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[Hamdy A. Hassan](#) *

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Article

The Salvador Pass Dilemma: Security, Violence, and the Paradox of Governance in the Sahel's Borderlands

Hamdy A. Hassan

Department of International Studies, Zayed University, Dubai; hhamdy21@yahoo.com

Abstract: The border between Niger and Libya, often described as an "ungoverned space," epitomizes the complex interplay of economic, political, and security challenges within the Sahel region. Authorities and international actors have made various efforts to establish control, but tribal structures predominantly manage governance in these areas. These structures lack formal institutions and rely heavily on external security interventions to combat terrorism and irregular migration. The increasing militarization of the region raises significant concerns about the long-term efficacy of these approaches in achieving sustainable security. This study argues that enduring stability in such contexts requires a nuanced balance of economic, political, and social factors. The research methodology includes a comprehensive literature review of security issues, governance, state fragility, and counter-terrorism, utilizing scientific journals, books, reports, and newspapers. The study investigated the dual nature of ungoverned spaces, examining their role in facilitating terrorism and organized crime while highlighting the critical need for governance to enhance citizen welfare and support state functions. Recent developments in Libya and the Sahel underscore the urgency of addressing security and developmental challenges. The study concludes by advocating for sustainable political and development initiatives over militarization, emphasizing the necessity of a new social contract to address the security challenges in the Sahel region effectively.

Keywords: ungoverned space; Salvador Pass; Libya; Niger; Sahel ; Africa

1. Introduction

The border between Niger and Libya is often referred to as an "ungoverned space." However, it lies at the core of the Sahel's significant economic, political, and security challenges. Libyan authorities, the State of Niger, and international and regional powers are striving to exert strict control over this region, marked by its isolation in terms of geographical and demographic characteristics (Lloyd, 2016). In the absence of formal institutions, local actors in this area implement their governance methods, relying on tribal relations that often lack an institutional dimension and operate far from the purview of the central government. Cross-border movements in these areas, such as the Salvador Corridor between Niger and Libya, are considered relatively straightforward [1]. A notable example of this ease of movement is the incursion of rebels from the Front for Change and Accord, originating in Fezzan, Libya, into Kanem, Chad, resulting in the assassination of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021.

The local governance structures in this region allow the national state and its international partners to explore possibilities for indirect governance. However, the current priority leans towards outsourcing security, as the agendas of these actors are primarily focused on countering Terrorism and irregular migration flows. Presently, the Sahel region is experiencing unparalleled militarization, posing a dilemma regarding the relationship between excessive militarization approaches and insecurity on the one hand and achieving the stated goals of the War on Terrorism in the medium or long term on the other hand.

2. Materials and Methods

This study contends that the stability and security of remote and ungoverned spaces depend on maintaining a sustainable economic, political, and social balance, which may be adversely affected by adopting purely security and military approaches. It is valuable to approach the issue of "ungoverned spaces" from two perspectives. The first involves examining its relationship with the terrorist phenomenon and violent, organized crime groups, as these areas have significant negative impacts on regional and international security by serving as safe havens for terrorists and violent groups. Recent history in Libya and the Central Sahel demonstrates that these safe havens can facilitate devastating attacks throughout the region and beyond. The second perspective is developmental, as a certain level of governance appears necessary for development and improving citizens' well-being by supporting the distributive function of the state.

This study, building on a review of relevant literature on security issues, governance, state fragility, and counter-terrorism approaches from scientific journals, books, reports, newspapers, and other sources, focuses on the relationship between insecurity in "ungoverned spaces" and the terrorism industry in the Sahel region. The fundamental question raised and addressed by this research is: How does non-state actors' control over ungoverned borders and easy access to them contribute to creating and perpetuating cross-border insecurity in the Sahel region? Addressing this question underscores the need to shift militarization approaches and provide adequate governance mechanisms involving state and non-state actors to reduce ungoverned African spaces.

This study will be divided into four sections to answer the main research question, including the introduction and conclusion. Through a literature review, the first section critically discusses the concept of ungoverned spaces and their importance, applying this to the African context in general and the Sahel region. The second section examines the state of the Libyan border with Niger, especially the Salvador Corridor, and its impact on the security and stability of the Sahel region. An essential question here relates to the problematic relationship between ungoverned spaces and the escalation of violence and criminal operations in the Sahel region. The third section studies regional and international approaches to confronting the challenge of ungoverned spaces south of the Libyan state and its impact on the complex coastal crises. The fourth and final part emphasizes the failure of the militarization approach in addressing these security challenges and advocates for the necessity of adopting sustainable political and development initiatives by formulating a new social contract.

