negotiated between high-level police officials and high-level representatives of the group which managed a particular region. Such long-term contractual agreements help to ensure consistency and smooth functioning; they also support effective dispute resolution. Several boat pilots, smugglers and government officials referred to the role of big smugglers who conducted negotiations on behalf of the group: one smuggler provided the following description of the dynamics between “big” smugglers and border patrol officers: “The big guys stay inside. If there is a problem with gendarmes, they give a call because they know the gendarmes, [they] arrange for the payment and the goods [i.e., the migrants] are allowed to pass” (Smuggler 13, Obock, Djibouti, 2024).

A range of literature exists on the formalisation of smuggling arrangements. Ethnographers have explained the relatively systematic modes of interaction at border points (Scheele 2012; Brachet and Scheele 2019; Gallien 2024), and various researchers (e.g. Nugent and Asiwaju 1996; Nugent 2002; Gallien 2024a) have explained how this formalisation, and the creation of informal institutions, can actually support state structures. My research finds, however, that not only does formalisation help smuggling groups to act on a larger scale, and with a greater degree of capacity, but that it also helps to protect the entire ecosystem and mitigate risks to different actors. When larger-scale smugglers negotiate agreement with higher authorities such as the gendarmerie in Djibouti and Niger, they

minimise the risk of conflict between local border guards and individual smugglers during a single passage, and they increase the likelihood that relationships between different actors in a smuggling ecosystem will be smooth.

While interactions between smugglers and border guards take place daily, engagements between smugglers and government officials are much less frequent. Government officials in towns such as Agadez, Obock and Zaranj are located at the edges of smuggling ecosystems: they are not directly involved in the services offered by smuggling groups or the transactions between smuggling groups and migrants. However, they do pose a potential threat: it is possible for local government officials to choose to enforce national anti-smuggling laws, or to demand large bribes, commensurate with their status, from smuggling groups. As such, they represent a risk – and smuggling groups take proactive measures to mitigate this risk.

Similar to border guards, local government officials face conflicting incentives with regard to engagement in smuggling ecosystems – but the choices facing government officials are more nuanced. A government job has the potential to offer both significant financial benefits and social status. Tacit acceptance of a smuggling ecosystem offers some benefits: local government officials can take credit for economic growth without incurring the risk of explicit engagement. Active acceptance of and/or involvement in a smuggling ecosystem offers the benefit of claiming responsibility for economic growth, while also making additional personal income – but it comes at the risk that the national government will impose sanctions. If cooperation between local government officials and smugglers is reported to national governments, then there is a possibility that the local officials might be formally reprimanded or fired.

I went to the government office in Obock, Djibouti to speak to two officials together with Mohamed, my local interlocutor. The office was built in the French colonial style and was one of about three buildings in the town with air conditioning. I sighed as we entered – the temperature in Obock was about 40 degrees Celsius and I had almost forgotten what it felt like to be cool. The first official was correct – upright and circumspect. He shook hands, explained the routes by which goods flowed between Djibouti and Yemen, and discussed the legal framework around smuggling. When I asked what he thought about migrants, he used measured tones to explain that “migrants are a profit for Obockois. They pay for the tickets to come here, they pay for the food and the water while they are here... They are a source of benefit – courtesy of them we have cars, courtesy of them we have houses.” But he hastened to qualify his words. Migrants might be a source of profit, but “there is no relationship between government and smugglers. The government sees smugglers as traffickers and people engaging in illegal activities.” After he left, the second official came in. He wrung my hand and grinned. “Smuggling? Well, we all know that the national government itself is full of smugglers, don’t we?” He then proceeded to describe, in great detail, the dynamics of the smuggling industry, down to relationships with border guards. “There are guards and things – but you buy them off with a little something, or the boss gives them a call, or you give them some alcohol.” Just before the interview ended, he shrugged his shoulders and said philosophically, “It’s not profitable to have trouble, so negotiation is a better way.”

#### **5.4 Information, Intentionality and International Actors**

In Agadez, Obock and Zaranj, individual transactions between smugglers and migrants have led to the growth of a larger market; as the market has grown, it has developed relationships with the wider community. The organic expansion of smuggling has encompassed not only informal actors, but also civil and military agencies. Within this ecosystem, incentives are also wide-ranging, fluid over time and strongly dependent on

contextual factors. Despite the complexity of this environment, most actors within a smuggling ecosystem – state and non-state alike – are acutely aware both of their own incentives and of the incentives of other actors. There is one set of actors, however, which actively changes incentives within smuggling ecosystems, but appears to have limited knowledge of its own role and place. International actors – particularly those in the international aid system – influence smuggling ecosystems in two ways. First, the international aid system promulgates anti-smuggling measures and support national governments in enforcing anti-smuggling laws. Second, international aid actors invest in border communities in a range of different ways; these investments are be intended to limit irregular migration but in practice can be absorbed into the wider smuggling ecosystem.

Analysis of interactions between international aid organisations and smuggling ecosystems needs to clearly account for the nature of aid organisations themselves: they are very large and have operations across many countries; as a result of their size and complexity, aid organisations have difficulty translating organisational priorities from the global to the local level, and maintaining clear and consistent understandings of specific local contexts. The challenges faced by aid organisations, and the ways in which development and aid have been co-opted for migration control purposes, have been laid out by several authors in the context of Euro-African cooperation (Andersson 2014, 2022; Frowd 2018). An anecdote of my own may encapsulate some of the challenges. After several years conducting research into border communities, I wrote an article about porous borders in Somalia for an international organisation. The article included descriptions of the ways in which a UNHCR training was seen by smugglers: several smugglers referred to a “deal” brokered by UNHCR between border guards and smuggling groups, in which the groups agreed to engage in less aggressive behaviour to migrants in return for lighter enforcement by border guards. Knowledge of this deal was relatively pervasive – it was referred to in several interviews, and without any

prompting from my interlocutor. As a researcher, I understood that there was a high probability that UNHCR had conducted a training course on the smuggling protocol and on human rights for border guards; there was also a possibility that this deal had been brokered between smuggling groups and border guards at approximately the same time as the course. I nonetheless used a quote about the deal to explain the types of agreements that were brokered between smuggling groups and border guards, but I also included caveats. The headquarters (HQ) of the international organisation commissioning the work strongly requested removal of all references to UNHCR: that is, they negated any discussion of the possibility that international aid actors might have influenced smuggling ecosystems in any way. This refusal to discuss the possibility that smugglers and aid actors might affect each other in unexpected ways is likely to be due to the stark condemnation of smugglers in the international political arena – but it also limits self-reflection within aid agencies about the nature of their engagements within smuggling communities.

The perspective of HQ actors can be contrasted with that of a community member in Agadez who, when asked to describe his career, failed entirely to distinguish between licit and illicit actors. For him, international agencies and smuggling groups played very similar roles in his life – they were both a part of a seamless ecosystem that absorbed foreign influences. Amir was a part of the local community in Agadez, and he described himself as a smuggler with 25 years of experience. He was known within the Agadez community as a smuggler, and has been known as such over the last quarter-century. As a smuggler, he learned language skills (specifically Arabic and West African languages). When UNHCR established an office in Agadez in 2015, Amir applied for a job as a translator. He got the job, and combined his work as a smuggler with his paycheque from UNHCR. He was effectively diversifying his income streams. After his contract with UNHCR ran out, he got jobs with other international aid organisations, and even at one point worked for the state organisation

responsible for enforcing borders. He did all of this while continuing his smuggling activities, and while continuing to be known among the Agadez community as a smuggler. After the coup d'état,<sup>17</sup> enforcement measures in Niger reduced and aid organisations pulled out – but Amir's livelihood was safe, because although he lost income from his jobs with aid agencies, his income from smuggling increased. Amir effectively co-opted the HR system in UNHCR and other aid organisations to diversify his income stream and ensure the resilience of the smuggling system in Agadez.

A slightly different example of the ways in which smuggling ecosystems can absorb aid resources took place in Obock. Migrants passing through Obock come primarily from Ethiopia, but with origins in different ethnic groups. Migrants approach smugglers from their own ethnic group, trusting that social, ethnic and kinship connections will support a safe journey. Although the ethnic groups usually travel separately, they are also in close proximity, often receiving food from the same canteen and buying credit from the same seller.

Long-standing ethnic tension occasionally erupts into rivalry and fights, which are usually triggered by scarce resources. In particular, the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups often experience tensions with the Oromo ethnic group. For smuggling groups and for local communities, mitigating tensions and managing division of resources between these groups can be challenging. They found a solution to the problem in international aid agencies. When I visited the smuggler marketplace in Obock, Mohamed and I passed two wells, and an aid placard was affixed to each well. One had been constructed by UNHCR, and another had been constructed by IOM. Mohammed and others in Obock told me that the wells had been constructed for different ethnic groups – the UNHCR well was for the Amhara and Tigray, and the IOM well was for the Oromo. From Mohamed's perspective, the international aid

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<sup>17</sup> A coup d'état took place in Niger in 2023; this was discussed in Chapter 3 and will be examined in more detail in Chapter 8

agencies had invested in two wells specifically in order to help smuggling groups and the smuggling ecosystem. The perception that the aid system was helping smuggling groups – whether accurate or not, and whatever the original intentions of the organisations – helped to achieve greater buy-in for both IOM and UNHCR.

It is worth noting that this situation should be understood as demonstrating that international investment was absorbed into the ecosystem's incentive structure, not as evidence that the division which made the investment necessary was itself resolved. Tension between the Amhara and the Tigray is long-standing, as discussed in Section 5.2, and the solution developed by the smuggling market – that of co-opting international resources – is unlikely to have resolved the conflict, but instead may have simply given it a separate, less visible channel. To a degree, international resources were used to formalise a division rather than dissolve it: two groups that had fought over a shared resource were given parallel, unshared resources instead by leveraging a new entrant into the system. The relationships between aid actors and actors within the smuggling ecosystem are complex, non-linear and generally unpredictable. At a global level, international aid actors express very clear intentions: in line with global policy developments, they aim to reduce the flow of irregular migration while protecting individuals on the route.<sup>18</sup> These intentions are realised through programmes and investments which target specific needs of vulnerable groups – for example, the construction of wells helped to address the scarcity of resources that sparked tensions between different ethnic groups. International aid actors assume that their activities will be perceived as distinct from the activities of smugglers – that is, they assume that smugglers are discrete actors who can be isolated from the wider community. However, the story Amir told about his own engagement with UNHCR, as well as the perception of IOM and UNHCR

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<sup>18</sup> *For example, projects funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa focus explicitly on migration management and aim to address the root causes of migration, thus implicitly acknowledging that they are aiming to reduce migration flows.*

wells in Obock, indicates that both aid actors and smugglers are perceived as a part of the same ecosystem – that local norms and values within the communities I engaged with absorbed actors with divergent aims and objectives.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that actors who participate in smuggling economies can build something bigger than the sum of their transactions. Specific transactions – which could, if analysed as individual items, be considered temporary and instrumental – are repeated, and as a result actors form longer term relationships which jointly create value, and develop mechanisms of managing competing interests and tensions. These relationships develop organically and adjust to account for contextual changes; they also extend and expand over time, and they do so as much through negotiated competition as through straightforward alignment. To argue this, I have demonstrated that a wide range of actors – from smugglers to migrants to shopkeepers to border guards – participate in the smuggling economy. While each set of actors has an independent set of incentives, and some of these incentives conflict as they maximise profit and struggle for power, there is a structural alignment around the need to ensure the continual presence and growth of the market. They perceive enough value from their interaction to develop mechanisms to protect the market and to resolve tensions and frictions, including insurance and risk mitigation mechanisms, as well as hierarchies that manage, rather than eliminate, competing claims. When new actors enter into the ecosystem, they can be integrated into it – even when their stated values diverge from those of the ecosystem. The well built by international actors in Obock, for instance, was intended to relieve resource pressure rather than to participate in the smuggling economy; but the ethnic tension it was built to defuse did not disappear so much as find a new outlet, as smugglers from specific ethnic groups laid claim to the resource as their own.

As the ecosystem develops and grows stronger, actors within it grow more strongly interdependent and the system as a whole becomes more resilient.

The conceptualisation of smuggling as an ecosystem has three main implications. The first is that those within the ecosystem – not only smugglers, but also community members, businesspeople and local leaders – have incentives to preserve smuggling activities and to maximise value, even where they hold real reservations about specific actors or practices within it. Because smuggling benefits many people within the community, even those not directly involved with smuggling activities and who voice concern about its effects will be reluctant to disrupt activities. Collaboration, in other words, coexists with, rather than replaces, dissent. The second implication is that collaboration may extend beyond direct smuggling activities. The smuggling ecosystem engages with traditional justice systems and local government officials, and individuals within the ecosystem may thus be likely to optimise benefits for all actors. It is therefore possible for smugglers to engage in activities or invest in projects that are perceived as being more strongly related with another actor; this would take place if the investment would optimise value for the ecosystem as a whole. Conceptualising smuggling as an ecosystem therefore suggests that smuggler activities and investments should be seen not as maximising individual profit, but instead as optimising value across a community consisting of a complex set of actors; the process of value optimisation includes both allocating value to different actors and preserving value over time. The third implication of conceptualising smuggling as an ecosystem concerns non-linearity: when smuggling is perceived as a market, then it can be assumed that actions have relatively predictable effects (e.g., if international agencies invest in a well, their own credibility will increase and the influence of smugglers will decrease). However, if smuggling is understood as an ecosystem, then discontinuities between the intentions and outcomes can be more

analysed in a more nuanced fashion (e.g., if international agencies invest in a well, this investment is integrated into the ecosystem and attributed to specific smuggling groups).

The findings in this chapter indicate that it may be appropriate to use a moral economy lens when considering smuggling activities. As discussed in Chapter 2, moral economy literature suggests that when actors engage in repeated economic interactions, these engagements are underpinned by shared norms and values (Thompson 1971; Palomera and Vetta 2016). Actors in a smuggling ecosystem engage repeatedly and have developed norms – sometimes consciously, deliberately and at cost. As Thompson's (1971) original account of the moral economy makes clear, shared norms are as often a site of contestation as of consensus: they are invoked selectively, applied unevenly, and used to draw boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate practice; this concept is appropriate to describe the types of conflicts which emerge in smuggling economies, including as when established smugglers characterise newer entrants as unbound by the same codes of conduct, and when smugglers of different products develop and then reinforce hierarchies. It can therefore be argued that the ways in which these actors engage – both in building consensus and in resolving conflict – can help to shed light on their common values, including about states that restrict and manage migration. The involvement of state actors in the ecosystem indicates that the moral economy is not restricted to irregular actors: both smugglers and state representatives are bound by shared values. Therefore, the norms that are expressed through the smuggling ecosystem are likely to be prevalent among street-level bureaucrats as well as those who have limited engagement with the government. The smuggling ecosystem is built on circumventing the state border, so by adopting a moral economy lens it is possible to assume that one of the values shared by actors within the ecosystem is discontent with the state; this will be explored further in Chapter 6.

This chapter effectively sets the stage for an analysis of how smugglers and smuggling ecosystems interact with states. It demonstrates that an ecosystem has developed around smuggling activities; this ecosystem is likely to evolve organically to resolve disputes among different actors and preserve its wellbeing, and has the capacity to make investments that transcend self-interest. The chapter also shows that the smuggling ecosystem is likely to constitute a moral economy in which actors share norms and values, likely values that contradict and oppose the state. If smuggling ecosystems have the capacity to act in a coordinated manner in accordance with shared norms and values, then it is possible for them to concretely influence state legitimacy. But in order to understand whether they do so, it is necessary first to analyse smugglers' perceptions of state legitimacy – which I will do in the next chapter.

## 6.0 Smuggling Ecosystems and State Legitimacy

### 6.1 Introduction

*July is the hottest, most disagreeable month of the year in Obock – and it is the month in which I conducted much of my Djibouti fieldwork. I spent a couple of days in Djiboutiville, the capital city, before taking the ferry to Obock, and I caught up with friends who had strong associations with the government. We had coffee together and I told them about my plan. They looked at me blankly. “You’re going to Obock? Now? Why?”*

*“I’m Djiboutian and I would never go north now! It’s hot!”*

*“You’re strong – none of us would brave Obock at this time of year.”*

*I arrived in Obock and told Mohamed about my friends’ reactions. “Of course they wouldn’t come here now. They’re from the capital.” Mohamed scoffed derisively – he didn’t see why he should waste his energy on the government or people from the capital. He just dismissed them out of hand.*

*Several days later, Mohamed and I walked through the town in the midday sun. Very few people were in the street – it was too hot. My brain was muddled by the heat, but I noticed that the town seemed only half-finished; several buildings had been abandoned in the middle of construction, fences seemed to droop and paved roads just seemed to sputter and end at random points. Halfway through the walk from the government offices to my rooms, we passed a large concrete building. “See that building? It’s supposed to be a school!” I obediently turned my head and looked at the building: the shoddy paint job, the makeshift security measures (the wall was topped with shards of broken glass), the almost-non-existent playground equipment. “The government is supposed to be responsible for schools. And this is all they can do!” His disappointment was palpable. “How do they expect children to get a decent education? These people from the capital, from the government, they never bother to*

*do anything or give us any support.” Mohamed continued to grumble about the government for the rest of the walk and in fact for the rest of my stay in Obock – they never bothered to come to Obock, schools were terrible, health care was non-existent, they were corrupt, they wasted money, they were just a burden for the common man.*

During the July heat, I tuned out Mohamed’s conversation – but months later when I started analysing the data from my fieldwork, I had a flashback to his many tirades. I analysed my interview data in two stages: in the first stage, I reviewed data specific to a particular country, and coded quotes that were particularly relevant to my research questions. In the second stage, I reviewed shortlisted quotes from all three countries to formulate a more comprehensive picture of smuggling ecosystems. One of the clearest common threads between Agadez, Obock and Zaranj was dissatisfaction with the state, expressed most frequently by smugglers, but also discussed by businesspeople, migrants and community members. Memorable quotes about the state arose with remarkable frequency. A facilitator in Obock had issues with corruption: “Government officials are good when you give them an envelope of money, but if the envelope isn't enough, they're no good at all. They're monsters who divide society in order to rule it better.” In Agadez, a businessman commented on the implications of weak government presence: “The natives and inhabitants of [Agadez] consider it to be a city without law... the authorities don't give a damn about the needs of the population.” A smuggler in Zaranj was openly contemptuous of the state: “The worst time was during Ashraf Ghani period because all of his government was corrupted and made all people corrupted. Like a cancer.” Sometimes discussions tipped into surreal dystopias, with a man in Obock outlining this theory: “Industrial and pharmaceutical trusts have become tentacular, infiltrating everywhere and everything, the better to steal money and power... governments are nothing but puppets at their beck and call.”

Such discussions by smugglers make the state appear, at first glance, to be an overwhelming and amorphous mass of discontent. Even a cursory glance at the data I collected indicates that actors within the smuggling ecosystems I engaged with strongly question the state's right to hold and exercise political power – that is, they doubt the legitimacy of the state. This discontent also has some elements that are strongly profit-driven and self-interested: borders are patrolled by states, and in undermining the state, smugglers also implicitly strengthen the perception that they have a social and moral right to engage in their business. On closer examination, smugglers' dissatisfaction with the state revolves, not only around amorphous discontent and clear self-interest, but also around several specific complaints that integrate elements of both the idea of the state– that the state represents a cohesive and unified vision – and the state system, or the administrative and bureaucratic functions that a state is supposed to perform.

I have structured this chapter around three specific complaints that arose frequently among those we interviewed in the smuggling ecosystem. Each complaint arises in large part because of smuggler self-interest, but the frequent repetition of the complaints indicates that these narratives have gained currency within local smuggling ecosystems. I first discuss the degree to which states provide, and are perceived to provide, public services. To a large degree, service provision by the state reflects the effectiveness of the state system and its capacity to optimise economic resources. I also provide some reflections on the degree to which states have maintained security in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj. The capacity to provide security is an indication of the degree to which the state has a monopoly on the use of force. Next, I consider the ways in which historical factors – notably colonial legacies – affect perceptions of state legitimacy. This discussion is broadly in line with the conceptualisation of the state as a set of common social bonds developed over time. The perception that the state is a colonial construct has significant influence on the capacity of the state to promote

and purvey an idea of unity and cohesion. Finally, I analyse some prevalent narratives around smuggling and the state. I conclude with some reflections on the ways in which the state idea and the state system are perceived in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj, what this means for the legitimacy of the state as a whole, and the role of discontent – specifically discontent with the state – in smuggling ecosystems in Afghanistan, Niger and Djibouti.

Three caveats are important when reading this chapter. First, it should be noted that I have selected the specific narratives I present in this chapter to reflect those which were echoed by several respondent types (smuggler, businesspeople, local community). I have eliminated narratives with relatively tenuous links to reality (such as those about the tentacular interests of pharmaceutical companies), and focused on narratives which can be verified and triangulated against strong secondary evidence. Smugglers' narratives toward their communities serve a self-interested purpose: they aim to build their reputation within the community and attract new customers. Where these narratives were echoed by other actors, there is an indication that they reflected a perceived reality at the community level, and thus formed a part of the formation or consolidation of norms and values within the smuggling ecosystem. Second, it is worth acknowledging a recursive logic that runs through the complaints analysed in this chapter. The central argument of Chapter 7 is that smugglers build their own legitimacy by filling gaps left by the state; the size of the gap is therefore not a neutral fact in smugglers' telling, but the premise of their claim to be needed. Every statement that the government "never bothers to do anything" is simultaneously a description and an advertisement: in narrating state absence, smugglers legitimise their own presence. Lastly, this chapter focuses on narratives about state legitimacy; these narratives are generally framed with regard to the state-idea, and specifically with regard to the state at a national level. Perceptions of local state representatives are included but as subsidiary; this is in large

part because perceptions of local government are driven by personality, history and ethnic kinship ties.

