Troubled transitions and organised crime in Ethiopia and Tunisia

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Summary

Due to their difficult political paths – Ethiopia’s stalled transition and Tunisia’s reversal – these two nations demonstrate the effects of failing transitions and democratic backsliding on rising transnational organised crime. Reversing the current trend of organised crime depends heavily on restoring stability and rule-of-law-based democracies, which could be achieved through a revived political process that embraces dialogue and transitional justice to mitigate the challenges and enable governance structures to tackle the complexities of organised crime.

Key points

The surge in transnational organised crime in Ethiopia and Tunisia can be seen as a consequence of their unrealised political transitions due to:

- ensuing economic upheaval that has been the major driver of transnational organised crimes in both countries
- porous borders and ungoverned spaces that allow criminal networks to grow
- attention to pressing security challenges, such as conflicts and terrorism, that create space for criminal networks to strengthen and operate with impunity.
Introduction

Democracy is in trouble. Around the world, the wave of political transitions to democracy that started in the 1980s began to ebb in the late 2000s, as the number of regimes that were ‘neither clearly democratic nor conventionally authoritarian’ surged. Democratic erosion and backsliding have grown more visible and acute since that point, emerging as a major global trend with substantial ramifications on international diplomacy, economics and security.

Democratic backsliding has not spared Africa. A swathe of states on the continent have either recorded stalled political transitions or outright reversals, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. At its most dramatic, this has seen militaries stage a series of coups since 2020, including in Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan. However, in a number of cases democratic backsliding has been more incremental, with political institutions and norms central to democracies restricted or losing power to executive leaders. In Tunisia, for example, Kais Saied, the democratically elected president, suspended the country’s parliament in 2021, ruling by decree before crafting a new constitution, which vests most authority in the executive. In turn, the post-2018 transitional context in Ethiopia has witnessed a failed endeavour to implement a negotiated transition and forge a consensus-based political settlement. Initial reforms and promises were soon stalled, giving way to myriad social and political conflicts that caused the country’s ongoing fragility – making some experts doubt if it was a political transitional at all. The backsliding has now reached a level where, in some regions, constitutional order has been replaced by state of emergency rules.

There has been substantial research and analysis on the impact of democratic backsliding in Africa on governance, economics, human rights, international relations, and peace and security throughout the continent. However, information on how democratic backsliding impacts organised crime and illicit markets is more limited. Material that does exist often focuses more broadly on how political transitions to democracy impact organised crime and illicit markets, including in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The dearth of information on the intersection of democratic backsliding and organised crime in Africa is problematic. Such backsliding is a major trend in both Africa and globally. So too is the rising power of transnational organised crime groups and illicit markets. In Africa, the ENACT Organised Crime Index recorded worsening continental criminality scores between the 2019 and 2023 editions, along with a growing pervasiveness of criminal markets and rising influence by criminal actors. It is important then to understand whether and how the trend of democratic backsliding intersects with the trends around rising criminality and illicit markets.
Further, there is a need to understand why contexts of democratic backsliding are vulnerable to organised crime. Evidence that political transitions to democracy impact criminality is relatively well established, with research underscoring that such contexts are vulnerable to growth in the scope and power of criminal groups or an expansion in types of illicit markets. Largely this hinges on a weakening of political focus, security attention and social controls, which provide an environment conducive to criminality.\textsuperscript{10} It is unclear whether these dynamics are equally salient in situations of democratic backsliding, or whether other factors may also fuel criminal activity. This has important implications on how the issue can be addressed.

This report from ENACT seeks to assess these issues. It seeks to establish the opportunities that core periods of political transitions provide to criminal actors to either consolidate their criminal networks within the new political economy or use new political actors and institutions to develop and grow their criminal networks. By understanding the vulnerabilities to crime within such a situation, internal and external stakeholders can better tailor resilience building and responses to organised crime, and moreover gain a degree of forewarning on risks that may develop.

To unpack and analyse these issues, this paper looks at two case studies: Ethiopia and Tunisia. These countries were chosen in part due to the more incremental muted shifts within their transitions, from democratising to democratic backsliding. This enables a more nuanced analysis of how dynamics have shifted over the course of the transitions.

In Ethiopia, the 2018 political transition emerged from a series of peaceful protests and youth-led movements that removed the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-led administration and brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. Since then, Ethiopia’s transition has been characterised by a mix of progressive policymaking and escalating conflicts. Noteworthy progress in reform during the first year of the transition has been shadowed by increasing domestic turmoil. Although the initial perception of Ahmed’s ascension was one of a clear deviation from previous regimes, with a promise to guide Ethiopia towards a better democracy, the nation has failed to maintain this momentum.

Tunisia, in turn, has gone through two distinct political transitions in the last 12 years. In 2011, a revolution deposed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the country’s longstanding and autocratic leader, ushering in a period of political liberalisation and multiparty democracy. Ten years later, in 2021, democratically elected President Kais Saied seized power in a self-coup, sidelining parliament and promulgating a new, executive-focused constitution.

The two cases sit in very different geographic environments, and in turn link into different types of illicit economic networks. Ethiopia is influenced by, and in turn influences, organised crime dynamics in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea regions, as well as central African illicit markets across its western borders. Tunisia sits at the intersection point of a number of North African and cross-Mediterranean smuggling routes. By examining the differences in cases, the intent is to more readily identify how shifts in organised crime are linked to democratic backsliding, rather than simply shifts in regional illicit economic ecosystems.

The report first begins by detailing key points for thinking about political transitions, democratic backsliding and organised crime. It next assesses the stalled transition from autocracy to democracy in Ethiopia between 2018 and the present day, and its impact on organised crime dynamics. It goes on to analyse Tunisia, first looking at the impact of the transition to democracy in 2011 and then that of democratic backsliding since 2021, identifying the impact of each on criminal ecosystems in the country. The report ends with a conclusion and a brief set of recommendations.
Methodology

The methodology for this report is primarily qualitative. It is based on more than twenty interviews with current and former government officials, think tank staff, civil society activists, smugglers and citizens in border areas in Ethiopia and Tunisia. The study also draws on historic interviews done in the 2010s and early 2020s, mainly for Tunisia. The interviews are complemented by secondary sources, including government documents and assessments, think tank reports and media articles. Finally, the report makes extensive use of the 2019, 2021 and 2023 editions of the Global Organised Crime Index.

Understanding political transitions and organised crime

Most countries, at any given time, are going through transitions of one form or another. Economic and societal shifts drive, and in turn are driven by, political change. Generally, these changes manifest incrementally and within the bounds of established political structures: a liberal party loses an election to a conservative party, or an autocratic regime shifts policies in response to protests.

However, in some instances the social, economic and political changes are more profound, with major structural breaks occurring. Popular street protests force an autocratic leader to yield power, or military authorities stage a coup against a democratically elected administration. Notably, these major transitions can be protracted affairs, as political and governance systems are revised and re-ordered.

It is these larger, most structurally dramatic events that are the focus of this paper. It defines political transitions as the interval between the loss of functional control by one political regime and the solidification of control by another. It is important to note that transitions are defined by the change in regime, not the nature of the regime losing or gaining power.