3. Ungoverned Spaces and Security: A Theoretical Perspective

Although rooted in ancient meanings, "ungoverned spaces" emerged during the twenty-first century's first decade. It refers to geographical areas akin to the state of non-state societies, where "territorial state control has been ceded voluntarily or involuntarily, in whole or in part, to actors other than legally recognized sovereign authorities [2]. "Despite the absence of public services in these areas, scholars argue that the lack of government, resulting from either the state's withdrawal or a challenge to its authority, does not imply the absence of all forms of governance.

In reality, other actors, such as traditional authorities, civil society institutions, or violent armed groups, can step in to fill the void left by the state. Depending on the situation and context, these entities may exercise some form of authority, collect taxes, or provide essential services. In the short term, these structures can act as stabilizing factors, performing distributional functions and facilitating aid delivery. However, if not adequately regulated, alternative forms of governance can pose significant risks, including involvement in criminal and terrorist activities.

3.1. Literature Review

The term "ungoverned spaces" is highly debated, with scholars questioning its analytical precision and relevance. Some argue that the concept relies too heavily on a Westphalian notion of state control, which does not adequately capture the complex realities on the ground (Murtazashvili, 2018). The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office also critiques this state-centric perspective, noting that non-state actors govern many ungoverned areas (De Teo, 2018). Contrary to the notion that such

spaces are lawless zones where Terrorism thrives unchecked, densely populated urban areas can often provide better refuges for terrorists due to the anonymity they offer.

Despite these criticisms, the literature identifies four critical trends regarding ungoverned spaces in Africa. Firstly, scholars like Sobrino et al. (2016) underscore the importance of understanding transnational threats and exploring theoretical contexts, legal frameworks, and initiatives to manage these regions. This exploration highlights the intricate task of defining and addressing these areas, emphasizing the necessity for a nuanced understanding, theoretical frameworks, legal considerations, and coordinated efforts to mitigate the impact of ungoverned spaces on global security and stability. Secondly, Ojo (2020) and others establish a direct causal link between ungoverned spaces and insecurity, highlighting how governance failures lead to the rise of warlordism, religious extremism, and tribal conflicts. Consequently, governance failure in these areas not only triggers the illicit movement of weapons, drugs, and irregular migration but also transforms them into safe havens for groups like Boko Haram jihadists and other armed factions. Marsai and Tarrósy (2022) further illustrate how extremist groups exploit state weakness and fragility to gain domestic support by utilizing their alternative service delivery capacities and the religious narratives needed to build legitimacy.

Thirdly, Downey (2021) argues that military deterrence has been ineffective, often due to top-down state-building efforts that overlook local dynamics, while Ejiofor (2022) calls for socio-economic interventions to address underlying grievances. Lastly, in counter-terrorism discourse, government documents like Nigeria's Security Strategy (2014) use the term to emphasize the need for inclusive governance to counterinsurgency. Accordingly, to defeat Terrorism, the document emphasizes that: 'We cannot leave anyone behind; we cannot have "ungoverned spaces" [in the northeast]. It is time we leverage our democratic processes to increase access to decision-making for most citizens. Inclusive, non-discriminatory, and participatory governance will likely detect discontent before it erupts. The goal of politics must be to lift our people out of poverty and provide them with an environment that enables them to compete favorably. We are confident that our governance approach to countering insurgency addresses the multiple factors that link peace, security, development, rule of law, and respect for human rights (ibid, 35).

This debate suggests that "ungoverned spaces" might be better understood as contested, under-governed, or inadequately governed spaces, especially with the emergence of ungovernable regions in maritime, external, and virtual domains. There is an emphasis on the need for tailored responses in the African context, considering the distinctiveness of each case, even if similarities exist, such as those between Afghanistan and various ungoverned areas in the Sahel and West Africa. West Africa has taken a unique approach in response to the threat posed by ungoverned regions. The collapse of Libya has had widespread repercussions in the area, leading to the devastation of significant places in Mali, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Recognizing the regional nature of the challenge, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria collaborated as a regional bloc, establishing a multinational joint task force under the Lake Chad Basin countries to pool resources against terrorist activities. While not identical, this situation resembles the Afghan case (Olorunfemi, 2021). Nevertheless, a regional framework, supported by resources from the G7, remains indispensable to address these challenges effectively.

Thus, this manuscript contributes to filling the gaps in the existing literature by examining informal governance structures in the Salvador Pass, presenting a detailed case study of arms smuggling and vigilante groups, and evaluating the balance between militarized and developmental approaches to regional security.