## **6.2 Services, Sympathy and States**

My interviews indicated that on a day-to-day basis, individuals in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj interacted with the state apparatus primarily through their efforts to access services including health, education and water. The quality of services was low, and often services were not available at all, which led to much frustration. The trigger point for discontent with the state was thus often linked to (lack of) provision of a specific service. Irritation about service provision often led to deeper reflections about the state's capacity and willingness to fulfil perceived obligations to its citizens, and some sympathy for the predicament in which states find themselves.

Smugglers discuss state legitimacy over bunches of qat and cups of tea; researchers analyse similar issues in academic journals. The concept of state legitimacy is inherently fuzzy, but there is a thread of argument suggesting that when states provide public services, they fulfil their side of the social contract, and thus build legitimacy with citizens (Migdal 1988, 2001; Levi 2018; Gilley 2006). This conceptualisation has informed international aid approaches to fragile states; the OECD for instance clearly frames state legitimacy as predicated on fulfilling the social contract through delivery of services (OECD 2022). The relationship between state legitimacy and provision of public services is not, however, linear or straightforward. The conditions under which services are provided affect legitimacy. For instance, Margaret Levi's research shows that service provision is more likely to build legitimacy when citizens believe that goods are delivered fairly and equitably (Levi 2018). States can also provide services, especially in remote areas, through other actors; in this type of context they can build legitimacy through public services even when not having a monopoly over the use of force (Krasner and Risse 2014). Provision of services is also a clear

and visible expression of the state system: when citizens encounter the state through public services, the state produces a sense of presence (Migdal 2001, 1988). There is thus a level of consensus across academic and policy actors that when states provide or arrange for the provision of public services, they are making active efforts to build their own legitimacy.

If provision of services is a litmus test for legitimacy, then the pre-2023 state of Niger can broadly be considered a failure, from the point of view of citizens in Agadez. Only one person we spoke to was content with government service provision; most thought that the government was falling short with regard to health, education and access to water. The general dissatisfaction with service provision among our respondents was reflective of a broader trend. Research conducted before the 2023 coup found that states have very limited presence in Agadez, and that citizens' dissatisfaction with the state is high (Fransje Molenaar, Ursu, and Tinni 2017; Molenaar, et al. 2019). Only 35% of respondents in one survey trust public officials and the same survey found that residents of Agadez do not have high levels of confidence in the state's ability to provide services (Kwietsu 2025). One business owner, Boubacar, explained the nature of his discontent with state services. He had himself been a migrant to Algeria. After four years doing manual labour, he returned home in 2022 and used the profits of his migration journey to open a shop. Although he was happy with his life and his social circumstances, he was very unhappy with the pre-coup government. According to him, "they do injustice to the population [and] have no pity for poor citizens." Boubacar made several sweeping general statements about his discontent with the government, including that they "provide words only. Otherwise, I don't see anything that has been done about our needs." Health was a big problem: "At the moment, you don't even want someone close to you to fall ill, because things aren't going well at the hospital." According to him, the hospital had insufficient equipment and medicine, and staff were underqualified. He also dismissed out of hand the government's ability to provide water, saying simply "we [as a

community] are not satisfied.” Boubacar saw potential in the city – he was one of several migrants who had invested money in building new businesses, he appreciated the stability of his life in Agadez, and he was proud that people in the city helped each other. But one of the reasons why the city failed to achieve its potential, according to Boubacar, was the fact that the pre-coup government did not provide the prerequisites for a healthy society.

When Boubacar spoke about authorities, he limited his comments to the government in place before the 2023 coup; other respondents were as unhappy with the pre-coup government as Boubacar, but expressed some hope that a new government was in power. One shelter provider, Mahamadou, complained about services. He was more despairing than Boubacar, and explained that “some people would rather die than go to hospital or a health centre, because not only do you have to pay a lot, but the nursing staff aren't competent or able to provide a good service.” Mahamadou explicitly linked this poor service provision to the pre-coup government. He expressed hope that the post-coup government would support improvement. “Our resources are well managed now [by the Tchiani government], not like before... You can see they're trying to be fair and honest with the people, [and work] for the development of our country.”

Many people – shop owners, host community members, migrants and smugglers – shared Mahamadou and Boubacar's viewpoint that services were inadequate. However, discussions about lack of services were nuanced, and complaints about lack of services were interspersed with comments about how difficult the state's job was. A restaurant owner in Agadez acknowledged that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the state to fully meet citizens' expectations: “There's such a huge shortfall in the areas of health, water and education... There are shortcomings in terms of the availability of agents and the lack of materials [for the state].” Another hostel owner put things more succinctly: “[T]he state is doing their best to try and meet the needs of the population, [but] it depends on the means at

their disposal [and the state does not have resources at either the national or the local level].” This sympathy for national and local government actors seemed instinctive, but it was also grounded in financial realities. Provision of public services such as health, education and infrastructure requires both that the state has resources and that it allocates these resources to areas such as Agadez. In Niger, the overall level of resources is very low, and international financial institutions have found that the government has insufficient funding to provide adequate services (International Monetary Fund 2025). In addition, its systems for allocation of resources are not necessarily conducive to equitable distribution. States generally allocate resources through earmarking government revenue for a specific province or region. In Niger, the state has historically allocated very low levels of resources to the region of Agadez. For instance, the IMF published a public expenditure and financial accountability assessment which found that 97.7% of government expenditure was allocated to the central government (across 26 ministries) and only 0.3% was allocated to sub-national authorities (IMF 2013). There were thus very few safeguards to ensure that Agadez received appropriate and adequate public services.

Structural factors underpinned the lack of allocation of resources to Agadez. Historically, state functions were centralised in the capital city of Niamey, and there were relatively limited incentives for actors in the capital to allocate resources to regions (Mohamadou 2009). In Niger, national level laws were passed allocating several functions, including education, transport and health care, to local level authorities. In theory, such a law should support local government actors to provide tailored and appropriate services to communities. In practice, however, decentralisation has not functioned well: in Agadez, effective decentralisation was held back by inadequate transfers of funds from the central government, lack of qualified personnel to fulfil local governance functions, and lack of systems and capacity at the local level to generate revenue (Fransje Molenaar, Ursu, and

Tinni 2017; Hoffman et al. 2017). Sympathy for the state thus reflected, not only an awareness that there were few resources available at the national level, but also a clear understanding that local authorities had even less money than the central government. Expressions of sympathy toward the state may also have been strengthened by decentralisation initiatives in Niger; due to conflicts between the Tuareg and the central government, described in Chapter 4, local authorities in Agadez have a voice in the central government, and a governance mechanism has been developed that explicitly accounts for traditional actors such as the Sultan.

The situation in Agadez bears similarities to conditions in Zaranj in Afghanistan and Obock in Djibouti. Across all three countries, the central government has had limited success in providing services to remote areas (including all three smuggling communities), decentralisation efforts are relatively recent, and resources available to local governments are scarce. In pre-Taliban Afghanistan, Nimroz represented a particularly disadvantaged area. The border crossing between Iran and Afghanistan located in Nimroz is estimated to have provided approximately 93 million USD per year to the Ghani government (Mansfield and Smith 2021). However, the central government only provided 18.7 million USD in national-level programmes and provincial development to the province of Nimroz (in which Zaranj is situated), accounting for 1.2% of the total budget required by the province (Mansfield and Smith 2021). The provincial government responsible for Zaranj thus did not have adequate resources to independently provide sufficient levels of public services in 2019. In the case of Zaranj, smugglers' discussions about the state generally referred specifically to Kabul, to Ghani and to the Taliban; they did not differentiate local government actors, perhaps due to an underlying acknowledgement that local government had little if any power or resources. In Djibouti, although decentralisation laws have been passed, their implementation has been slow; the system is not fully transparent, but there are indications that peripheral areas such as

Obock continue to receive only limited services (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). I could not identify secondary sources indicating that decentralisation efforts had provided more power or resources to local government or to the dissatisfied Afar minority in Djibouti; this stands in contrast to the political compromise reached between the central government and the local government in Agadez. Overall, governments have generally failed to provide basic services to all three smuggling communities examined in this thesis – in large part because they did not have the structures and/or the resources to do so.

In all three smuggling communities, the lack of basic services such as health, education and water acts as a flashpoint for discontent. Verbal expressions of dissatisfaction with state service provision abounded in our interviews, suggesting that smugglers and those within smuggling ecosystems have a relatively poor perception of the state system and of state legitimacy. However, in contrast to the arguments of the OECD (2011), the relationship between service provision and state legitimacy was not linear. People who participate in the smuggling ecosystem might conduct their political analyses in corrugated iron shacks, or at the end of piers – but many interviewees recognised some of the macro-level political and financial trends that drove state actions. They discussed, either explicitly or implicitly, the sheer difficulty local and national government actors faced in providing services, and in each country perceptions of local governments reflected the actual degree of power and resources available at this level. While people in smuggling communities did want governments to provide services, they understood that the government faced practical financial constraints – and so lack of service provision did not in and of itself delegitimise the state.

### **6.3 Corruption, Security, and Safety**

People in Obock, Zaranj and Agadez empathised with the difficulties states faced in providing services – but they had less sympathy for states' lack of ability to provide security. The interviews with Boubacar, the Nigerien returnee who set up a phone credit business in

Agadez, were telling. His response to the government's inability to provide services was laconic – his responses were short and resigned, and my interlocutor told me that he shrugged his shoulders fatalistically when talking about the government's inability to provide services. But when he talked about lack of security in Agadez, he became truly agitated. His answers became longer and his phrasing more vehement. His first comments about lack of security were somewhat tentative: “[T]he forces of law and order no longer reassure people, especially the police.” As the discussion continued, Boubacar started talking about specific gaps of law and order: the police made him tired because they stopped him and forced him to pay bribes – but they did not do anything about insecurity and delinquency among the youth. Corruption was not, in and of itself, a problem for Boubacar – but if the police were corrupt and also did not guarantee security, then something was seriously wrong with the state. Lack of service provision could be dismissed – but if states did not provide security, they seriously disappointed their citizens. In this respect, the government of Niger has not been meeting citizens' expectations: A 2025 Afrobarometer dispatch on Niger reports that 43% of Nigeriens said they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood at least once in the previous year, and over 30% feared crime in their home, with insecurity indicators worsening over the past decade (Kwietsu 2025).<sup>19</sup> While results are uneven throughout the country, the context in Agadez specifically is unique: Agadez was the de-facto base of Tuareg rebels fighting the government over several decades, and the local government reflects efforts to include community governance mechanisms into national structures. The practical degree to which state and regional actors could cooperate to support law and order was unclear – but it was also unclear that for Boubacar, neither level of government was meeting his security needs.

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<sup>19</sup> *Afrobarometer reports cover the full country of Niger, not the specific locality of Agadez. It is likely that feelings of insecurity would be higher in Agadez compared to Niger more broadly, due to the higher levels of violence and weak state presence.*

Boubacar's concerns about security were echoed not only in macro-level data on Niger, but also in Afghanistan. Residents of Zaranj, and of Afghanistan more broadly, had reactions to insecurity that resembled Boubacar's. My key interlocutor Abdullah and I first interviewed smugglers in Nimroz in 2018 when the Ghani government was in power. Abdullah drew on his extensive networks with students, individuals within his own ethnic group and kinship circles, and his friends to identify smugglers. At the time, many smugglers were eager to talk to Abdullah, in large part because they saw themselves as providing a service to compensate for lack of security within the country. Smugglers were unhappy with border guards not only because they charged too much money, but also because they did not guarantee safety: many references were made to guards who assaulted, abused and were very brutal to migrants. The guards' violence toward migrants crossing borders seemed particularly unjustified given the poor security situation in Afghanistan as a whole and the perceived weakness of the Ghani government, described by one smuggler as follows: "Afghanistan is not a good mother for its people... if Afghans flee and become migrant[s] in other countries, it is the only choice for them to live." One smuggler described his own profession as making up for the Ghani government's security failures: "There are many families who just want to send the children out of the country because there is no hope for their future here. There is a high chance of dying because of suicide attacks or Taliban attack. [The government are hiding] behind Kabul gates. So actually, we are saving people, doing something that the government should do but does not or cannot."

Smugglers in Zaranj stated that their job was to help the poor and the defenceless, and they stated this as a primary justification for their work across different rounds of interviews from 2018 to 2022. In 2018, one smuggler stated that it was his job to help the dispossessed in Afghanistan: "[w]e are the ones they come to when nobody can help." Another phrased his job more positively: "We take [our community's] children and youth to safety." A third gave a

more concrete description of how he saved specific people: “We are doing this job for more than 30 years, and a lot of people are saved because of us. It happened a lot that in the mountains or deserts we found people without [a] guide who were on the verge of dying. We saved them all.” In more recent interviews, after international military forces left the country, the Ghani government was ousted by the Taliban, and the Taliban consolidated their monopoly over the use of force in Afghanistan, smuggler narratives about security have shifted. The smugglers we interviewed after 2021 emphasise the ways in which they help those who are fleeing “violences and threats”. One smuggler explained his customer base after the Taliban takeover as follows: “All people, young and old, are leaving Afghanistan ... people are in great suffering, and the Taliban are harassing everyone.” Another said that his customer base consisted mainly of Hazaras and Tajiks, which are a group who have been particularly targeted by the Taliban since their takeover (Mohamed and Askary 2021). To a degree, these statements were likely to be self-serving; smugglers have an incentive to exacerbate the threat of government violence to enhance their own credibility and to attract clients. However, it should also be noted that these statements were repeated in so many interviews that they appeared to have been effective at capturing the attention of community members and clients.

Smugglers’ perceptions of the state’s (lack of) capacity were broadly accurate. In 2019, the Ghani government controlled all major provincial capitals, but the rural areas were heavily contested, and the Taliban claimed to control 85% of the territory of the country (BBC 2021b; Council on Foreign Relations, no date). Local government actors had little control over national security and managed physical safety primarily through alliances with different actors, both government and non-government. 75% of people who participated in the Survey of the Afghan People (Asia Foundation 2019) had fears for their personal safety, and fewer than 50% of participants believed that the Afghan national police helped to

improve security in 2019. Within this context, the Taliban was also making territorial gains, specifically by capturing strategic border points (BBC 2021). During the Taliban takeover in 2021, Zaranj became the first provincial capital to fall to the Taliban, and it was widely considered that it “fell without a fight” (BBC 2021a). In other words, Afghan national security forces clearly did not have a monopoly over the use of force in Zaranj and could not protect citizens against competing Taliban forces. This lack of ability to secure the lives and wellbeing of citizens contributed strongly to reducing the legitimacy of the Ghani government among members of the smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj.

In contrast to Zaranj and Agadez, physical security was not a major theme among interview respondents in Obock. This may be due to the fact that Obock is much more stable compared to Agadez and Zaranj and Djibouti is safer compared to Afghanistan and Niger. While physical security was a less prevalent issue in Djibouti compared to Agadez and Obock, frustration still arose about the actions of security forces. A traditional elder in Obock had witnessed the growth of the smuggling industry over time, and was well aware of the conflicts in Yemen. He said that historically, for his people, power arose from family wealth and political power; according to him, Djiboutians had developed ways of negotiating their conflicts using wealth and power. However, because of the activities of smugglers, security risks were becoming bigger: “The problem is that the Yemeni smugglers are integrated into the population of the city except [the biggest] difference is that the Yemeni smugglers are armed to the teeth compared to us [who are] barehanded.” These tendencies of Yemeni smugglers posed a security risk to the town, and to the community for which the elder was responsible. According to the elder, the government was not helping to manage these risks. “My idea of the border guards is pessimistic, because their job was to protect the safety of the population and the sea, but all they do is plunder those who want to work and bring bread home to their families.” The elder saw real security risks in his community, and did not see

the state taking action to mitigate these risks. This was a key factor in his growing discontent with the state, and his hopelessness about the government. “The authorities are ghosts, [they are visible] during legislative or presidential campaigns [but not after], they are fierce toward us, yet they are supposed to protect us and watch over us.” The elder in Obock, like Boubacar in Niger, was willing to accept corruption on the part of security forces – but only if they were physically present and able to guarantee the safety of the local population.

Where states are either unable or unwilling to provide security to their own populations, local government staff deprioritise efforts to strengthen borders. As discussed in Section 5.3, border guards are linked to the smuggling ecosystem by social and cultural ties. These ties often supersede obligations to a distant government, and they underpin long-term “contracts” in which border guards accept payment to allow migrants to cross borders. These contracts are inherently complex and are becoming more creative and collaborative over time (Augustova and Suber 2023; Augustova et al. 2023; Suber 2023). It may also be due to a recognition of the constraints facing local government actors. In Niger local authorities reflect traditional decision-making processes and community norms, and also have a place in national government, but still have little say in the provision of security; in both Afghanistan and Niger, local government has little, if any, voice in security decisions which are effectively imposed by national level governments.

The arrangements between border guards and smugglers reflect cultural norms – but because border guards are employed by the state, they also affect local perceptions of state legitimacy. Discontent about border guards – the amount of money they charged, the way in which they engaged with community members, the techniques they used – was rife among interviewees in all three smuggling communities. Local community members, smugglers and even government authorities complained about corruption within the border forces – despite indicating within the same conversation that they knew border guards needed to look after

their families. This inconsistency arose from two sources: the first was the feeling that border guards took money without guaranteeing the security of the local population; the second was the perception that border guards were extracting an excessive profit. My interlocutor spoke to a fare collector in the bus station in Agadez who had been observing the day-to-day interactions between smugglers, migrants and border guards for over 15 years. The fare collector discussed both smugglers and border guards: when he talked about smugglers, he described them as good people – they were human, they made mistakes, but they tried to do some good and to get by. Border guards, in contrast, were just in it to get rich, according to him. For him, everyone was trying to make money – that was acceptable – but border guards were double dipping. “They take money indiscriminately to let anyone pass, even though they have a salary.” The fact that border guards got money both from the state and the smugglers made their activity unacceptable, according to him. The fare collector's ranking — smugglers as flawed but human, border guards as purely extractive — is to a large degree the result of his position: his livelihood at the bus station depended on the smuggling economy, not on the state. His assessment demonstrates a type of moral hierarchy within his ecosystem, and is evidence of some of the principles governing how legitimacy was allocated within the ecosystem. The arrangements between smugglers and border guards affected local perceptions not only of border guards, but also the legitimacy of the state as a whole. Within each of the smuggling ecosystems I engaged with, it was commonly accepted that smugglers made arrangements with higher level officials within border management services, and that these officials gave a cut to individual border guards. In other words, people in the smuggling ecosystem were well aware that representatives of the state were colluding with smugglers for private profit. Several people extrapolated their experiences with local border guards to the state as a whole. For instance, smugglers in Afghanistan justified their own activities in light of state illegitimacy. In 2018, every smuggler we spoke to referred to the national

government as corrupt, with one saying that the authorities were his enemy not because they tried to stop him from moving migrants over the border, but instead because they asked him for money in order to do so. Another smuggler situated and justified his work in terms of the national context: “[What I do is] not legal. But what is legal in this country? Everyone from the president himself [down] is doing illegal things. Everybody is corrupt.” Although smugglers’ reasons for arguing that the state legitimacy were likely to be self-serving, the extrapolations and assumptions about national corruption were nonetheless strongly justified: a Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (2022) report identified endemic corruption as one of the reasons for the collapse of the Ghani government and the insecurity that allowed for a quick Taliban takeover.

The seminal definition of a state – that is, Weber’s (1919) definition of the state as an entity with a monopoly over the use of force – entails the provision of security. By this metric, two of the three states I researched had only very limited legitimacy. Security and safety were important not only to academics and international policymakers, but also to citizens. The local community members we engaged with in Obock, Agadez and Zaranj were willing to accept states that did not provide services, but their tolerance for states that did not provide security was much lower, at both an institutional and a personal level. Individuals in smuggling communities perceived that states were failing in their duties to protect their citizens, and they had little sympathy for these security shortcomings; a state that could not provide security had lost legitimacy, in the eyes of many interviewees.

#### **6.4 “Foreigners are Kings”: Colonialism and State Legitimacy**

States are considered legitimate when citizens treat the state as rightfully holding power. States can take actions to justify their power and build their legitimacy; for example, when states provide services and assure security, they take active measures to build their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (E. Matthews 1978; Mueller 2010). However, legitimacy

can also be tied to factors over which states have relatively little control, such as the perception that the state reflects common social, historical and cultural ties between its citizens (Abrams 1988; Bear 2014). Each of the three countries I examine in this thesis have complex historical legacies in which colonial powers played a major role in state formation. As such, state legitimacy was linked not only to actions taken by the state that was in power, but also to the history of state institutions.

When I developed the research questions for this thesis, I focused on the present – on factors that states could influence to improve their own legitimacy. However, as I started collecting data, it became steadily more obvious that perceptions of state legitimacy were tied to narratives about colonialism, and that these narratives were pervasive across all my field sites. I spoke to Abdullah, my interlocutor in Afghanistan, about some of my preliminary ideas on colonial legacies and the legitimacies of borders. There was a silence as Abdullah turned the ideas over in his head. “Of course the borders are not legitimate – you drew them and we did not. But don’t you all know all of that already? Don’t all the people in the West know already that you drew the borders?” he asked.

