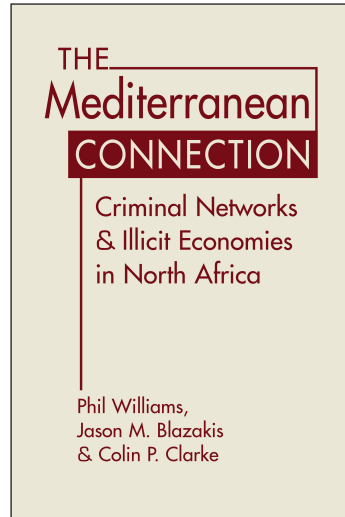


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Connection:
Criminal Networks and
Illicit Economies in
North Africa

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1

Criminal and Illicit Networks in North Africa

THE UPWELLING OF DISCONTENT THAT GRIPPED COUNTRIES THROUGHOUT North Africa and the Middle East, which was simplistically and optimistically termed the “Arab Spring,” disrupted social, political, and economic life. Images from Tahrir Square in 2011 and those of the food vendor in Tunisia whose self-immolation sparked the revolution remain vivid. Political reform in North Africa may still be just out of reach, but the desire for political change in the region remains steadfast—making North Africa a relevant region for a wide range of studies and analysis.

More than a decade ago, North Africa was at the center of a maelstrom of dramatic political upheaval. Assuming center stage in the world’s imagination is not new to the region. Indeed, throughout history, ancient empires, imperialists, colonialists, and locally powerful fiefdoms vied for the region’s rich natural resources and strategic locations fundamental to securing geopolitical dominance. The Vandals, Byzantines, Carthaginians, Ottomans, Romans, and many other conquerors, like locusts, feasted on North Africa’s landscape. For the Romans, North Africa was the granary of its empire. Yet, North Africa is far more than its land produces or the imports and exports that move through its ports. Culturally, linguistically, and historically, North Africa is an important crossroads that has indelibly shaped and contributed to the development of Western civilization. Ancient land and sea trade routes that link the Sahara to the Mediterranean Sea and into Europe remain extant and quite vibrant. These routes allowed for the transmission of knowledge, goods, and culture that would shape the world for centuries to come. Today, these routes pass through the modern North African states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, allowing the flow of people, including irregular migrants, and both licit and illicit goods.

Some may object to the inclusion of Egypt in a book on North Africa. But Egypt is critical to any discourse on North Africa, especially one that examines the illicit economies of the region. Egypt is the sinew that unites western Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Indeed, Napoleon once observed that Egypt was the most strategic country in the world. At the very least, its political, economic, social, cultural, and historical significance is difficult to overstate. And it remains a critical waypoint for illicit economies.

Popular examination of illicit economies is often shaped by hyperbole, simplicity, and at times even conspiracy theories that have little relevance to reality. Sadly, these tendencies obscure the real challenge of illicit economies that often prey on society's most vulnerable people. The legitimate challenges of criminal networks engaged in illicit activity also occur far beyond US borders and, for this reason, often escape Washington's bandwidth to address in a meaningful way. Yet, the reverberations of illicit economies wash upon distant shores. Moreover, they are part of the sordid underbelly of a world that, despite some pushback and reversals, is still highly globalized, linked, and interconnected.

As a region, North Africa is vitally important to the study of illicit economies and criminal networks. These challenges are historic and relevant to geographic locations noncontiguous to the region. For example, privateering, piracy, and frequent deployment of corsairs to plunder US commercial vessels engaged in legitimate commercial exchange resulted in the rapid expansion of the US Navy in the early 1800s. Today, the challenges associated with illicit economies in North Africa are significant, with profound impact beyond the geographic contours of the five countries this book examines. Individuals like Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an arch-terrorist who became known by the sobriquet "Marlboro Man" because of his engagement in cigarette smuggling, and organized criminal enterprises like the Italian mafia are key players and critical nodes in the story of illicit economies. Criminal networks and pioneering terrorists like Belmokhtar have financed their deadly operations by engaging in illicit trafficking and smuggling. Yet, as transnational crime scholars Matthew Herbert and Max Gallien have written, the challenge associated with illicit activity plagues both the hinterlands and borderlands of the North African states. Scholars like Herbert and Gallien have pointed to a hierarchical stratification in North African society that has contributed to human misery, resulting in well-meaning individuals turning to smuggling to make ends meet. This instinct to survive by engaging in illicit activity as a coping mechanism emerges throughout this book and is frequently revisited. Moreover, we would

be remiss not to mention that politicians in Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Rabat, and Tripoli often fail to administer to the needs of those who live precariously at the periphery of society and the economy. As a result, people who have been marginalized and forgotten by their capitals have no resort other than to put their lives at risk by engaging in dangerous and illicit markets and activities. In this sense, organized crime and illicit markets provide a safety net and even a safety valve where economic marginalization and social exclusion are pervasive features of society.

This book is intended to inform a wide readership, especially scholars, government practitioners, journalists, regional experts, and the attentive public who want to learn more about criminal networks and illicit economies in North Africa. Written during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, the book also considers, to the extent possible, how Covid-19 affected the criminal networks and illicit trading practices and patterns in North Africa. Although they underwent short-term disruption, both networks and the illicit economies in which they operated proved highly resilient, adapting through new routes and makeshift hubs, enabled by the rapid advance of digital communications and highly sophisticated information technologies.

Purpose and Scope

In this book we examine the scale, scope, and impact of criminal networks and illicit economies in five North African states: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. We look at various forms of trafficking and smuggling, ranging from drugs and arms to human beings—some of whom are engaged in what is sometimes termed irregular migration and some of whom are being trafficked into a life of sexual servitude or forced labor. We identify not only the routes that are used but also the key hubs where routes converge and where there is also, in some cases at least, a concentration of criminal services and criminal activities. In other words, the aim is to map the illicit flows in and through the five North African countries that are being examined.

Each country section study is structured similarly, with an introductory overview that analyzes state capacity and resilience and provides a foundation for understanding both the inhibitors to and the facilitators of smuggling and trafficking activities. This process is made somewhat easier by the ENACT Organized Crime Index of 2019 and the Global Organized Crime Index that was published in 2021 and refined and updated in 2023. The latter index, which is produced by the Global

Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, is a major game changer as it massively strengthens the knowledge base about organized crime and illicit economies not only in Africa but globally. Furthermore, the iterative nature of the index both facilitates the understanding of criminal trends and informs policies that can more effectively respond to the challenges of criminality.¹

The Index measures criminality and resilience for each country on a scale of 1 to 10. Countries' criminality scores are made up of the average scores of ten criminal markets and four criminal actor types. Criminal market scores consider the scope, scale, value, and reach (i.e. non-monetary impact) of each illicit economy. Criminal actor scores consider the structure, control, and influence of each criminal actor type. The higher the criminality score a country has, the more severe its criminality conditions are.²

In September 2023, ENACT and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime released a new version of the Index. This not only updated the country assessments, but also extended the categories to encompass fifteen different criminal markets and five different criminal types—mafia-style groups, criminal networks, state-embedded actors, foreign actors, and private-sector actors. The new criminal markets added to the index are financial fraud, cyber-dependent crimes, counterfeiting, the illicit trade in excisable goods, and extortion and protection-racketeering. The surprise was that financial fraud emerged as the largest criminal market.

Both the original index and the 2023 update identified twelve dimensions of resilience—defined as the “ability to withstand and disrupt organized criminal activities as a whole . . . through political, economic, legal and social measures.”³ These included factors such as political leadership and governance; transparency and accountability; law enforcement, policies, and laws; the judicial system; and nonstate actors.

The index—supplemented by observations about the quality of governance, the effectiveness of the rule of law, and recent political and economic developments—provides the basis for the introductory section of each country study. The analysis then moves from the general to the specific. It recognizes that while the five North African countries face some common challenges in terms of organized crime and illicit economies, there are also important variations in terms of which illegal markets are most prominent, the commodities that are smuggled or trafficked, the extent to which corruption is an important facilitator, as well as the capacity and even the desire of the governments concerned to combat these activities.⁴

As always, when examining the illicit and the covert, a degree of caution is in order. Research on illicit economies attempts to shed light on conduct, transactions, and flows that, by their very nature, deliberately reside in the shadows. Too many studies of illicit activity attempt to quantify what is inherently unquantifiable. Many of the figures that are typically used are based on law enforcement and interdiction successes, but it is almost impossible to determine the percentage of illicit flows that are intercepted, whether trends are moving in a favorable or unfavorable direction, and whether law enforcement agencies were particularly efficient, or the criminals simply failed to develop effective risk management strategies. Such difficulties notwithstanding, this study makes use of a wide variety of sources ranging from those produced by international organizations and specialized nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to scholarly ethnographic research conducted at the national and local levels. It also makes good use of community access to detailed news articles reporting from on the ground. In effect, we have tried to piece together a kaleidoscope that provides insight and understanding of the complex drivers, facilitators, and inhibitors of criminal behaviors and illicit economies.

Smuggling and Trafficking: The Challenges

Although the terms *smuggling* and *trafficking* are often used interchangeably, they have slightly different meanings. These have been captured succinctly in the comment by Mark Shaw and Tuesday Reitano that

the term ‘trafficking’ represents those activities involved in moving . . . illegal commodities (drugs or guns or people against their will). ‘Smuggling’ denotes the movement of commodities that are not themselves illegal (food, fuel, cigarettes, or people who consent), but their sourcing or the activity of moving them across borders contravenes the law of at least one government, such as in relation to the payment of tax or customs duties. This latter category of smuggling overlaps significantly with a substantial and growing informal (or grey) economy.⁵

This is a helpful distinction despite an inevitable degree of fuzziness at the edges. Some criminal organizations, for example, might be engaged in both smuggling and trafficking at the same time. Moreover, when the focus is on human beings, it appears that those engaged in irregular migration—and are being smuggled voluntarily—can also become victims of human traffickers who use coercion or deception and

force women into sexual servitude and men into forced labor. The analysis here looks at both smuggling and trafficking.