3.2. *Characteristics of Ungoverned Spaces*

Contested, under-governed, or inadequately governed spaces typically exhibit several defining characteristics:

- **Rugged Terrain:** Unstable terrain escalates land management costs and diminishes government benefits. Travel and impact become challenging, as exemplified by Mao Zedong's struggles to implement the Great Leap Forward program in rugged terrain. This difficulty is exacerbated in African countries facing fragility and instability. Scholarly evidence from 161 countries indicates that rugged terrain heightens the risk of

civil War by providing rebels with concealment (Fearon and Laitin. 2003). Additionally, rough terrain often hampers agricultural or grazing activities, making badlands less appealing for governance.

- **Geographical Remoteness:** Generally, ungoverned spaces are geographically remote, referring to sparsely populated, low-density regions far from the national capital or major cities. Ethnic groups in these remote areas may strive for autonomy, while providing public goods becomes challenging, resulting in limited or absent government activity. Geographical variables, particularly remoteness, strongly incentivize rebellion and civil War, as evidenced in the African experience, especially in the Sahel region (Tollefsen, Buhaug, 2015).
- **Linked to the Concept of Safe Havens:** Individuals and groups often operate with impunity or go undetected when employing violence to threaten national, regional, or international security. These entities thrive when they have a haven, an ungoverned space, to conduct their activities beyond practical confrontation efforts.
- **Includes New Frontiers:** The concept of ungoverned spaces extends beyond terrestrial boundaries, encompassing new frontiers in sea, air, and the Internet. With advancing technology and globalization, actors compete to control previously unknown or invisible borders, such as seas, oceans, outer areas, or the virtual world. Cyberarea, in particular, has become a medium for criminal and terrorist activities, exemplified by non-state actors like ISIS operating both in physical territories and cyber areas (Sobrinho et al., 2016).
- **Linked to Weak or Failed States:** Ungoverned space can manifest as weak or failed states, poorly controlled land or sea borders, or viable areas within a territory where central government control is absent, weak, or contested (Lynch. 2016). A lack of effective sovereignty characterizes these areas.
- **Associated with Criminal and Violent Activity:** The presence of armed groups, violent extremism, Terrorism, and criminal activities outside state control indicates the degree of ungovernability in a territory. Such areas are potential breeding grounds for extremist and terrorist networks.
- **Various Types:** Case studies classify ungoverned lands into several types, each requiring different responses. These include "contested governance," "incomplete governance," and "governing abdication," posing challenges in formulating effective responses to the risks posed by uncontrolled areas.

These characteristics highlight two key points: First, the concept of contested, under-governed, or inadequately governed spaces is rooted in the centrality of the state in the international legal system, emphasizing the absence or abdication of state authority. Second, the term does not imply a power vacuum, as non-state actors often exert different forms and levels of control. When state institutions falter, international law loses its motivating force, especially when alternative forms of authority are not recognized, raising critical questions about state-building (Taylor, 2016)

3.3. *Distribution of Ungoverned Spaces in Africa*

We can identify four major ungoverned regions in Africa that serve as safe havens for terrorists, smugglers, and violent groups:

- **The Sahel Region:** Encompassing the areas between North Africa and the Sahel and Sahara region, the Sahel region features a hostile environment that provides a safe haven for those outside the state's authority (Check, 2023). With low population density, it serves as a crossing point for terrorists witnessing illegal trade in diamonds, gold, weapons, and drugs. The Salvador crossing between Libya and Niger is a trendy route in this region.
- **The Horn of Africa Region:** Known for piracy along the Somali coast, south-central Somalia has experienced complete state collapse. Northern border regions of Kenya and the Karamoja regions of eastern Uganda have a weak or nominal government presence. The Horn of Africa serves as a crucial location for safe havens for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Since the early 1990s, it has been a significant area of operations for Al-Qaeda and the jihadist movement (Marsai and Tarrósy. 2022).
- **Central Africa:** Specifically, around the Great Lakes region, the Democratic Republic of the Congo lacks effective control along its borders with Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. Unregulated exploitation of diamonds, minerals, and arms smuggling occurs outside the Congolese government's authority. Areas north of the Central African Republic and the Gulf of Guinea also lack effective governance.
- **Mozambique Channel Area:** The southwest Indian Ocean, particularly the Mozambique Channel, is considered one of the largest overfishing areas globally. The lack of monitoring and control by neighboring countries has led to high levels of poaching and environmental

degradation. The absence of state authority makes it an attractive location for various criminal activities, including smuggling and Terrorism (Mishra, 2022).