The question of the legitimacy of borders, and colonial histories, is particularly acute in Afghanistan. The state of Afghanistan hosts at least 14 ethnic groups, and these groups have historically been hostile toward each other (Barfield 2023; Monsutti and Camiller 2021; Monsutti 2005). Different ethnic groups make territorial claims which are renegotiated through a complex process of warfare and tribal mediation. In this context of inter-tribal and inter-ethnic warfare, the British and Russian empires superimposed colonial power struggles. The borders of Afghanistan were drawn in an 1893 agreement negotiated between the British diplomat Mortimer Durand and the Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman Khan. The Durand Line was strategic for the British as it established a buffer zone between Britain and Russia, thus protecting their resources in India (Barfield 2023; Hopkirk 1993). However, the border also

had implications for inter-ethnic dynamics in the region, particularly for the dominant Pashtun ethnic group. The establishment of the Durand Line split the Pashtuns between Afghanistan and Pakistan; this split affected a community that was – and continues to be – very close-knit (Afghan Analysts Network 2024). The historical narrative around the border is therefore acute and ever present. One smuggler we spoke to described the effect of colonial borders as follows: “[H]alf of Helmand or Kandahar people have relatives on the other side of the border in Pakistan. Look at the history, if it wasn't for Britain mischiefs [*sic*], there will not be any ... border that separate[s] people.”

The artificiality of colonial borders is felt particularly acutely in Zaranj. We spoke to smugglers with different ethnic, educational and religious backgrounds; across these different lines, people expressed a consistent viewpoint that borders were not legitimate and did not reflect dynamics between different ethnic and cultural groups in Afghanistan. A smuggler who had a bachelor’s degree in literature, with a focus on Pashtun poetry, wove references about the Durand Line and British “mischiefs” into his conversation. Another, in a different conversation, acknowledged his limitations – but still stood against the border: “I am not a very literate person, but I studied [the] history of Afghanistan and these borders are the work of Englishmen and cruel corrupt governments of Afghanistan.”

Pushback against the legitimacy of the border may be due, not only to efforts to gain customers and legitimise the smuggling profession, but also in part to recent efforts to harden the border. Prior to 2005, no border infrastructure limited engagement between Afghanistan and Iran in Zaranj, so goods and people flowed freely. Since 2005, however, border infrastructure was put in place, and increasing efforts have been made to check visas and travel permissions (Grawert et al. 2017). As smugglers and community members have been confronted with new processes, narratives have developed about the difficulty of movement. Several smugglers pointed to the increasing difficulty of passing borders. One pointed to his

own experience: “the restrictions and guards were not at the borders before. When my family and I fled the country to Pakistan ... there was no line of wire that shows here is the border. But now, all along the border is wire.” Another harkened back to previous generations, pointing out that “[w]hen my parents crossed the border to Iran, there was no questioning or imprisoning [*sic*] or asking for passport.” Smugglers are also aware of the ways in which borders are hardening across the region, and make specific reference not only to the increasing number of guards at the Zaranj border and the decision on the part of Iran to institute shoot to kill orders, but also to the building of walls between Türkiye and its neighbours and the use of biometrics in border management systems.

Smugglers have responded to the hardening of borders between Afghanistan and Iran at Zaranj by developing narratives about injustice. These narratives are built on the perceived illegitimacy of colonial borders, and they expand and entrench a neocolonial narrative – the narrative that “when West left Afghanistan to itself, it betrayed all Afghans.” One smuggler described border hardening specifically in the context of the UK’s foreign policy initiatives: “They made these borders to put division among Muslim people... These are all plans of England to destroy Islam and Muslims. If the borders didn't exist, Muslim nations would unite and then, [the] West would [lose] its power over world.” Another described border management policies, and externalisation efforts specifically, as the fault of Western colonial powers – even though these actions were carried out by Türkiye, Iran and Pakistan. “I think it is a very dirty policy, the [West] pays Turks and Pakistan to build walls and wires and dig holes on the border to not let migrants cross the border... West governments and their people know that they are paying for the killing of these migrants. They don't want these people in their countries so they do whatever they can to frighten migrants not to come to the West.” One smuggler explicitly framed his own activities as a form of resistance: “Borders [don’t] have any good for ordinary people, because it stops them from doing what they were doing

for years. My father was importing good[s] from Mashhad and Zahedan 50 years ago easily and made a living for himself and his family, but now I, his son, cannot cross the border without [a] passport and visa. So, there is no choice for me to travel illegally because I don't accept this. If I want to accept everything that [is] imposed [on] me, I wouldn't be able to leave my house... [foreign actors are] spying in our country and feeding our conflicts and cause our people to become homeless and jobless, so [when I smuggle migrants] I am just returning their favour back to them.”

It is in the interests of smugglers, and those living in smuggling ecosystems, to believe that colonial borders are not legitimate or just – but to what degree does the colonial legacy affect broader state legitimacy? Niger provides an example of the ways in which colonial legacies can influence the legitimacy of the state as a whole. France colonised Niger in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the country declared independence in 1960 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). As described in Chapter 3, uranium was discovered by French companies in Niger shortly before independence was declared. In 1961, France and Niger signed the 1961 Accord de Défense, which included a requirement for Niger to supply France with uranium as well as other minerals on a priority basis. The Nigerien government was not granted the right to a percentage of the uranium mined until the 1990s, meaning that for most of its history, Niger received only a fraction of the value of its most important natural resource (Volberding and Warner 2018).

The details of uranium mining contracts are technical – but the principle is clear, and is well understood within the smuggling ecosystem. The uranium mines are located in the region of Agadez. Participants in the smuggling ecosystem are strongly aware that a high-value commodity is being extracted from their land, and they are seeing very little benefit. This sense of being exploited was pervasive among those we spoke to in Agadez, and was discussed not only by smugglers but also by businessmen and community members. Some

discussed exploitation in vague terms, whereas others spoke with remarkable precision about the details of uranium mining agreements. One smuggler described the situation as follows: “The region does not change ... it's only the French who profit from our wealth. Since 1960 [they have profited] and it's as if we're not independent... it's as if we've only been given a copy of the paper [announcing our independence]. The wealth exploited in Agadez is for the whole of Niger [but right now no one in Niger benefits].”

Frustration about the role of the French was not limited to smugglers; a community elder who works closely with the international community appreciated the support provided by IOM and other humanitarian agencies – but saw these investments as not necessarily aligned with the interests of the local community. The resources and revenue associated with uranium would, according to him, give Agadez more autonomy. “The greatest challenges for the city of Agadez, given the question of how many foreign interests that arise [and are interested in us] today, I think, is [how to maximize our heritage]. We have to do everything we can to take advantage of our heritage because we have gold, oil, uranium and so on.” It is interesting to note the specific level at which these complaints were levelled: where discontent against the colonial nature of the state was expressed in Agadez, it was done primarily at the level of the central state. Local government was not included in the complaints, and in fact respondents claimed that the Sultan of Air served a strong purpose in representing the interests of the smuggling ecosystem and the different Agadez communities. Frustration about colonialism and foreign influence was targeted far more at the national level, whereas local level government was broadly excluded from these complaints and was considered more representative of the region and its people.

One of the most prevalent viewpoints among the community members we spoke to in Agadez was that pre-junta government actors were helpless in the face of foreign interference: that the state effectively permitted and supported the continuation of

colonialism. We spoke to a young musician who seemed, at first glance, happy-go-lucky. When we asked him about the challenges he faced, he answered that nothing was particularly difficult – he didn't set goals for himself, but instead worked and played the guitar when he wanted to feel more positive. He loved his community, describing Agadez as full of “open-minded, curious, resilient and understanding” people. This positivity and happiness fell away, however, when he talked about foreigners and Westerners. He described Westerners as “kings” in Agadez; people who took what they wanted at the expense of the local people. When we asked him to explain the city's social dynamics, his dislike of foreigners came to the fore. He first explained the relationships between the different ethnic groups and argued for building solidarity between the different groups. Then, without prompting, he added some reflections: “[A] foreigner must be treated like a hospitalised person. We must be vigilant in taking what is good from them and leave all those [things which] don't fit in with the rule of benevolence.” If foreigners were a disease, then the state offered a potential solution. After commenting about the danger of foreigners, he moved directly on to the state, saying that for life to improve in Agadez, “we need good authorities who bring about tangible change.” Tangible change, to him, involved limiting the influence of the West and of foreigners. Other interviewees, too, made similar comments about the need for the state to rein in the role of the west. One blamed previous governments for allowing the French to take away the uranium wealth of Niger: for him, it was the responsibility of the state to break contracts that did not deliver enough benefit, and the state had effectively lost legitimacy by allowing the French to mine uranium. A third stated explicitly: “[I]t's a question of sovereignty and it's the job of the state to defend our sovereignty.” When I started writing my thesis, I assumed that states had relatively little control over historical factors and colonial legacies. But many people in Agadez disagreed with me: for them, French control of uranium mining contracts was a current issue that served to deprive them of resources. The state had an obligation to

fight against the French and the foreigners; in doing so, they were not only representing the interests of their citizens, but also defending the sovereignty of the country.

States have failed individuals in smuggling ecosystems in many ways, especially at the national level, but some failures had a greater effect on state legitimacy than others. The people we interviewed recognised that the state has limited resources and capacity, so they were willing to accept a state that had relatively low levels of service provision. They were less willing to accept poor security – personal safety and wellbeing were the minimum service that a state was required to provide, according to those in the ecosystem. The greatest friction around legitimacy arose from states that appeared to betray the cultural and historical bonds they shared with smuggling ecosystem in favour of a distant and powerful West.

### **6.5 “It was the French who Brought the Smuggling!”**

During one of my first online meetings with Mohamed, I asked him to tell me about the history of smuggling in Djibouti. I thought this was a light question – a bit of an icebreaker to ease us into discussion. But Mohamed launched into a vociferous tirade. It was the French who brought the smuggling! he cried. The Afar had been living peacefully in Djibouti, looking after themselves, disturbing nobody but each other. And then the French arrived, with their bad habits, and their ungodly ways, and their tendencies toward illegal activities, and had corrupted the innocent Afar. In painting the smuggler as an injured innocent, Mohamed contributed to a battle of narratives about who smugglers were and where their allegiances lay.

Imaginariness, narratives and discourses surround the figure of the smuggler. These discourses fall broadly into two camps. In Western media, migrant smugglers are often portrayed as parts of international criminal groups; they are predators who feed on hapless migrants (Achilli 2018; Brachet 2018b; Zhang et al. 2018). Alternatively, in countries of

origin, they are often considered to be daring figures, making adventurous journeys for a (sometimes) noble cause (Hüsken 2017; Carrasco-Granger et al. 2025). Smugglers have been depicted as rebels who flout state borders and figures of authority (Bredeloup 2016, 2012; Lauret 2023). In some cases, such as among the “coyotes” of Ecuador, narratives focus on the trust developed between smugglers and communities (Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018).

A variety of these narratives arise specifically in Djibouti, in part because of the strong role of oral narratives and storytelling in Afar society (Lauret 2023). In the course of my research, I drove in pickup trucks with smugglers who regaled me for hours with tales of the strength and courage and daring of the Afar. When I was in the capital, Somalis with links to the government laughed uproariously as they called smugglers “bandits” who were upending local governments and undermining authority.

In the capital of Djiboutiville, I heard several stories which positioned Afar smugglers from Obock as fighting against a powerful Somali state. These stories continued to praise smugglers and laud their revolutionary spirit – but they also tied smugglers to the Somali government. The smugglers were simultaneously protesting against the state – but also deeply rooted in it, and affiliated with the majority ethnic group. I had a chat with a Djiboutian friend during a workshop organised together with government officials. The workshop was held in one of the nicest hotels in Djiboutiville – a far cry from the dust and heat of Obock. When I mentioned my research on smuggling, he started giving me his thoughts and impressions.

*“But everyone is involved in this smuggling business. You see, it’s organised so that in every region there are lots of little smugglers, controlled by a chief. The chiefs of every region negotiate with each other. And the chiefs are brought together by a big*

*smuggler. This is the nephew of the president. And everyone knows that he is responsible for the smuggling rings. It's an embarrassment to the President, because everyone knows they are related. The President has tried to manage the situation, and he has sent his nephew away on a scholarship. The nephew took the scholarship, left for three months for a holiday in Europe, and then came back and kept going with smuggling. The president tried it again, and the nephew did the same thing. Now it's happening for the third time. That nephew, he's a real bandit! A proper cowboy. He knows he has the president in a bind and he's using it!"*

In telling these stories, people in the capital city seemed almost to be laying claim to smugglers. Smugglers' activities were phrased in the context of a strong government and a strong system; smugglers and their networks were depicted almost as the prodigal son of a benevolent, paternal state. These narratives served, at some level, to reinforce the legitimacy of the state – smugglers were an offshoot of the state, and were thus neither foreign nor ungovernable. They also helped to indicate the relative importance of migrant smuggling to the state in Djibouti. While migrant smuggling is nominally illegal, the state is aware that it happens but chooses to turn a blind eye to it.

In Obock, however, none of the narratives about smuggling referred to the Djiboutian state. Instead, those within the smuggling ecosystem justify their actions by linking smuggling specifically to the French. My key interlocutor, Mohamed, started telling me about how the French were to blame for smuggling during our first engagement for this thesis. Mohamed talked about Arthur Rimbaud and Henri de Monfried – famous French authors who, according to Mohamed, had engaged in their swashbuckling adventures on the shores of Obock. Following some research, I verified Mohamed's stories: Arthur Rimbaud, the famous French poet, tried his best to smuggle arms to Ethiopia; the deal went sour and he spent 11 months stuck in Djibouti (Natsoulas 1981). I could not find indications that he enjoyed

Djibouti – but the presence of a famous French poet on Djiboutian soil certainly inspired the Afar people. Henri de Monfried is less well known outside France, but he was an adventurer and author who lived in Djibouti for over 20 years and smuggled hashish and pearls across the Red Sea. De Monfried wrote swashbuckling books about his adventures on the sea, and died at the age of 95, having spent the last years of his life fuelling his opium habit by growing his own poppies to make opium, and making his own honey to mitigate some of its effects (de Monfreid and Treat 2010).

The pride felt by the Obockois in Rimbaud and de Monfried was unique, even within the country. I had visited Djiboutiville many times over the course of seven years, and had never heard a capital city resident mention either the poet or the author. I had lived in France for two years and never heard of Djibouti at all, let alone in connection with Rimbaud or de Monfried. When I probed with a colleague in Djiboutiville, and proactively asked questions, he acknowledged that Rimbaud had been in Djibouti and expressed vague appreciation of his poetry, but did not elaborate further. The elevation of Rimbaud and de Monfried – and specifically, their history as smugglers – could be seen as an effort on the part of the Obockois community to rationalise their newfound smuggling economy. The development of the smuggling economy in Obock is relatively recent, and so it is possible that the process of rationalising the business, and making sense of this activity, is still taking place. During this process, Rimbaud and de Monfried have assumed the status of archetypical smugglers in Obockois society. Their involvement in smuggling activities both justifies smuggling activities – even if these activities are illegal, smugglers are still taking part in a long tradition – and presents a possibility of glory and respect. Both Rimbaud and de Monfried were venerated in French society; if they, as smugglers, can achieve this status, the Obockois smugglers can do so as well.

The fact that the Obockois have chosen French heroes and archetypes, rather than those from their own region, is notable. The adoption of French role models, rather than local ones, by the smuggling community in Obock is a form of argument about the hypocrisy of the West. Western agents conducted smuggling in and through Djibouti were historically lauded by Western society for their activities; de Monfried in particular had a reputation as much for his swashbuckling smuggling activities as for his literary merit. In repeatedly bringing up the examples of Rimbaud and de Monfried, people in Obock seemed to be asking: if it was acceptable for these paragons of French society to smuggle, why is it not acceptable for us? The use of these examples points to a fundamental inconsistency in Western arguments about legality, good behaviour and smuggling; they suggest that the West itself has not lived up to its own principles for most of its history. The use of examples which are not direct, but instead appeal to myth, also helps to bring people together, not only around a logical point (the inconsistency of Western policy), but also an emotive figure (that of a mythical hero).

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The concept of state legitimacy is fraught. To understand the degree to which states are legitimate, academics need to examine the role states are supposed to perform: are they primarily responsible for maintaining a monopoly on the use of force, for optimising resources, or for maintaining and fostering cultural and social bonds? In addition, the level at which states operate plays a role: the degree to which the state idea is legitimate (that is, citizens' level of support for a common vision promulgated by the state) may differ from the degree to which the state system is legitimate (that is, whether institutions and processes of the state meet citizen needs and expectations). Within this framework, consisting of many different variables and dimensions, it can be harder still to understand the degree to which

smugglers, who act in a legal grey zone and can be difficult to access, find the state to be legitimate.

In my field sites, smugglers and those within smuggling ecosystems saw themselves primarily as citizens; their perceptions and expectations of the state were formed predominantly by their desire for individual and community wellbeing. Smugglers across all three areas recognised that in doing their work they broke the law – but they did not consider themselves to have opted out of the state. Instead, they had clear and definitive ideas about what a legitimate state would look like. Expectations were formed around provision of basic services (health, education, water) and security; these expectations overlay a general assumption that the state needed to reflect the diverse interests of its citizens, and specifically the interests of those in the smuggling ecosystem. Those within smuggling ecosystems thus had expectations around state, processes, and institutions; they expected that the state system would be able to provide services and guarantee security. They also had expectations around the state idea; they wanted the state to reflect their needs, which were generally seen in contrast to the interests of Western foreign agents.

Across all three dimensions that smugglers identified as important – provision of services, maintaining security and building common bonds – state legitimacy was very low in all of the smuggling ecosystems I considered across Djibouti, Niger and Afghanistan. However, responses and reactions to perceived state failure were diverse. While people in the smuggling ecosystems I interacted with did expect the state to provide public services, they also had a clear understanding of the constraints faced by national and local actors. They therefore adjusted expectations; lack of service provision did not necessarily delegitimise the state. States lost legitimacy not because they failed to provide public services, but instead because they appeared to be lackadaisical about the security of their populations and because they seemed to bend to the will of foreign powers.

In discussions and interviews with smugglers and others within the ecosystem, different types of dissatisfaction appeared to blend together. Individuals faced concrete challenges due to lack of services and security; these challenges were amplified by narratives about the fickle nature of the state. In these narratives, the West played a particular role: it was seen as an outsider, a coloniser and a foreign influence. Delegitimization of the state thus became, not only a statement on local and national politics, but also on the global system more broadly. Different forms of discontent thus interacted in a mutually reinforcing way: tangible state failure with regard to services caused discontent, but not enough to delegitimise the state. When lack of services was combined with lack of security, discontent with state systems grew stronger. This, in turn, led to the reinforcement of narratives which painted the state as allied more with Western powers than its own people. This combination of disappointment in the state system as well as disillusionment with the state idea was shared among different actors; resentment of the state acted as a shared bond among different actors in the smuggling ecosystem. Issues associated with economics, security and culture compounded, leading to a sense of alienation from the state as well as a feeling that the state's exercise of power was not necessarily rightful – that is, that the state was not legitimate. The severity of these issues also led to efforts on the part of local communities and smugglers to fill the gaps, as we will see in the next chapter.

## 7.0 Filling the Gap Left by the State: Smugglers and Informal Institutions

### 7.1 Introduction

*The road from the capital to Obock winds through salt flats and dark hills, and it takes about three hours to make the trip. Ismail was driving and I was in the passenger seat. After two hours, I caught a glimpse of a 4x4 in a side mirror. It was going at an incredible pace, steadily and noticeably creeping up on us. The driver leaned on his horn as he cut to the side and passed us. Ismail took the horn as a challenge. After navigating one or two turns in the road, he stepped on the gas, pulled out, grinned at the car to our right, honked and pulled back in again. But the 4x4 driver was aggressive – his engine thrummed as he took us over again. After gaining on us, though, he didn't pull into the lane. He pulled across it, effectively blocking us from going further. The driver – a surprisingly well-built middle-aged man – slammed the door as he got out of the car and started berating Ismail. Before I knew it, Ismail was also out of the car. Fists waved and legs flailed as the two men were engaged in a thoroughly awkward fight. Then the driver of the 4x4 pulled out a knife that was roughly the length of my upper arm. He waved it about; Ismail flinched back. Posturing continued – but the knife put an edge on the situation. This went on for over 30 minutes until finally both parties seemed to tire. But the driver of the 4x4 needed to express his rage somehow – so he slashed the tyres of our car. He then left in a huff.*

*After the driver of the 4x4 left, Ismail did two things. First, he called a member of the local council of elders. Then, he contacted the police to report the incident. A car arrived at the site to pick me up and take me to the next town. The driver, Ahmed, asked me about myself; I answered circumspectly, aware of the fact that it's rarely good to lead into conversations with strangers by announcing my intention of researching migrant smuggling. After asking a few more probing questions, the muscles in Ahmed's face eased, and he told me that he had actually been the person who had organised my trip. He had played a game with*

*me because he hadn't been sure of my discretion. Next, he asked me what had happened in the car. I gave a factual account. I didn't realise it at the time, but I had just provided an eyewitness account in the traditional Afar justice system. Ahmed, the traditional elder, had provided a prompt public service: he had provided emergency support after a security incident, and he had taken evidence in a court case that would later be held away from my eyes. For several days, Ismail kept me abreast of all the developments – the gendarmes had taken hours to arrive at the site of the incident. They had arrested the 4X4 driver. The driver's family begged Ismail to drop the formal court case and go to the elders; Ismail hummed and hawed and pressed his advantage. In the end he went to the traditional elders. They were more reliable, and their judgments were more binding.*

In Chapter 6, we saw that in Obock, Agadez and Zaranj, smugglers and those within smuggling ecosystems have clear expectations of states, but that states are not currently fulfilling these expectations, and in doing so are losing legitimacy. As the state leaves gaps, both in terms of building a common vision and in terms of implementing effective processes, smugglers have started working with community structures to build alternatives. This vignette describes a situation that was not a low-stakes disagreement: two men fought with their fists, and one produced a knife long enough to draw real fear, over a dispute that began with aggressive overtaking. That this kind of confrontation was routine enough to have a standing institutional response — a call to a named elder, a police report, a known sequence of subsequent steps — says as much about the ambient likelihood of violence on this road as it does about the strength of Afar dispute-resolution mechanisms. While smuggling ecosystems have built risk management systems, they have done so in a context where the likelihood of conflict continues to be high. Resolution and mitigation of conflict thus requires the development of a robust system that is appropriate for the participants in the ecosystem — that is, for smugglers as well as citizens. Ismail had effectively been offered a choice between

the informal institution of the clan elders, and the formal institution of the state. He chose to access both – he used the formal justice system to put pressure on the driver’s family, but he trusted the informal justice system to provide actual results. The informal system provided transport, mediated complex family dynamics and implemented effective and long-lasting sanctions. The formal justice system played a role – but primarily as a lever for negotiating better outcomes. This situation – one in which the state has a low level of legitimacy, and a range of other actors step in to provide services and security – is well described in literature on informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; K. Meagher 2006; K. Meagher 2014).