Most studies of transitions, however, have focused on democratic transitions, reflecting the predominance of this type of transition from the 1980s to the 2000s. In these transitions, authoritarian regimes gave way to democratic systems, characterised by electoral competition, political participation, separation of powers, and the enshrinement of civil and political rights. These transitions also tended to involve attempt to control security forces and ensure they followed rule of law-based approaches.

Tunisian security officers stand guard outside a polling station in the centre of Tunis, on 23 November 2014, during Tunisia’s first presidential election since the 2011 revolution.
This has changed since the late 2000s, as a growing number of countries have transitioned away from democracy. Often termed democratic backsliding, such transitions involve the erosion or destruction of key institutions and norms that are central to democratic systems – such as those detailed above – in order to expand executive authority and control.

Backsliding has occurred across a range of states, including both long-established democracies and those that have recently, or are still, transitioning. However, transitioning states are often particularly fragile and vulnerable, given the difficulty of building new institutions, enshrining good governance, and addressing citizen’s grievances around economic development and corruption.

Some cases of democratic backsliding are abrupt and dramatic, such as military coups. But more often the shift towards authoritarianism is incremental and nuanced. Further, many leaders driving such transitions tend to define their aims as ‘defending democracy’ or stage their actions by means of formal authorities, legal tools, referendums and elections, effectively obscuring the authoritarian drift. As a result, states undergoing such transitions often manifest characteristics of both democracies and authoritarian systems for lengthy periods of time.

This underscores how political transitions of all types are generally protracted affairs that entail long periods of systemic change. This does not equate, however, to a steady level of change throughout. Transitions, like crises, are frequently non-linear. Systemic change is often particularly profound and encompassing during distinct periods, which see the development of new political structures and the emergence of new power relations. This study refers to these as core transition periods.

Further, transitions tend to have key events that drive or catalyse widespread or irreversible shifts in the situation. Examples include a coup, the flight of an authoritarian leader or a referendum approving new authoritarian powers for a leader. This study calls these tipping points. They frequently precede core transition periods, but can occur in latter stages as well.

The end of political transition is often more difficult to identify. It is often marked by the consolidation of a durable regime and the mitigation of any significant challenges posed by former regime elements. However, these markers are often difficult to assess with any substantial degree of clarity, and many transitions continue for lengthy periods of time after the core transition period has ceased.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed attends his last campaign event ahead of Ethiopia’s elections scheduled for June 21, in Jimma, Ethiopia, June 16, 2021
There is a substantial risk that political transitions lead to the growth of criminal ecosystems

Overall, it is important to assess and understand political transitions – towards either democracy or authoritarianism – as processes, often extended in duration, in which political institutions, systems and norms are revised, and the power relationships underpinning them and emanating from them renegotiated. They are often periods of substantial fragility for states involved, a weakness that is often at risk of being exploited by opportunistic actors, such as politicians, businessmen and criminals, for personal gain.

The intersection of political transitions and organised crime

Over the last three decades, a growing body of research has focused on the impact of political transitions on criminal ecosystems. This paper defines such ecosystems as encompassing discrete criminal groups and networks, specific illicit markets and the wider range of actors, including those embedded in the state, who facilitate criminal activities in a given country.25 Most of this research has focused on countries undergoing democratic transitions, such as South Africa, Nigeria and Libya.26 Only in a limited number of instances has the relationship between transitions to authoritarian regimes and criminal ecosystems been explored, mostly focusing on Russia.27 However, by pointing out specific factors that make democratic political transitions vulnerable to the evolution of criminal ecosystems, this literature provides a helpful analytical departure point for this study’s attempt to evaluate and understand the risks present in situations of democratic backsliding.

Broadly, this research has found there is a substantial risk that political transitions lead to the growth, empowerment or heightened visibility of criminal ecosystems.28 In some cases, new illicit markets can evolve – either due to transnational organised crime groups targeting a weakened state, such as by developing trafficking routes through it, or to local groups seeking benefit within the shifting context, such as protection and dispute resolution or the extraction and trafficking of natural resources.29

Longer-standing criminal markets can also grow or diversify during transitional periods. Existent drug or fuel trafficking markets, for example, can expand substantially as security force pressure dissipates and economic need drives growing numbers of individuals to become involved.

Further, transitions can also lead to greater official transparency and social debate on criminality, magnifying impressions that crime levels are increasing regardless of the
This points to the difficulty of measuring organised crime in general, and the importance of using multiple evidentiary points to establish how criminal ecosystems are growing and shifting during and after core transitional periods.

While the reasons for the above vulnerability are complex, and often disputed between researchers, there appears to be broad agreement on four key dynamics that enable and, in some cases, drive the expansion of criminal ecosystems during democratic transitions.

Firstly, the focus of transitional authorities is rarely on organised crime. Especially during core transition periods, new governments face a large number of critical priorities. The most critical arguably hinge on the enshrinement of a new political order, establishment of a new government, reform or formation of key ministries and the consolidation of the new regime’s security control.

These priorities do not generally include addressing organised crime and criminal ecosystems. Some new officials, particularly those joining a government for the first time, may not fully understand the threat posed by criminal actors or the previous regime’s strategies for countering them. Other officials, who are aware, may simply view organised crime as an issue to be tackled after critical priorities are addressed and when circumstances allow. The net effect, however, is that limited focus by politicians can filter down into government ministries, leading to a deprioritisation of the issue, in turn opening operational space for criminal ecosystems to evolve and expand.

Further, new governments often prioritise the establishment of control in core areas of the state or those that are politically important, such as capital cities, key urban areas, territories home to powerful ethnic or tribal groups, or zones that host key infrastructure. Remote and rural areas, in turn, face deepened marginalisation as government resources and security forces are redirected. This neglect can create opportunities for criminal economies to evolve, especially if the area in question abuts an international border.

Secondly, transitions often impact security force capacity and effectiveness. The transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one often involves efforts to restructure or reform security forces, generally to address past rule of law and human rights deficits. These initiatives, however, weaken the operational capacity and cohesion of security forces, in turn impacting the reach and degree of security control a new government can exercise over its territory, creating conditions for organised crime to grow. Notably, this is not simply a vulnerability that manifests in rural and remote areas. Law enforcement weaknesses can also manifest in core state areas, easing the development of corrupt or criminal relations between state and criminal actors, including with security actors.

Less frequently, law enforcement reform processes can directly fuel criminal expansion, with security force officers dismissed during the process turning to crime for livelihood support. An extreme example of this was seen in Russia in the 1990s, though similar dynamics have been recorded to a lesser degree in other transitional states.