In terms of long-term stability, it is crucial for the state to re-establish a positive presence through essential services, even if only in an organizing and coordinating role. Additionally, gradually building institutions, often based on locally emerging governance structures, can lead to hybrid governance systems.

4. The Salvador Pass and Violent Conflict in the Sahel

Libya shares over 4,300 kilometers of land borders with six countries. Apart from a minority entering through neighboring Egypt and Tunisia along the Mediterranean coast, the majority of migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, enter through its southern borders, primarily from Niger and Sudan [3]. For decades, the transport, trade, and smuggling of subsidized goods, as well as illicit items like cigarettes, drugs, and small arms, have formed the economic foundation of entire communities in the Sahara and Sahel countries. They are facilitating the movement of people—whether migrants, pilgrims, or enslaved people—which has been a traditional aspect of Sahrawi livelihoods for centuries. However, recently, smuggling migrants from Africa to Europe has become one of the most lucrative businesses in the Sahara.

In the case of Libya, a crucial starting point for boat trips to Europe, three main routes in the south of the country form the main gateways linking sub-Saharan Africa to Europe: the Eastern Way, the Middle Way, and the Western Way. The southwestern route, passing through Sebha, Ubari, and Ghat, traditionally controlled by Arab tribes, heavily relies on Tuareg groups for movement across the desert. Ghat, controlled by the Tuareg, and Qatrun and Murzuq, under the Tebu's control, mark the Salvador Triangle, where the borders of Libya, Algeria, and Niger converge. The southeast route, mainly controlled by the Tebu and Alzway, is primarily used by migrants from Chad, Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. The Tebu and Tuareg, long-standing desert tribes with connections throughout the region, have faced years of marginalization and deprivation of citizenship rights.

Under the Gaddafi regime, border crossings were far from average and characterized by corruption and nepotism. The weak investment in border security and training for border officials exacerbated the situation. In a bid to maintain political influence, the regime left control of the black market to specific tribes in the region. Deliberate oversight of certain forms of smuggling allowed areas to remain self-sufficient, contributing to the flourishing of smuggling activities. However, the state's inability to provide public services within its desert borders and the actual marginalization of these communities have further fueled smuggling and illicit trade across the border corridors.

4.1. The Libya-Mali Axis and the First Sahel Crisis

Following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in the summer of 2011, Tuareg individuals who had been employed in the Libyan security service returned to Mali. They played a crucial role in organizing the rebellion that contributed to the partial collapse of the state in 2012-2013. Subsequently, security concerns in Mali became a central issue in the Maghreb region. The French-led, UN-led intervention in Mali undermined Algerian and Libyan counterinsurgency policies, which, since the late 1990s, had facilitated the transfer of Islamist rebels from the Maghreb toward the Sahel (Alcaro., 2014).

Terrorist groups operating in West Africa became more audacious and active due to the proliferation of weapons in the Sahara and Sahel region following the destabilization in Libya. Libyan weapons acquired by AQIM and other mercenaries were transferred to violent jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine, Boko Haram, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. This enabled them to launch more lethal attacks on citizens of other Sahel and West African countries. At the core of these developments are AQIM's attacks on the Sahel, as well as the tactical weapons and ideological support they provide to groups like Ansar Dine, Boko Haram, and other sleeper cells throughout the region.

Previously considered homegrown terrorist groups, including Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, militant Fulani herders, and Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa, were able to launch

cross-border attacks or strike international targets in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its sleeper cells are implicated in numerous cases of kidnapping and killing of Western tourists, aid workers, and soldiers, as well as attacks on government targets, security centers, and foreign diplomatic missions. AQIM's relations with Islamists in neighboring countries were evident in the double bombing on May 23, 2013, in Niger, which killed at least 26 people, primarily Nigerian soldiers, and wounded about 30 others (Aniche et al., 2021, pp. 304-318).

Since 2013, jihadists and rebels known to operate in the Sahel have become active in the Maghreb. Notably, extremist jihadists based in Mali attacked the oil and gas refinery in Amenas, southeastern Algeria, in 2013. Between 2014 and 2015, jihadists with a history in the Sahel region reportedly operated in Libya. This led to a significant increase in arms flows towards the south of Libya, facilitating Tuareg rebels in Mali and armed groups in the Sahel region and the Lake Chad Basin to obtain weapons and ammunition during a period of widespread regional turmoil.

The weapons, transported by Tuareg fighters and smuggling gangs, followed a route from the Libyan southwest along the borders with Algeria and Niger. After crossing ungoverned spaces away from government authorities, the arms reached the regions of Agadez, Tahoua, and Tillabéri in Niger. Subsequently, they reached the tri-border area between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso and the Lake Chad Basin via the Diffa region in Niger.