Douglas North (1990, pp. 3) defines institutions as “humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interactions.” The state can establish formal institutions, such as contracts and legal frameworks, as well as enforcement mechanisms to ensure that constraints are respected; where states are legitimate, they are more effective at operating institutions. Informal institutions, in contrast, are constraints that are perpetuated and normalised by society, rather than by formal state processes. Informal institutions can range in influence and structure from unspoken social taboos to grassroots justice systems such as the informal xeer legal system in Somalia to the reciprocal relationships associated with *guanxi* in China (Barbalet 2023; Meraki Labs 2023). Informal institutions derive legitimacy primarily because individuals see the benefit of cooperation; the capacity for enforcement has traditionally been perceived as limited (North 1990; Jutting et al. 2007; Ostrom 2009). Informal and formal institutions can be seen as antithetical: for instance, if states want to stop smuggling and informal institutions want to regulate it, there is a competition regarding priorities (Gallien and Weigand 2021). However, it is also possible for interactions between informal and formal institutions to strengthen the state. Informal institutions can fill gaps which the state does not have the resources to address, and if the goals of informal institutions and the state are complementary, then the interaction between

the two can contribute to greater stability (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). There is a wide existing literature on the relationship between informal institutions and the state; similarly, there is literature on the ways in which smugglers can coexist with states and reinforce borders (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996; Nugent 2002; K1 Meagher 2006; K. Meagher 2014; Gallien and Weigand 2021). The relationship between smugglers and informal institutions – whether and how smugglers negotiate within their communities for more influence and credibility – remains under-researched, however.

Smugglers clearly align themselves with informal institutions, as discussed in Chapter 5; they have built relationships with traditional elders, justice systems, money transfer providers and others. The nature of these relationships – how smugglers engage with informal institutions, the hierarchies involved in these relationships and the balance of power between different informal actors – remains unclear. Do smugglers seek approval from traditional elders, and if so, how? Are smugglers trusted by local community members, and if so, do smugglers put effort in to maintaining this trust? In this chapter I seek to explore the type of legitimacy smugglers have within their own communities, and how they exercise this legitimacy within informal institutions. I first discuss smugglers' alignment with their communities; I consider the smugglers' own narratives as well as responses to these narratives from community elders and members, and smugglers' efforts to signal social status. Next, I discuss the ways in which smugglers invest in local communities and provide practical public services. Lastly, I examine the ways in which smugglers contribute to local settlements around security and stability; I use the example of Niger to describe a set of shifting allegiances that help individuals and communities to build security and predictability. I conclude with some thoughts on the ways in which smugglers and informal institutions collaborate and the political significance of these alliances for fragile states.

## 7.2 Morals and Money

Post-colonial states such as Niger, Djibouti and Afghanistan can struggle to build historical and cultural legitimacy, in part because they represent compromises between different ethnic groups and as well as between the state and Western powers. In contrast, informal institutions are strongly rooted in the community, and derive their legitimacy clearly from shared social and cultural bonds. In Obock, Agadez and Zaranj, smugglers clearly come from the local community – but they also conduct activities which may threaten community cohesion. Migrants are considered a potential threat to communities even in smuggling ecosystems, as discussed in Chapter 5; ecosystem participants are also aware that smuggling activities are illegal, and could result in retaliation from the state. In this context, do smugglers make active efforts to align themselves with the norms and values that govern local communities and informal institutions?

The story of Bello, whom we met in Agadez, sheds light on interactions between smugglers and their communities. Bello works as a smuggler – but if he is asked to describe his primary characteristic, he will talk about himself as a community advocate and leader. When we asked Bello to explain who he was, he started by talking about football. Bello has been a football player for many years and has played for different teams in the region. After he explains his football career, he talks about his family. He has multiple wives and 11 children; the notetaker was impressed by the size of his family and made sure to both type out the word ‘eleven’, and to include the numbers, in brackets. Similarly, when we ask Bello to talk about his day, he starts by talking about his football training centre. He has more than 40 players under his responsibility and he trained a player who made the national team. Bello’s character could probably be summed up by this sentence: “I’ve really helped young people in the Agadez region, and I’m always smiling and welcoming everyone.” Bello got into migration after his career on the pitch ended. He started as a migrant, and he went to Libya to

earn money. He didn't explain what he did, but it had clearly been profitable – after he came home from Libya, Bello was able to get married and start having children. He also started working with smugglers at this point, first as a brokerage agent and then as an active agent in the movement of people toward Libya.

For Bello, his work as a smuggler is tied up in his community engagements. He goes to the mosque with an empty pocket and comes back with money; aspiring migrants come to his football training centre and ask him for help. He believes he is helping his people: "I'm sure that anyone who falls into my hands will never regret my work." For Bello, smugglers have a duty to support their community. Smugglers can transport people through the bus station, or they can transport people through the "street" – using informal mechanisms that are not fully aligned with pre-existing norms. At the bus station, there is a clear system, and informal institutions exert strong influence. A smuggler described the bus station as a place where "a lot of Tuareg" gather; the implication of this sentence was that informal institutions had a strong presence. These institutions, for both Bello and others, served to safeguard migrants. There was a structure for migrants who travelled irregularly through the bus station; both smugglers and migrants were perceived to be protected by community guarantees. In contrast, those operating in the "street" were in the wilderness. There was no social structure to protect them. Bello's description of both himself and his work was designed to emphasise his positive contribution to the community, and his efforts to build community safety and security – his narrative was designed to demonstrate his alignment with local norms and values. The structure Bello described, and the degree to which it succeeded in protecting migrants, sits at odds with the migrants in Agadez who described smugglers as "swindling" them, and statements from businesspeople indicating that smugglers are operating out of self-interest – but at the same time Bello's story served a purpose with regard to building a

narrative within the broader community. While Bello's narrative could be contested, it still helped to build legitimacy of smugglers and their ecosystem.

Smugglers in Afghanistan made similar efforts to align themselves not only to community well-being, but also to historical and cultural touchstones. Abdullah and I were reviewing transcripts from smugglers and migrants one day when Abdullah asked if I knew how smuggling started in Afghanistan. Smuggling, Abdullah proceeded to tell me, was not smuggling at all. Abdullah came from the Hazara ethnic group; they are a Shi'a minority in a primarily Sunni country. The Shi'a have different traditions compared to the Sunni: the Sunni only conduct one type of pilgrimage, the Hajj, to cleanse their sins and follow in the footsteps of the Prophet Mohamed. Shi'a Muslims, in contrast, go on several pilgrimages, including to Karbala, the shrine of Husein Ali and the site of the Battle of Karbala, and Mashhad, the home of Ali al Rida. Among the Hazara, a group of families, called "rahalabad" maintained a tradition of organising religious pilgrimages for others and, as mentioned in Chapter 5, passed down their profession across generations. "When the Soviets arrived, people were suffering. So the rahalabads used their networks and their links to move people, not just for pilgrimages, but to save them from the Soviets. And then from the Taliban." Abdullah knew a family in which grandfather, father and son were all smugglers, rahlabad; the family had weathered generations of political turmoil, and they would continue to do so in the future. Smuggling has been thus been considered licit, and even virtuous, among the Hazara ethnic group (Monsutti 2005; Monsutti and Camiller 2021).

Throughout the interviews we conducted, from 2018 until 2022, smugglers in Afghanistan made regular references both to their ancestors and to the moral rectitude of their work. One Tajik man spoke about how easy it was to move around in earlier days: "my grandfather who went to Hajj [Saudi Arabia] without any passport 70 years ago, from one Muslim country to another." Another Hazara man talked about his uncle who "wanted to

study in a religious school in Najaf, Iraq forty years ago and become a mullah. So he travelled to Iran and Iraq over a donkey in a caravan and no one asked him where do you go or where is your passport.” Many smugglers saw themselves not only as maintaining the tradition of their ancestors, but also as serving the will of God and righting moral injustices and wrongs. One framed his work in the following terms: “This is God's land and God's land is for everyone. Everyone should be able to go everywhere he wants.” Another brought scriptures to bear, saying that “We don't have border in Islam and God says in Quran that you can go wherever on earth you want to go.” Several smugglers referenced Hajj journeys made by their uncles and grandfathers; others harked back to the Prophet Mohamed himself. “When there is war and insecurity, naturally people flee. This is their right, even the Prophet fle[d] Makka to Madina out of fear for his life.” Both Abdullah’s story and the regular references to God and the Quran demonstrated an effort on the part of smugglers in Afghanistan to frame their activities in light of social values and social justice.

Smugglers across Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger made efforts in conversations with me and my key interlocutors to stress their social role, their upright natures and the impact of their work for the community. At first, this push for legitimacy surprised me: after all, smugglers were from the local community, so I had assumed that there was a strong degree of alignment. As I reviewed engagements and discussions with different community stakeholders, however, I started to notice that community acceptance of smugglers and their activities was not guaranteed. Community doubts and hesitations were best described by a traditional elder in Obock. He knew that smugglers allowed migrants to die on the sea, and he worried about the fact that “the life of a human being is worth nothing to them.” The elder was also aware that smuggling had potentially damaging security implications. Yemeni migrant smugglers had become integrated into his society, and they were armed; Djiboutians, in comparison, were not armed and the town had relatively little experience in assuring

people's security when small arms were everywhere. Despite these moral quandaries, however, he had trust in smugglers – enough trust in them to support them as they kept “control” of the town. Trust in smugglers, for this elder, arose from their perceived financial stability. We asked the elder who he thought was powerful within the community, and he answered as follows: “One [type of power] is being from a trading family [and this means you] are invested in the development of this town. The second [type of power is] the wealth of the people that is embezzled by those who hold government office.” Smugglers had the first type of power – that is, they engaged in trade and had a financial stake in the development of the town. They were trustworthy because their interests aligned with those of the community. They had, for the elder, “the power of the sea”, which they had harnessed to build property and houses. such investments were good for the town and the community from the perspective of the local elder, and because smugglers had made these investments, the elder was willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to them.

Perhaps because money was associated with trustworthiness, legitimacy and masculinity, smugglers made efforts to show off their wealth. When Mohamed and I walked through Obock, he told me that the new, shiny white buildings on our route had been built by smugglers. Similarly, we passed several building sites in the heat of the afternoon; workers curled up in tiny patches of shade at the corners of the sites. “See how the smugglers are? They hire migrants to build their houses, and then the migrants can use the money for their onward journey.” Mohamed nodded in approval at the generosity of the smugglers. Tales were also told about how smugglers sent their children abroad – to France, naturally – to go to school. These displays of wealth acted as a form of status projection; if smugglers could afford to build houses and send their children to school in France, then they were declaring that they had high status, not only in Obock but also beyond. Open displays of wealth and status projection served a social purpose, as it increased social trust in smugglers and the

work that they did. It helped to ensure the buy-in of traditional elders and businesspeople. It is also likely that these affirmations of wealth also helped smugglers in Obock to access more credit and to negotiate with a wider range of actors, although no specific examples were discussed in the interviews (Dahlhaus and Schlösser 2021; Blue et al. 2020). In all three locations, masculinity was defined (at least in part) as being able to provide for one's family, so when smugglers could build big houses and send their children to France for their education, they were also signalling their status in line with locally recognised ideals of masculine responsibility. These signals were a wider community reflection of dynamics that were also present in interviews I conducted without interlocutors, where smugglers tried to enhance narratives of their own influence and present themselves as larger than they were to consolidate and cement their status.

Smuggler efforts to build community ties in Obock were so successful that they were also recognised informally by government officials. I spoke to Hasan, a talkative government official, in the government's beautiful headquarters, built out of stone during colonial times. He had watched the smuggling industry grow and he had watched his friends and his family grow more reliant on it. He knew that the smuggling industry brought benefits to his town – economic growth, jobs for youth. He also knew that the government could not provide for the town. But at the end of the day, Hasan was worried about what the smuggling industry represented. There was growth, there was glitter, but he questioned whether it was sustainable. “Everything is all mixed up. Because there is no state, people do what they want. It's all about the money. And people will follow the money.” He told me a story to demonstrate the changes wrought in Obock society by the arrival of smugglers; the story indicated that smugglers had gained legitimacy, but perhaps at the expense of previously accepted desirable social values.

*“Around 2008, there was a guy from a small town. He was going to school, to high school. He did smuggling work during the night. He did a night’s work, and got 10,000 francs, 20,000 francs. One morning after a night working, he was talking with some friends on the beach. A professor saw him and yelled at him for not being in class. He replied [by] saying: ‘I’m a bigger man than you, I’m earning three times as much as you.’ Why should he want to be a professor or be educated if he was earning that much money?”*

Hasan’s story encapsulated the trajectory of smugglers’ efforts to build cultural and social legitimacy. The social needs and norms of smugglers did not always align with those of the community, and when the smuggling business grew, different types of frictions developed. As young smugglers got easy access to ready money, relationships worsened not only between them and traditional elders, but also those who had been seen as pillars of the community, such as teachers. The types of conflicts that arose were rooted in both age and masculinity: within each of the three locations in this thesis, men hold primary responsibility for looking after their households and earning money, and by taking part in the smuggling market, young men were able to meet social expectations and signal their status quickly. In doing so, however, they created conflict with older men like the professor in the story and like traditional elders, who perceived that masculinity was defined, not only by money, but also by other personal characteristics such as education. Perhaps to manage these frictions, higher-level smugglers started to build alignment between themselves and community standards. In Chapter 5, the manager of a smuggling ring explained the evolution of the smuggling market in Obock, and he explicitly discussed his perception that the second generation of smugglers was more “educated” and therefore better able to engage with traditional elders. In Afghanistan, smugglers clearly drew on tropes of morality and religious observance to gain community support and buy-in. As smugglers grew more powerful, they

supplemented their image with cash – they invested in themselves, their families and their image, and in doing so, they gained further trust and credit within their ecosystem. This legitimacy and trust came at a potential cost to the community, however, and the risks associated with dependency on smugglers were noted by interviewees across all three locations.

### **7.3 Smugglers and Services**

The smugglers we spoke to in Obock, Zaranj and Agadez made efforts to build legitimacy within their communities through demonstrations of wealth and appeals to morality. While both of these strategies helped to build positive perceptions of smugglers, and credibility with regard to cultural bonds, they did not tangibly benefit community members. This gives rise to a question: were appeals to cultural commonality enough for smugglers to gain community acceptance, or were more concrete and costly efforts also necessary? Were smugglers just engaging in a lot of talk, or did they put their money behind their words?

Public services in the region of Obock have never been strong. The local government development report states that the region has 17 primary schools, but only one middle school and one secondary institution. There is one level 2 health care facility and six primary health care facilities, but the same development report indicates that infrastructure is poor and that health facilities do not receive adequate amounts of medicine (République de Djibouti 2021). Lack of sufficient health and education services was a major preoccupation of many of the people I spoke to in Obock. Reports by international agencies confirm that not only is there limited provision of health and education in Obock, but it also has lower access to electricity, water and general sanitation than the rest of the country. One report adds that “peripheral areas of the state are largely neglected in favour of visible development in the capital” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b).

In this context, smugglers have stepped in; they met a key need among local communities, and in filling a gap left by the state, they also built their own legitimacy. Mohamed and I walked past both the hospital and the school in the town of Obock several times during my visits. The first time we passed the hospital, it was about three o'clock in the afternoon, the thermometer read about 35 degrees Celsius, and I was hot and sweaty. But Mohamed stopped dead in the street. "See that? See there?" He pointed at the assembly of buildings in front of us. One building, on the left, was newly built and freshly painted. The other, slightly recessed and to the right, was grey and drab; cracks ran up the concrete. "These are two wings of the hospital. That one on the right, the state built it. The one on the left, the smugglers built it!" It was so hot, and I was melting, but the lack of logic still nagged at me. "They built it? But that must have been expensive, no?" "It was during COVID. They could not bring the migrants to the state hospital, so they built a separate wing of their own. And they bought medicines. They still buy medicines, actually!" Two minutes later, after we turned a corner into another street, Mohamed stopped in the street again, this time to point out a similar situation with the local high school. The windows of the government-built building were broken and in shards; the smuggler-built building, on the same plot of land, was fresh, airy and inviting. "Our smugglers are educated now, and they want to educate others too!" Mohamed's effusive compliments also aligned with the trajectory described by Abdul, the smuggling manager I had met on the hilltops outside the city. Abdul had explained that more educated people had entered the smuggling profession in its second generation: this had not only supported engagement with traditional elders and the local community, but these second generation smugglers also had a desire to give back to the community.



*Figure 6: A wing of the local hospital built by smugglers.*

Smugglers provided public services at their own cost in Obock – and their role was so essential that government actors also recognised it. When I spoke to government representatives in Obock, I asked them what would happen to the city if smuggling no longer existed. The two officials had different temperaments. One was serious and quiet, and gave the impression of following all the rules; the other, Hasan, was gregarious, with a touch of rebellion in him. Hassan dropped hints that the government was colluding with smugglers – there were winks, and nudges, and unsubtle asides. The rule bound official was circumspect, without a trace of humour. But both agreed: without smuggling, the city of Obock would dwindle, and the residents would be worse off. The rule-bound official described the situation as follows: “Of course smuggling is necessary for the economy of Obock. The government doesn’t have enough money to look after this town and to provide services. How would we manage if smuggling didn’t exist?”

In Obock, smugglers provided specific and tangible public services – they built hospitals, bought drugs, and staffed schools – but in Agadez, their influence was wider and more diffuse. 69% of the population of Agadez is under the age of 25 and less than half of children between 7 and 16 are in school (United Nations Population Fund 2022).

Opportunities for youth are very low; in 2023 Niger ranked 181 out of 183 countries in the Global Youth Development Index (Danish Trade Union Development Agency 2025). The youth bulge has developed in a country that offers few opportunities for youth: in 2021, 40% of the population of Niger was estimated to live under the poverty line and while per capita GDP growth was relatively high, at 4.9%, growth was unequally distributed and economic growth was less likely to take place in areas that were further away from the capital (World Bank 2025d). Concerns about youth were widespread, including among our interviewees, with businesspeople concerned that youth were not showing up to work, community members expressing issues with youth delinquency and smugglers acknowledging the sheer scale of out of work youth in town.

In this context, with high levels of youth unemployment, low youth education and relatively few prospects, migrant smuggling represents an opportunity for economic growth. In Agadez, clandestine cross-border movement across the Sahara has taken place over generations and encompasses a range of goods. However, migrant flows represented huge levels of revenue, to the point where at peak years more than 300,000 people a year travelled through Agadez, and the migration industry was estimated to employ over 6,000 people (Hoffman et al. 2017; Lucht 2022). Some estimates suggest that migrant smuggling supported the income of more than half the households in Agadez in 2015 (Hoffman et al. 2017). Smugglers thus represented a key sector that provided revenue, employment and general social support. Individual smugglers were very aware of the role they played in supporting the town as a whole. One described his profession as follows: “The smuggler is someone we

should respect and salute. He's someone who does a good job facilitating the journey and contributes to the town's economy.” Another said that because of his activities and those of other smugglers, “everyone in Agadez is really happy... all the people ... are in business, drivers, shopkeepers, everyone is in business [because of smugglers]”. A third referred to the ways in which the smuggling sector supported youth, saying that during the period in which smuggling was banned “[the state had] led young people into delinquency, crime, theft, trafficking.”

The economic and social importance of migrant smuggling became most visible when the industry was shut down. Following the 2015 influx of migrants to Europe, the EU took increasing measures to externalise their borders, including efforts to support reformed legal frameworks and investments in Niger’s border capacity, as well as provision of development aid (Claes and Schmauder 2020). The changes in the legal anti-smuggling framework, and the strong enforcement of this framework, had significant impacts on the economy of Agadez; it left youth unemployed, businesses without revenue and community members wondering where their town was going (Claes and Schmauder 2020). We spoke to a restaurant owner who had been born in Agadez, and had operated his business over many years: he described the economic situation in Agadez as follows: “In my capacity as a restaurateur, we're now at a point where we're earning nothing because there are no migrants in Agadez as there used to be. Before, there were NGOs and smugglers who provided us with services to feed these people, but with the passage of the law on migration, things have taken a [worse] turn ... if [smuggling] is lacking, there won't be all these investments and the people who benefit from it will also be dissatisfied, simply unemployed, at the risk of taking other undesirable paths.” Smugglers’ role in working with youth, providing employment and providing income was referred to as a public good, benefiting everyone in the community, across our interviews in Agadez.