Thirdly, the emergence of new power structures both modifies existing state–criminal engagements and forges new ones. In part this emerges due to interests within new governments. Profiteering off government offices, in both licit and illicit spheres, often endures between regimes, given they are rooted in deeply set social norms within key groups of government functionaries. Further, within core transition periods there is often broader ambiguity about the acceptability of different norms of behaviour, especially when a country has emerged from a tightly controlled authoritarian regime. As a result, ‘political economies of protection’ by state actors often continue or expand even as beneficiaries change.
State–criminal relationships within transitional states are not only founded on financial interests. Rather, they can and often are instrumentalised by officials as means of building power, solidifying political control or projecting control into marginalised areas where the state is weak. Nonetheless, in transitional environments the power imbalance held by state officials over criminal actors often shrinks, leading to the emergence of more alliance-like structures between criminals and state officials. In some cases, the power imbalance flips, with criminal actors assuming positions of influence and power over political actors. This allows criminal groups to transform their informal power into more institutionalised – and sometimes even formalised – roles in political processes and systems, such as by entering into strategic partnerships with elected political actors in key political positions.

Fourth, economic challenges before and during transitions fuel crime. Research has identified economic difficulties – such as recessions, stagnant growth, rising inflation and rising inequality – as important catalysts for transition tipping points. For new governments, addressing economic issues is often essential, though, as detailed earlier, such efforts often necessarily take second place to foundational priorities, such as government formation and stabilisation. Even when prioritised, transitional environments frequently struggle to effectively reform problematic economic systems and enable a return to economic growth. These economic struggles, in turn, create openings for organised crime. Economic need can fuel heightened recruitment of new members by criminal groups, the emergence of new illicit markets peddling scarce goods and heighten the receptiveness of low-paid government officials to corrupt overtures.

Finally, growing crime can weaken transitional states, heightening their vulnerability to greater criminal expansion. While political transitions can create environments vulnerable to organised crime, the reverse is also true, with rising criminality posing substantial risks to transitional states, heightening fragility and eroding democratisation. Large illicit markets and empowered criminal groups can drive corruption, fuel violence and instability, and subvert the rule of law. This, in turn, can impede the solidification of new regimes, undermine their popular support and stymie efforts to further licit economic development. This can create a wicked cycle, with growing crime heightening the fragility of transitional states and so forging greater opportunities for illicit markets to evolve within them. Further, it can expose the transition to risks of democratic backsliding, as populist-leaning politicians leverage counter-crime discourse to build support or justify authoritarian-style actions.

Overall, studies over the last three decades point to a risk of heightened criminality in democratic transitional environments. The following sections will attempt to identify whether the dynamics detailed above are equally salient in situations of democratic backsliding, as seen in Ethiopia and Tunisia, or whether other dynamics play a key role.

**Ethiopia**

**The post-2018 transition**

Ethiopia stands out as one of Africa’s oldest independent states, having never been colonised, yet governed by a series of authoritarian regimes. Its political landscape is characterised by centralised power and ethnic resistance, with its diverse ethnic groups often challenging state authority. The country’s long-standing monarchical rule, claiming a history of three millennia, ended in 1974 with the
rise of the Derg, a military junta aiming to establish a communist state. In 1991, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – an alliance of four ethnic-based parties with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) as its leading force – overthrew the Derg and ruled for nearly three decades until 2018.

Despite claims of democracy, the EPRDF governed autocratically, holding tight control over governance and facing public backlash for failing to address poverty, inequality and governance issues. Tensions within the EPRDF, mainly due to the TPLF’s dominance, led to perceptions of unequal development and exacerbated ethnic tensions, particularly in Oromia and Amhara, the homelands of Ethiopia’s two largest ethnic groups.

In Oromia, the Qeerroo (youth), started an intensified protest against the EPRDF administration in 2014. The protest continued until 2018, forcing the EPRDF to make significant political changes. On 2 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed of the Oromo Democratic Party came to power as prime minister, after being elected as the first Oromo chairperson of the EPRDF coalition on 27 March 2018. This was the first time since 1991 that the TPLF’s grip on political power seemed to loosen and marks the beginning of Ethiopia’s political transition.

Since Abiy took the helm, Ethiopia’s political landscape has been marked by a paradox of notable strides in progressive reform set against a backdrop of intensifying internal strife. During the initial period of Abiy’s administration, the core period of the transition, he cast himself as a departure from past governance, promising to steer the nation towards greater democratisation and societal reform. This period, roughly from April 2018 to the end of 2019, was defined by efforts to build a more inclusive political environment, evidenced by the release of detainees held for political reasons, repatriation of exiles and liberalisation of media regulations. His diplomatic endeavours with Eritrea not only mitigated a long-standing conflict but also won international accolades, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Reopening borders and demilitarising the shared boundary with Eritrea were seen as tangible affirmations of a commitment to peace.

These reforms were part of a broader vision to transform Ethiopia into a country where open dialogue and political freedoms were not just envisioned but actively implemented. However, it was challenged by the emergence of new and old conflicts, the 2020–2022 Tigray War being one of the most catastrophic. The conflicts put the durability and effectiveness of the reforms to the test, underscoring the complexity of navigating change in a diverse and multifaceted nation.

Beyond Tigray, large-scale and widespread interethnic and communal violence as well as insurgent movements have become commonplace in various regions of Ethiopia. Violence and armed conflict in Oromia has persisted since before the Tigray war in early 2019, while clashes between Fano militias and government forces in Amhara escalated in mid-2023 after the Pretoria Peace Deal. Violence and instability have also been reported in other areas, such as the Metekel region of Benishangul-Gumuz, the Afar and Somali regions, and southern regions like the newly established Central Regional State.

These conflicts have deeply affected the nation’s economy. The government has assessed the damage to infrastructure at approximately USD 22.7 billion along with USD 6 billion in lost productivity between November 2020 and December 2021, tantamount to about 26% of the country’s GDP. The Ethiopian Policy Studies Institute reported in 2021 that over two-thirds of the population (68.7%) live in multidimensional poverty, with an additional 18.4% teetering on the edge.

The economic decline has been further aggravated by falling foreign direct investment and spiralling inflation rates which affect all sectors. Beyond Tigray, ongoing conflicts in the agriculturally vital regions of...
Oromia and Amhara compound the situation, intensifying food shortages and elevating poverty. Ethiopia’s financial woes culminated in a default on international debt, with Fitch downgrading the nation’s credit rating to ‘default’ following a missed USD 33 million interest payment in December 2023, marking the country as Africa’s latest defaulter.61

The complexities of Ethiopia’s political transition and the erosion of its effective governance are further manifested by the numerous states of emergency declared across different regions since 2018.

Chart 1: Major political events in Ethiopia since 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 April 2018</td>
<td>Abiy Ahmed becomes Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2018</td>
<td>Peace Agreement with Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2018</td>
<td>Cabinet reforms including the release of political prisoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>Government reforms including the release of political prisoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 October 2019</td>
<td>Nobel Peace Prize for Abiy Ahmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2020</td>
<td>Hachalu Hundessa’s (prominent Oromo singer) assassination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2020</td>
<td>Postponement of elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2021</td>
<td>Reports of atrocities in Tigray emerge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2021</td>
<td>Tigray conflict escalation, TPLF forces advance into neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2021</td>
<td>National Dialogue Commission established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2022</td>
<td>Ceasefire and peace talks initiated between the Ethiopian government and TPLF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2022</td>
<td>TPLF withdrawal from neighbouring regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2023</td>
<td>Establishment of Transitional Justice Working Group of Experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2023</td>
<td>Conflict erupts in Amhara region between Fano and federal government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2023</td>
<td>Mediation efforts in Amhara region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2024</td>
<td>Adoption of Transitional Justice Policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These emergencies were administered by decree, bypassing constitutional protocols, and predominantly enforced alongside internet blackouts. A recent report disclosed that Ethiopia lost close to USD 1.59 billion in 2023 due to conflict-related internet shutdowns, aggravating the country’s economic difficulties.62

The government aims to mitigate ongoing violence and ethnonationalist conflicts through efforts to initiate national dialogue and establish transitional justice mechanisms. However, these measures have struggled to achieve their intended impact and are partly seen as responses to international pressure. Their success is uncertain and largely depends on resolving the underlying conflicts.