Even if governments have both the will and significant capabilities to combat smuggling and trafficking, the task remains formidable partly because illicit markets develop where the legal market is not functioning properly, and partly because of the skill, sophistication, and capacity for adaptation of criminal organizations and networks. The most effective criminals are highly opportunistic and able to take advantages of global phenomena—for example, new markets created by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this connection, it is useful to look at what can be termed the smuggling and trafficking toolkit. The toolkit not only highlights methods that are common to both but also explains why smuggling and trafficking are so difficult to counter. The toolkit consists of four major techniques and methods, but these can be mixed and matched in ways that create positive synergies for the perpetrators and additional complications for those trying to combat their activities.

Method 1. Concealment of goods is designed to ensure that they are, in effect, moved covertly. The degree of sophistication varies greatly from simply hiding the commodities under something else in a truck or container, through sealed compartments in cars or trucks, to what might be termed deep concealment. Southern Colombia-based Cali drug trafficking organizations were particularly good at deep concealment, hiding cocaine in cement posts, while more recent drug traffickers from Latin America have used canned goods supposedly containing fruits or vegetables to hide cocaine and heroin moving to the United States and Europe.⁶ Concealment works because it is relatively easy to hide illicit commodities within the vast shipments of licit goods that both contribute to and are a product of globalization. In effect, illicit trade is a parasite on the back of the transnational flows of goods and services that have become a critical component of the contemporary global economy.

Method 2. Deception obviously overlaps with concealment but typically involves portraying the commodities that are being moved as something they are not—through papers such as false bills of lading, counterfeit passports, or falsified end-user certificates. In a fascinating account, a *sistemista* (an experienced cocaine smuggler) who arranged shipments of cocaine from Colombia to Europe highlighted the importance of deception as an additional safeguard against discovery and seizure. He emphasized the need to ensure that “the stuff travels in shipments of big-name firms, world-famous and above suspicion” as this significantly reduces the probability that the container will be scanned

or searched.⁷ “What you need is a reliable name, a respectable firm—well-known and trusted. Precisely because thousands of containers cross borders every day and the traffic of goods is continuous, those that tend to go through the arch belong to little-known or suspect companies, provenances that give cause for doubt.”⁸

Method 3. Circumvention involves the avoidance of formal ports of entry or other locations where regulatory measures might be in place, or intrusive inspections might occur. In many borderland regions, there are well-established and traditional crossing points that are far from checkpoints, require no inspections, and are part of integrated local and regional cross-border economies. Purchases in such regions are often based on arbitrage opportunities resulting from price differentials between the two sides of the border.⁹ The result is a thriving cross-border trade, sometimes involving barter, that benefits populations but not governments.

Method 4. Facilitation involves the use of bribery and corruption to ensure that authorities with the responsibility to combat smuggling and trafficking fail to do their job and are neither efficient nor effective at interdicting smuggled or trafficked commodities. In some instances, all that is required is passivity or simply looking the other way, while in others, more active participation is necessary. Whatever the case, close and enduring relations between criminals and government officials often play a critical role in the success of smuggling and trafficking activities and provide a slew of benefits for criminal enterprises. In this connection, there are two distinct if interrelated conceptions of corruption: first is corruption as a condition that permeates to some degree or another the public administration of a country; second is corruption as an instrument that can be used by criminal organizations to neutralize the coercive and punitive powers of the state, to undermine legal and regulatory measures, and to facilitate the flows of prohibited, regulated, stolen, or counterfeit commodities.

As suggested above, these four methods can be combined in different ways. Yet it is not simply about skill or sophistication. It is also about exploiting the sheer volume of licit flows that has become a deeply embedded characteristic of contemporary globalization. Although this volume declined precipitously during the Covid-19 pandemic, it bounced back relatively quickly. The 2022 DHL Global Connectedness Index, for example, noted that “international trade, capital, and information flows” had all surpassed those prior to the pandemic.¹⁰ The challenge for governments, therefore, is not so much to find a needle in a haystack but to find a specific needle in a very large stack of

needles. More broadly it is to exploit the benefits of globalization while inhibiting or constricting the flows of prohibited, regulated, stolen, or counterfeit commodities and limiting the power of the criminal enterprises that manage these flows.

At the same time, it is important not to characterize illegal activities as only imposing harms—which they obviously do—on societies, economies, and, even more significantly, on human security. They also provide benefits that need to be acknowledged. Without widespread benefits, organized crime and illicit economies would be relatively easy to deal with. Moreover, the emergence and expansion of criminal organizations and activities can be understood in large part as a symptom of deeper problems connected to globalization, neoliberalism, and what can best be described as a global crisis of governance at the national level.¹¹ With the massive expansion of global trade facilitated by the invention and widespread adoption of the intermodal container, the rise of global financial markets, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of deeply interconnected computer and information systems resulting in the growth of cyberspace, the opportunities for both traditional and new forms of organized crime increased exponentially. The technologies have been user-friendly, thereby lowering the barriers for entry.

The rise of transnational organized crime and the expansion of illicit economies were also facilitated by weak states and by the dominant ethos of neoliberalism, with its preference for markets over regulation, for the limited role of government, and for the reduction or withdrawal of social safety nets. The rise of massive economic inequalities both between nations and within them, the dominance of entrenched elites seeking only to maintain their preferential status, the social and economic exclusion of key segments of the population, and the gap between aspirations and opportunities for young people all fed into the growing attractiveness of the illicit economy as a coping mechanism and safety net and of organized crime as the only available ladder for economic and social mobility. This downside of globalization has been effectively captured by Thomas Friedman. An avowed champion of globalization, Friedman is also sensitive to its adverse effects, acknowledging that it has also produced “a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by the new system.”¹² In effect, Friedman recognizes that globalization has winners and losers—and the pain for the losers can be enormous. In a similar vein, two books have been published with the title *The Dark Side of Globalization*. In one of them Jorge Heine and Ramesh Thakur note that global governance mechanisms have lagged far behind globalization itself, and this has “let loose the infrastructure

of uncivil society and accelerated the transnational flows” of crime, terrorism, and disease.¹³ In the other, edited by Leila Talani and Roberto Roccu, the dark side is seen in terms of “purposive actions” by criminal networks to exploit the illicit opportunities that are the inevitable accompaniment to globalization.¹⁴

Seen in this context, the focus on the five nations of North Africa can be understood as a subset of these global problems and one which highlights the way they are manifested at the regional level and at the level of the states within the region. Accordingly, this analysis starts from the presumption that, whether exploring illicit organizations and activities within a single state or a small group of states, it is crucial to examine the broader neighborhood. This neighborhood provides context, opportunities, and threats. It can be a source of instability that creates the possibility of exogenous shocks leading to population outflows, a source of inspiration that encourages population inflows, or a source of stability that helps to dampen endogenous shocks within the North Africa region.

North Africa’s Neighborhood

North Africa has two very different neighborhoods. During the colonial era, the European neighborhood was a source of control; it now offers an attractive vision of employment opportunities, democratic participation, and social safety nets, as well as an aging population. The neighborhood to the south is very different, with some endemically weak states, the increased virulence and reach of Islamist extremists, insurgencies and civil wars, high levels of poverty, and continuing and rapid population growth. Concomitantly, North Africa itself has a form of dual identity: it is part of the Mediterranean littoral but is also a part of Africa, albeit a relatively prosperous and developed part. The Mediterranean component highlights the links to Europe, links that were part of the colonial experience but also, and at times more importantly, reflect the impact of geographical proximity—especially in the cases of Morocco and Spain and Libya and Italy, respectively. It is therefore then hardly surprising that, as Mehdi Lahlou has emphasized, the Mediterranean has been crucial in shaping a “shared history” of Europe and North Africa.¹⁵ Other observers focus more on the African component of North Africa’s complex identity. The land borders are more immediately and directly shared; there is a common experience of colonialism—even though its manifestations differed significantly from country to

country—and the Berbers, the indigenous people in the Maghreb, extend not only through Morocco and Algeria but into Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Moreover, as Algerian commentator Iman Amrani noted, the countries of North Africa and those of sub-Saharan Africa “have had shared struggles” during both the colonial era and the fractious period of decolonization.¹⁶ She also suggested that although the economic attraction of the Middle East is important, in the final analysis, “Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt share not only a colonial past with the rest of Africa but also a physical continent.”¹⁷

Accordingly, it bears emphasis that both the Mediterranean/European and the African components of the neighborhood are crucial to understanding the activities of criminal networks and smuggling and trafficking throughout North Africa. It is also worth emphasizing that the five countries of North Africa—while sharing a regional identity and other common attributes—possess unique characteristics that differentiate each one of them from its neighbors. Egypt also has the distinction of being part of the Middle East as well as North Africa with all the geopolitical complexities and other complications that are involved. Further, all five countries were impacted to a greater or lesser degree by the Arab Spring.¹⁸ Regime changes occurred in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, while Morocco and Algeria, although not impervious to the profound changes taking place, did not suffer from the same levels of economic and political dislocation. While the differences will be discussed in the country sections, this introduction focuses primarily on the Mediterranean and African environments within which North Africa functions. It then considers the flows through the five countries and identifies ways in which these countries converge and diverge.