Migrant smuggling provides economic and social benefits in Agadez – and it is difficult, if not impossible, for other actors to replace these benefits. Following the passage of anti-smuggling Law 2015/36, the state tried to step in, with reinforcements from the international system. State efforts to support the local economy broadly failed, however: while reconversion plans were developed that targeted smugglers and aimed to support the wider community, progress was slow and funding, especially from international sources, was too short-term to have an impact (Fransje Molenaar, Ursu, and Tinni 2017). The benefits of smuggling are so significant that, similarly to the situation in Obock, local authorities have accepted the necessity of the smuggling industry, and have acknowledged the value it brings. The authorities in Agadez have formalised arrangements with smugglers, and arranged for them to pay a tax of 1,000 CFA for each migrant passing through the city. One community member described the days on which caravans arrived as follows: “the population of Agadez, the State also earns a lot, everyone earns [from migrant smuggling]... [On] the day the convoy arrives it looks like the day of the holiday, everyone earns, shopkeepers, the town hall earns millions [of CFA].” It is notable that smugglers pay a tax to the local government; their willingness to engage demonstrates the degree to which local, decentralised government has developed local legitimacy. Smugglers referred positively to the role of the Sultan of Air and to his role in representing the local community at the national level; perhaps this positive attitude underpinned their willingness to contribute to local government initiatives.

Smugglers in both Obock and Agadez made visible and costly efforts to invest in health systems, education and public services. When smugglers provide services, they are actually investing in local communities: building a hospital wing and stocking it with drugs is a significant expense, and committing a percentage of profits to the local town hall reduces profitability. It could be possible to explain these decisions as a desire on the part of smugglers to do good and to give back to their communities. However, decisions on the part

of smugglers to provide services and support for local institutions are likely to be influenced not by altruistic motives but rather by the need to mitigate risks and protect future profits. Smuggler investments in public services thus represent a form of tempered altruism – smugglers give back to their communities, and in doing so also build another form of risk mitigation into their activities (Stark 1985). In trying to build their own legitimacy with their communities, smugglers in Agadez and Obock also help to fill a gap left by the state, and as such, construction of smuggler legitimacy may take place at the expense of the state.

#### **7.4 Security and Shifting Sands**

Abdullah, my key interlocutor in Afghanistan, is soft-spoken and measured. When he came to me in 2018 to talk about writing an article on smugglers, I was excited. I also assumed that the article would reflect our previous collaborative work – smugglers as perpetrators of physical violence or collectors of bribes, or prices in the smuggling economy. I was surprised when Abdullah explained his idea. “Ruta, I think we need to write about how smugglers save people.” I was confused; I hadn’t thought of smugglers in this light. Abdullah continued “Smugglers save people. In the desert. When they find migrants who are stranded, they give them water. And help them find a way out. I want to write about that.” I turned the idea over in my head. I was accustomed to considering search and rescue operations to be the remit of governments – after all, they were the people with helicopters and expertise. But the Ghani government had other priorities in 2018 – and smugglers had indeed stepped in to fill the perceived security gap, as discussed in Chapter 6. This framing is, of course, indicative of the narratives prevalent within the smuggling ecosystem and serves the purpose not only of describing the motivations of different actors but also of building the legitimacy of the ecosystem as a whole. In the locations I engaged with for my thesis, smugglers presented themselves as responsible for ensuring the safety of migrants, and

to achieve this goal they engaged in a web of local alliances and structures that effectively took responsibility for assuring community security.

In Afghanistan, physical insecurity has been a major issue for citizens for many years. In 2019, the Asia Foundation's Survey of the Afghan People (2019) found that 74.5% of respondents feared for their personal safety on a regular basis – a significant increase compared to 2012, when 50% of respondents feared for their personal safety on a regular basis (Asia Foundation 2012). Changes in feelings about personal security seemed to mirror impressions of state legitimacy: for instance, in 2012 62% of respondents had confidence in Parliament as a whole, compared to 47% in 2019 (Asia Foundation 2012, 2019). According to the same survey, people had a somewhat nebulous idea of who precisely posed a security risk: 38% of respondents identified “criminals/thieves” – a general category – as posing significant risks. A significant proportion of respondents (35%) also were unable to explain who exactly they considered a risk. It was notable that only 2% of respondents considered smugglers a risk (Asia Foundation 2019). In short, available data indicates that physical security has deteriorated in Afghanistan, in tandem with perceptions of state legitimacy.

The smugglers we spoke to in Afghanistan felt an obligation to provide security specifically to the migrants they transported. When describing how they assured safe passage for migrants, smugglers talked about interacting with a vast network of other actors, ranging from the government to police officers to drug smugglers. In Zaranj, smugglers seemed to make clear and conscious choices about how to arrange their activities, and with whom to form alliances, on the basis of security and safety. These choices can be seen in the context both of the actors whom smugglers choose to avoid and those with whom they choose to build relationships and alliances.

Migrant smugglers in Afghanistan operate in an environment where other illegal activity – notably drug smuggling – is common. Migrant smuggling and drug smuggling have historically been separate activities. When I started working on irregular migration in 2018, Abdullah and I spoke to smugglers across the country, and most referenced an informal rule: migrant smuggling took place primarily through Zaranj, in Nimroz, whereas drug smuggling took place further north, through a border point called Islam Qala in the province of Herat. The dynamics of the Herat route were different from those of the Zaranj route: the route was considered to be riskier and drug smugglers, rather than migrant smugglers, determined norms and operational modalities. These dynamics started to change after the Taliban took over; the Taliban constricted drug transport routes in Herat province, so drug smugglers moved their activities further south. One migrant smuggler explained the situation as follows: “[T]here have been a lot of problem and crossing [through Herat] has been difficult mainly because of Taliban restrictions and internal rivalries over commission money. [The] route via Pakistan is one of the main two routes [for migrant smuggling that has traditionally been considered safe], but it's now under the control of drug mafia [so we are not using it as much]. However, those smugglers who have good relations with drug mafia can use this route to cross migrants.” Another smuggler confirmed that he moved away from routes where drug smugglers were present: “[W]e couldn't use [the route via a town called Raja] during last year because drug smugglers use that route now and it [became] very dangerous ... So, it is only [the route via a town called Mushkil] route now.”

Migrant smugglers perceived that drug smugglers posed not only an operational risk to their activities, but also a reputational risk. “[Migrant] smugglers here in Zaranj who are also smuggling drugs that makes our name bad, as [they] are criminals and murderers. These are people who have no conscience and do whatever possible for money.” Another pointed out that a “new wave” of smugglers “are working with thieves and criminal networks ...

[they] are very cruel and not only beat migrants but also engage in rape and theft.” Migrant smugglers thus made a deliberate effort to avoid drug smugglers, for both operational and reputational reasons.

It should be noted that the contrast interviewees drew between their own restraint and the violence of others served a purpose: it positioned migrant smuggling as licit work, sanctioned by the community. Similar "good smuggler" self-portrayals have been documented among smuggling facilitators in other contexts (Achilli 2018; Sanchez 2017). The clean segregation of migrant and drug smuggling in Zaranj is explained by the smugglers as reflective of a type of morality: migrant smuggling is moral and helpful to the community, but drug smuggling is harmful. Secondary data, however, indicates that other factors underlie the division between the two smuggling types, including ethnic divisions between Hazara and Tajik, acting as migrant smugglers, and Pashtuns who dominate the drug smuggling market. Secondary evidence from Agadez indicates that in at least some settings the two trades share networks (Lucht 2022). What the interviews establish with confidence is therefore not that migrant smugglers were less violent than their counterparts, but that they perceived a strong interest in being seen as such — and that this perceived interest demonstrably shaped their choices and alliances with regard to routes and security.

While migrant smugglers went out of their way to avoid their counterparts who dealt in drugs, they made some efforts to build alliances with actors who could help to preserve migrant wellbeing, even when these alliances could pose a risk. International humanitarian and charitable organisations are present in Zaranj, but the community knows that these organisations align closely with Western political priorities. One smuggler described humanitarian organisations as follows: “[T]hey work with foreigners and receive salaries from them. And the foreigners don’t want Afghans to migrate. The best way is to pay Afghans themselves to stop others from migrating.” Despite the misalignment between

smugglers and humanitarian organisations, smugglers did develop methods of reaching out to humanitarian organisations, particularly during situations of crisis. One smuggler provided this example of a situation in which he worked with an international NGO: “[T]wo months ago, when Baloch smugglers were trying to take a group across the border, a few people separated from the group and stepped on a landmine. A couple – both parents – died on the spot, and their six- or seven-year-old son survived. The smugglers brought him back to Zaranj and contacted us to ask what to do with the child. We called our relative, who then took responsibility. They collected the boy from us, and after a week they located his uncle in Mazar.” Smugglers thus developed relationships and networks with organisations who were diametrically opposed to their work to provide some support to vulnerable migrants. These relationships were not built directly or formally, but instead through pre-existing family and tribal networks. “My brother-in-law works at one of these organizations that helps children... [When we work together] it usually happens through acquaintances and friends. Since most of the staff at these organisations are local people from this city, we know who works with which organisation and what kind of help they can offer. Whenever necessary, we contact them through a relative or acquaintance.” It should however be noted that when smugglers built alliances with actors that supported and preserved security outcomes, these were relatively costless, and also provided smugglers with reputational benefit and social capital. Smugglers took very little financial or physical risk when reaching out to humanitarian organisations, as they did so through family and ethnic networks. The use of family networks helped to mitigate the risk of engaging with Western organisations, as family members were relatively unlikely to flag the activities of smugglers; the organisations themselves also took on the cost of caring for migrants who were transferred by smugglers. Where positive outcomes were achieved for migrants, stories about smuggler involvement with Western NGOs – and about the benefits for the poor and vulnerable – were spread within the local

community, thus building the reputation of the smuggler, and potentially attracting new customers. Smugglers in Zaranj thus built relationships selectively: they avoided actors whom they considered to be a security risk, and developed alliances – sometimes tentative ones – with those who could provide assistance, especially when such alliances could benefit their own reputations.

The principle of assuring security through alliances held not only in Afghanistan, but also in Niger. In Niger as in Afghanistan, smugglers engaged with a range of actors to guarantee the security of migrants and to conduct business. Whereas smugglers in Afghanistan chose to avoid associating with some groups (i.e., drug smugglers), those in Niger seemed much more open to collaboration, and to tighter relationships with other actors. While relationships with humanitarian agencies were treated with caution in Zaranj, smugglers in Agadez co-opted humanitarian actors: as discussed in Chapter 5, some individuals worked both as smugglers and for humanitarian agencies, and several individuals (both smugglers and community members) referred to international actors as supporting the work of smugglers because they took steps to protect migrants (e.g., by paying restaurants to provide migrants with food). Similarly, there was a strong relationship between smugglers and informal governance institutions. Smugglers discussed referring conflicts to the Sultan of Air, or the tribal leader who represented the traditional governance mechanism. There is evidence from secondary sources that migrant smugglers in Agadez also have a much closer link with illicit goods smuggling (notably arms and drugs) compared to smugglers in Zaranj, and that other forms of smuggling such as smuggling of animals and gold also take place in Agadez, using the same networks as migrant smuggling (Lucht 2022).

If there is clear evidence that smugglers build alliances to support security in both Afghanistan and Niger, then another question arises: how exactly are these alliances built, and what factors are associated with participation in these alliances? Across all of the

locations included in this thesis – Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger – migrant smugglers drew on long-standing alliances and networks. The head of a local smuggling network in Djibouti, Abdul, described to me the growth of the smuggling industry in Djibouti, and his description indicated that in Obock, smugglers approached local informal justice systems in part because there were pre-existing links between the two groups. In Afghanistan, cross-border movement has a long history, and smugglers referred to generational traditions and customs, including family allegiances and tribal ties. In Niger, a similar historical dynamic exists, but more recently, new ties have been built in part to manage the shifts in the smuggling economy brought about by anti-smuggling laws brought in through EU externalisation policies. By examining the ways in which new alliances have formed, and specifically considering the figure of Saley Boss, it is possible to better understand the tools and techniques which strengthen alliances and build security.

#### *7.4.1 Practical and Pragmatic Local Security Solutions*

A set of alliances have been built around a figure named “Saley Boss” in Niger that can provide an instructive case study. As noted, a variety of illicit activity takes place in and around Agadez, from relatively “light” smuggling of cigarettes, petrol and light arms, to movement of more dangerous contraband such as arms and drugs. This happens alongside other types of semi-legal activity, such as illicit gold mining. Non-state armed actors also proliferate in the region, with causes ranging from Tuareg liberation to Islamist jihad. Conducting any form of business in the region involves developing relationships with armed groups, different types of smugglers, government actors, traditional leaders and formal businesses (Pellerin 2017). Saley Boss has built both his own wealth and independent authority and legitimacy in this context. In nine out of the 31 interviews we conducted in Niger, Saley Boss was identified as one of the most powerful figures in Agadez. Saley Boss played an important role in the migrant smuggling ecosystem: three of the six smugglers we

spoke to referred to Saley Boss as an important figure who was considered powerful and influential in the smuggling economy. However, migrant smuggling was not necessarily important to Saley Boss: his most significant business interests were in gold mining, according to both interviewees and a review of secondary data (Pellerin 2017; Raineri 2020). Despite the fact that Saley Boss made his money in gold mining, his influence extended through Agadez and to migrant smugglers; this is in large part because he has strong alliance-building skills. The interviews we conducted, as well as academic articles and reports by organisations such as the Small Arms Survey, provides some insight into the ways in which Saley Boss built alliances, and how he used these alliances to mitigate security risks, including risks associated with changes in government (Pellerin 2017; Raineri 2020).

Saley Boss' influence started to grow following a gold rush that took place in northern Niger starting in early 2014. At this time two main gold deposits were discovered, one in Djado and one in Tchibarakaten. Saley Boss is known for his involvement in Tchibarakaten, but he is actually from an oasis in the Air Mountains. He hired individuals from his tribe to staff his mines. In order to both extract and transport the gold, he needed to negotiate with armed groups who derive revenue from transport convoys. After making money through gold mining, he maintained his base (now owning over 12 mines) and started developing an infrastructure to support mining communities, offering water, food, equipment, vehicle repair, and other goods and services (Pellerin 2017). Diversification has helped him to consolidate profit and gave him more room to negotiate with licit and illicit actors ( Pellerin 2017; Raineri 2020). As his reputation grew and his network expanded, he was able to negotiate steadily more important compromises between different groups. He is given credit not only for establishing a military garrison at Tchibarakaten, but also for setting up a local governance system whereby a committee (run by a former Tuareg rebel) settles disputes and calls on the military to enforce its decisions. The structure Saley Boss has set up is unique,

and has been described as a situation in which “the use of public force [is subject to] the service of private decision-making”(Raineri 2020). Saley Boss’s influence remained strong through the change in government in Niger. Despite his clear connections with the previous government, the new President of Niger gave him two elaborate awards (the Sarauniya Mangou Sovereignty Medal and the title of Commander of the National Order of Merit) for services to the nation (Atafa 2024).

There is no clear account in secondary literature of how Saley Boss achieved his influence, or how he built alliances with such a wide range of actors. However, discussions with residents of Agadez indicate that Saley Boss leveraged several tools to bolster his own legitimacy. Different interviewees mentioned his contribution to various public services – he was supposed to have built the hospital and equipped it with an ambulance, and to have built the police station and the justice department. Saley Boss also leveraged community ties. One interviewee said that Saley Boss was “on one side Tebu and on the other side Tuareg... [he is] of mixed Tebu and Tuareg blood.” Another interviewee stated that Saley Boss was Tebu. These perceptions of Saley Boss as having strong ties to the Tebu community are interesting given that documentation shows that Saley Boss is Tuareg (there is no indication of “mixed blood”) and strongly affiliated with a prominent tribe (Pellerin 2017). The discrepancy between interviewee responses and fact indicates that Saley Boss has leveraged community ties – and made ties where they did not exist. Saley Boss was also developed a moral basis for his authority. This rested in part on building mosques and engaging with the religious community – but in part on developing a perception that he was open handed and generous, and would help any individual who managed to access him. Saley Boss thus leveraged community ties, his own wealth, and the power of service provision to build his own reputation and influence – and through his reputation, he established alliances that built security and safety for the community. Saley Boss’s legitimacy can be seen in some of the

stories told about him. For example, there is a story that bandits attacked a truck transporting gold, but when they realised it belonged to Saley Boss, they returned it with the gold intact (Pellerin 2017).

In both Agadez and Zaranj, smugglers had a vested interest in building a safe environment; they needed to guarantee the security of the migrants they transported and they needed to contribute to the safety and security of community as a whole. Smugglers made commitments to provide security, especially to migrants – and they delivered on these commitments not necessarily through arms, but instead through allegiances which were founded on kinship, reciprocity, service provision and financial exchange. The ways in which smugglers approached security was particularly interesting when contrasted with their approaches to services and social and cultural bonds. Smugglers made direct and straightforward attempts to build social credibility, and they made concrete, large scale investments in public goods to demonstrate that they could provide services. The approaches smugglers took to guaranteeing security, however, were much more cautious – rather than directly confronting the state, as they did with regard to social bonds and services, smugglers made efforts to build alliances in which different actors could collaborate to meet community needs and undercut the state.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

Smuggling ecosystems develop at the periphery of states, in areas with weak security, limited public service provision and stretched social bonds with the state. In these ecosystems, different actors engage and interact to the point that they are willing to invest to protect the communal value they generate, and to optimise results both for themselves and for the entire ecosystem. Within this context, in this chapter I asked how smugglers engage with their communities to build their own legitimacy and whether, in doing so, they fill gaps left

by the state. I found that smugglers do, in fact, take specific and targeted measures to provide services to the wider community.

The relationship between smugglers and their communities is fluid in Obock, Agadez and Zaranj; although smugglers came from and were a part of local communities, their activities were not always accepted and could challenge pre-existing local hierarchies and structures. Smugglers in these communities adopted different stratagems to manage this dynamic, ranging from highlighting their moral values to investing in public services to developing new structures and institutions to support governance. The smugglers we spoke to had a variety of tools at their disposal, and they selected from this repertoire of possibilities to build their own legitimacy with local communities and informal institutions.

The gaps left by states in service provision, security and cultural bonds represented clear entry points for smugglers to build legitimacy. Discontent with the state is pervasive within the smuggling ecosystems I engaged with, as discussed in Chapter 6. Businesspeople, traditional elders, and even migrants were unhappy with government authorities. Not only did they feel that the state was not taking concrete actions to help them; they also felt that the state did not represent them. In quests to build their own legitimacy, smugglers effectively stepped into this gap: they met needs that were clearly expressed within their communities. These needs were both practical – health systems, improved schools – and ideological – smugglers spoke directly to the values and history of people within their communities. The smugglers we spoke to had a vested interest in filling the gaps left by the state, since by doing so they built their own legitimacy.

Smugglers may have effectively built a light-touch, practical governance system with strong local legitimacy, but wider recognition of this system is relatively low. Of the three case studies I considered, Obock has always operated outside the sphere of the national

government, and the smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj appears to have had limited, if any, contact with the Ghani government. There is, however, the potential for productive engagement between the government and smuggling ecosystems: the example of Saley Boss in Niger demonstrates the ways in which government actors can collaborate with alliances built around irregular trade to support security. An important question remains: to what extent do smugglers and smuggling ecosystems use their legitimacy to influence national level politics, and if they do, what is the impact of their engagements?

## 8.0 Smugglers and Authoritarian States: High-Stakes Games

### 8.1 Introduction

*Abdul was the manager of a local smuggling network in Djibouti, introduced to me by Ismail, a contact I had made through friends in Djiboutiville. When we went to see him, the contact drove on the tarmac road for several miles, and then we veered off the road into the hills. We stopped on a hilltop where a man – Abdul – was bending over a sick goat with acute concern. He straightened up and greeted us with suspicion. Ismail and Abdul had a long conversation in Afar; when the conversation ended, Abdul grudgingly introduced himself to me. We then walked to the headquarters of Abdul's smuggling operation – a set of haphazard concrete buildings located just opposite a gendarmerie base. A woman was cooking in one building; a gendarme perused bunches of qat in front of another building. At the end of the compound, a sort of medieval court had been set up. Red velvet cushions were arranged in a U shape, and members of the smuggling group lounged against them while chewing qat and drinking tea. Conversation was stilted at first – after all, the smuggling team had no reason to trust me. Abdul asked me to justify my presence, so I explained my research and my interest in talking to him. He continued to look uncomfortable and others in the court seemed awkward as well. So I offered to just have a cup of tea and leave – after all, I already had quite a lot of data, and while an interview with Abdul would be nice, it wasn't necessary. Abdul frowned. Then he offered me qat. I took the bunch of leaves and started chewing. Before I knew it, everyone was talking in a mixture of French, Somali and Afar. After a while, I asked Abdul how he had started smuggling. He took a deep breath and then a sip of tea. "Well, you see, I used to be a qat smuggler. But that was hard work. Government patrols would chase us. We went fast on the tarmac road, and we left the road to hide in the hills, and they kept on chasing us. But when we smuggle migrants, things are easier. The government chases us, but they never go over the speed limit. And they never leave the tarmac roads. So*

*we just drive into the hills and escape.” He stopped to chew the wad of qat in his mouth. I took a sip of tea. “Why doesn’t the government chase you?”*

*“They don’t really care about us moving migrants. They get money from all those Gulf countries to keep migrants out and they want to keep the Europeans happy. And they need the money. The government just needs to make it look like they are putting up border controls so that they can play political games.”*

Abdul talked about the political games governments played with the nonchalance of a realist political science theorist. His argument – that the state of Djibouti was effectively using migration to extract political concessions from other countries – lies at the core of not only his own jaded attitude toward the state, but also migration diplomacy literature. Migration diplomacy literature argues that states in the Global South threaten to use tools such as expulsion of migrants and loosening of border controls to negotiate for more aid resources and political concessions. The actions of policymakers and the academic literature on migration diplomacy is undergirded by an assumption that states have the capacity have to manage their borders, either directly through existing state systems such as border guards and police, or indirectly through their relationships with informal institutions (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Cold-Ravnkilde 2022; Tsourapas 2025). In short, migration diplomacy rests on the assumption that states have adequate legitimacy – either through a monopoly on the use of force or through other means – to manage borders. This assumption is at odds with the findings from Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 of this thesis, which indicates that states have low legitimacy in border areas and that legitimacy is contested and diffused among a range of non-state actors including smugglers. If states want to deliver on the commitments they make through negotiated migration diplomacy processes, then it is likely that they need to align with smuggling ecosystems. This need for alignment gives rise to a question: how do

smugglers and smuggling ecosystems figure in state efforts to build legitimacy? What kind of influence do they have in national and international politics?