Ethiopia’s political transitions also create vulnerabilities that criminal networks can exploit. With the rise of armed groups and constant shifts in conflict enhancing the conditions for illicit activities, the government faces challenges to its authority across the country. The reorganisation of key state institutions during

Chart 2: Ethiopia and neighbouring states in the Horn of Africa

Source: ENACT
these transitions may also provide opportunities for organised crime groups to infiltrate and influence these entities – a phenomenon observed, for example, in southern African and eastern European countries in periods of political transition.63

Against this backdrop, this section details the state of organised crime in Ethiopia since 2018 and to look for tangible links between the transitional period and the current crime landscape. This analysis is instrumental for understanding how political shifts and their ramifications can bolster the activities of criminal groups and what measures can be implemented to mitigate this risk.

**Assessing the Impact of Ethiopia’s 2018 transition on criminal ecosystems**

Since the beginning of the 2018 transition, incidents of transnational organised crime have risen. The ENACT Organised Crime index, for example, has underscored a continual rise in the country’s criminality score between 2019 and 2023 (Table 1).64 Notably, during the transition period the country’s criminality score within the Index went from well below the average in Africa to well above it, with the most sustained increase occurring between 2021 and 2023.65

A similar rise in criminality can be seen in data compiled by the Federal Police Commission (Table 2).

### Table 1: Criminality scores for Ethiopia and Africa as a whole

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ethiopia</th>
<th>Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>5.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ENACT*66

### Table 2: Number of TOC incidents reported to the Federal Police Commission, 2018–2023

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drug trafficking</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human trafficking and smuggling of migrants</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arms trafficking</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawala and illegal currency exchange</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal coffee trade</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold smuggling</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N/A indicates data not available

*Source: Federal Police Commission, Addis Ababa*
According to key informants, the actual incidence of crime in Ethiopia is likely to be much higher. Because of the country’s reliance on a reactive investigation system that responds to victim or third-party reports and the lack of a centralised crime database, many crimes are potentially missing from official statistics. For this reason, it is also important to focus also on qualitative data around the nature and context of specific incidents, the criminal markets involved and the networks behind these activities. This data too indicates a marked increase in the scope and nature of organised crime within Ethiopia over the past five years.

Notably, both quantitative and qualitative date underscores that the rise in organised crime activity over the last five years cuts across a number of criminal markets.

The first type of market which has grown during the transition involves kidnapping for ransom. This first gained attention in 2019, when a group of university students in Dambi Dolo City in western Ethiopia were abducted. This criminal activity, previously used by armed groups to eliminate local politicians, particularly in Oromia region, has evolved into a more structured and profit-driven practice of kidnapping for ransom that has spread throughout the country. In Tigray, Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia are often held for ransom. The problem appears to have received little intervention from law enforcement and security agencies.

The second type of market involved the illicit trade in gold. This is widespread in Ethiopia, especially in Shakiso in the Guji Zone of southern Oromia, which has a long history of large-scale mining. Artisanal gold-mining has also gained popularity in the Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions, attracting both companies and individuals involved in unlicensed gold-mining and trade.

Illicitly acquired gold leaves Ethiopia through three main routes, the most popular being via Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa to Middle Eastern countries, India and China. In October 2022, for example, an Indian national arriving in Mumbai from Addis Ababa was arrested with 16 kilograms of gold. The airport also serves as a transit point for illicit Sudanese gold to the Middle East. A southern gold-smuggling route leads to Uganda, either directly or via Kenya, and from Bole International Airport. Another significant route moves from western Ethiopia to South Sudan and Sudan. The past two years have also seen a notable rise in the number of jewellery shops in Addis Ababa, with more than one hundred dealing primarily in gold, prompting questions about their compliance with the National Bank’s licensing requirements.

A third major market involves trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. This market top the list of TOCs in Ethiopia, according to the 2023 Global Organised Crime Index. This ongoing crisis, especially the perilous journey to Saudi Arabia, is a matter of grave concern. A combination of factors – economic hardship, climate-change-induced drought, lack of opportunities, political instability and conflict – push Ethiopia’s citizens to undertake these dangerous journeys in the quest for a better life and economic prospects in Saudi Arabia.

According to Yosiyad Abeje, director general of the Ministry of Justice’s Transnational and Organised Crimes Prosecution Division, the route to Saudi Arabia is rife with exploitation. Smugglers abuse the vulnerability and desperation of their clients by demanding ever-increasing fees to facilitate these trips, which sometimes involve armed clashes between the smugglers and Saudi border guards on the Yemen–Saudi border. The increasing risk has not deterred human trafficking and smuggling of migrants from Ethiopia.

Fourth, Ethiopia also serves as a transit country for heroin and cocaine shipments through Bole International Airport, with a growing domestic demand. Cannabis production, primarily in the southern
part of the country, is relatively high, with smuggling occurring mainly to neighbouring Kenya. The 2023 Global Organised Crime Index reported that cocaine trafficking had not increased since 2021. However, according to informants at the Federal Police Commission and the Ministry of Justice, there has been a significant increase in cocaine trafficking from São Paulo. While small quantities were previously hidden in traffickers’ bodies, traffickers in the past two years have brought in quantities of up to 230 kilograms in their checked-in luggage.

Fifth, the black-market currency exchange has surged in importance during the transition. Both locals and foreigners, including businesses and tourists, engage in black-market currency trading, driven by the significant disparity between the official bank exchange rate and the higher black-market rate. Foreign companies resort to this practice to convert their Ethiopian birr profits for repatriation. Besides the smuggling of physical currency through Bole International Airport, the crime uses three distinct laundering methods.

First, individuals or companies bribe officials at Bole International Airport to make a falsified declaration. This asserts that a specific individual who has not actually exited Ethiopia has entered the country with a substantial sum of foreign currency and allows criminals to covertly move foreign funds through financial institutions in Addis Ababa.

Another method involves banks situated in Togo Wochale and Moyale, Ethiopian towns located near the borders of Somaliland and Kenya, respectively. Criminal networks surreptitiously transport foreign currency from Addis Ababa to neighbouring countries, only to reintroduce it to Ethiopia through these banks at the border regions. This re-entry is facilitated by bank officers who provide the necessary documentation to give the money lawful status.