4.2. Risks of Migration and Illegal Trade

In recent years, the migration route between Niger and Libya has become a focal point of the European Union's anti-migration efforts. The primary focus is Agadez, a city on the southern fringes of the central-sub-Saharan region, where migrants embark on their journey to Libya. These migrants constitute a crucial source of income for the impoverished region, benefiting local drivers and associated businesses involved in passenger transportation. European initiatives to combat smuggling, however, have led to a transformation of regional economies, with entrepreneurs shifting from transporting migrants to dealing in less sensitive goods like drugs and rare animals. From a bioeconomic perspective, this highlights the complex interplay between economies that profit from mobility. Disrupting human smuggling activities can sometimes have severe consequences (Rizk, 2021).

Following the second collapse in Libya in 2014, weapons started flowing into Niger, and migrants rushed to Libya, with some perishing in the desert. During peak years, over 300,000 people annually traveled through Agadez towards Libya, either seeking employment or attempting the dangerous Mediterranean crossing. While jeeps still depart for the desert with migrants, EU interventions in the Agadez region have significantly impacted the local economy. The official EU stance asserts a substantial decline in migration from Niger to Libya, from 70,000 to 1,500 in May 2016. However, verifying these statistics is challenging as drivers now travel at night, without lights, and take alternative, rough routes to Libya (Lucht, 2022, p.19).

Conversely, transporting narcotic drugs to militias in Libya has emerged as an alternative income source, offsetting the losses from human smuggling. Former migrant transporters now head to Nigeria, purchase Tramadol, and transport it to the Libyan border. The pills are then delivered to militias and sold in the broader North African market. Narcotics have been reported to fuel the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria, with former soldiers, including kidnapped children, revealing drug use before attacks, potentially explaining the brutality of these atrocities.

The Salvador Triangle's strategic location and the complex tribal and power dynamics in the region make it a pivotal area for transnational trafficking routes, facilitating the movement of illicit goods through a network of tribal-controlled territories and avoiding official monitoring.

4.3. Who Governs the Salvador Corridor?

Swiss photojournalist Philippe Dudoit (2019), working on a project titled "Dust Dynamics" about the people of the Sahara, likened the conflict in Ubari between the Tebu and Tuareg to a 'football game' orchestrated by rival Libyan governments in the north. In 2014, the foundations of trade and

smuggling were fortified for Tebu groups. They capitalized on their support for the revolution against the Gaddafi regime to seize control of strategic crossing points after the closure of the Algeria-Libya border and the reduction of French patrols in Niger.

Traditionally, the Tuaregs utilized the El Salvador corridor for trading and smuggling cigarettes, fuel, and people. The closure of borders and French patrols led to a rerouting of commercial flows towards the Niger-Libya border, reigniting tensions with the Tebu, who operate smuggling and trade networks in this region. This rivalry is compounded by the fact that some points remain contentious despite a century of peace established by the 1893 Treaty of Midi, which concluded nine years of War between the Tebu and Tuareg over control of roads and pastures.

The 1893 treaty delineated the boundaries of the Tuareg and Tebu regions. To the west of the El Salvador Corridor, known as 'the land of the Tuareg,' and to the east, the city of Ubari, also considered Tuareg territory. However, it is still disputed by the Tebu, who claim the right to settle there. These tribal tensions worsened with the outbreak of the second civil War in Libya in May 2014 [4].

While conflict and social tensions vary in southern Libya, Sebha and Ubari, in particular, hold significance due to their ability to attract social and political actors from across the region. Both areas grapple with inherited problems and injustices characterized by mixed ethnic and tribal communities. The state's presence is marked by institutional weaknesses, especially in the security and justice sectors. Additionally, these regions are strategically located near primary fixed-income sources, such as smuggling routes and oil fields. Moreover, they have been targets of intervention by both northern and international actors (Tubiana & Gramizzi . 2017).

5. Militarization of Border Areas

(1). The New European Borders between Niger and Libya

In 2014, the French government announced plans for a military base in Madama as part of Operation Barkhane against rebels. The base utilized a military airport established in 1931, a former French colonial fort on the northeastern border of Niger. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), based in Warsaw, Poland, also aims to enhance its role in Niger. Here, liaison officers will collaborate with EU military and security deployments to bolster border control between Niger, Algeria, and Libya (Fakhry, 2023).