The Mediterranean Context

The Mediterranean has traditionally been a connector—a maritime superhighway for trade, cultural exchanges, movements of people, and transfers of knowledge and ideas—between North Africa and Europe. The North African coastline—which starts from the Atlantic Ocean and goes to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea—extends 9,311 kilometers and hosts a significant number of ports, large and small. As one description noted: “The Mediterranean Sea region . . . is surrounded by 22 countries, which together share a coastline of 46,000 km. It is also home to around 480 million people living across three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. It is still one of the world’s busiest shipping routes with about one-third of the world’s total merchant shipping crossing the sea each year.”¹⁹

Dynamar, a commercial company based in the Netherlands and focused on maritime trade, produced a series of enormously valuable reports about trends and developments in “the intra-Mediterranean container trade as it daily unfolds between the two outlets of Gibraltar Straits and the Suez Canal.”²⁰ Its 2014 report noted that “about 170 intra-Mediterranean shipping services carrying containers call at total 100 ports large and small spread all over mare nostrum. Combined, these services offer nearly . . . 170 sailings per week, an average of 90 departures every day from each port.”²¹ In terms of the percentages of containers being transshipped through the port—as opposed to the port being the point of origin or final destination—Gioia Tauro in Italy and Tanger Med port, a Moroccan industrial port complex, had the highest shares.²² Indeed, Tanger Med port has emerged as the premier container port in the Mediterranean. In 2020, its throughput of 5.77 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU)—up from 2.6 million TEU in 2013—surpassed that of Piraeus in Greece and Valencia in Spain.²³ In 2021, Tanger Med handled over 7.17 million TEU, with Valencia around 5.6 million and Piraeus around 5.3 million TEU.²⁴ When the important Egyptian ports, especially Port Said and Alexandria, are also considered, it is clear there continues to be enormous dynamism in shipping and commerce throughout the Mediterranean, with North African countries playing an important role in this activity. Although Covid-19 had a significant impact on intra-Mediterranean trade in the first half of 2020, the trade rebounded somewhat in the second half of the year and has continued to flourish since then.

In a speech in 2019, Angelino Alfano, then Italian minister for foreign affairs and international cooperation, emphasized that the Mediterranean was “a sea of many opportunities, with a huge proportion of the world’s economic activity and maritime traffic.”²⁵ He also noted, however, that “the region could retain its historic significance as a meeting place of nations, trading freely and cross-fertilizing cultures, or it could descend to a place where insecurity overshadowed all such activity.”²⁶ The reason for this ambivalence had been identified more than a decade earlier in a special issue of *Mediterranean Politics*. The editor, Bradford Dillman, noted that “the countries bordering the Mediterranean are connected through a dense set of trade, capital, cultural, and people flows. Globalization, liberalization, and the end of the Cold War have accelerated integration and relationships of mutual gain. However, these same processes have produced what can be called ‘shadow globalization’” with the “illegal flows of goods, services, capital, and people.”²⁷ Significantly, he also noted that “shadow economies are not peripheral, residual phenomena” but are “inherent components of global capitalism and globalization.”²⁸

These shadows are also particularly salient in ports and port cities. Historically, organized crime has typically developed and flourished in many port cities: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Marseilles, New York, and Naples are among the most obvious cases. “Round up the usual suspects” might be most memorable as a line from the movie *Casablanca*, but it also captures part of the reality of many ports and littoral cities throughout the world—including those in North Africa. The ways in which organized crime operates in ports has been succinctly captured by Anna Sergi. Noting the pervasiveness of “criminality on the waterfront,” Sergi argued that “organized crime manifests across three trajectories in seaports: trafficking through the port, infiltration in the port economy, and governance of the port management.”²⁹ She observed that corruption of dock workers as well as “government agents and port employees, including border agents and terminals’ employees are also persistent factors.”³⁰ This fully accords with the notion of facilitation discussed above as part of the smugglers’ toolkit. In this connection, it also bears emphasis that North Africa has a wide variety of ports—small and large—mostly on the Mediterranean, but with some on Morocco’s Atlantic coast, and some Egyptian ports on the Red Sea. According to the World Port Source, Morocco has fifteen ports, Algeria has eighteen, Libya has fifteen, Tunisia has eight, and Egypt has twenty-eight ports with one large port, three medium, and the rest—including those on the Red Sea—being small and very small.³¹

Ports have always been highly cosmopolitan. They are also border regions. When we think of borders, we typically think of land demarcations where countries abut one another. Yet ports can also be understood as part of a country’s border. They are points of entry and exit to a country and are key nodes in the network of licit global commerce. As Sergi has noted, “ports are unique environments; they are universes of processes and meanings. Ports are border zones, liminal areas across different juridical systems. Even morphologically, they are in flux, being places of arrival and places of transit and departures, in between economic processes and political decisions.”³² They are also enormously complex and very busy, serving as the engines of global trade, making it extremely difficult to find anomalies or detect overt indicators of illicit activity. Efforts to combat illicit activity will invariably stymie the trade flow of licit goods, presenting a difficult cost-benefit equation to state authorities seeking to thread this needle.

Ports are, first and foremost, about commerce. Consequently, the emphasis is on movement. Container ports, especially, are enormously important in facilitating the easy movement of goods from sea to land

and vice versa. Inspection of the contents of ships or containers slows down this movement. When the tradeoff is between rapid throughput of high volumes of goods and thorough scrutiny and inspection, therefore, inspection typically comes second. As Interpol noted, “with high competition, African ports are under a lot of pressure to maintain throughput metrics and reduce turnaround times, which in turn compromises law enforcement oversight processes.”³³ In sum, speed and efficiency often trump security. Moreover, even when and where inspection occurs, it is often difficult to differentiate between licit and illicit commodities. As Interpol once again noted, “the sheer volume of the shipping industry presents organized crime with an ideal opportunity to hide illegal activities in plain sight.”³⁴

These are inherent challenges for regulatory and law enforcement agencies responsible for detecting and interdicting smuggling and trafficking. The challenge becomes even more formidable when the smugglers’ toolkit outlined above and criminal sophistication and adaptation are added to the equation. Bills of lading, for example, which are central to the shipping process, can be “altered to hide the true origin/route/destination of the shipping container, and filled with inadequate or incomplete information concerning the consignor, consignee, ownership and business activities of the shipment.”³⁵ Another evasion technique noted by Interpol is “trafficking illicit goods via Free Trade Zones in the Middle East before arriving in, or after departure from, African ports and airports. They are believed to take advantage of the flexible regulation environment . . . to better conceal the origin and/or destination of the illicit goods.”³⁶ Indeed, Free Trade Zones are used to move a wide variety of counterfeit goods. Their opacity also allows transfers of goods between containers as well as the introduction of illicit goods into licit shipments. In effect, they do for illicit trade what offshore financial centers have done for money laundering since the 1990s. Another challenge identified by Interpol is that cargo and container scanners are sometimes deliberately disabled. This can create freight traffic backlogs, because of which trucks are then simply waved through without inspection to make up for lost time.³⁷

Not all illicit activity is confined to ports of course. Long stretches of deserted or rugged coastline provide opportunities to circumvent the formal checks and inspections that are an integral—if often cursory—part of port operations. In one way or another, therefore, the North African coast is inherently vulnerable to smuggling and trafficking. Yet, this is not the only criminogenic factor in the Mediterranean. Southern Europe has several criminal hubs that contribute significantly to illicit

activities in North Africa. The idea of criminal hubs in Europe, initially discussed in Europol's 2007 Organized Crime Threat Assessment, emphasized two different facets of hubs: one was the concentration of groups and activities; the other was a center for logistics and distribution.³⁸ Europol's 2011 Organized Crime Threat Assessment, however, focused more heavily on the latter and defined criminal hubs as "concentrations of criminal logistics which receive illicit flows from numerous sources, and whose influence extends throughout the EU. Such concentrations facilitate not only the trafficking of illicit commodities but also the forging of new criminal markets, providing new opportunities for criminal groups."³⁹ Europol also suggested that the key attributes of these hubs included close "proximity to major destination markets, commercial and transport infrastructure, prevalence of criminal groups and opportunities for criminal migration."⁴⁰

The logistic focus is very important and was highlighted by Patrick Radden Keefe, who astutely noted the parallels between transportation and delivery patterns in licit and illicit commodities. As he stated, "in the same way Continental Airlines, Amazon.com, and United Parcel Service (UPS) construct their delivery routes around a handful of critical hubs, black marketeers come to rely on some locations more than others."⁴¹ In some instances, this may be a matter of targeted corruption to ensure that illicit goods avoid interdiction. "But in other cases, criminal actors will come to base a large part of their business in these hubs, staging their shipments there, sourcing otherwise hard-to-come-by documentation, or laundering their money."⁴² This suggests that hubs can be much more than logistical or distribution centers, especially if there is a concentration of diverse criminal organizations and activities in a particular location. It is useful, therefore, to delineate three distinct kinds of hubs: (1) a concentration-of-crime hub, (2) a logistical hub, and (3) a super-hub that has multiple, influential criminal organizations and activities while also operating as a logistics center.

Efforts to delineate spaces in terms of any one of these hubs, however, run into a level-of-analysis problem and the issue of whether the focus should be a city, a region within a state, a state itself, a region encompassing several states, or even areas where several borders come together. In fact, hubs can exist at multiple levels since they are highly scalable. One way to think about hubs is to think about fractals, described as "infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales."⁴³ In other words, we can look for hubs at the global level, the national level, the city level, and so on. Here, the focus is on criminal hubs in the broad Mediterranean region. Still, when we move to the

study of illegal activities and criminal flows in the five North African countries under consideration, we will also be able to identify hubs at the subnational level, whether logistical hubs or hubs that provide a concentration of criminal organizations and activities. In some cases, we might even find what can be understood as mini super-hubs, with a very localized concentration of logistics, criminals, and activities. The notion of preferential attachments might also be relevant as criminal services spring up to provide documents that facilitate irregular migration or other forms of illicit activities.

Three countries bordering the Mediterranean can legitimately be described as criminal hubs or even super-hubs: Spain, Italy, and Turkey. In addition, some of the countries in the Balkans have easy access to the Mediterranean and are also home to powerful criminal organizations, which further emphasizes the salience of criminal markets in the region. Perhaps equally significant and often overlooked, Malta has emerged as an important mini hub facilitating organized crime, people smuggling, financial crimes, and sanctions evasion.