A final method is to open a diaspora account – a foreign currency account for Ethiopians residing abroad and foreigners of Ethiopian origin. This allows individuals and businesses to deposit currency collected from the black market and make it look legitimately earned, which they then transfer outside the country or use for international trade.

A final illicit activity which is of major concern is corruption. The country grapples in particular with the entrenched issue of land corruption, which appears to be pervasive in the capital city of Addis Ababa and the surrounding Sheger City development project. It is suspected that significant sums of money obtained through land corruption are laundered to appear as legitimately earned. The funds then leave the country through illicit means or are used to commit other forms of organised crime, such as contraband and illicit trade in counterfeit goods.
Compared to the scope of the problem a decade ago, when one-third of Ethiopians reportedly may have paid a bribe to land administration officials, several key informants in this study now believe that almost all land administration and related issues involve corruption. Specific activities include the forgery of identity cards to wrongfully gain from land allocations; tampering with land-lease rights to unlawfully acquire land meant for others; producing fake title deeds to illegitimately claim ownership of land and properties; manipulating public housing and condominium project allocations through insider connections to divert them to unqualified recipients or to resell at higher prices; and unauthorised land occupation and construction without following legal protocols.

According to an internal Ministry of Justice study, ‘land corruption, in particular, is on the rise and evolving in a concerning manner, posing significant threats to the nation’s economic, social and political systems’. As land is publicly owned and all procedures related to the establishment and transfer of possessory rights must be conducted through land administration offices, these illegal practices cannot occur without the complicity of the authorities.

Existing and emerging criminal actors drive a rise in organised crime

It is notable that the rise in criminality in Ethiopia in recent years has been driven by a new, more agile criminal ecosystem involving a variety of different types of criminal actors. One of the more important types are state-embedded actors, who continue to wield significant influence in the perpetration of and impunity for organised crime. This network of criminal activity involves a spectrum of participants, including high-ranking officials, lower-ranking officers within public administration offices, intermediaries and businesspeople. Their collective cooperation sustains the cycle of corruption, with each participant playing a facilitating role.

Interviews with members of the National Partnership Coalition for Migration revealed that state-embedded actors have been involved in crimes related to human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants. Individuals in the country’s law enforcement agencies, such as the police, the National Intelligence and Security Service, the Information Network Security Agency, the Financial Intelligence Service (FIS), the Ministry of Justice and judges have been implicated in a range of transnational...
and organised crimes, including drug trafficking, money laundering and corruption. Collaboration between military personnel and the police has also been reported in the context of the illicit coffee trade.\textsuperscript{30}

High-ranking public officials are implicated in various forms of TOC. Their involvement goes beyond facilitating the commission of crimes to directly or indirectly impeding criminal investigations, seeking premature termination of investigations, assisting suspects to evade apprehension and ordering or facilitating the unlawful release of accused individuals from custody.

Further, the involvement of financial institutions in transnational organised crime in Ethiopia has become increasingly evident. The governor of the National Bank publicly acknowledged that banks engage in back-office deals to sell foreign currency at rates higher than those on the black market.\textsuperscript{31}

According to a senior official in Oromia regional state, the recent surge in kidnapping for ransom is also facilitated by financial institutions collaborating with kidnappers by divulging victims’ account balances.\textsuperscript{32} This engagement extends beyond the disclosure of account details. A journalist who requested anonymity told ENACT that the cash collected as ransom found its way back into financial institutions in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries like Kenya and South Sudan to be laundered as legitimate transactions.

Further, foreign actors in various forms of TOC in Ethiopia have reached unprecedented levels after 2018. Eritrean, Somali and Chinese nationals, in particular, are prominent in illicit activities such as black-market currency exchange. Chinese nationals are often mentioned in association with gold smuggling, counterfeit goods trade, tax evasion, transfer pricing and the abuse of tax grace periods.\textsuperscript{33} Community backlash to their participation in illicit gold-mining has led to their expulsion from mining areas like Shakiso and Lege Dembi.\textsuperscript{34} Indian individuals often collaborate with their Chinese counterparts in artisanal gold-mining operations in the Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions.

Individuals and groups from West African countries, notably Nigeria, are increasingly engaged in drug trafficking within Ethiopia, transforming the nation from a transit point to a destination point for drug consumption. The emergence of fights between groups of West African drug dealers in Addis Ababa, as reported by a key informant at the Federal Police Commission, is a significant development.\textsuperscript{35}

Foreign companies operating in Ethiopia are also complicit in IFFs, particularly black-market exchanges of Ethiopian birr for foreign currency, in order to repatriate their funds. This includes certain international schools based in Addis Ababa that primarily cater to expatriates and the diplomatic community.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, it is important to underscore that armed conflict and instability in all regions of Ethiopia have given rise to the criminal involvement of ethnonational armed groups, especially crimes related to arms trafficking. Incidents of kidnapping for ransom in various locations, with the Amhara and Oromia regions being hotspots, are often attributed to armed groups, including the Fano and other militia factions operating in Amhara and Oromo Liberation Army in Oromia.\textsuperscript{37} In Tigray too, even after the cessation of hostilities agreement, armed groups currently or formerly affiliated to Tigray Liberation Front participate in similar crimes.
Impacts of Ethiopia’s stalled transition: letting transnational organised crime thrive with impunity

As noted in the foregoing, the past five years in Ethiopia have seen a surge in various types of organised crimes and increased involvement of new and old actors in the crimes. This new level and nature of criminality is accompanied by a weakened state of response. Also, the Ethiopia of post-2018 has witnessed a decline in the investigation and prosecution of transnational organised crime. Investigations are not proactive but are initiated mostly when victims report crimes. Prosecutions do not ‘follow the money’ nor recover assets or criminal proceeds, thereby allowing alleged criminals to continue benefiting from their crimes. The system also tends to overlook the broader issues of criminal networks and the complex nature of TOC.

As described above, corruption related to land and public property in Addis Ababa and its surrounding areas generates substantial revenue for criminal networks and is carried out with impunity. According to an internal report compiled by a team of prosecutors for the Ministry of Justice, only one-third of those accused of such corruption appear in court and cases are frequently discontinued, primarily due to failure to apprehend the accused individuals.

In the case of human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants, criminal acts that constitute trafficking are often prosecuted as smuggling, as the former requires more investigation and evidence. Furthermore, despite suspicions of their connections to smuggling and trafficking networks, agencies that send Ethiopians abroad for work are not subjected to investigation or prosecution. The system also does not prosecute criminal masterminds. Since the 2020 case of Askale Loddiso and Dejene Filatte, which concerned the smuggling of migrants from Ethiopia to South Africa, only one trafficking ringleader, Kidane Zekarias, has been prosecuted in absentia for transnational human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. Zekarias had been a notorious trafficking ringleader on the northern route from the Horn of Africa to Europe via Libya.

Turning to the illicit trade in gold, the approach taken by the Ministry of Justice does not address the issue of unchecked gold leaving the country. Individuals are often prosecuted for statutory crimes related to gold-mining – such as engaging in mining without the required licence or leasing their mining licences to third parties – but not for the smuggling of gold or transnational criminal acts.