In this chapter I seek to consider the ways in which smuggling ecosystems can influence the narratives and actions of states, and the types of conditions under which states become more receptive to influence from and by smugglers. This chapter draws on the fact that in two of my field sites – Afghanistan and Niger – there was a change in government during my data collection period. In each state, governments that adopted visible anti-smuggling postures were succeeded by those whose attitude toward smuggling was more ambiguous. The chapter argues that in both the post-coup Tchiani government in Niger and the Taliban in Afghanistan there is evidence indicating that smuggling ecosystems have become politically relevant actors. In Niger, the Tchiani government has made clear and well-articulated efforts to meet the specific needs and objectives of smuggling ecosystems, and in Afghanistan the Taliban has taken practical actions to build its own legitimacy in Niger. Despite these efforts, however, both governments are willing to sacrifice smugglers and their communities when larger political objectives are at stake. In the first part of this chapter, I examine the ways in which states can leverage the discontent prevalent in smuggling ecosystems to build their own legitimacy. After this, I consider situations in which states trade off the interests of smuggling ecosystems against achieving international legitimacy. I then examine some of the techniques states have adopted to balance the conflicting interests of smuggling ecosystems and international structures. I conclude by considering some of the implications of this trade-off for externalisation policies as well as for the international system more broadly. Please note that the analysis in this chapter is limited to the national government level; this is in large part because in two of my field sites (Djibouti and Afghanistan), local government actors did not have sufficient power or resources to significantly influence national government.

## 8.2 Shared Discontent and Domestic Legitimacy

National political events in both Niger and Afghanistan suggest that discontent with the state is not limited to smuggling ecosystems. Niger has experienced only one peaceful transfer of power since its independence and Afghanistan has had at least 20 leaders between 1945 and 2025 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024c). Elections of perceived pro-Western leaders are not considered fully legitimate in either country: in Niger the election of Mohamed Bazoum was marked by accusations of fraud (Nsabia and Harchaoui 2023) and in Afghanistan in 2019 all commissioners of the Independent Election Commission and Independent Electoral Complaints Commission were imprisoned for large-scale administrative fraud (Asia Foundation 2019). This lack of legitimacy is widely considered to have contributed to violent transfers of power and the takeover of authoritarian regimes, with the Tchiani government in Niger taking power from the previous Bazoum government through a coup, and the Taliban in Afghanistan ousting the previous government of Ashraf Ghani through a military takeover. In both countries, the new regimes have taken explicit measures to distance themselves from their predecessors; they have also taken deliberate actions to align themselves with smuggling ecosystems. In doing so, they specifically address concerns prevalent in smuggling ecosystems and simultaneously build their own legitimacy.

In Niger, Tchiani's alignment with smuggling ecosystems began shortly after he came to power with the overturning of anti-smuggling legislation. In 2015, under President Mahamadou Issoufou (Bazoum's predecessor), Niger passed Law 2015-36; this law intended to reduce "illegal" smuggling of migrants in Niger by imposing penalties including heavy fines and jail for facilitating migration-related offences. The European Union pushed for the drafting of the law alongside different international agencies such as IOM and UNODC in the aftermath of the 2015 migration "influx" into Europe (Stille 2023). The law was passed in 2015, and relatively strict enforcement of the law began in 2016, with the EU reporting that

95 vehicles were confiscated and 102 smugglers were arrested between mid-July and the end of October 2016 (Stille 2023). This law induced significant discontent and pushback, particularly from the community in Agadez. Pushback was directed in part at the government which passed the law, and in part at the successive government, that of Mohamoud Bazoum. Community representatives from Agadez requested an abrogation of the law very shortly after Bazoum's government was overthrown by Tchiani (Golovko and Willeme 2024). The request was strongly associated with community needs, including the need to ensure that youth were employed and that the local economy was invigorated, as discussed in Chapter 7. The Tchiani government acquiesced relatively quickly to the request for the anti-smuggling law be overturned; this move received strong support from the Agadez community, and helped to build confidence in the government. Those in the ecosystem no longer face fines and prison sentences, and so smuggling becomes both logically easier and more efficient. One smuggler explained the situation as follows: "Now everyone in Agadez is really happy that this law has been annulled, because all the people this law put out of work are now back in business... Activities have resumed in Agadez, it's not like before when the law was in place. We really thank God and also the current authorities." Several others referred to the abrogation of the smuggling law as a foundation for future cooperation with the government. One community member said that the recent repeal of the law had broad benefits: "When this law was [repealed] here in Agadez [it helped everyone], even the population of Agadez; the State also earns a lot, everyone earns." A smuggler pointed to the potential joint benefits that could be achieved with the state: "The town hall earns money through the tax, because each migrant who arrives, pays one thousand francs [about 1.75 US dollars as of April 2026] to the town hall as tax [so now that] the law has been repealed we can have more than 500 migrants who arrive per day [and everyone benefits]."

The abrogation of the anti-smuggling law showed an alignment with the smuggling ecosystem, but it was only one of several large-scale measures adopted by the Tchiani government that distanced himself from both his predecessor and the West more broadly. These efforts span military and economic dimensions, and they speak directly to concerns voiced within the Agadez community, and discussed in Chapter 6, about the West exerting excessive influence in Niger. Tchiani expelled French troops from Niger, including those which formed a part of Operation Barkhane, which was designed to intervene in different states (Mali, Chad, Mauritania) across the Sahel. He also withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and withdrawn from the West African G5, an alliance between Sahelian countries aiming to fight terrorism, coordinate military operations across borders and address key regional development challenges. Operation Barkhane was clearly led by the French, and the French had significant influence in both ECOWAS and the West African G5. By withdrawing from these regional cooperation instruments, Tchiani effectively announced his intention to reduce Western influence in Nigerien affairs and to take a step away from the long-standing colonial legacies which were so frustrating to those in smuggling ecosystems across my field sites.

Tchiani's government took specific measures to reduce French influence in uranium production, thus explicitly addressing the concerns of those in Agadez who felt that their mining activities produced wealth, but that neither Agadez nor the country of Niger was reaping the rewards. The Tchiani government has revoked permits for the French company Orano, which had been responsible for operating the country's uranium mines (Ferdjani 2024). The government has taken over responsibility for operating the mines, and granted new permits to Nigerien companies for the exploitation of uranium deposits (World Nuclear News, no date). These new permits involve much higher royalty rates – which in turn could provide the government with substantially more revenue with which to fund public services.

The Tchiani government thus directly started to address three legitimacy concerns prevalent in the smuggling ecosystem. First, by moving for control over uranium contracts, it made efforts to increase government revenue, thus suggesting that it might be able to better provide public services. Second, by moving against the French, it positioned itself as a local actor fighting for the rights of the Nigerien people. Third, by pushing for control of the military, it suggested that it might help to improve the situation with regard to security.

The anti-Western sentiment of the post-coup government struck a strong positive chord within the smuggling ecosystem. One shelter provider had long experience with migration: he was himself a migrant to Algeria and Libya before returning home with his savings and setting up a carpentry and shelter business in Agadez. He acknowledges that times have been tough recently – his business grew before the implementation of Law 2015/36, but he has recently seen the industry shrinking. Now, though, despite the current confusion, he has hope. His hope is specifically pinned to the rhetoric coming from the new regime. “You know, [everything is uncertain now and] our situation and our relations with partners, international institutions aren't like they used to be. But it's a question of sovereignty. We hope that everything will be fine, not just for Agadez, but for the whole country in 10 years' time. We hope to see change and progress. Before, everything was politicized, there was only favouritism, but now it's okay, we're all equal [under the current government].” He went on to say that the new regime was already making progress with regard to financial and economic management: “You can see [the government is] trying to be fair and honest with the people... our resources are well managed now, not like before when we had no control over our wealth and it was only the Westerners who profited the most.”

Tchiani's government in Niger made efforts to build legitimacy and engage with the smuggling ecosystem after it came into power. In contrast, the Taliban in Afghanistan started to make similar efforts before they attempted to fully take over the state. One clear example

involved service provision and security in peripheral areas such as Nimroz. Prior to the August 2021 takeover, the Taliban provided a court service in rural areas that included a three-tier (primary, appeal and supreme court) system (Jackson and Weigand 2019; Weigand 2022). This service was highly appreciated by rural communities, especially given the lack of presence of the central government (Kumar 2018; Jackson and Weigand 2019; Weigand 2022). Since August 2021, the Taliban has made Shari'a law the primary law of Afghanistan and argued that appropriate worship of Allah involves obedience to the law (Termeer 2023). It has thus provided a necessary and highly appreciated public service – that of resolution of local disputes – in a way which builds its own legitimacy and confirms that it aligns with the moral codes of those living in peripheral areas, including participants in the smuggling ecosystem (Weigand 2017; Weigand 2022; Termeer 2023).

Not only has the Taliban provided a level of justice, it has also had some mixed success in achieving two other functions of the state – security and optimisation of economic resources. In terms of security, the Taliban has had demonstrable success in achieving peace. During the Ghani government (September 2014 – August 2021), non-state armed groups proliferated: in March 2017, the Afghan National Police submitted a report to Interpol identifying at least 27 different non-state armed groups vying for a position in Afghanistan. These ranged from well-known groups such as Al Qaeda to offshoots of the Taliban such as the Islamic Emirate of Waziristan (Afghanistan Center for the Study of Terrorism and Democracy no date). Following the collapse of the Ghani government, many of these groups could have launched violent campaigns to undermine the Taliban. Instead, the Taliban took control of security in the country. An International Crisis Group report and UN monitoring reports found that following the Taliban takeover, fighting diminished to 18% of previous levels and civilian casualties fell noticeably (International Crisis Group 2022). While pockets of violence and resistance still exist, the security situation in Afghanistan has largely

stabilised – indicating that the Taliban have at least temporarily achieved an effective monopoly over the use of force (International Crisis Group 2022).

The price associated with the Taliban's achievement of monopoly over force has been steep, particularly with regard to economic factors. Following the Taliban's takeover, several changes took place to the economy: foreign military actors withdrew, thus causing a loss for businesses that had developed to support their activities; sanctions were established, thus losing Afghans access to the international banking system; and levels of foreign aid dropped sharply (World Bank 2025a). As a result of these factors, the World Bank estimates that there was a sharp decline in GDP, with a contraction of between 20% and 30%, and aid actors report that more than 23 million people required humanitarian assistance (Felbab-Brown 2024; World Bank 2025d). Need, in short, was very high and the economy suffered – but these issues affected urban areas more than rural areas, meaning that peripheral areas such as Nimroz were comparatively better off. Economic decline could also be directly linked to international interference in Afghanistan's affairs, thus feeding into pre-existing narratives about efforts on the part of foreign powers to control Afghanistan described in Chapter 6. In parallel, the Taliban made efforts to build the economy, and in 2024 Afghanistan's GDP is estimated to have grown by 2.5% (World Bank 2025a). The Taliban can thus be seen as having effectively achieved clear security objectives and having at least started to reverse the economic decline caused by the takeover – that is, the Taliban can be perceived to have made a clear start at building domestic legitimacy.

The effects of the Taliban's efforts to build legitimacy on perceptions of state legitimacy in Zaranj were not easy to determine; unlike in Niger, smugglers in Afghanistan did not comment openly about the Taliban. Where comments were made, they were broadly operational: of the nine interviews conducted after the Taliban came to power, four refer explicitly to the Taliban having the capacity to “allow” smugglers to conduct their operations.

One smuggler said that “two-three months ago the Taliban forbid all smugglers to cross migrants ... last month the Taliban allowed us again to resume our activities.” The Taliban, according to these interviews, had the capacity to stop or to allow smuggling activities – indicating that they had at least some degree of monopoly over the use of force in the Zaranj area. Only two smugglers out of nine interviewed after the Taliban took over expressed negative sentiments about the Taliban.

This is in direct contrast to their attitudes toward the Ghani government. In total Abdullah and I conducted 26 interviews in Afghanistan, of which 9 were conducted when the Taliban was in power. Disapproval of the Ghani government was clear, not only during interviews that took place when Ghani was in power, but also in later rounds of interviews. In the 2018 interviews, smugglers expressed very strong anti-Ghani sentiment; one interviewee described the situation within the country as follows: “There is no choice for the government to let people to migrate otherwise all the youth would protest and burn the country. But the government do nothing. They are thinking always about themselves and their pockets.” Later, in 2023 and 2025, smugglers continued to discuss at length the evils of the Ghani government – despite the fact that Ghani was no longer in power. One was categorical about his disgust for the Ghani government: “In every period, during soviets, during Jihad, during Taliban and during the Karzai government, all the time [things are bad] ... but the worst time was during Ashraf Ghani period.” In short, two years after the Taliban takeover, smugglers in Zaranj continued to hold Ghani responsible for their ills while volunteering markedly less comment — critical or otherwise — about the Taliban. This pattern could be consistent with either a genuine shift in sentiment or with reluctance to criticise a regime that controls the security forces in the area.

The case of Obock presents an interesting contrast to Zaranj and Agadez. There is significant discontent with the authorities in peripheral areas such as Obock, and smugglers, businesspeople and community members complained about the Djiboutian government in the interviews Mohamed and I conducted. When we asked one boat pilot about local power dynamics, he initially tried to wave the question away: “Ask me questions about the sea and my migrant passengers because I know nothing about this damn society.” Before Mohamed could retract the question, the driver continued to speak, and talked about the power of the state: “Those who work for the state have the art of lying to the poorest people. They have influence through the political system. It's a system where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Similarly, a traditional elder described the power of the state as: “the wealth of the people that is embezzled by those who hold power, the MP for example.” Despite the level of discontent within Obock, the government of Djibouti has remained stable. The president, Ismail Guelleh, has been in power since 1999, and is widely considered to be authoritarian. The current regime limits political space for opposition parties and curbs freedom of speech (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). While the Djiboutian state has faced opposition, notably from Afar-dominated insurgent groups, there is little to no indication that it is in danger of being replaced. This may be in part due to deliberate efforts on the part of the government to restrict dissent: Freedom House gives Djibouti a score of 0 out of 4 with regard to freedom of assembly and 0 out of 4 with regard to opportunities for the opposition to increase support or gain power during elections (Freedom House 2025). It may also, however, be due to the relatively higher capacity of the Djiboutian state (when compared with Niger and Afghanistan) to fulfil state functions and be considered legitimate outside peripheral areas. The Djiboutian government is broadly considered to have a monopoly over the use of force at a state level, and has reinforced this monopoly through its engagement with foreign military powers and investors (Larsen 2024). It guarantees relative security, especially when

compared to other countries in the region which have experienced significant conflict (notably Somalia and more recently Ethiopia). The Djiboutian state has also taken measures to align itself with historical and cultural norms: the most visible of its efforts is the integration of Islam into the state. Djibouti's legal system combines Islamic law and civil law, with citizens free to choose which legal framework to use and which court to address. In addition, religious imams have been integrated into the state structure and are now civil service employees receiving compensation from the state (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b). The state of Djibouti has thus retained arguments for legitimacy, especially with regard to maintaining a monopoly over the use of force and deliberately building and fostering historical and cultural linkages across ethnic dividing lines. Even if these arguments have not been fully successful in Obock – as evidenced in Chapter 6 – they may have been adequately effective in the rest of the country, and may have contributed to state stability and domestic legitimacy.

In Chapter 6, I claimed that one of the factors bringing together actors in the smuggling ecosystem was discontent with the state, and in Chapter 7 I argued that smugglers invested in building their own legitimacy by adapting some functions of the state. In this chapter, I present evidence that the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Tchiani government in Niger have made explicit efforts to reach out to smuggling ecosystems, and to address their discontent; in Niger these efforts are clearly articulated and documented, whereas in Afghanistan the Taliban has focused on provision of practical services but has made fewer explicit statements about its intentions. In taking actions that address some of the concerns expressed by smuggling ecosystems, these two governments may be signalling that these communities are politically relevant; these signals differ starkly from those of the states they replaced, which generally did not invest either financial capital or political capital in smuggling ecosystems. Djibouti, as noted, follows somewhat different dynamics – smuggling

is lower on the national agenda, and the state has relatively more legitimacy. However, it is notable that here as well, the state has taken systemic measures to build legitimacy with marginal areas and ecosystems.

### **8.3 A Pawn in International Political Games?**

In October 2025, the government of Germany made the decision to accredit two diplomatic representatives appointed by the Taliban government (Marsh and Knolle 2024; i24 News 2024). This move was widely considered to represent a step forward in bilateral relations. It also helped to provide international legitimacy to the Taliban government; while Germany has not formally recognised the Taliban, the decision to acknowledge and welcome Taliban representatives is a clear statement that the two governments are formally communicating. The Taliban recognises the importance of Germany's decision: photographs and videos of the representatives, dressed in traditional Afghan attire, have been circulating on social media. One of the most significant roles of the Taliban envoys to Germany is to negotiate issues associated with irregular migration, including the deportation of Afghans from Germany; the focus on deportations and limiting irregular migration is strongly linked to the priorities of the German far right (Marsh and Knolle 2024).

Germany's recognition of Taliban representatives, and the associated underlying message that a European government is willing to at least semi-officially acknowledge the government of Afghanistan, represents a clear achievement for the Taliban. The Taliban have demonstrated a clear desire to receive acceptance from the international community (Zelin 2024): this is evidenced by extensive efforts to meet different countries, including publicly announcing 1,582 diplomatic meetings with at least 80 countries, and by the effort made to maintain 39 foreign embassies and consulates (Yawar 2024). Foreign engagement provides a range of benefits to the Taliban: engagement with the US and Europe has already helped to ensure some aid revenue, and some infrastructure investments have been made by China (in

oil extraction, copper mines and railway infrastructure) as well as by the UAE (Godek 2025). The Taliban often engage in specific working-level discussions about targeted issues as a stepping stone toward formal recognition; one of the most significant topics of discussion is irregular migration out of Afghanistan toward Europe.

When the Taliban engage in discussions about irregular migration with Europe, it can be assumed that they face two sets of conflicting incentives. On the one hand, it is very clear that reduction of irregular migration is a significant policy priority for Europe. Not only has Europe developed a host of regulatory instruments around migration, as discussed in Chapter 2, but it has also applied these instruments in the Afghan context, even in times of emergency in the country. In the EU's post-crisis statement following the Taliban takeover, it specified that its priorities included "cooperat[ion] with [neighbouring and transit] countries to prevent illegal migration from the region, reinforce border management capacity and prevent smuggling of migrants" (European Union 2021). The inclusion of irregular migration priorities in an emergency statement is rare: such statements usually focus on evacuation of EU citizens, risks for civilians and the region, and calls to restore order. Statements about irregular migration during an emergency situation demonstrate the high priority the EU places on reducing irregular migration, and clearly indicate that it is possible to engage diplomatically on this issue. Chatham House stated that "for the Taliban leaders celebrating four years in power, engagement with Europe on migration management can help build rapport" and represent an "acceptance that they Taliban is here to stay" (Hakimi 2025a). Migration diplomacy literature also provides examples of how other countries have successfully used the issue of irregular migration to achieve diplomatic goals (Greenhill 2010; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Tsourapas 2025). As such, the Taliban can reasonably expect to significantly improve their international relations if they make efforts to close borders and manage migration more stringently in line with EU priorities.

To take advantage of this opportunity, however, the Taliban needed to undertake measures in which they risk losing the domestic legitimacy they have gained with individuals in the smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj and elsewhere. Clear and open talks have been held between the Taliban and the EU on returns from Europe to Afghanistan (Grobe 2025). However, communities in Afghanistan are likely to look on returns as a burden: deportations and returns take place to a country with inadequate food supplies, infrastructure, water and basic services (Hakimi 2025a). If the Taliban allows or condones returns, they thus accept a policy that puts pressure on the domestic population, and on the limited public services the Taliban is able to provide; returns thus could undermine its domestic legitimacy as an arbiter of economic resources. If the Taliban support returns, they also curtail a strategy that Afghans have commonly used over generations to diversify income sources and augment livelihoods (Monsutti and Camiller 2021; Monsutti 2005). In addition, acceptance of returns is perceived to align with EU priorities and incentives, thus undercutting its efforts to be seen as an actor with strong historical and cultural connections to the people of Afghanistan. The decision to engage with the EU around migration issues thus pushes forward the Taliban's agenda with regard to international recognition, but at the potential expense of domestic legitimacy, particularly within remote areas such as the smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj.