Spain is host to diverse sets of criminals from Russia, Ireland, Mexico, and Colombia as well as gangs from Central America, Italian mafia organizations, Balkan criminals, and criminals from Britain and the Netherlands. Spain is attractive to transnational organized crime because of its location as an entry point to Western Europe, its proximity to North Africa, its 4,200-kilometer coastline, the importance of the tourist and construction sectors of the economy, and its large immigrant and tourist populations, as well as nightlife hot spots like Ibiza, which draws hordes of young revelers and pleasure seekers from across the world to its infamous bacchanals.⁴⁴ Moreover, Spain's location close "to the logistical bases of powerful criminal organizations, such as the Marseilles clans or the Sicilian Cosa Nostra" as well as its role as a transshipment country for Moroccan hashish being smuggled to Europe and its status as a natural southern entry point to the open market of the European Union add to its attractiveness—and vulnerability—to transnational criminal organizations.⁴⁵ As if this were not enough, the coast of Galicia is remote and offers multiple opportunities for smuggling. Market dynamics reinforce the attractiveness of Spain to criminals: "Spain remains one of Europe's biggest cocaine consumers and among the top three consumers of cannabis."⁴⁶ Colombians and other Latin American drug traffickers can operate in Spain relatively easily because of cultural and linguistic affinity, while North African criminals benefit from proximity and ease of access. In addition, the infrastructure is adequate, air travel is buttressed by tourism, and there are multiple ports through which smuggling can occur.

The attractions of Spain far outweigh the few offsetting risks or inhibitors that might act as a deterrent. Spain has been easy for transnational criminal organizations to penetrate because of “weaknesses or inefficiencies in some state institutions and systems . . . political (and other types of) corruption, particularly surrounding urban planning; a lack of public and political attention given to the problem of organized crime and a lack of political will to fight it; deficiencies in the legal and judicial spheres; and complexities surrounding the Spanish law enforcement and policing structures.”⁴⁷ As a criminal hub, Spain has added significance because of the country’s proximity to Morocco. In addition, Spain has two enclaves in Morocco—Ceuta and Melilla, both autonomous cities—that are still deemed to be Spanish territory and are sometimes described as Europe’s only direct land border with Africa. These cities are a bone of contention between Spain and Morocco but have also become destinations for migrants seeking access to Europe. In addition, Spain maintains jurisdiction over the Canary Islands, an archipelago that at its closest is only about 70 miles away from the North African coast. Not surprisingly, the Canaries have increasingly been seen as another migrant route to Europe.

Italy is another major criminal hub, with a concentration of three large homegrown mafias—the ’Ndrangheta, the Camorra, and the Sicilian Mafia (Cosa Nostra)—and a less significant mafia, Sacra Corona Unita.⁴⁸ In addition, Italy has become host to Albanian criminal networks and to Nigerian criminal gangs such as the Vikings and the Black Axe.⁴⁹ The latter organization is highly active in Palermo but has engaged in criminal activities in at least fourteen Italian provinces.⁵⁰ The town of Castel Volturno, about 25 miles north of Naples, is the epicenter of Nigerian organized crime in Italy, although it seems that Nigerian organizations operating there still pay tribute to the Camorra. This is hardly surprising given the deeply entrenched power of the Camorra clans in the coastal city of Naples and the surrounding region of Campagna. Even so, Roberto Saviano’s characterization of Castel Volturno as an “African city in Europe . . . culturally African”⁵¹ appears to be compelling.

The ’Ndrangheta, which is based in Calabria but is active in other major cities such as Milan and Genoa, is even more powerful than the Camorra. Indeed, the ’Ndrangheta, which also has a presence in Australia, Canada, the United States, and Latin America, is now widely accepted as Italy’s most powerful mafia.⁵² One reason for this is ’Ndrangheta’s involvement in cocaine trafficking to and across Europe.⁵³ This is closely linked to the development of the port of Gioia Tauro, which began oper-

ating in 1995. Indeed, the use of the port for the importation of drugs into Italy reflected the 'Ndrangheta's two dimensions as "a power syndicate"—with control over the territory (including the port)—and as an "enterprise syndicate" engaged in various forms of trafficking.⁵⁴ The 'Ndrangheta also seems to have a significant presence in the port of Genoa. As Sergi noted, the prevalence of various forms of smuggling and trafficking through the port reflects the proximity to both France and Switzerland as well as Northern European markets.⁵⁵ Moreover, "drug trafficking is particularly effective in Liguria thanks to the ports—not only Genoa but also the smaller ones of Imperia and Ligure, where both mafia organizations and other criminal groups have different connections and prolific businesses.⁵⁶ Besides drugs coming in, waste disposal shipments go out to North and West Africa.⁵⁷ The port of Genoa hosts a variety of criminals, ranging from loose networks and ethnic groups to mafia organizations."⁵⁸ The 'Ndrangheta, however, stands out as particularly important and powerful.

The Sicilian Mafia, which was once Italy's premier mafia organization, has declined in importance partly because it seriously overplayed its hand in the early 1990s with the killing of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino and partly as the result of a leadership vacuum. Letizia Paoli observed in 2008 that "Cosa Nostra has seen all of its high-ranking members of the 1980s and 1990s arrested, has been excluded from most international trafficking and has lost political power nationally."⁵⁹ At the same time, the Sicilian Mafia has exploited new opportunities, especially in relation to irregular migrants and the need for reception centers and accommodation facilities.⁶⁰ Misappropriation of funds and exploitation of migrants has provided an alternative but lucrative source of income when more traditional criminal opportunities were no longer as readily available to the Sicilian Mafia. Whatever the trajectories of the specific mafia organizations in Italy, organized crime remains deeply entrenched in the society, politics, and economy of the country, thus elevating its status as a major criminal hub.

Turkey—although closer to the Middle East than North Africa—can also be understood as a criminal hub. Part of this is simply Turkey's geographic location. Connecting both Asia and the Middle East to Europe, Turkey has long coastlines in both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, is close to the Balkans and the Caucasus, and has borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. All these factors make Turkey a major transshipment hub for both licit and illicit goods. Although Turkey banned opium poppy cultivation in 1972, as opium and heroin production increased in Afghanistan during the 1990s, the country developed into

an important transshipment country for heroin—much of which is smuggled across the border from Iran.⁶¹ Once heroin is in Turkey, some of it is trafficked by couriers on commercial air flights to airports in the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany, while much of it goes out via land routes through the Balkans.⁶² Drug trafficking is not confined to criminal organizations, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the US Department of State, has also been deeply involved.⁶³ Yet drugs represent only one of many illicit commodities that are moved into Turkey and then widely distributed to a variety of other countries.⁶⁴

In this connection, “Turkey’s proximity to conflict zones has also fed illicit trade into and through the country. Conflict zones transform markets as they create a new opportunity structure for participation.”⁶⁵ As a result of the insurgency in Iraq that followed the US intervention in 2003 and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Turkey also developed into a major hub for the oil smuggling and antiquities trafficking. Oil smuggling opportunities, initially identified by Saddam Hussein as part of sanctions evasion, were subsequently exploited by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISIS, often working closely with families in the borderlands who had been engaged in cross-border smuggling to Turkey for decades, if not centuries. Even today, Turkey remains a crucial hub for ISIS money launderers, logisticians, and facilitators.⁶⁶ Other illicit markets in Turkey include counterfeit cigarettes, looted antiquities, contraband liquor, and stolen cars. Turkey has also become a transshipment country for nuclear materials trafficking—although the destination country is usually unknown.⁶⁷ It has also become a destination for human trafficking and a target country for human smuggling.

In sum, Turkey has a wide range of organized crime activities. The proceeds from these activities created a housing boom and have been invested in hotel construction and the tourism sector.⁶⁸ The prevalence of illicit markets also reflects the concentration of organized crime in Turkey—a concentration that is a mix of domestic organizations and groups from elsewhere. Russian criminals have a well-established presence, while Georgian and Albanian criminals have traditionally had close links to Turkish groups. The same can be said about Bulgarian and Romanian criminals. Indeed, Turkey has become a favorite destination for foreign criminals, with Georgians and Russians involved in armed robbery; Pakistanis in kidnapping; Russians, Moldovans, and Ukrainians in controlling prostitution; Iranians in scams; and various African nationalities involved in passing counterfeit money.⁶⁹ The situation has

been worsened by the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia. Not surprisingly, Turkey has become a super-hub of organized crime and has a large and sophisticated illicit economy.

The other Mediterranean country that requires attention is Malta. With a population of just over half a million, the nation of Malta is an archipelago located south of Sicily, east of Tunisia, and north of Libya. While it is not in the same league as Italy, Spain, and Turkey in terms of being a criminal hub, it is strategically located in a key part of the Mediterranean and one that has witnessed a surge of irregular migration. Small as it is, Malta has managed to carve out a litany of corrupt and criminal activities, with government figures playing a large role. In fact, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) named Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat as its 2019 Person of the Year in Organized Crime and Corruption. As the OCCRP wrote, “Under Muscat’s leadership, criminality and corruption have flourished—and in many cases gone unpunished—in the small Mediterranean archipelago of Malta, creating an environment that led to the 2017 murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.”⁷⁰ Malta has displayed enormously high levels of corruption, buttressed by a climate of impunity, which attracts more criminals seeking illicit profits.⁷¹ The island’s Pilatus Bank was involved in sanctions evasion for money paid by Venezuela to Iran for a massive housing construction project. Malta has also facilitated the sale of golden passports and the creation of shell companies. “Vessels change names and ownership with ease, swapping national flags from Togo to Tanzania to Belize.”⁷² An Italian law enforcement official has described Malta, unsurprisingly, as “a crossroad of illegal trafficking.”⁷³ Reportedly, a “network of smugglers” has built “a stronghold on the docks.”⁷⁴ These smugglers “have been linked to trafficking in illegal drugs and migrants; smuggling cigarettes; illegal fishing; and spiriting fuel stolen from Libya’s poorly protected stockpiles to avid customers.”⁷⁵ They are highly innovative, “scouting new routes and implementing new techniques, from masquerading as fishermen to interspersing legitimate cargo with illegal wares. The trade crosses many borders around the Mediterranean, from the ports of Spain all the way east to the island of Cyprus.”⁷⁶

In sum, North Africa belongs to a Mediterranean neighborhood that is highly criminogenic. Yet another crucial factor feeds into this: the demographic divergence between Europe, with an aging and declining population, and Africa, which continues to have high birth rates, even though these have leveled off somewhat in recent years. The upshot is labor shortages in Europe and a surfeit of workers in Africa. The initial

European response to this involved guest worker programs, but these have given way to a much more hostile approach to immigration. As one scholar noted, the Mediterranean has been turned “into a defensive moat to stop the flow of unwanted migrants. Contrary to the popular vision of the Mediterranean Sea as a homogeneous and lawless expanse lying outside the reach of state power, this maritime territory is, in fact, crisscrossed by variegated and at times conflicting jurisdictional regimes. . . . In this techno-political moat, the communication networks of ‘Fortress Europe’ have established a buffer zone surrounding EU territorial waters.”⁷⁷ Moreover, even though some of the antimigrant rhetoric abated slightly after the 2014–2015 surge in irregular migration, Western governments continue to be restrictive, “especially with regard to those illegalized by state policies: the unauthorized entrant, the asylum seeker, and the victim of trafficking.”⁷⁸ Although Covid-19 provided a short-term lull in illegal or irregular migration, the issue came back to the fore in 2022 and 2023. The result is that North Africa remains caught between the restrictive policies of Fortress Europe and the inexorable drivers of poverty—violence, conflict, and repression—that continue to push many Africans toward the Mediterranean coast and to Europe. These drivers can only be explored by looking at the conditions and challenges facing North Africa’s southern neighbors.