Frontex's involvement includes facilitating border control activities in southern Libya (in collaboration with Italy and the International Organization for Migration) and intensifying border patrols with Algeria and Libya. This militarization is unprecedented in the Niger border region. The recent revelation of a CIA base in Dirkou adds to the complexity, alongside the presence of the most extensive base established by the US military command (AFRICOM) in Agadez. Additionally, the command center of the Five Coastal States Force has been relocated to War in northern Chad.

While this foreign presence aligns with the interests of Niger's central authorities, providing financial and strategic protection against jihadist or rebel infiltration, it may potentially clash with the interests of local communities reliant on the smuggling economy.

However, after the Niger coup on July 26, 2023, the European Union suspended all security cooperation with the landlocked country in West Africa. Additionally, France withdrew its military and closed its embassy in Niamey. The military junta in Niger has repealed law 2015-36 that criminalized migration through the country, marking significant shifts in internal governance, straining international relations with the EU, and raising concerns about the security of the border with Libya. This move has the potential to impact regional stability and migration dynamics.

The 2015 legislation empowered authorities to combat smugglers transporting migrants through Niger's vast desert to Libya and Europe. However, with the repeal of this law, concerns arise regarding potential exploitation by trafficking gangs, potentially resulting in a resurgence of migrant flows through Niger. Traffickers, facing severe penalties under the overturned law, may view this as an opportunity to resume operations. The associated risk is that migrants might again be directed into neighboring countries like Libya or Algeria for onward transport to Europe.

(2) Changing Political Loyalties of Border Tribes

The political loyalty of border regions is inherently variable and characterized by expediency. An illustrative incident transpired in June 2020, where a convoy of at least 13 Chadian Zaghawa fighters met their demise in an attack by Libyan Tebu militants near the El Salvador Corridor. This example vividly underscores the dynamic shifts in roles embraced by Chadian youth. In December 2019, many fighters ventured to Libya to support forces affiliated with the Libyan National Army. They only returned to the Kouri Bougoudi region in April 2020, where they initiated gold mining activities. These gold sites then served as a base for engaging in drug trafficking activities.

A more recent incident on November 6, 2021, witnessed clashes between two groups of drug traffickers over the El Salvador Corridor. Chadian Anakaza traders based in Qatrun were transporting cannabis plants acquired in Amloul when Chadian Zaghawa smugglers attacked them at the El Salvador Pass. The Anakaza smugglers reportedly repelled the attack, losing four men, while the attackers suffered a reported loss of at least ten individuals. Notably, in early 2015, the Union of Resistance Forces (affiliated with Timane Erdimi) profited from the drug trade, selling drugs worth \$11 million that had been seized from a convoy of smugglers. This revenue enabled the opposition movement in Chad to purchase 15 armed vehicles in Libya and Sudan. This highlights the intricate intersection of tribal, political, and criminal dynamics in areas lacking governance or where government control is weak.

(3) Vigilante Groups

Previous efforts to militarize northern Niger regions, coupled with the eruption of the second Libyan civil War in 2014, disrupted the flow of arms southward. Simultaneously, the demand for weapons surged in Libya, compelling terrorist movements to seek arms from alternative sources. Consequently, terrorist attacks on army barracks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger intensified to plunder weapons and ammunition stocks. In northern Niger, various factors contribute to insecurity, facilitating Libyan arms smuggling.

The heightened demand for weapons has provided smugglers with lucrative opportunities. Stockpiles amassed in southwestern Libya are sold to civilians for self-defense or to armed groups in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Typically transported in four-wheel-drive vehicles, well-suited for the desert's sandy roads, these weapons follow routes that cross the Salvador Corridor. Utilizing ancient trade routes across the Sahel, these flows avoid surveillance systems implemented by the United States and Niger in recent years. Vehicles, often concealing weapons beneath other goods, traverse a corridor heading towards Agadez, Tassara, or Tchín-Tabaradene to reach Mali.

On March 21, 2021, armed bandits killed 137 people in multiple attacks in the town of Telia. This violence prompted residents of the Agadez, Tahoua, and Tillabéri regions to defend themselves (Anadolu Ajansı, 2021). The state's failure to ensure citizen safety and its loss of control over border areas led civilians to establish vigilante militias for protection [5]. The rise and prevalence of vigilante groups in ungoverned spaces stem from three critical shortcomings: (1) a security gap, occurring when the state fails to ensure the safety of its citizens; (2) a capacity gap, arising when the state is incapable of delivering fundamental services to its citizens; and (3) a legitimacy gap, manifesting when the state lacks credibility among its populace, leading to governance through force. These interconnected gaps are implicit in the notions of state failure, state weakness, state fragility, or limited statehood.