In parallel with the Taliban's decision to accept returns, it also appeared, according to our interviewees, to strengthen border management; this perception is supported by research conducted on the Taliban's approach to border and revenue management (Mansfield and Smith 2021; Mansfield and Alcis 2024; Mansfield and Smith 2021). In interviews we conducted after the Taliban took power in 2023 and 2025, several smugglers referred to additional border management measures that had been put in place by the Taliban. One explained the situation as follows: "[things have] definitely become more dangerous for us, especially after Taliban because the patrols have increased and more smugglers are arrested

or being [shot] and killed these days... also Taliban are controlling us [in Zaranj] and make a lot of trouble for us in our daily activities.” Another similarly said that “everything is in the hands of Taliban. They are ruling everything here and they want to take everything in their hands, including the trade of migrants. They have the border and the city, and they control all activities and crossings.” These interviews serve to confirm and reinforce secondary research showing that the Taliban has centralised power in Nimroz and made active progress with regard to controlling territory and revenue (Mansfield 2024; Mansfield and Alcis 2024). This decision on the part of the Taliban to pursue stronger border management could arise from several incentives. Political economy analyses indicate that by gaining control over borders, the Taliban also gains access to essential tax revenue: one study estimates that the Taliban collected about 54 million USD in revenue in Nimroz before 2021, and is now collecting 83 million USD in revenue (Mansfield and Alcis 2022, 2024). Simultaneously, by exerting more control over both drugs and people, the Taliban strengthens the argument that it has control over its territory and thus is a legitimate actor in international forums (Mansfield and Alcis 2022; Mansfield and Smith 2021; Felbab-Brown 2024; Hakimi 2025b)

As the Taliban took measures to manage borders more effectively and extract revenue from cross border trade – which could negatively affect their domestic legitimacy – they simultaneously appeared to make deliberate efforts to preserve their own legitimacy. The Taliban’s control over Afghanistan has strengthened over time and remains relatively uncontested; the monopoly over the use of force maintained by the Taliban is one of the strongest arguments for legitimising the state (Saul 2021). When the Taliban implemented border control measures, they did so in ways which were coherent with traditional historical and social connections. The Taliban dismantled a network of roadside checkpoints that represented a “political settlement that rested on a system of patronage”, but it did so in a way that opened up other doors for patronage-based appointments, including “government

appointments, mineral industry contracts, aid delivery and the drug industry” (Mansfield and Alcis 2022).

The Taliban’s openness to forming alliances with local communities is visible even in Zaranj. While smugglers are very clear about the fact that the Taliban control borders, they also use traditional approaches such as *salehi*, or reciprocal exchanges that can be called bribery, and has been discussed in Chapter 5, to bypass new border control measures. One smuggler described his interactions with the Taliban as follows: “[They] make a large amount of money each day out of [migrant smuggling]. Every pickup that leaves the terminal should pay their soldiers. On the border, [everyone] with [a] passport and visa should pay the officers at the border.” Another was even clearer that the Taliban as an entity was open to negotiations: “[The] Taliban is trying to let smugglers to use one route so they can take bribe from all migrants. They are very determined in applying restrictions and obstacle to make a profit of migrant smuggling.” While the Taliban have effectively shut borders, they have done so in a way which is not absolute; it is negotiable using traditional ways of engagement that are prevalent within the Zaranj community. The Taliban have thus used the smuggling ecosystem as a pawn in its quest for legitimacy on the international stage, but it has mitigated the risk of reduced domestic legitimacy through its willingness to maintain specific cultural practices such as *salehi*. It is also interesting to contextualise smugglers’ perceptions of the Taliban against estimates of the revenue they collected within Nimroz and Zaranj. One estimate suggests that informal revenues (i.e., bribes) collected by the Ghani government in Nimroz amounted to 92 million USD annually, whereas formal revenues collected by the Taliban in Nimroz amount to 83 million USD annually (Mansfield 2024). This suggests that while the Taliban is extracting revenue from smuggling, the amount extracted is slightly lower than payments to Ghani officials, and that as a result local community members in Zaranj are unlikely to be worse off financially compared to their situation prior to 2021.

It is well known that the interests of Western states are diametrically opposed to those of smuggling ecosystems, and in this context the Taliban have simultaneous contradictory policy objectives: they appeared to both want to maintain domestic legitimacy and to increase their engagement with Western actors on the international stage. The Tchiani government of Niger is in the more fortunate position of having aligned domestic and foreign policy goals. Domestically, as discussed previously, the Tchiani government is seeking buy-in from different stakeholders, including more peripheral communities and smuggling ecosystems. Internationally, the government has adopted a strongly anti-Western posture. The pillars of its approach are expulsion of international forces, restructuring of uranium mining contracts and a public repudiation of anti-smuggling laws. At a slightly wider level, the Tchiani government is also looking to re-form alliances in the Sahel region around a more sovereignty-based, anti-Western posture. The junta entered into the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) with the rulers of Mali and Burkina Faso. One of the primary common threads between these states is a desire to reduce Western influence in the region. Tchiani's abrogation of the anti-smuggling laws is thus not only an internal bid for legitimacy, but can also be seen as a signal to potential allies of his rejection of the EU and its policies. The Tchiani government's engagements with the smuggling ecosystem in Niger thus seem to clearly dovetail with the rest of its foreign policy. The sustainability of this alignment, however, is unclear. The Agadez region hosts both uranium mines and smuggling communities, and possibilities exist for smugglers and criminal groups to hijack uranium shipments. The Orano company has already raised concerns about such risks, and about whether uranium transported through an unsafe corridor can meet with international standards and requirements (Adombila 2025). If concerns continue to be floated, the Tchiani government may face a situation where its interests in uranium exploitation and sales conflict with the interests of the smuggling ecosystem in

Agadez; this could threaten the current informal accord between the Tchiani government and the ecosystem in Agadez.

The situation in Djibouti differs starkly from that of both Niger and Afghanistan. In both Niger and Afghanistan, migration was an integral part of foreign policy and diplomatic discussions with the West, especially the European Union. For Djibouti, in contrast, migration is a secondary issue. The relative lack of importance of migration arises from two factors. The first is associated with the nature of irregular migration through Djibouti: Djibouti is a corridor for migration between the Horn of Africa and the Gulf, and while the Gulf has made some efforts to strengthen its migration controls, it also has an interest in continuing to receive irregular migrants, particularly in specific sectors such as domestic labour (Cortes et al. 2020).<sup>20</sup> The EU has relatively little reason to focus externalisation measures on Djibouti, as it does not receive many migrants who pass through this route (International Organisation for Migration 2021). The second factor concerns the other issues that inform Djibouti's foreign policy. Migration is less significant in Djibouti in part because the country is important from a geostrategic perspective: around one-third of ship traffic passes through Djibouti on its way to the Suez canal, so disruptions in Djibouti have major impacts on the prices of shipping and thus consumer goods (Larsen 2024). In addition, since Eritrea's independence in 1993, Djibouti has represented Ethiopia's primary access to a port, and thus has been crucial for regional trade (Larsen 2024). As a result of Djibouti's importance to logistics routes, it has also attracted military attention: as noted, there are at least six military bases in Djibouti, including from the US, China, France, Italy, Japan and Saudi Arabia (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024b; Okewoye 2025). Historically, Djibouti has

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<sup>20</sup> *Efforts to manage migration in the Gulf are rooted in several factors, one of which is nationalisation. Nationalisation efforts such as Saudi Arabia's nitaqat policies aim to improve employment and productivity rates among the domestic population, but they also focus on more high-value and high-prestige sectors. Allowing migration to support the availability of cheap domestic labour does not necessarily conflict with nationalisation and employment objectives.*

maintained a strategic neutrality in large part because its priority is to maximise the revenue both from port activities and hosting military bases. In recent months, though, it has become harder for Djibouti to do this: in 2025 the US pushed to conduct air strikes on the Houthis from Djibouti, but Djibouti refused. This, in turn, has led to accusations of undue Chinese influence in the country (Simardone 2025).

In a context where Djibouti is conducting negotiations on military affairs with the US and China, irregular migration fades as a policy priority. This is despite some EU investments in better migration management and strengthening of border controls (European Union, no date). For the government of Djibouti, smuggling ecosystems such as those in Obock remain relatively harmless. The presence of the smuggling ecosystem attracts a small amount of revenue from the international system, and has not posed major risks to date with respect to port activity or foreign military activity. At the same time, the smuggling economy helps to ensure the maintenance of public services in Obock, as mentioned by local government officials and discussed in Chapter 7. In contrast to Afghanistan and Niger, where irregular migration has taken centre stage in international negotiations, the government of Djibouti treats the issue as close to insignificant. Abdul, sitting on his hilltop in Djibouti, had a clear and accurate hold on the situation: the government of Djibouti was willing to make all the right noises, but they had little, if any, clear incentive to disrupt smuggling or limit the ecosystem in Obock.

In both Niger and Afghanistan, newly anointed national governments needed to define their objectives and intentions with regard to the European Union. The aims of each state are diametrically opposed: the Taliban are looking for acceptance, whereas Tchiani aims to forcefully reject the West. For both actors, though, smugglers act as signal – the way in which each government engages with smuggling ecosystems sets the stage for engagements and negotiations with international actors. Djibouti provides an interesting contrast – the EU has

little, if any, interest in the migration flows passing through Djibouti, and so the state's attitude toward smugglers has little, if any, bearing on its international engagements.

#### **8.4 Authoritarian Regimes, Smugglers and Grey Policy Zones**

The three states considered in this thesis – Afghanistan, Djibouti and Niger – have all taken measures ranging from repealing laws to benign neglect to maintaining or increasing their domestic legitimacy with the smuggling ecosystem – that is, with actors in peripheral areas. In Niger, there is also clear evidence that the Tchiani government has used its relationship with smuggling ecosystems to achieve foreign policy goals, and in Afghanistan, the actions taken by the Taliban indicate, similarly, that the government recognises that border management is a diplomacy tool. There are thus suggestions that both states use migration as a strategic tool in negotiations (Greenhill 2010). This confluence of events suggests that for states such as Afghanistan and Niger, smuggling ecosystems represent a political constituency with both domestic and international significance. The degree to which authoritarian governments used migrant smuggling intentionally in domestic and foreign policy is difficult to determine, but an analysis of their policy positions (or lack thereof) indicates that both governments have deliberately developed a policy grey zone that provides them with the space to build links with smuggling ecosystems and simultaneously pursue international relations objectives.

Participants in the smuggling ecosystem in Agadez clearly and repeatedly stated that they wanted reduced foreign influence within their country. As discussed in Chapter 6, community members and smugglers both complained actively about the presence of foreigners, saying that the French profited from the wealth of Agadez and international actors had a disproportionate influence, to the point that they were treated like kings. The Tchiani government in Niger took clear steps to reduce foreign influence, both via disseminating

rhetoric about the evils of the West and through decisions to expel military forces, stop mining contracts with French companies and repeal EU-sponsored anti-smuggling laws.

Despite its strong language and political moves, the government of Niger still has urgent need of the international system, particularly the funds that are invested by the World Bank and other international institutions. At the time Tchiani took power, the World Bank had a portfolio of investments in Niger worth approximately 4.5 billion USD (Singh and Shalal 2023). The sudden closure of these investments and/or extraction of these funds could have thrown the country into an economic depression and a humanitarian crisis.

The Tchiani government thus needed to balance its efforts to reach out to smuggling ecosystems and other similar domestic groups that responded to anti-Western rhetoric with measures to appease the international community and the World Bank. Some of the measures it took to balance incompatible interests are clearly documented; the clearest of these examples is the approval of the national development plan. Bazoum, the previous president, had developed and approved a plan that was strongly tied to the development strategies of his Western-oriented predecessor. The plan was the third iteration of an economic “Renaissance” effort; even the title was an oblique reference to the West and to the benefits of assuring a strong relationship between Niger and Europe. In contrast, Tchiani has given his plan a new name that explicitly references the importance of the domestic population, the “Resilience Programme for the Safeguarding of the Homeland” (PRSP) (République du Niger 2024). Within the document, there are also prominent efforts to distance the new regime from the old one: for instance the document states that ECOWAS is undergoing internal crisis (and implied reduced legitimacy) due to interference in their governance by foreign powers (République du Niger 2024). However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that the details of Tchiani’s development plan are strongly similar to those of Bazoum’s plan. In fact, the vision for the country’s future has not changed at all, and all of the buzzwords are still in

place. The underlying consistency is so strong that the World Bank states on its website that the pillars of the PRSP are “aligned with” those of the previous PDES. Strong anti-Western rhetoric, designed to appeal to the smuggling ecosystem in Agadez and other similar groups, thus hid policies and approaches that were fundamentally unchanged.

This strategy – targeting marginalised domestic groups such as the smuggling ecosystem with strong language, but maintaining policy consistency – has paid off; the World Bank is currently financing 23 operations in Niger with a value of 3.94 billion USD, and other donors also continue to contribute to them (World Bank 2025c). At the same time, the individuals we spoke to expressed hope about the new regime, with one smuggler saying that “the authorities [in this new regime have] good intentions ...and if this new regime works as it should ... in 10 years you will find every corner of this city better.” The Tchiani government has thus taken active measures to sustain relationships with international financial institutions and the inflow of foreign aid – despite its tense relationship with Western military and security actors. It has also used strong anti-Western language to maintain domestic buy-in. By cloaking policy consistency in anti-Western language, the government argues for its alignment with the norms of the smuggling ecosystem while ensuring that service provision does not suffer – thus meeting an expectation of local communities.

In Niger, the government’s attempts to balance between the international and the smuggling communities were clearly documented through the development plan. In Afghanistan, by contrast, the Taliban government has not written or approved clear policies or statements about migration, and its formal approach to migration and border control is vague. The Afghan government has deployed a form of collaborative rhetoric to reduce irregular migration: they have issued statements referring to their “brotherhood” with the government of Iran and pointing out that due to this positive relationship, there are legal

routes through which Afghans can enter Iran. In parallel with this rhetoric, which focuses more on legal pathways than on demonising smuggling, the Taliban have allowed a legal vacuum to develop around migration. This is in contrast to the previous Ghani government which passed a Comprehensive Migration Policy that was clearly in line with international standards and objectives. The Taliban government effectively nullified all previous laws – including those associated with migration – in favour of Shari’a law, and as such legal experts have declared that they are not aware of, or fully able to analyse, migration legislation (CEDOCA 2023). The Taliban have thus allowed a situation to develop in which Afghan laws do not substantively criminalise migration or smuggling – but they also offer no protection to irregular migrants or smugglers.

It is unclear whether the creation of this grey policy space is a deliberate strategy on the part of the current Afghan government. The Taliban present themselves as so fragmented that one international commentator suggested that “There is no discernible vision among the old senior Taliban leaders” (Hakimi 2025b). Where the Taliban do make statements, they are generally focused on specific practices: in 2023 ACAPS identified 42 different statements made by the Taliban government about rights, and most of these statements focused on the degree to which different rights were enforced (ACAPS 2023). The government has shown that it is open to making statements which are definitive and opposed to Western principles: for example, it made a statement, and then took relevant actions, to re-establish the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, preventing women from working for the UN and international agencies (ACAPS 2023). If no such clear action was taken with regard to migration and smuggling, then it can be inferred that the Taliban are creating a space in which they can navigate the competing interests of communities like Zaranj and those of the EU and other actors promoting externalisation policies.

Evidence suggests that both the Tchiani government and the Taliban have built legitimacy with smuggling ecosystems, but that they are potentially willing to trade this legitimacy to achieve international relations objectives. The degree to which engagement between these states and the smuggling ecosystem is intentional is unclear, with stronger evidence for intentional engagement in Niger compared to Afghanistan. In Niger, documented discussions took place between the Tchiani government and leaders from Agadez, followed by concrete actions (notably the striking down of the anti-smuggling law). In Afghanistan, there was no documentation of engagement between the Taliban and smugglers, though the actions of the Taliban indicate that they are taking efforts to meet the needs of the smuggling ecosystem. Both states are struggling, not just for domestic legitimacy, but also for international legitimacy; the actions taken both states suggest that they are establishing a policy grey area (e.g., the Taliban's lack of explicit statement about migration) to allow them to engage with smuggling ecosystems and use this engagement to achieve migration diplomacy goals.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

Earlier chapters of this thesis argued that ecosystems develop around migrant smuggling, that actors within this ecosystem share a strong discontent with the state, and that smugglers, in seeking to build their own legitimacy within their communities, have made tangible investments in areas such as security and provision of public goods. This analysis of local-level dynamics led to an important question: do smuggling ecosystems and smuggling legitimacy have power and influence beyond the community level? If so, what kind of influence do they have and what impact do they achieve?

In two of the three case studies I considered, national governments changed during the process of data collection. In both Niger and Afghanistan, the governments in power before the change made few efforts to explicitly reach out to smuggling ecosystems; instead, they

aligned their domestic policies with imperatives of the Western-dominated international system. The post-change governments, in contrast, took clear actions to reach out to smuggling ecosystems, using several approaches. In the case of the Tchiani government, outreach consisted both of lifting barriers to smuggling business by repealing anti-smuggling laws and demonstrating the ways in which they reflected local norms through both rhetoric and efforts to expel Western forces. The Taliban actively provided services to smuggling ecosystems, and also built laws, policies and structures on the basis of Islamic values, which corresponded strongly to those in place in the smuggling ecosystem. Both the Tchiani and the Taliban governments engaged smuggling ecosystems as political actors. The evidence for this is more direct in Niger, where smugglers and community members repeatedly and explicitly linked their optimism to the new regime. In Afghanistan, the argument rests more heavily on documented state action — court provision, security data, economic recovery — than on smugglers' own accounts of the Taliban, which were comparatively sparse. In the case in which the government remained stable, Djibouti, the state system includes several measures to integrate traditional governance and justice into the national system. The case studies thus suggest that discontent within smuggling ecosystems can be leveraged; state actors can address the sources of discontent articulated by those in the ecosystem and, in so doing, can build their own legitimacy.

It is worth distinguishing two claims that sometimes run together, particularly in the context of Afghanistan. The first — that smuggling ecosystems can shape state behaviour — is supported in both Niger and Afghanistan independently of how smugglers feel about the government. In Niger, the Tchiani government has clearly struck down anti-smuggling legislation and made explicit statements rejecting EU externalisation policies. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's willingness to negotiate over crossings, tolerate salehi, and provide dispute resolution are observable actions, not inferences from sentiment. The second — that these

governments have thereby built domestic legitimacy with the smuggling ecosystem — is the more tentative claim. In Niger, data from interviews indicates clear support within the ecosystem for the Tchiani government – but data was collected shortly after the government came into power, and respondents themselves were tentative about their claims, with some stating clearly that they had hope but that the government had not yet taken enough actions. In Afghanistan, data was too limited to provide a clear indication of sentiment within the smuggling ecosystem toward the Taliban. As a result, this thesis argues that the Tchiani government and the Taliban government made efforts to treat the smuggling ecosystem as a political actor, but it does not make claims about how these efforts were received.

The actions of the Tchiani and Taliban governments indicate that while both recognised that there was value in engaging with the smuggling ecosystem, they were also willing to sacrifice the priorities of the smuggling ecosystem if necessary. The Tchiani government made few substantive changes to the development policies of its predecessor, and the Taliban government has engaged in migration diplomacy with Western states, suggesting that they are willing to trade the interests of the smuggling ecosystem for a higher chance of recognition by the Western-dominated international community. At the international level, smugglers and those in their ecosystem seem to represent a bargaining chip for the Tchiani and Taliban governments. These governments appear to recognise the trade-offs that they are making, and to develop a policy grey zone that enables them to manoeuvre between the expectations and demands of the smuggling ecosystem and the international community.

This thesis thus describes a complex and non-linear set of interactions that link local communities hosting migrant smuggling economies in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj with international state actors. At the local level, individual transactions in the migrant smuggling economy produce enough value to support the creation of an ecosystem which engages different actors and spurs initiatives to safeguard value over time; this ecosystem is built on a

shared set of norms and values, as described in Chapter 5. One of the norms and values binding actors in the smuggling ecosystem is discontent with the state – not only with its failure to provide services, but also for its challenges in ensuring security and its perceived discordance with local norms, as discussed in Chapter 6. Smuggling activities involve an inflow of resources, but can also cause tensions with local hierarchies and communities, so smugglers in my three field sites made efforts to build their own legitimacy – and in doing so, they both entered into alliances with other informal institutions and took over some of the functions of the state; this process was described in Chapter 7. Finally, chapter 8 describes the ways in which smuggling ecosystems can influence states at both the domestic and international levels. The actions taken by both the Tchiani government in Niger and the Taliban in Afghanistan with regard to legal change and practical service provision suggest that smugglers and the ecosystems in which they operate are politically relevant, especially at the domestic level. However, the Taliban's measures to control borders and the Tchiani government's lack of willingness to substantively change its development plan indicate that smugglers have less influence on international dynamics – and in fact, that the Taliban government might be willing to sacrifice the interests of smuggling ecosystems to achieve international diplomacy objectives. However, both states have taken steps to balance potentially conflicting priorities through the creation of policy grey zones. The discontent within smuggling ecosystems can thus serve to strengthen states both domestically and in terms of international negotiation power.