The African Context

Although all five North African countries experienced considerable—albeit varying—levels of turbulence during the Arab Spring, they now (with the glaring exception of Libya) seem to enjoy a higher level of stability and security than many, if not most, of their southern counterparts. Whether focused on the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, or West Africa, kleptocratic leaders, corrupt bureaucracies, jihadist extremists, and violent conflict are endemic. Moreover, throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, the state—which is typically weak or repressive—remains the prize of politics, with those in power distributing favors to family, cronies, and expansive patronage networks. Many are excluded from economic opportunity. With continued, if gradually slowing population growth and global climate change, conditions are certain to deteriorate further.

State weakness has also had significant consequences in sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in the Sahel region. And what happens in the Sahel rarely stays in the Sahel; instead, it spills over into North African states. Over the past decade, the Sahel, a vast semiarid region of western and north-central Africa, has fallen to a

range of transnational terrorist groups, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Boko Haram, and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin. Operation Barkhane, France's eight-year military campaign geared toward stabilizing the region, ended in failure in the fall of 2022, leaving a security vacuum that was quickly filled by jihadists and Wagner mercenaries.⁷⁹ Some of the violent nonstate actors in the region have benefited from Libyan weapons trafficked across multiple borders. And while the Wagner Group was brought in to help "coup-proof" various junta regimes while protecting warlords, the byproduct has been more chaos. Wagner's arrival has energized jihadist groups, while the mercenaries' draconian approach has pushed civilians into the arms of terrorist and insurgent groups.

Wagner has deployed mercenaries to Mali and Libya, as well as to the Central African Republic and Sudan. Since first sending troops to Africa in 2017, the group has embedded itself in these fragile states and siphoned valuable resources—a quid pro quo that offers military muscle in exchange for mining contracts that allow Wagner subsidiaries to extract gold, diamonds, and other commodities that pad Russia's coffers.⁸⁰ Their operations have frequently resulted in the deaths of civilians, with credible accusations of sexual violence, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The arrangements boil down to simple supply and demand: African leaders need the security that Wagner can provide, and the Kremlin needs the funding stream to soften the blow from biting Western sanctions. But for Wagner, business in the Sahel is good and made better by what Declan Walsh has labeled Africa's "coup corridor." Beginning in the west with Guinea and extending across nearly the width of the continent, there have been coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan.⁸¹ This belt of failing states is directly south of the five countries analyzed in this book, and the Sahel's instability impacts each of them to one degree or another. Conversely, upheaval in North Africa can send shock waves through the Sahel, as occurred with the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi and the dispersion of Libyan weapons.

If state weakness and restrictions of economic opportunity are an important part of the context for contemporary organized crime and illicit economies, there are several additional drivers that are particularly relevant to North Africa. One of these is migration. Mobility and migration, of course, are nothing new. It is arguable, however, that more of the world is on the move than ever before, with over 108 million displaced people.⁸² Partly this reflects a growing population and the unprecedented ease and speed of transportation that was dislocated, but only temporarily, by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the long term, many

destination countries, particularly in the Global North, allow only strictly limited legal immigration. Yet this demand side response has done little to contain the supply side. Indeed, flows of irregular migrants (that is, those who have not been granted legal permission to reside in the host country), refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are still seeking entrance into Europe, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere. Much of the movement of particular concern in this study is from the Middle East and West, Central, and East Africa through North Africa into Southern Europe and, in many cases, upward to Northern Europe, including Scandinavia. There are some pull factors—with the lure of a better life being the most obvious—contributing to this phenomenon, but the push factors are often more compelling and play a large part in migration spikes. While poverty is important, pervasive violence in countries that are unstable or deeply oppressive seems to be a huge driver, whether the violence is from civil wars, from insurgencies, or perpetrated by ruthless criminal enterprises.

Although some migrants have unrealistic expectations about both the journey and the destination country, the decisions of many others can be understood in terms of prospect theory. Developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, this theory notes that “people underweight outcomes that are merely probable in comparison with outcomes that are obtained with certainty. This tendency, called the certainty effect, contributes to risk aversion in choices involving sure gains and to risk seeking in choices involving sure losses.”⁸³ In other words, the greater the risk involved in staying at home amidst violent conflict, the more likely it is that people will be prepared to risk the perils involved in irregular migration. In some cases, of course, the issue is not violence but simply despair at the lack of opportunities—something that makes the status quo untenable.

It is tempting, partly because of the importance of violence and instability as drivers, to ignore the multifaceted nature of migration and, indeed, the caustic debate that often surrounds it. One author, for example, has noted that migration, is best understood as “a permanent structural phenomenon that—precisely because of the kind of characteristics driving it—can only ebb and flow, and never ceases completely.”⁸⁴ From this perspective, demographic factors cannot be ignored. Much of Africa is undergoing a “demographic transition” with “declines in mortality and birth rates accompanied by a middle transition phase characterized by intense population growth and likely higher out-migration rates.”⁸⁵ The birth rate decline remains slow with an average of 4.7 children per woman.⁸⁶ As a result, Africa is on course to become “a population giant: a quarter of the world’s people will live there by 2050 (it was

less than 10% in 1950). Africa's population was half that of Europe during the 1960s; today it is close to 1.3 billion while the European population is less than 750 million. In the next two decades, the African population will reach over 2.5 billion, more than three times that of Europe."⁸⁷ Moreover, Nigeria is on course to become the third most populous country in the world by 2050, surpassing the United States.⁸⁸

This helps to illuminate two things. First, it is not surprising that so many Africans move to Europe. "After all, the continent with the largest population growth in the world—the African population will double in the next thirty years—sits next door to the continent where population growth is in decline. Demographic imbalances tend toward a natural 'readjustment' of the population through the influx of new people from the most populous to the least populous countries."⁸⁹ Second, large migration flows will continue for the foreseeable future.⁹⁰ There are good reasons to expect that these flows will intensify rather than abate. One reason for this is that as sub-Saharan countries develop further, then migration is likely to increase as more people will have the resources to allow increased mobility. Indeed, "the largest flows do not start from the poorest countries, but from those with a development process" already underway.⁹¹ A "certain degree of economic and social development" is necessary "to trigger aspirations for improvement, availability of resources and knowledge necessary to implement the decision to emigrate."⁹² Yet, even in expanding economies, employment opportunities fail to keep pace with the growing labor market. Against this background, one analysis even suggested that in West Africa the choice many young people face is between emigration and radicalization.⁹³ The former offers better prospects, while the latter helps to create a sense of belonging and status and, in some instances, provides financial support.

Another important push factor is climate change, which is having a significant impact on the Sahel and is resulting in "galloping desertification, increasingly scarce rainfall, recurrent cycles of drought, famine and food crisis, and the difficulties in accessing water and cultivable land. These challenges combine to produce a lethal cocktail for the survival of local populations, driven by unsustainable practices like deforestation (wood for household use) and land- and water-grabbings."⁹⁴ The impact of climate change will undoubtedly become even more important in the years ahead, creating significant hardship and disruption and exacerbating both internal conflict and migration, resulting in the mass movement of "climate refugees." Climate-related violence in the Sahel, for example, is sometimes mischaracterized as jihadist violence, when the initial trigger has nothing to do with extremism and

everything to do with a competition for scarce resources, including grazing land and access to potable water.