The emergence of vigilante groups highlights the complex dynamics in regions where the state cannot provide adequate security and governance. These groups fill the void left by state institutions, often operating independently and outside the formal legal framework. Their existence underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of insecurity and governance deficits in the Sahel region. For example, two armed groups from the Tebu tribe control the border road between Libya and Niger, which extends 320 kilometers from Qatroun to Al-Toum. The Desert Shield Battalion and the Umm al-Aranib Martyrs Battalion operate multiple checkpoints (Eaton et al., V. (2021). These armed groups and others in the region face increasing difficulty collecting fees once the paved roads in the El Salvador Corridor area end. In these areas, armed groups are strategically positioned in unavoidable bottlenecks, forcing cross-border traders and smugglers to pay fees. Some merchants and smugglers pay advance sums to these armed groups to ensure safe passage. At the

Toum border crossing, Tebu forces manage the entry and exit of vehicles and impose "customs duties" on goods without any official supervision due to the lack of an official immigration and customs system. Once in Niger, traders and smugglers must also pay government forces. This scenario highlights how non-state actors, such as Tebu armed groups, exercise control and governance in the El Salvador Corridor region, filling the void left by state institutions and illustrating the complex security dynamics in these ungoverned spaces.

6. Toward a New Social Contract

Central state authority is often absent in the remote peripheries of southern Libya and many Sahel countries. If it does exist, it typically governs the daily lives of individuals in an informal manner based on tribal or local customs. Perhaps this absence or nominal presence of the state makes it easier for jihadist or criminal networks to establish themselves and circumvent local power structures.

For instance, according to some sources, Algerian jihadist leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar gained a social incubator and security presence in the region by marrying four women from the local Arab and Tuareg communities. He spoke local dialects and shared some of his income from smuggling activities and ransom money from Westerners with the local population. However, terrorist groups constitute only one type of many groups engaging in illicit activities by exploiting the weakness or absence of the state.

In this highly complex security context of ungoverned spaces, illicit networks, local insurgents, and, to a lesser extent, violent jihadist groups are establishing hybrid systems of governance. Sometimes, they work side by side, as in Fezzan, where they sometimes replace local institutions. In southern Libya, Chad, and Niger, criminals are allying with the Tebu to control the trafficking of human beings and illicit goods, such as drugs and cigarettes, across the border into Libya, as well as the export of subsidized goods, such as fuel and food.

In recent years, escalating violence and conflict have threatened to destabilize the entire region and undermine limited development gains. The increasing violence has created a severe humanitarian crisis, with the lack of food security resulting in waves of forced displacement. What worsens matters is the exacerbation of these complex crises due to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, sustainable confrontation of these gaps requires long-term political solutions beyond the shortcomings of approaches to fighting Terrorism in the region. We need to embrace a new social contract.

Although the concept of the social contract in Africa reflects a heterogeneous and evolving reality, several common factors warrant consideration and reflection:

- **Post-Colonial State Formation:** The processes of post-colonial state formation have shaped political settlements and systems.
- **Non-State Authorities:** Religious, traditional tribal, and other non-state authorities are vital in mediating the relationship between citizens and the state.
- **Electoral Politics:** Patronage and political clientelism significantly influence electoral politics.
- **Demographics:** The population in rural and remote areas, a small middle class, and a limited independent private sector are critical demographic factors.
- **State Revenues:** Many African states rely on natural resources and aid to generate revenue (Cloutier et al., 2021).

Nyadera and Masoud (2019) propose a model that offers a framework for restoring state authority and legitimacy. This model measures the extent of a state's control over a given area and suggests ways for a state to regain control over previously lost areas. For instance, to measure law and order, one could examine variables such as police presence, prisons, courts, and border posts. To assess social well-being, one can evaluate variables like local governments, health facilities, and schools.

This model emphasizes the importance of state power, including law enforcement institutions, economic activities, and social welfare, in undermining the presence of armed and terrorist groups. The absence of these elements provides extremist and armed groups with the conditions needed to recruit marginalized and deprived individuals into their organizations.

7. Conclusions

It is apparent that despite increased militarization along the border regions between Libya and its neighboring countries, particularly at critical points like the Salvador Corridor, the surplus weapons and ammunition accumulated during Libya's civil War (2014-2020) could potentially fuel smuggling networks. These networks may extend through Niger into other regions, including the Sahel, Basin, Lake Chad, and West Africa, thereby empowering various armed groups, including terrorist movements, and posing a significant risk to regional stability.