Ethiopian government representative Redwan Hussien and Tigray delegate Getachew Reda attend the signing of the AU-led negotiations to resolve the conflict in northern Ethiopia, in Pretoria, South Africa, November 2022.
Although there are some success stories in the prosecution of IFFs, key informants suggest that they merely scratch the surface. Activities such as hawala, the black-market exchange and tax evasion present challenges that the system is ill-prepared to address. Cases involving IFFs are considerably more intricate than Ethiopian experts are currently able to investigate. Again, the emphasis is often on possessing foreign currency without proper authorisation, rather than investigating the intricacies of black-market exchange schemes involving criminal networks.

With regard to trafficking, investigation is not extended to all the actors involved in moving illicit arms from source to endpoint, and the prosecution of drug trafficking often focuses more on drug possession than the trafficking offence. Furthermore, according to a senior prosecutor at the Ministry of Justice, the arrests and subsequent prosecutions are the outcome of proactive, intelligence-led investigative efforts. He stated that the police tend to discover smuggled drugs only by chance – for example, by examining luggage that appears unusually heavy – and then alert authorities to conduct further inspections, or a truck full of export-standard coffee will be stopped in Addis Ababa, but there is no pursuit of how the coffee was transported from Jimma, Harar, Yirga Chafe, Sidamo or Wellege in the first place. In so doing, the investigation and prosecution procedures treat separate and disconnected parts of a broader crime problem, mostly perpetrated by intertwined networks of criminality.

As the transition has not managed to establish an inclusive system, the criminal justice system, and particularly its prevention and prosecution procedures, has been widely seen by various groups as partisan. The ineffectiveness of the investigation and prosecution of TOC has also led to the politicisation of efforts to combat these crimes, according to key informant interviews. Members of the public also perceive the system to be selective and partisan, believing that it looks the other way when those affiliated with the ruling party or certain ethnic groups are implicated.

Building on the framework laid out in the first section of the paper and explored later in the Tunisia section, the following takeaways detail some of the critical factors that have allowed transnational organised crimes to thrive during Ethiopia’s transitional period.

**Interrupted and incomplete reforms**

The initial process to overhaul Ethiopia’s justice system and governmental structures was disrupted and then halted by a series of conflicts. Aside from a nominal reshuffling of officials, comprehensive lustration and thorough vetting have not been undertaken. Consequently, individuals and factions possibly involved in corruption and misconduct have retained their positions within government institutions. This has prevented the government from establishing firm control over its bureaucratic apparatus.

In effect, the interruption of reforms has enabled a continuation of the sort of the state–criminal relationships that existed prior to 2018. Individuals entrenched within the state apparatus who are adept at navigating institutional gaps and weaknesses have exploited these vulnerabilities. They engage in organised criminal activities and aid others in doing the same, leveraging their positions and knowledge of the system’s shortcomings.

**Emergence of ungoverned spaces**

The ongoing conflicts and instabilities in Ethiopia have given rise to ungoverned territories. In regions such as Tigray – even after the cessation-of-hostilities agreement – Amhara, Oromia, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz, armed factions have seized and held areas, reducing the government’s influence and leading to the collapse of state institutions. This shift has significantly worsened the issue of organised crime and
illicit markets in a couple of key ways, according to informants at the Ministry of Justice and the Federal Police Commission.

In regions controlled or influenced by armed groups, the decline in peace and governance has created an environment where illicit networks operate unchecked. This has led to a rise in crimes like kidnapping for ransom and illicit gold trafficking. Additionally, arms trafficking in conflict-ridden areas has increased, often without fear of government intervention. In some regions, such as southern Oromia, investigations into crimes like gold smuggling are nearly impossible due to intense conflicts between the state and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), as noted by a key informant from the Ministry of Justice.

Further, these ungoverned areas serve as safe havens for those involved in organised crime. Criminals elude capture and legal proceedings by relocating to areas embroiled in conflict, forcing federal prosecutors to opt for in-absentia trials. Furthermore, law enforcement efforts often only reach lower-level operatives within the criminal hierarchy (such as drivers and dealers) as the masterminds and intermediaries orchestrate operations from within the conflict-ridden zones.

No time or resources to combat illicit markets

The post-2018 Ethiopia has seen illicit markets evolve with substantial impunity. With the system so ill-equipped, organised criminals face little risk of getting caught. However, there is an even more worrying trend that accounts for impunity. The transitional context drained the justice system of the resources and time necessary to combat transnational organised crimes.

In 2022 and 2023, the General Directorate for the Prosecution of Transnational and Organised Crimes has been predominantly occupied with non-TOC crimes. The plethora of complex cases it handled countrywide includes serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws in Afar, Amhara and Tigray regions. This included cases stemming from conflicts in Gambella City involving the OLA and the Gambella Liberation Front, interethnic violence in East Shoa, persistent strife in the Derashe Special Zone, and ethnic and religious conflicts in Benishangul-Gumuz and the Silte Special Zone, respectively. Political unrest in the South Omo Zone and ethnic conflicts in the Northern Shoa Oromo Special Zone further compounded the challenges.

These high-priority cases, which are critical due to their implications for national peace and stability, have overburdened the TOC General Directorate, consuming over 80% of its resources. Key informants suggest that prosecutors seeking specialised training in TOC find themselves working on cases related to communal violence or armed conflicts, contrary to their interests and expertise.
In addition, the Directorate has been dealing with unresolved cases from prior years involving notable figures such as former intelligence officers and regional governors. Consequently, TOC has been relegated within the Ministry of Justice and the Federal Police Commission. The state's focus on immediate conflict zones and situations has allowed TOC to flourish in the shadows of transition and conflict.

**Prioritisation of counter-terrorism further limits resources to counter illicit markets**

The stalled transition and resultant internal strife require a stringent stance against acts of terrorism, with the government and law enforcement agencies placing significant emphasis on preventing them within the nation's borders. The threat of terrorism, particularly from groups like al-Shabaab, and its pressing immediacy – heightened by regional instability and contentious issues like the Nile water politics and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam – is viewed with utmost seriousness due to its stark implications for national security and Ethiopia's standing on the international stage.

However, this has inadvertently resulted in the marginalisation of the equally complex and damaging issue of transnational organised crime. A former head of the prosecution department for organised crime pointed out that Ethiopia's transition has prioritised the fight against terrorism above other criminal activities. The implications of such a skewed focus are profound. By primarily viewing law enforcement success through the prism of anti-terrorism, the subtler, more pervasive threat of TOC is not adequately addressed, and its reach and impact are potentially underestimated. This, in turn, provides criminal organisations with opportunities to expand and deepen their influence within society.

**Rising border porosity creates openings for criminal actors**

Following Ethiopia's 2018 political shift, the ongoing unrest and instability in Ethiopia have rendered the country's borders increasingly susceptible to breaches. Security, intelligence and law enforcement resources, heavily preoccupied with urgent national security concerns in conflict zones, have been diverted from strengthening border controls. This shift in focus has simplified criminals' ability to cross in and out of the country.