It is also worth emphasizing that African and Middle Eastern migration to Europe did not start with the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war. These two developments simply intensified trends that were already underway. A study by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2006 noted that because it was “difficult for young Africans to work in Europe legally, every year tens of thousands attempt to cross the borders illegally.”⁹⁵ It also observed, somewhat presciently, that a study by the Real Instituto Elcano had warned that this was “only the beginning of an immigration phenomenon that could evolve into one of the largest in history.”⁹⁶ The study also suggested that “at least 200,000 Africans enter Europe illegally annually, while another 100,000 try and are intercepted.”⁹⁷ Many are sent back. Some never make it in the arduous land journey north, while others perish crossing the Mediterranean. Significantly, Spain’s North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla were popular routes, although stronger enforcement efforts have led to “alternative routings, including attempts via the Canary Islands from West Africa, and attempts to reach Italy from Libya and Tunisia.”⁹⁸ The study also noted that most of the migrants of the 1990s were from North Africa but these began to decline, while from 2002 onward, increased numbers came from sub-Saharan Africa, especially Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan.⁹⁹ It was subsequently reported that the number of illegal immigrants entering Spain via the Canary Islands increased from 4,715 to 31,678 in 2006.¹⁰⁰ The 2006 UNODC study also focused on the role of organized crime, noting that more sophisticated organizations offered “full packet solutions” from point of departure to destination, while more localized and opportunist groups adopted a modular approach, taking migrants part of the way and then handing them off to other smugglers or simply abandoning them at various points along the journey.¹⁰¹

In 2010, UNODC offered another study, reviewing some of the specialized literature. One of the most important observations focused on the fact that North African countries were no longer “only points of departure for irregular migration directed towards Europe (outgoing flows), but . . . also areas of destination and transit for international migration coming from the South, in particular sub-Saharan Africa.”¹⁰² The concern over transit to Europe was reflected in pressure from the European Union and southern European countries on North African governments to take a tougher approach to the migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰³ Some of this was successful. At that time, sea routes from

Tunisia, which had been active during the 1990s, were no longer used, partly because of agreements with Italy, and also because of the passage and enforcement of new laws. Similarly, maritime movement of migrants across the Mediterranean decreased during this period. For its part, Algeria arrested 65,000 foreigners and 70,000 Algerian nationals for activities related to irregular migration from 2000 to 2007, and in 2007 alone there were “35,000 police incidents” related to migration.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, a reported 145,000 irregular migrants were expelled from Libya between 2003 and 2005.¹⁰⁵ Morocco arrested 36,000 migrants in 2003 but only 30,000 in 2005 and under 15,000 in 2007.¹⁰⁶

All of this suggests that the European Union was already *de facto* extending its borders into North Africa, in effect, demanding that the countries of North Africa play a key interdiction role to stop the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean. As the UNODC report noted, however, national, and international migration controls provoke “a constant redefinition of the geography of routes. More precisely, the geography of irregular migration is the result of the countermeasures of authorities, on the one hand, and the efforts of smugglers and migrants to contravene them on the other.”¹⁰⁷ The impact was not to stop the smuggling but to create a new Darwinian dynamism in the smuggling process demanding adaptation, innovation, and greater sophistication by the smugglers. This was reflected in a 2018 European Union report reiterating that a “large majority” of irregular migrants from Africa to Europe in previous years were from Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰⁸

Two other related points about migrants and refugees need to be emphasized: first, there are far more of them in developing countries than in countries of the Global North; second, for a surprising number of migrants, what were initially viewed merely as transit countries become their final destinations. In this connection, it is worth noting that “only a small fraction of international migration in Africa results in journeys to Europe. This particularly applies to sub-Saharan Africa, where most movement is intra-regional.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, when it goes beyond this, many irregular migrants only make it as far as North Africa. Often described as transit migrants, many of these simply become permanently stranded there, while others desperately seek work to finance the next stage of the journey. Against this background, North Africa can be understood for some migrants as the space between their homes and Europe but for others as their new homes.

Having established the context within which North Africa can best be understood, it is necessary to look at the region itself before moving on to the individual countries. This is done initially in terms of North

Africa as a space of flows, as a microcosm of illicit or shadow globalization. Second, it is important to highlight the commonalities among the five countries in the region as well as their distinctive features. In effect, our analysis focuses on what might be termed pentagonal symmetries and asymmetries.

The North African Space of Flows

One way of thinking about North Africa is as “a space of flows.” Developed by Manuel Castells, the idea of a space of flows has been increasingly used in relation to globalization.¹¹⁰ David Held, for example, one of the most perceptive analysts of globalization, has emphasized the flows—of people, money, commodities, information, messages, digital signals, and services—around the world as one of its central features.¹¹¹ In today’s modern world, the “space of flows” is now a global space.¹¹² This is as true of trade and finance as it is of the internet, which facilitates the almost instantaneous flow of information and messages. In one sense, of course, there is nothing new about flows. During the medieval crusades, there were considerable flows to and from Europe to the holy land, while the slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rested upon the flow of people—albeit involuntarily—from Africa to Europe and the United States. In the nineteenth century, as one author observed, “Tripoli was the swinging door that connected the Mediterranean countries with the interior of Africa. Merchandise from Europe entered through the city’s busy port. Goods from Africa’s interior—ivory, gold, indigo, cotton cloth, animal skins, ostrich feathers, leather goods, kola nuts—left the city for Europe and the Ottoman countries. But the main export moving through Tripoli was slaves.”¹¹³

The difference in contemporary flows is their scale and diversity as well as the speed and relative fluidity with which they occur. As several analysts have noted, there has been “an intensification of flows and networks of interaction and interconnectedness that transcend nation-states.”¹¹⁴ Increased density has been accompanied by increased speed and decreased costs. Global flows ranging from commodities to communications have long been feasible—but the time and the associated transportation and transaction costs have been considerably compressed. This is certainly true in North Africa, which remains the lynchpin between the African Continent and Europe. This is not to suggest that the region is simply a transshipment funnel for flows moving through. Some flows originate in North Africa while other flows terminate there.

In considering flows, it is important to emphasize points of origin, direction, putative and actual destinations, and whether these flows are constant or intermittent. Flows themselves can surge and recede. Moreover, flows are typically multidirectional. It is tempting, for example to see all the flows through North Africa as coming from the south and moving inexorably and directly toward Europe. This is certainly true of many of these flows, but even these are characterized by horizontal movements and displacements, as constraints and opportunities vary and those controlling the flows adapt. In addition, some flows—including illicit flows—move north to south. It is also important to consider horizontal flows from east to west and west to east throughout North Africa. In this connection, Gallien has argued that “if we observe the central nodes of smuggling routes in the region, another geography of regional trade emerges. At its heart are places like Nador, Tamanrasset, Zuwara, or Ben Gardane—medium-sized cities in the geographic and economic periphery of their respective nation-states, and logistical centers of commercial networks that include strong East-West links across the region, alongside connections to Europe and the wider global economy.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, some flows also move diagonally, while routes can shift slowly and incrementally or radically and quickly. Flows can cross one border or multiple borders. They can be interrupted, diverted, or in some cases halted altogether. What is intended as transit zones or way stations sometimes become interim or even permanent destinations. Yet flows are like water—they usually find a way. Sometimes, flows are even reversed. As noted above, in the early stages of the Libyan revolution, many weapons left Libya, creating contagion effects in neighboring countries such as Niger and Chad and even as far away as Mali. Subsequently, weapons have been flooding into Libya as external powers seek to sponsor various proxy groups and directly influence the outcome of the ongoing civil war.

Many of these flows are driven by sound economic principles. Some of the illicit flows, however, are driven by what Nikos Passas termed criminogenic asymmetries.¹¹⁶ Whether it is price differentials in different countries, differences in laws and regulations, or variations in state capacity, particularly in the areas of law enforcement and customs enforcement, such asymmetries provide attractive and often lucrative opportunities for criminal exploitation. Criminal organizations and networks typically take advantage of these variations, engaging in a form of jurisdictional arbitrage that minimizes risk and maximizes opportunities and profits. We trace the scale, as well as the movements and directions of these flows, more fully in the country sections.

One question that obviously arises concerns the role of borders in all this. Once again, however, there is no simple answer. Borders or boundaries can be understood, in the words of one book subtitle, as barriers, conduits, and opportunities.¹¹⁷ They are barriers in the sense that the state at least formally tries to determine what comes in and out, which of these products are permissible and which are prohibited or regulated, and what, if any, monetary costs should be imposed for entry or exit. Borders have often become the focus of security forces, particularly in the era of global Islamist terrorism that so dramatically impacted the world on September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, borders vary significantly in terms of how strictly or permissively the flows are dealt with—and this often changes over time at the same border, depending on a variety of domestic and external factors. Borders are conduits for both licit and illicit trade, and it is significant that, for prohibited products in particular, a border crossing will often result in higher prices. For licit goods, in contrast, smuggling from one jurisdiction to another is attractive because prices of illegally imported commodities are often lower for consumers than the domestic equivalents. Opportunities for smuggling also often reflect the commonality of communities on each side of the national border, a commonality that is often tribal or familial in nature. In effect, borders divide, but tribal and kinship links transcend divisions, creating a sharp discrepancy between the fictions of border control and the realities of cross-border movements. Both borderland and diaspora communities are clear evidence of this. Even though the borders among the North African countries themselves vary significantly, the commonalities of the borderlands across the region are, in fact, very striking, as will become evident from the analyses of the individual countries. In the next section, we seek to identify more broadly similarities and differences among the five nations across the region.

North African Pentagonal Asymmetries

It used to be said that when one looked at the big three powers in Europe, there was always an odd one out: Britain and France were nuclear powers, Germany was not; Britain and Germany were members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), France under General Charles de Gaulle had left the organization; Germany and France were both members of the European Economic Community (EEC) and then the European Union, Britain was much slower to join the EEC and then the first country to leave the European Union following Brexit. A British military officer described this phenomenon in terms of triangular

asymmetries and suggested that it was an important reason that Western Europe had not developed a stronger and more coherent common defense and security strategy. It can be argued that similar kinds of asymmetries exist in the five countries of North Africa. On some dimensions, there is an odd one out; on others, the split is three and two. Whatever the constellation, however, there is rarely uniformity among all five countries. This means that it is difficult for the five countries to develop a coherent and coordinated response to common challenges, such as the spread of extremism and terrorist attacks or the expansion of various forms of trafficking and smuggling and the growing power of organized crime. Against this background, it is necessary to understand the diversity of the five countries in terms of physical factors such as size of the country, the extent of both maritime and land borders, the contiguous countries, and the degree of urbanization. These are summarized in Table 1.1.

In terms of land mass, Algeria is by far the biggest country, with Libya in second place, followed by Egypt and Morocco. Tunisia is the smallest country in the region with a land mass that is less than one-quarter of the size of Morocco and one-tenth the size of Libya. Regarding urbanization, Egypt with 43 percent is a major outlier with by far the lowest level, while both Algeria and Libya have over 75 percent of their populations in cities, and Tunisia has around 70 percent and Morocco just over 65 percent of its population living in urban areas.