Understanding the dynamics of the political economy in ungoverned areas is crucial. Disruption of the informal economy, a significant source of income for many smugglers, raises concerns about potential recourse to conflict or resorting to kidnapping foreigners for ransom.

Therefore, if efforts to curb the flow of migrants and illicit trade along the Salvador Corridor prove successful, it is imperative to provide viable economic alternatives to communities dependent on smuggling. Additionally, the potential recruitment of unemployed youth with smuggling skills by rebel groups and terrorist movements must be considered.

Adopting new approaches encompassing political, developmental, and military components is crucial to addressing this security dilemma effectively. The proposed steps include:

(1). Implementing Regional Initiatives: Focus on the collection and control of illicit weapons through enhanced military and security cooperation among Niger, Algeria, and Chad, along with joint border patrols. ECOWAS should intensify efforts to combat small arms proliferation, and international partners can contribute tailored assistance, including intelligence, air support, and training.

(2). Recognizing Limitations of Military Solutions: Governments involved in G5 Sahel operations should prioritize organized dialogue to address the needs of ungoverned areas. Strengthening the state's presence by providing public goods such as health facilities, clean water, education, and sanitation is crucial. These alternative approaches may render terrorist group narratives irrelevant and disrupt their operational capacity.

(3). Exploring Legal Avenues: Address crimes in the region through forms of transitional justice. Establishing a regional legal coalition with the cooperation of countries and international actors is essential to ensure justice for victims affected by violence in the Sahel.

(4). Confronting Internal Challenges: Sahel countries must confront internal challenges with political will and seek sustainable solutions. The study suggests the importance of adopting a new social contract, emphasizing the need for these nations to acknowledge weaknesses and garner support for a comprehensive resolution.

In conclusion, broadening the response to violence in Sahel countries, emphasizing political settlements and societal dialogue, is essential. The return of state sovereignty to ungoverned areas through the provision of critical government institutions and services, enhanced security and intelligence services, and public participation in policy processes, along with short-, medium-, and long-term development and strategic strategies, is vital for a positive impact.

Notes

^[1] The Salvador Corridor, located between Niger and Libya, symbolizes an ungoverned area highlighting security challenges in the southern border region of Libya. Positioned at the northern Manguéni Plateau, this narrow, remote mountain pass is an alternative route for well-armed smugglers and rebels, notably exploited by figures like Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Controlled nominally by Tuareg militias on the Libyan side, Tebu militias took over smuggling activities post-Gaddafi. In mid-April 2015, the French 2nd Parachute Regiment, in collaboration with the Nigerien army, asserted control over the corridor (McGregor, 2016, pp. 21-22).

^[2] A more encompassing definition is offered for ungoverned areas (UGA), referring to places where the state or central government is either unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern, or influence the local population. Such areas may involve situations where a provincial, local, tribal, or otherwise autonomous government lacks full or effective governance. UGA is a comprehensive term encompassing under-governed, misgoverned, contested, and exploitable

areas, marked by traits such as inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, legitimacy gaps, the presence or recent occurrence of conflict, or restrictive norms of behavior. (Clunan and Trinks, 2010; Taylor, 2016)

- [3] The Maghreb and Sahel region constitute an exceptionally intricate and interconnected security complex. The ongoing Maghreb conflict, particularly the tensions between Algeria and Morocco and the tumultuous developments in Libya and Mali, has intricately woven the geopolitical landscape. These events have, directly and indirectly, given rise to a complex interplay between security and political dynamics in the Sahel and North Africa regions. Within this complex tapestry, various groups with local grievances, alongside those espousing a globalized jihadi discourse, have found fertile ground to converge and establish movements, thereby posing a multifaceted threat to security in the region (Tinti and Westcott, .2016).
- [4] After the revolution against the Gaddafi regime, both Tuareg and Tebu adopted competing propaganda narratives to secure support in the post-revolution state. Marginalized under the Gaddafi regime, the Tebu sought to portray themselves as trustworthy border guards and allies in the international fight against Terrorism. They consistently accused the Tuareg brigades in Ubari, including Brigade 315 and Ansar al-Haq, of affiliating with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, asserting that the Salvador corridor was rife with extremists. In contrast, the Tuareg regarded the Tebu tribes as 'foreigners,' simultaneously encroaching on mineral-rich lands inhabited by the Tuareg (Murray, 2017).
- [5] Vigilante groups are self-appointed citizens who undertake law enforcement and protective measures within their communities without legal authority, often in response to perceived failures or inadequacies of official institutions to provide adequate security and governance. For more details see: (Rizk, 2021).

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