There has been an uptick in cross-border migrant smuggling and arms trafficking, especially in regions under the control of armed groups or with dwindling law enforcement presence. Notably, arms are smuggled through Djibouti and South Sudan, often undetected until they reach the capital, and there is an increase in drug smuggling on Ethiopian Airlines flights. Unauthorised entry by individuals, mainly from China and India, has also risen, with many involved in illegal gold-mining activities. Weakened border security has been linked to new gold smuggling routes to Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan from Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz and southern and western Oromia.

**Economic crises drive involvement in illicit markets and impact government capacity**

The post-2018 economic challenges have significantly raised the cost of living, making it unsustainable for many citizens. This economic strain has, in turn, promoted involvement in illicit markets in several ways.

Economic challenges have fuelled the significant disparity between official and black-market exchange rates. By late 2023, this gap had widened, with the US dollar trading at 117 Ethiopian birr on the black market versus the official rate of 55 birr, pushing reliance on informal systems like hawala.
Further, economic hardship, rather than political repression, has driven many Ethiopians to risk the journey to the Middle East, making migrant smuggling easier and more profitable, as noted by a senior police commissioner involved in migrant repatriation.

In addition, some law enforcement members and other state actors became actively involved in various forms of organised crime and corruption to supplement their income.99

Finally, economic crises have caused experienced state professionals and law enforcement personnel to leave their positions at the Ministry of Justice and the Federal Police Commission. A record 170 prosecutors left the ministry between July 2022 and July 2023, with an additional 66 resigning by November 2023. Getaneh, the head of the Prosecutors’ Administration Council at the Ministry of Justice, spoke of the ongoing challenge of an average of 13 prosecutors leaving every month. The high staff turnover is attributed to inadequate salaries, with the discrepancy between earnings and the rising cost of living pushing prosecutors to pursue opportunities elsewhere.

Efforts to recruit new prosecutors tend to attract fresh graduates, leading to a notable absence of prosecutorial experience and maturity in courtrooms. One Supreme Court judge, speaking anonymously, highlighted this as a potential reason that complex cases involving organised crime and state-embedded actors are absent from court proceedings, indicating a need for a more strategic recruitment and retention approach within the ministry.

Tunisia

Pre-2011: organised crime, illicit markets and autocratic control

Organised crime and illicit markets were well established in Tunisia before its 2011 revolution, with relatively robust smuggling of goods and people along the borders with Algeria and Libya. Largely, these reflected scarcities in licit economic opportunities in border regions, a dynamic which progressively worsened after economic shocks in the 1980s.100

A Tunisian demonstrator flashes the V for victory sign as police fire water cannons during protests against President Kais Saied, on the 11th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution in the capital Tunis on 14 January 2022
Between the late 1980s and 2011, the government of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011) tacitly tolerated the smuggling of commodities, the most widespread illicit market at the time, viewing it as a tool for promoting stability in rural and remote areas of the country and buttressing government control. This reflected a governance strategy focused overwhelmingly on protecting regime rule rather than advancing the rule of law.

At a mass level, tacit acceptance of cross-border smuggling acted as a de facto economic development scheme for border regions. By enabling borderland dwellers to engage in low-level livelihood options, such as contraband transporters or vendors, state officials aimed to limit political tensions. As one Tunisian official noted, ‘Toleration of smuggling was the only way to ensure political control of people.’

However, while smuggling proliferated, it was kept under the tight control of security forces and the Ben Ali family. Security forces operating in the borderlands dictated the rules on what was permissible and what was not. They allowed certain types of contraband, such as consumer goods, fuel and food, while prohibiting the trade in goods which posed a greater threat to the regime and public security, such as drugs, weapons or the movement of terrorists. In exchange for the ability to operate, smugglers were further required to act as informers for security forces.

In the 2000s, the regime slightly shifted its approach. Increasingly, members of the Trabelsi family – Ben Ali’s in-laws – moved to take over and structure smuggling systems, particularly on the border with Algeria. The Trabelsis effectively centralised control of smuggling, dictating which smugglers could operate and directing security forces to arrest or drive out of business all others. This control allowed the Trabelsi family to reportedly glean around 30% of all profits from the borderland contraband trade.

There was little external pushback on Tunisia’s approach to organised crime during this period. In part, this reflected the reality that most illicit market activity was linked to the neighbouring states of Algeria and Libya and not to Europe. Both of these neighbours followed similar strategies to Tunisia for controlling organised crime, with some types of smuggling quietly allowed as a strategic tool of control. While some tensions emerged between Italy and Tunisia over human smuggling, these were effectively minimised not by comprehensive crackdowns on the market, but instead by efforts to obscure the provenance of Tunisian arrivals.

In equal part, however, the limited international focus reflected a broader external focus on counterterrorism after 2011, which led European states and the US to partner with the Ben Ali regime to counter shared terrorism challenges and threats. By positioning itself as an important interlocutor and ally of Western nations on counterterrorism issues, Tunisia was broadly able to blunt international pressure on it in other areas, such as democratic opening, economic reform and organised crime responses.

Overall, prior to the 2011 revolution, Tunisia’s approach to organised crime hinged on strategic control and instrumentalisation. It was enabled by the strength and coercive capacity of the security forces, causing Ben Ali’s Tunisia to be dubbed ‘a police state par excellence’. Through tacit acceptance of some illicit markets, it effectively channelled the evolution of organised crime in the borderlands, with state decisions and control driving the organised crime landscape within the country, largely to the benefit of key elites – mainly the Trabelsi family.

Ultimately, as a former senior military official noted, ‘Smuggling under Ben Ali wasn’t a problem, it was a solution.’
Chart 3: Major political, security and organised crime events in Tunisia since 2018

Political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2010</td>
<td>Ben Guerdane protests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 December 2010</td>
<td>Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 January 2011</td>
<td>President Ben Ali flees to Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – March 2011</td>
<td>Government of national unity under Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March – December 2011</td>
<td>Technocrat government under Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 October 2011</td>
<td>Parliamentary elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2011</td>
<td>Moncef Marzouki elected by Parliament as interim president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2011 – February 2013</td>
<td>First Troika government under Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 January 2014</td>
<td>New constitution passed by the parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2014 – January 2015</td>
<td>Technocrat government under Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 October 2014</td>
<td>Parliamentary elections under the new constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 November 2014</td>
<td>Beji Caid Essebsi elected president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2015 – August 2016</td>
<td>First elected government under the new constitution under Prime Minister Habib Essid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 August 2016</td>
<td>National unity government under Prime Minister Youssef Chahed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 October 2019</td>
<td>Parliamentary elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 October 2019</td>
<td>President Kais Saied elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 January 2020</td>
<td>New government under Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 September 2020</td>
<td>New government under Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Security and organised crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Contraband smuggling increases sharply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February – April 2011</td>
<td>Sharp spike in human smuggling to Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Clash between Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Tunisian forces in Siliana Governorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN) established as AQIM affiliate in Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 February 2013</td>
<td>Assassination of secular politician Chokri Belaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 – present</td>
<td>KUIN wages low level insurgency, attacking Tunisian security forces in rural and urban areas in western Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 July 2013</td>
<td>Assassination of secular politician Mohamed Brahmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>KUIN unit breaks away, pledges allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and forms Jund al-Khilafah (JAK-T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 – present</td>
<td>JAK-T wages low level insurgency, attacking Tunisian security forces and civilians in western Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 March 2015</td>
<td>ISIL claims responsibility for an attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 June 2015</td>
<td>ISIL claims responsibility for the attack on the Riu Imperial Marhaba Hotel in Sousse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 November 2015</td>
<td>ISIL claims responsibility for the bombing of a presidential guard bus in Tunis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 March 2016</td>
<td>ISIL – Libya Province attack on Ben Guerdane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2020</td>
<td>COVID-19-linked restrictions implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2020</td>
<td>Human smuggling begins to climb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021 – present</td>
<td>Unprecedented levels of human smuggling of Tunisian nationals from Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2023 – present</td>
<td>Sharp rise in human smuggling of foreign migrants through Tunisia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Core period of the first transition