## 9.0 Conclusion

*Mohamed and I went on a long journey to a town close to Obock. We discussed transport with a driver and agreed on a price in US dollars, but I didn't have change. I gave Mohamed big bills, and asked him to keep the change and use it for the next trip we would take; he agreed. That evening, I went back to my room and flopped onto the bed, exhausted. After a few minutes, my phone rang. Mohamed was just outside the front door and he had brought a present for me. I let him in, then he opened a grocery bag and withdrew a bag of milk and a can of cheap mango drink. He mixed the two in a glass and held the mixture out to me with a wink. "This is a traditional drink! It's GREAT!" I drank, smiled at Mohamed and waved him off. The next day, Mohamed and I met a boat pilot to agree on the price of a ride to an embarkation point. After the three of us agreed, Mohamed looked at me, expecting me to go and get the money. I raised my eyebrows. "But you have the money from yesterday's trip, don't you?" I asked.*

*"What money?" Mohamed replied innocently.*

*"The ... the ... money?" I was sure I had given Mohamed money.*

*"I don't have any money. There isn't any left!" Mohamed winked at me, and I gave him an angry and confused stare in reply.*

*Later in the day I asked Mohamed to sit down. We reviewed the previous day's financial transactions. Mohamed agreed that a significant amount of money (50 USD) had been left over. "But I bought you a drink! It cost 50 USD!" he said triumphantly.*

*"So I drank a 50 USD mango milkshake? Made of a can of mango juice that costs maximum 2 USD and a plastic bag of milk?"*

*“The milk was expensive!” Mohamed bickered with a teasing, friendly look in his eye. But the friendly light had died out of my eyes. My DPhil was self-funded, and I was running really low on cash. I didn’t have an extra 50 USD to spare. I knew that if I wanted to avoid bankruptcy, I needed to make a point. So I put on my saddest face, explained my problems, explained that I trusted him, and it wasn’t his fault, but I didn’t have the money, and what was I going to do, and I was broke, and I had no money. I talked for about 15 minutes, and Mohamed kept on interrupting with jokey asides. “But it was a very GOOD milkshake, and milk from Yemen is very expensive!”*

*I finally retaliated: “Yes, but I can’t afford a 50-dollar milkshake! If I had known it was that expensive, I could have said no! I just wanted the choice! It’s my money!”*

*Suddenly, something penetrated into Mohamed’s consciousness. “Wait. Oxford isn’t paying?”*

*“No, I am!”*

*“But I thought Oxford was paying.”*

*“They aren’t. I am. I’m paying. That was my 50 dollars.”*

*The jovial light in Mohammed’s eyes dimmed as he finally understood – for the first time– that this project involved my personal funds. Until this point, Mohamed had assumed that he and I were colluding – playing a little game to extract all the money we could out of a wealthy institution with more money than sense. From his perspective, we were jointly complicit in an effort to fleece the rich, who would never really feel the loss of 50 USD.*

Before the milkshake incident, most of my interactions with Mohamed were characterised by flat mutual incomprehension: I had difficulty understanding his logic, and he got annoyed that I wasn’t helping him take advantage of a big rich institution. Mohamed and

I were driven by different sets of incentives, neither of us understood the other's incentives, and each of us made incorrect assumptions about the other.

The dynamic between Mohamed and me can be considered as a microcosm of the dynamic between migration policymakers, often based in the West, and communities who rely on smuggling for their livelihoods and wellbeing. Policymakers make assumptions about smugglers: that they are motivated primarily by individual self-interest, and that their primary goals are economic rather than social. Smugglers make assumptions about policymakers and the West more broadly: that their own state is hamstrung and emasculated, and that foreign actors have explicit goals of undermining local communities. This thesis is my attempt to consolidate the milkshake moment – to draw out the perspectives and incentives of smugglers and smuggling communities, in the hope of contributing to more constructive engagements between different actors in migration scholarship and policy.

## **9.1 Review and Recapitulation of Arguments**

Mustafa, a restaurant manager in Obock, wanted his town to flourish. He knew his town faced many problems – lack of jobs, lack of industry, lagging infrastructure. But for him, all these issues were caused by the state. “We've been divided by those in power into tribes, and it's sad. [Courtesy of the state] we are made up of the rich and the poor [and experience] inequality and injustice.” The state served no purpose for Mustafa, since “the authorities do not want development for this city [and they envy] the link that we possess with Yemen.” The solution to this problem was local solidarity. “It's time for leadership and commitment ... A change is essential [and we need] solutions developed by worthy sons of the city, born on the soil of Obock.” Smugglers, for Mustafa, were not a part of the problem, but instead were part of the solution. Smugglers brought up to 500 migrants per night to Mustafa's restaurant, and had tangibly improved his business. They offered hope for the future: “Smugglers ... intervene in all areas for the benefit of the people and in return the

people protect them. Their hallmarks are social cohesion and solidarity.” For Mustafa, smugglers also could challenge the state, and in doing so, could work toward a better and more unified future for Obock: “The state is powerful, but this power is worthless in the face of the smugglers.”

In this thesis, I set out to answer the question of how smugglers perceive and influence the state in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj. The answer to the first question – how smugglers perceive the state – was relatively straightforward. Not only smugglers, but many actors within the smuggling ecosystem, saw the state as fundamentally lacking legitimacy. In smuggling ecosystems, often located in peripheral borderland areas, the state has a limited presence, service provision is relatively weak, and security can be tenuous. Worse still, our interviews indicated that states do not reflect the norms and values prevalent in the smuggling ecosystem, either in laws and policies or in their rhetoric and international engagements.

The processes by which smugglers influence the state were more intricate. To understand the links between smugglers and states, I needed to step back and start with a more basic question: how exactly do smugglers interact with their own communities? Across all three of my field sites, the migrant smuggling market provides financial benefits, not only to smugglers, but also to a range of businesses. This value is significant enough that smugglers and businesses have developed risk mitigation and insurance mechanisms to safeguard the smuggling market in the future, and that local elders and leaders have taken an active role in resolving disputes and ensuring continuity. Smuggling communities also react to changes in the environment – for instance by developing new risk mitigation mechanisms – and absorb outside influences – such as investments by foreign actors aiming to curtail the smuggling market. Obock, Agadez and Zaranj could thus be described as smuggling ecosystems – sets of interdependent actors who collaborated and competed, but grew

organically and co-evolved to respond and develop resilience to changes in the environment. These ecosystems were developed around a range of shared norms and values.

One of the values that held the smuggling ecosystem together was lack of faith in the state. Neither smugglers nor those in their ecosystem believed that the state was fully legitimate; Mustafa's flat-out rejection of the state, and disbelief that the state had his interests at heart, was reiterated across all my three field sites. Discontent was, in short, rife within the smuggling ecosystems I engaged with, and was targeted specifically at the state. The state did not provide services, the state did not provide security, and the state did not adequately represent the interests, history, norms or values of those in the smuggling ecosystem.

Discontent within smuggling ecosystems spurred action – but it was action at the community, rather than the state, level. Smugglers made active efforts to align themselves with community norms and values. Mustafa's belief that the hallmarks of smugglers were cohesion and solidarity did not arise without effort – instead smugglers made active efforts to develop relationships with local elders and communities. In both Obock and Agadez, they also invested money into their relationships with their communities, paying taxes and building public infrastructure to support the public good. These investments were not altruistic – instead they helped to build smugglers' legitimacy with community members and other actors. This, in turn, allowed them to safeguard their cargo (i.e., migrants) and to protect the future of their business.

Smugglers' investment in their own legitimacy clearly yielded results, according to the data I collected. Mustafa as well as others in Obock and Agadez saw smugglers as an unalloyed good. Even traditional elders, who were aware of the potential dangers associated with smugglers, believed that there were strong community benefits associated with the

smuggling business. At a community level, then, it could be argued that smugglers had at least partially stepped into the shoes of the state: they had achieved legitimacy and delivered at least some positive outcomes for the population. But what implications, if any, did this have at the national level?

In two of my three field sites, Afghanistan and Niger, changes in government took place during the period in which data was collected. The pre-transition government was, in both countries, relatively blind to the needs of the smuggling ecosystem when not actively combating it. The Bazoum government in Niger passed strong anti-smuggling laws that corresponded strongly to the EU's policy objectives, and the Ghani government in Afghanistan hosted EU initiatives to strengthen borders and made strong anti-migration statements during the EU migration "crisis". In both countries, the post-transition government engaged explicitly with the smuggling ecosystem, and met specific needs and gaps identified by the ecosystem. In Niger, the Tchiani government took control of uranium mining from the French – which was a source of discontent in Agadez – and struck down the anti-smuggling legislation passed in 2016. In Afghanistan, the Taliban government provided justice and dispute resolution in peripheral areas such as Zaranj and assured security, despite the presence of multiple armed groups, relatively quickly after it took power.

The Tchiani government clearly saw smuggling ecosystems as a part of their political calculus, and the actions of the Taliban government similarly indicate a conscious and clear effort to reach out to the smuggling ecosystem – but neither government placed the needs of the smuggling ecosystem at the top of its priority list. The Tchiani government engaged in anti-smuggling rhetoric but left its agreements with international financial institutions generally untouched. The Taliban sought international acceptance, and used migration diplomacy techniques – collaboration on returns and efforts to close borders – as a part of its strategy. The influence of smuggling ecosystems on both states was thus bounded by

international relations goals and government priorities and interests. It is interesting, however, that both the Tchiani government and the Taliban have explicitly developed policy grey areas – they have developed a specific space in which they can negotiate between the needs of the smuggling ecosystem and the demands of the international community. The Taliban, for example, have issued no explicit statements around irregular migration, allowing them both to negotiate with international actors and to support communities in Zaranj.

This thesis thus argues that smugglers and those within the smuggling ecosystems I researched have for a long time seen the state as lacking legitimacy. Mustafa is one of many who perceive the state as far away and dissociated with the well-being of local communities. In the absence of the state, smugglers stepped in and provided services, security and, to a degree, cohesion, with existing informal institutions as well as through new institutions and initiatives, such as those of Saley Boss, discussed in Chapter 7. The strengthening of local cohesion and smuggler legitimacy led to some specific initiatives to advocate for the well-being of the smuggling ecosystem at the national level. At least two national actors – Tchiani's government and the Taliban government – responded directly and tangibly to the needs of the smuggling ecosystem. These states do not necessarily prioritise the needs of the smuggling ecosystem, but they have created the policy space to negotiate between local needs, international demands and state goals.

## **9.2 Limitations and External Validity of the Research**

My interactions with smugglers and smuggling ecosystems have sparked one key insight: smugglers are providing public goods to strengthen their own legitimacy, and in doing so are influencing both local and national governance systems. I argue that in my field sites smugglers have effectively become recognised as rightful, tolerable and necessary actors in Obock, Agadez and Zaranj. Before moving to the implications of this finding, it is important to ask two questions: first, what aspects of my methodology could have limited the

internal validity of my findings? And second, to what degree are these findings likely to hold in other contexts and circumstances?

As discussed in Chapter 4, there are several challenges associated with collecting data about smugglers and smuggling ecosystems. Smuggling communities are, to some degree, closed to those who do not share kinship or close social bonds. I collaborated with interlocutors to overcome this issue, and while we were able to interview many members of smuggling ecosystems, the degree to which people honestly expressed their concerns about the state is still not entirely clear.

Similarly, my own contextual knowledge and understanding has its limits. I engaged with all of my interlocutors over an extended period, but my relationship with Abdullah, my interlocutor in Afghanistan, is the longest. We started jointly working on smuggling and smuggling ecosystems in 2016, and have been engaged in continual discussions since then. Early in our discussions, Abdullah told me about the religious roots of smuggling and about dynamics of smuggling communities in Zaranj. After a few years, I thought I had a reasonably strong understanding of the smuggling community in Zaranj. However, in 2022 – six years after I had started discussing smuggling with Abdullah – I learned about salehi, or reciprocal gifts between communities and border guards, for the first time. Our 2022 discussions gave me a new understanding of the ways in which the smuggling ecosystem in Zaranj absorbed and interacted with state officials. They also made me wonder: would I gain a new insight that would change my perspective after six more years of discussion with Abdullah?

The third limitation involves the complexity of the relationships between smugglers, communities and states. Over the course of this thesis, I focused on collecting data about smugglers and their ecosystems. I gained insights into local smuggling communities, and the

assumptions they made about the state and the international system, in large part due to my repeated engagements with Mohamed and others in his ecosystem, in part through the process of trying to better understand his bias and verify his statements and conclusions. I triangulated both interview data and hypotheses identified through my relationship with Mohamed against government statements, analysis by international think tanks, media reports and other sources to gain insights into how government actors responded to smuggling ecosystems. As such, my analysis is skewed toward the community level. I did not work extensively to gain insights at the state level – that is, to conduct interviews with national actors, or to analyse state perceptions of smugglers and their activities. Additional data collection with government actors would help to support a more nuanced understanding of state actions and incentives.

A related limitation concerns the asymmetry of evidence across my three field sites regarding state legitimacy. In Niger, smugglers and community members volunteered explicit, unprompted assessments of the Tchiani government, giving me reasonably direct evidence of a shift in sentiment. In Afghanistan, by contrast, direct commentary on the Taliban was sparse, and where present was operational rather than evaluative. The near-absence of criticism after 2021, discussed in Chapter 8, is compatible with several explanations — genuine improvement in perceived legitimacy, reluctance to criticise an armed actor with local security control, or simply narrower interview coverage. I have tried to flag this ambiguity wherever it arises, but readers should treat conclusions about Taliban domestic legitimacy specifically as more tentative than the equivalent claims for Niger.

The smuggling ecosystems I chose as field sites shared a certain number of commonalities: each location had a strong traditional governance mechanism, each was located in the periphery of the state, and each was strongly dependent on migrant smuggling to support the local economy. I selected smuggling ecosystems with these characteristics to

simplify analysis of the interactions between smugglers, communities and states. For example, because each of the three smuggling ecosystems I chose was strongly dependent on migrant smuggling for livelihoods, it was possible to clearly examine the ways in which local businesspeople reacted to the smuggling economy – their perceptions were purely related to migrant smuggling, and not to developments in other sectors. Smuggling ecosystems also exist, however, in locations with characteristics that are different from those in my field sites. For example, both Tehran and Istanbul act as major transit points for Afghan migrants travelling to Europe, and smuggling ecosystems have developed within both of these cities. I chose not to analyse these locations because it is more difficult to isolate the effects of smuggling on, for instance, business owners. It is highly likely that, because a wider range of economic and social factors influence actors in these locations, the interactions between smugglers and other actors will be different, and more complicated.

On a similar note, at the state level, I selected cases that shared some similarities. All three of the countries I considered are predominantly Muslim. Two are strongly affected by EU externalisation efforts, and the third is influenced by Gulf foreign policy for which relatively limited English language data is available, as well as EU policies. In addition, cross-border flows in each of my field sites were somewhat segregated: the flow of migrants could be differentiated from the flow of other goods such as light arms and drugs. It is unclear whether my findings would hold in other contexts, notably migrant smuggling into the US or Australia. While there are commonalities between US, Australian and EU policy toward migration and smuggling, the dynamics in each region are strongly influenced by different policy histories and social dynamics. In addition, in the US the flows of migrants and drugs are more strongly interrelated, and move through similar networks, compared to the EU and Australia.

### 9.3 Implications and Future Possibilities

This research was inspired by a disconnect between politicians and policymakers like Keir Starmer who characterise migrant smugglers as terrorists and security threats, on the one hand, and migrant smugglers, on the other hand. The attitudes of European politicians to migrant smugglers are exceptionally clear – and do not, at first glance, seem to allow for any form of compromise with smugglers. The perspectives of smugglers are less clear, as there is little information about how smugglers justify their activities, how they view the states and the system that police them, and whether or not they have agency. This mismatch is likely to lead to ineffective and inefficient policy: measures adopted by Europe and other Western actors to engage with smugglers have limited scope for effectiveness if they are made in the absence of an understanding of smuggler incentives.

This research aimed to answer the question: how do smugglers perceive and influence states? It concluded that smugglers are disenfranchised, that they work through communities to engage with states, and that while some states treat smuggling ecosystems as political constituencies, the needs of these ecosystems need to be balanced against those of other actors. In short, smuggling ecosystems represent one among many actors competing for policymakers' time and attention. How, if at all, do these answers help to further understanding of smuggling ecosystems and state activity?

Theoretically, the concept of the ecosystem of discontent aims to support an improved understanding of the mechanisms through which political discontent can result in practical shifts in power and legitimacy toward criminal groups. The conceptualisation of smuggling as an ecosystem implies that those within the ecosystem – not only smugglers but also community members, businesspeople and local leaders – will collaborate and co-evolve to preserve smuggling activities and to maximise value. Because smuggling benefits many people within the community, even those not directly involved with smuggling activities will

be reluctant to disrupt activities. Smugglers may fill gaps left by the state to secure their own legitimacy with local community members – but in doing so they tangibly affect the distribution of political power and the legitimacy of states. They also influence the degree to which national political systems engage with actors in peripheral areas such as Agadez, Obock and Zaranj.

Smugglers matter, in short, not only because they provide services, but because they can become recognised as rightful, tolerable or necessary actors by communities, migrants, and state officials themselves. This recognition is not merely a practical accommodation within the state-system; it feeds into the production and stabilisation of the state-idea - into what counts as authority, order and rightful governance in contexts shaped by externalisation. This in turn helps explain why informal arrangements persist and scale up: they are not just tolerated practices, but can become part of the moral and political foundations that make governance acceptable and durable.

This thesis also gives rise to several new avenues for research. The first concerns the role of smugglers and other similar non-traditional actors in political transitions, such as those that took place in Afghanistan in August 2021 and in Niger through the coup. In this thesis, I examined how the Taliban and Tchiani governments engaged with smuggling ecosystems *after* taking power, but my data cannot establish whether and how those ecosystems shaped the transitions themselves. There are reasons to suspect they might. The withdrawal of legitimacy is gradual, and in this process ecosystems of discontent influence and direct resources that matter in moments of rupture, including transport networks, revenue streams outside state oversight, territorial knowledge, and — perhaps most importantly — informal institutions. The speed with which the Taliban consolidated control in Nimroz, and the apparent ease with which the CNSP's rhetoric found an audience in Agadez, both hint that incoming regimes may inherit, or actively cultivate, constituencies that smuggling

ecosystems have already organised. Future research could pursue this question through process tracing of transition episodes and interviews with actors on the state and insurgent side of such bargains. Such work would extend the ecosystem of discontent from a concept explaining how quasi-formal actors erode and reallocate state legitimacy, toward a theory of what that reallocated legitimacy is worth when the state is susceptible.

The second avenue for future research concerns the ways in which Western externalisation strategies play out in terms of domestic politics in countries of origin and transit. Externalisation treats countries of origin and transit states as sites for outsourcing border enforcement activities, and in return they provide support – equipment and infrastructure, but also development activities – to the state, usually at the national level. The effectiveness of this approach depends on partner governments whose political calculus includes constituencies (notably smuggling ecosystems) that are not explicitly or adequately accounted for through externalisation policies. While migration diplomacy literature accounts for the discrepancy in incentives between the West and countries of origin/transit, more could be done to examine the degree to which domestic legitimacy considerations (i.e., securing support from the smuggling ecosystem) plays into decision making at the local and national government levels.

The third avenue for research – which is, to a degree, a mirror of the second – concerns the degree to which isolation policies serve to strengthen relationships between post-transition governments and ecosystems of discontent. When a state is severed from international recognition and finance, the relative value of domestic legitimacy rises — and ecosystems of discontent offer legitimacy at a discount: striking down an unpopular law, tolerating a lucrative market, or providing security in a neglected borderland costs an isolated government little and appears, at first glance, to yield considerable goodwill, as Niamey appears to have understood. Isolation thus may push governments toward accommodation

with smuggling ecosystems while converting migration control into one of the few bargaining chips they hold.

The practical implications of this argument are strongest for organisations and institutions aiming to strengthen state legitimacy and conduct migration-related programming in countries of origin and transit. One of the first implications of this argument refers to programme design. The majority of international assistance designed to mitigate the effects of anti-smuggling laws and externalisation policies on local communities focus on economic wellbeing; the programmes aim to increase employment and support small business creation. There are challenges with programme design from the point of view of effectiveness: many of these are short-term and are not fully linked to local supply chains, and they also are unlikely to generate a profit that is sufficient to compensate for the loss of smuggling business. However, the analysis from this thesis suggests that even if these programmes were fully effective in building local economies, they would not achieve the desired larger goal of minimising pushback against externalisation policies. To achieve this goal, it would be necessary not only to improve security for households in smuggling ecosystems, but also to engage in discussions about some of the deeper underlying reasons for Western engagement in the affairs of countries like Djibouti, Niger and Afghanistan, as well as some of the logic for and broader context about externalisation policies.

Similarly, a significant proportion of funds and policy activities aim to support state-building and improved governance in countries of origin and transit. A set of literature already points out that many state-building and governance programmes focus on building capacity in the centre rather than in peripheral areas such as the ones that host smuggling ecosystems. This research also points out that state-building activities may have unintended negative consequences: when states participate in these activities, they may be perceived as aligning themselves with the West and this may further erode legitimacy. Thus, this thesis

suggests that state-building programmes could be more effective if they navigated challenges associated with perceptions of alignment with the West. Programs could be co-designed with states themselves and representatives from marginalised communities and smuggling ecosystems to be more effective. In addition, programmes that explicitly account for the presence of local informal governance systems such as those that are present in the smuggling ecosystem could be more effective.

Reframing migration discussions to reflect the engagements between smugglers and local communities and states also has the potential to shift perceptions and narratives at local levels. We asked Mustafa, the restaurant owner who believed that smugglers were true sons of Obock, where he saw his town in 10 years. He answered, “Frankly, if the Obockois unite for the development of the town, we can catch up. Everything changes and evolved for the better, if only there is unity.” Mustafa’s optimism was shared by others in Obock. In Agadez, a similar sense of optimism prevailed, and the striking down of smuggling laws led to the feeling that “our town will experience emergence” and “everything will change and Agadez will be more beautiful!” Perhaps a more nuanced understanding of how smugglers built legitimacy within their communities and influence with their states can help to harness and direct this optimism – to bring smugglers and other actors together around a common vision of prosperity in Agadez, Obock and Zaranj.

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