Algeria and Libya each have six contiguous neighbors. Ironically, the longest common land border in North Africa is that between Algeria and Morocco. It is also the most contentious and has been formally closed since 1994. A poorly delineated border with rich mineral deposits in the disputed areas combined with Moroccan aspirations for a “Greater Morocco” provided the background for the fighting in September and October 1963. Almost 700 Cuban troops or “volunteers” were deployed to Algeria to help defend the country against what was seen as Moroccan aggression. This helped to level the playing field, and after considerable diplomatic pressure a truce was reached on October 30, 1963. A formal peace treaty was signed in February 1964, but in 1975 when Spain relinquished control over the Western Sahara, Algeria supported the Polisario Front for the Sahrawi people, which resisted Moroccan claims of sovereignty—thereby contributing to the continued tensions between the neighbors. These tensions were exacerbated more recently by allegations in each country that the other was facilitating drug trafficking. More important, a ceasefire between the Polisario Front and Morocco that had lasted for several decades broke down in November 2020 when Moroccan soldiers dispersed a Sahrawi protest,

Table 1.1. Physical Attributes

Country	Total Area (square kilometers)	Coastline Length (kilometers)	Land Border Length (kilometers)	Neighboring Countries and Length of Borders (kilometers)	Urban population 2023 (%)
Morocco	716,550	2,945	3,523.5	Algeria: 1,941 Mauritania: 1,564 Spain: 0 Ceuta: 8 Melilla: 10.5	65.1
Algeria	2,381,740	998	6,734	Libya: 989 Mali: 1,359 Mauritania: 460 Morocco: 1,941 Niger: 951 Tunisia: 1,034	75.3
Tunisia	163,610	1,148	1,495	Algeria: 1,034 Libya: 461	70.5
Libya	1,759,540	1,770	4,339	Algeria: 989 Chad: 1,050 Egypt: 1,115 Niger: 342 Sudan: 382 Tunisia: 461	81.6
Egypt	1,001,450	2,450	2,612	Gaza Strip: 13 Israel: 208 Libya: 1,115 Sudan: 1,276	43.1

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>.

provoking the Polisario Front into renewed attacks and reigniting a conflict that has been described as “decolonization’s last stand.”¹¹⁸

If Algeria continues to provide support for the Polisario Front, the prospects for a formal reopening of the border between Morocco and Algeria will remain poor. On the other hand, the closure of the border—as will be discussed more fully—has not completely stopped illicit flows in either direction. Indeed, a salient feature of North Africa is its excessively permeable land and maritime borders. Consequently, horizontal illicit flows across the region continue to thrive despite efforts to strengthen border controls.

The other dimensions that need to be considered are governance and stability. During the 1990s, four of the countries seemed to exhibit a relatively high degree of stability, whereas the Algerian government fought a civil war with Islamist extremists that lasted from 1991 to 2002. More recently, national trajectories have become even more diverse. During the Arab Spring, three countries—Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—underwent regime change, while Algeria and Morocco simply made some constitutional reforms and adjustments.

After the toppling of longtime strongman Hosni Mubarak, Egypt enjoyed short-lived democratically elected government, but the military then reestablished control. The international community looked the other way as Abdel Fattah al-Sisi usurped the leadership of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, there has been little or no movement toward democracy. On the contrary, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) published by Bertelsmann Stiftung has consistently noted that in Egypt, the trend toward authoritarianism and state control has been unwavering. Sisi was reconfirmed as president in “an unfair and unfree election” in March 2018.¹¹⁹ Moreover, “policymaking remained dominated by anti-democratic veto actors, with the military and intelligence agencies playing a particularly prominent role.”¹²⁰ The regime also strengthened control over the judiciary, neutralized anticorruption agencies, and continued to strengthen the power of the presidency.¹²¹ The 2022 report described more of the same, while also noting that Covid-19 had been “particularly damaging for lower income segments and vulnerable groups such as day laborers in the informal sector.”¹²² In retrospect, the continuity from Mubarak to Sisi is remarkable. It is almost as if the Arab Spring never happened.

Following the overthrow and death of longtime Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the country disintegrated into chaos, with competing militias and warlords and what appears to be an enduring instability. In spite of the ceasefire agreement in October 2020, in 2023 Libya still suffered from pervasive violence and insecurity that continued to have ripple effects of one kind or another throughout North Africa and the Sahel.¹²³ The 2020 BTI report was unflinching, noting that “Libya has experienced an unprecedented process of state collapse and violent disintegration,” with over 1.1 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and “the Libyan health care system . . . on the brink of collapse.”¹²⁴ Libya had become anarchic with multiple militias and the targeting of civilians, including sexual violence against women. Migrants were at particularly high risk of being held in detention centers, where they were exploited for commercial sex and forced labor. Despite the 2020 road

map and the formation of a Government of National Unity, the country continued to suffer from rival claims of authority. Indeed, in 2022 another new government was formed, this time called the Government of National Stability. In both cases, the names represented little more than overly optimistic aspirations in a country that had no semblance of unity and remained a long way from stability.

In contrast, Tunisia's Jasmine revolution was widely hailed as a success. Yet the poster child for the Arab Spring has not aged well. The Economist Group's Democracy Index 2020 called Tunisia a "flawed democracy" but acknowledged it was the only state resembling a democracy in North Africa.¹²⁵ This assessment increasingly appears to have been overly optimistic. The youth bulge, extensive unemployment, and the gap between the wealthy coastal areas and the marginalized hinterland and borderlands increasingly created profound disillusionment with the transition and a realization that the economic future remained dismal. Moreover, after a period in which Tunisia's politics were gridlocked, the president in effect launched an internal coup that was subsequently given spurious legitimacy by a referendum on the revised constitution. The judiciary has lost its independence, crackdowns on protesters have been fierce, and dissent or criticism of the regime has become dangerous. More than a decade after the toppling of the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the revolution has been replaced by resurgent authoritarianism. In short, expectations of large-scale change and improvement have disappeared, and Tunisia has ceased to be the poster child for democracy.

For Algeria, there was a belated and rather modest "Arab spring" when, in 2019, widespread protests against an aged and infirm president seeking another term in office led to his removal by the military. This followed and upheld the constitution adopted in 2016 that imposed term limits on the president and strengthened the legislature. Yet there are continued tendencies toward stifling freedom of association and limiting the freedom of the press. In addition, "sluggish decision-making and a failure to push forward on governance reforms, as well as the continued crisis associated with falling oil prices weakened Algeria's previously strong financial standing" at a time when there are increased demands for government public service provision.¹²⁶ Connected to this, the 2020 BTI commented that "massive urbanization over the last 20 years has put pressure on Algeria's public services such as education, health, housing and transport. Resulting social unrest also contributes to rash political decisions, such as subsidizing prices, giving out grants to ensure social calm, or as is often suggested, to 'buy the peace.'"¹²⁷ It is not entirely clear why

these subsidies are rash, since they have a stabilizing effect. Moreover, Algerian subsidies, particularly on oil, have typically provided opportunities for arbitrage that contributed to commodity smuggling across borders, but in ways that reduced the prospects for social and political instability. Although Covid-19 contributed to a further deterioration of the economy and public health, the subsequent rebound increased prices and demand for oil and gas. Not surprisingly, therefore, Algeria increased production from 175.9 million tons of oil equivalent (toe) in 2020 to 185.2 million toe in 2021. Over the same period, hydrocarbon export revenues rose from \$20 billion to \$34.5 billion, providing the Algerian government with increased “breathing room.”¹²⁸

In some respects, Morocco is the most traditional regime in North Africa, with a monarchical constitutional republic. However, Morocco’s king, Mohammed VI, initiated “a reform program that included a new constitution, passed by popular referendum in July 2011, under which some new powers were extended to parliament and the prime minister, but ultimate authority remains in the hands of the monarch.”¹²⁹ This seemed to have some impact in maintaining stability and minimizing demands for regime change. According to the BTI, however, “reforms undertaken in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011 have done nothing to alter the distribution of power in Morocco.”¹³⁰ Moreover, the last few years have witnessed some regression, with the arrests of journalists and human rights activists—yet nothing as severe as in Tunisia. Morocco is criticized for its tacitly permissive approach to hashish production in the northern Rif region, although serious efforts to suppress this would increase disaffection and instability.¹³¹ One area of promise, however, is Rabat’s environmental policies that aim to provide over 50 percent of Morocco’s energy needs by 2030 through renewable sources such as solar power.

In sum, pentagonal asymmetries were evident in the Arab Spring, with three countries—Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—experiencing regime change, while Morocco and Algeria avoided it. Two of these three countries have suffered from the reimposition of authoritarian rule, while the third remains dominated by turmoil and civil strife. There are also three countries—Algeria, Libya, and to a much lesser extent Egypt—where oil has been the dominant source of wealth. In terms of illicit markets, there are significant variations. In some countries in the region, there is clearly a dominant commodity: cannabis resin in Morocco, fuel in Algeria, antiquities in Egypt, and arms in Libya. Migrants were also important in Libya, but as migrant smuggling temporarily declined in Libya, drug trafficking increased. Morocco is the only major producer of

drugs, but Libya has also become more important as a consumer country for illicit pharmaceuticals. Egypt is important because of its vast store of antiquities and the extent to which, in recent years, these have been widely looted.

The formal economy and demographics in the five countries are summarized in Table 1.2.

As this table reveals, there are some asymmetries along with a significant commonality: in all five countries in the region, the youth bulge will get larger for some years before it gets smaller. When this is combined with the unemployment figures for the 15 to 24 age group, it suggests that regardless of divergent political systems there is a structural demographic tsunami that could seriously challenge stability in the five North African countries. Coming on top of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic, social, and public health damage so widely inflicted, the politically destabilizing consequences could make the turbulence of the Arab Spring appear insignificant. On the other hand, in the short term, the resurgent authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia will likely prove difficult to dislodge, while both Algeria and Morocco have maintained a surprising level of stability.

Table 1.2 Economic and Demographic Data

Country	Population (2023 est.)	Real Gross Domestic Product (2021 est.)	Real Gross Domestic Product per Capita (2021 est.)	Percentage of Population 14 or under (2023)	Percentage of Population Aged 15 to 24 (2021)	Percentage of Unem- ployment Among 15–24 Age Group (2023)
Morocco	37,067,420	\$303.36 billion	\$8,100	26.01%	16.55	27.2
Algeria	44,758,398	\$487.716 billion	\$11,000	28.78% (2023)	13.93	31.9
Tunisia	11,976,182	\$127.509 billion	\$10,400	24.77% (2023)	12.9	38.3
Libya	7,252,573	\$147.942 billion	\$22,000	32.81% (2023)	15.21	50.5
Egypt	109,546,720	\$1.264 trillion	\$11,600	34.37%	18.01	24.3

Source: All data from Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, for 2021 and 2023, as of October 10, 2023.

When it comes to political economies of the five countries, there is a similar mix of commonalities and variations. The commonalities include significant inequalities—often combined with regional variations—in each country. As suggested above, coastal areas are typically more prosperous than the hinterlands, while border economies offer significant arbitrage opportunities through smuggling. There are also large informal economic sectors in all five countries.

Definitions of the informal economy typically note that it is an economy that is neither taxed nor monitored by the government. It often acts as a safety valve and generally provides employment for a significant portion of the economy. In Morocco, for example, two-thirds of all jobs are in the informal economy, which deprives the government of \$3.4 billion in tax revenues and limits expenditure on public goods. In the agricultural sector 97 percent of the jobs are informal. According to the Moroccan statistics agency, the informal economy is about 44 percent of the size of the gross domestic product (GDP).¹³² World Economics estimates the informal economy as 36.6 percent of Morocco's GDP.¹³³ Indeed, informal economies are difficult to measure, with different analysts using different methodologies and often coming up with divergent assessments. An assessment by World Economics in 2023, for example, estimated the size of Algeria's informal economy as 17.4 percent of GDP, which represented approximately \$103 billion. A few years earlier, assessments had been much higher at about 40 percent of GDP. Moreover, one detailed scholarly study in 2022 noted that several assessments had estimated the informal economy as well above 40 percent.¹³⁴ The study also set out to explain the high level by examining "institutional settings" that create "incentives that drive economic agents to conceal their activities."¹³⁵ This is an important theme throughout North African countries. It helps, for example, to explain a World Bank report on Morocco, noting that job creation was not keeping pace with population growth, identifying the shortage of good jobs in high-productivity industries, and highlighting the exclusion of women and youth from the labor market.¹³⁶ A similar situation exists in Tunisia, albeit with a pronounced divide between urban and rural areas. The informal economy in urban areas is only 26 percent of all jobs, whereas in the western and southern regions of the country it ranges from 44 to 68 percent.¹³⁷ The overall situation, however, is like that in Morocco, with youth and women, especially in rural areas, restricted in their job opportunities. And when they do get jobs in the informal sector, they face conditions of real hardship amidst an absence of labor standards. According to World Economics the overall size of Tunisia's

informal economy is 30.4 percent of the GDP, although this seems to be low given that many observers believe that the informal economy has been expanding in recent years.

If assessing informal economies is almost invariably difficult, these difficulties are especially pronounced in Libya where the political and military competition for power remains both acute and indeterminate. Moreover, since the fall of Gaddafi, Libya has had a war economy in which the informal and illicit are largely indistinguishable from one another. Nevertheless, the Libyan informal economy has been estimated by World Economics as 35.3 percent of the country's GDP. A 2018 doctoral thesis even suggested that Libya enjoyed a vibrant informal economy in the food sector that provided a high level of food security even as the country endured protracted civil strife.¹³⁸ The author concluded not only that the sector provided "food to the poor at affordable prices" but also that it created employment and even business opportunities for people who otherwise would find it difficult to earn a livelihood.¹³⁹ In Egypt, the informal economy has grown over time, with an estimated 63 percent of all Egypt's labor working outside the formal sector. Moreover, the informal economy "accounts for almost 50 percent of all non-agricultural employment and a staggering 30–40 percent of the country's economy."¹⁴⁰

In other words, despite national variations, for all five countries of North Africa, the informal economy is large, sprawling, and an important—albeit imperfect—social and economic safety net. Yet at the same time, it also acts as a drag on economic growth and development. Consequently, it is necessary to explore the reasons for both the emergence and the persistence of these informal economies.

Informal economies result from a mixture of excessive regulations and tax burdens. They also reflect poor governance of the economy. As an International Monetary Fund (IMF) blog pointed out in 2011, weak institutions and poor governance limit access to public services, foster corruption, and make access to the formal sector unavailable.¹⁴¹ In addition, "restrictive product market regulations and high tax burdens raise compliance and entry costs," making entry into the formal economy unattractive.¹⁴²

In all five countries, these barriers are substantial and, hitherto, endemic. Yet the inhibitions to a greater degree of entrepreneurial activity in the formal economy provide only one part of the story.

Another dimension that needs to be examined is the control of the economy. In Libya, the economy, like the state itself, is highly contested. The prize is control of both the state apparatus and the economy, especially the oil, which would simultaneously provide an amal-

gamation of power and wealth. Yet, this remains a long way from fulfillment for all the warring factions. In Egypt, in contrast, the military under Sisi has not only reestablished an upgraded authoritarianism but has also facilitated military control over much of the economy. According to one analysis, “military entrepreneurs have replaced private capital as the leading force in the government and the market. The state apparatus is increasingly constituted of retired officers who also occupy top government positions controlling the economy. They foster the military institution’s monopolies in sectors of civilian production and services” and have relegated the traditional business elite to subcontracting or irrelevance.¹⁴³

In Morocco, too, there is a concentration of economic wealth in the hands of the king and his key advisors and associates. At the same time, the king appears to have a long-term strategy of modernization that is linked to both a transition to green energy and a shift of focus from Europe to Africa. The Moroccan economy is becoming increasingly diversified as exemplified in the increasing importance of the Tanger Med port, domestic transportation improvements, and the external role of Moroccan banks—in particular Attijariwafa Bank, Banque Centrale Populaire, and Bank of Africa—in a variety of countries in Africa, especially West Africa.¹⁴⁴ Yet if there are highly positive developments in Morocco’s economic modernization, it is still a work in progress. Illiteracy remains high and the economy is very uneven. There is a recognition in the palace and elsewhere in the government that “much more is needed to deliver a sustainable better life for the majority of Moroccans,” but the goal remains elusive.¹⁴⁵ Much the same could be said of Morocco’s neighbor, Algeria, although a rentier state dependent on oil revenues, also has a largely centralized economy. Algeria’s bloody civil war in the 1990s was followed by “another centralized state structure, blending nationalist control with the promotion of new business classes linked to the ruling, military-security-dominated establishment, widely known as *le pouvoir*.”¹⁴⁶ The Bouteflika clan emerged as the dominant force within this structure, but continued levels of cronyism and corruption provoked widespread sentiment that the family and its allies were enriching themselves at the expense of the country. The Hirak protest movement that began in February 2019—and consisted largely of unemployed youth—eventually led the military to withdraw its support. As a result, the president was compelled to resign. As one analysis observed, the movement “was sudden, spontaneous, and overwhelming. It caught a complacent and sclerotic regime completely off-guard.”¹⁴⁷ Yet, much of the deep state structure remains intact, and Algeria continues to be a

difficult and unattractive place for foreign investment. *Le pouvoir*, “the power,” might have taken on a different form, but it has not gone away—and the increase in oil prices since the Covid-19 pandemic has provided it with an unexpected breathing space. Tunisia, in contrast, has not only seen widespread political disillusionment since the promise of the 2011 revolution but also experienced more than a decade of deterioration of its economy. One World Bank commentary even described the years after the revolution as “a lost decade of growth.”¹⁴⁸ Much of this is attributable to overregulation and limited investment and innovation. The reliance on the welfare state, public employment, and subsidies proved insufficient; it also led to an increase in public debt, which by 2022 stood at 79.3 percent of GDP.¹⁴⁹

The chapters that follow will elaborate on these themes and further explore the asymmetries and commonalities as we investigate the scale, scope, and impact of criminal networks and illicit economies of the five North African countries. Chapter 2 examines North Africa’s last monarchy, Morocco, and the impact illicit economies and activities have had on the country itself as well as its neighbors. Chapter 3 explores Algeria, a country that has long faced threats by transnational terrorists and now also faces a broad array of challenges stemming from illegal economies on the one hand and government corruption on the other. Chapter 4 focuses on Tunisia, a country that, despite its central role in the Arab Spring, has not fared as well as might have been expected. Moreover, Tunisia’s efforts to curb illicit economies remain a work in progress. In Chapter 5, we see that Libya, a country still reeling from its second civil war, continues to see its progress stifled by a mash-up of criminal profiteers who hinder the development of the country. Chapter 6 looks at Egypt’s persistent criminal underbelly, which inflicts damage to the country’s economy. Finally, Chapter 7 highlights how criminal networks continue to thrive and prosper throughout North Africa, placing this firmly within a context of inadequate and corrupt governance.

In each chapter, we follow a common format, to the extent possible given the variations in the criminal landscapes and illicit economies in the five North African countries. For example, Egypt has a section on organ trafficking that is not discussed elsewhere, while only Egypt and Libya have major problems with antiquities trafficking. Each chapter has a scene-setting introduction that is followed by analyses of drug trafficking, human smuggling, human trafficking (treated separately where possible and together when necessary), arms trafficking, and cigarette smuggling. This is typically followed by natural resource exploitation or contraband smuggling, depending on the country. A sec-

tion on corruption, money laundering, and illicit financial flows rounds off each chapter and is followed by a short assessment.

Notes

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35. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
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46. Gómez-Céspedes, "Spain: A Criminal Hub," p. 175.
47. Sands, "Organized Crime and Illicit Activities," pp. 211–212.
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49. See for example, Sergi, "Nigerian Gangs Partner with Mafia"; Klein, "Italy Arrests Dozens"; Mackie, "Italian Police: Mafia and Nigerian."
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