Core period of the second transition

6 October 2019 Parliamentary elections
13 October 2019 President Kais Saied elected
20 January 2020 New government under Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh
2 September 2020 New government under Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi
25 July 2021 President Saied dismisses government and suspends parliament
February 2023 President Saied makes comments focussing on foreign migrants in Tunisia
Troubled transitions and organised crime in Ethiopia and Tunisia

2011–2021: political transition democratises smuggling

In December 2010, the self-immolation of a street vendor in the centre of Tunisia incited street protests which rapidly snowballed into a broad-based uprising against the Ben Ali regime. This tipping point followed months of mounting pressure, including widespread protests in August 2010 in the border town of Ben Guerdane over the closure of the border crossing to Libya and its impacts on cross-border trade. The Tunisian government had been able to mitigate the August protests by opening the border. In December and into January, it proved unable to address the challenge.

On 14 January 2011, the regime collapsed, with Ben Ali fleeing the country, representing a second main tipping point setting the stage for the political transition. In the days and weeks that followed, other figures linked to the regime – including members of the Trabelsi family – either followed former President into exile, were arrested or otherwise lost their privileged position. Ben Ali’s departure marked the beginning of the core period of the 2011 transition, which would last until the passage of a new constitution on 26 January 2014.

The 2011 revolution posed a profound shock to Tunisia’s security forces. Citizens’ fear of the security forces ebbed, leading to a number of assaults on security officers and the storming of some four hundred National Guard and police stations. In some cases, security officers stopped reporting for work, while officers who did continue did so with substantial restraint, with limited patrolling and arrests. In the borderlands, anti-smuggling operations effectively collapsed, falling from 3,650 in 2010 to 91 in 2011, before rebounding slightly to 441 in 2012.

Table 3: National Guard counter-smuggling operations (2008–2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministère de l’Intérieur de la République Tunisienne

The chaotic situation within the security forces was further driven by the forced retirement of 42 senior security force officials in the months after the revolution. Notably, in contrast to political transitions seen in other countries, this was the only major high-level purge of security officers. Here, the reverse happened, as several thousand security officers who had been fired under the Ben Ali regime agitated for and regained their positions.

Weakness and internal confusion within the security force in turn opened space for a reconfiguration of illicit markets. Along the land borders, with the restraints imposed by the Trabelsi family and the security forces lifted, commodity and fuel smuggling surged. It also democratised, going from ‘one hundred big smugglers to ten thousand small smugglers’.

Notably, there is little indication that current or former security forces became involved in significant numbers in borderland illicit markets during this period, again in contrast to dynamics seen in other transitional contexts. To a large degree, this is likely due to the limited lustration of security forces in Tunisia in the wake of the revolution, as well as the reincorporation of former officers into official roles.
In littoral areas, the lack of security force activity also enabled a sharp but brief spike in human smuggling, with nearly 28,000 migrants arriving in Italy in the spring of 2011. One migrant who left at the time recounted, ‘The coastal areas were almost deserted [of security forces]. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.’

The security-force vacuum proved to be fleeting, however. By the mid-2010s, after Tunisia had exited its core transition period, the security forces largely re-established their operational presence and tempo. Their focus, by that point, had shifted to counterterrorism due to a series of urban terrorist attacks, the attempted takeover of the town of Ben Guerdane on the Libyan border and the emergence of a small terrorist insurgency in the Algeria–Tunisia borderlands.

The counterterrorism focus of Tunisia’s security forces had a mixed impact on illicit markets within the country. In part, it impeded smuggling and other forms of criminality. Rural areas along the Algerian and Libyan borders became the focus of heightened patrolling and operations by security and defence forces. Along the Tunisia–Libya border, concerns around terrorism helped to drive the construction of a 200-kilometre-long barrier and the installation of an extensive surveillance system. Both the patrolling and the barrier were primarily aimed at limiting the infiltration of terrorists or those providing logistical aid, but it nonetheless led to a heightened effort to secure Tunisia’s borders, affecting the practice – if not feasibility – of commodity smuggling.

In equal part, however, the counterterrorism focus furthered the enabling environment for commodity smuggling. There was broad recognition within the security forces that, just as in Ben Ali’s time, the tacit acceptance of smuggling was useful for tamping down grievances and the risks of both instability and terrorist recruitment in borderland communities. As one National Guard official noted, ‘When I catch a fuel smuggler, I make a report and then I release him. I know he has nothing else to do and it’s better for everyone if he stays in this kind of smuggling and under my supervision, rather than leaning towards terrorism or gun and drug trafficking.’

However, it is important to stress that, while the security forces’ approach to illicit markets remained the same as before the revolution, after 2011, the approach no longer appeared to be solely driven by centralised decision-making. It also resulted from the ad-hoc decisions and approaches of mid-level officials propelled by entrenched beliefs in its effectiveness.
These countervailing security dynamics essentially balanced when it came to the development and operations of illicit markets. Throughout the mid-2010s, the illicit markets which had risen to prominence along Tunisia’s land borders – primarily involving food, fuel and other commercial goods – stayed roughly stable. So too did the trafficking of cannabis resin, which had long been the main drug transported across Tunisia’s borders, usually by small, highly specialised networks.121

One illicit market which saw a noticeable oscillation was human smuggling. After the surge in 2011, departures from Tunisia declined to extremely low levels for nearly six years.122 In 2017, however, worsening conditions and growing pessimism led to a spike in human smuggling of migrants from Tunisia to Italy, with slightly more than 5 200 arrivals recorded by the end of the year and heightened departure levels continuing into 2018.123 While some long-standing local smugglers contributed to the surge, others – including former fishermen and Tunisian smugglers who had been active in Libya – also joined in, marking the revival of the human smuggling industry along the country’s coastline.124

The other illicit market which saw a substantial shift around 2017 was drug trafficking, with Tunisia emerging as an origin point for the diversion of pharmaceuticals such as pregabalin and Viagra, which were then smuggled to Algeria and Libya for recreational use.125 Worsening economic conditions drove Tunisians with access to the drugs – including pharmacists and employees in public hospitals – to divert or simply steal them.126 Cross-border transportation of the pills was relatively straightforward, with drugs shuttled either by passengers moving through border-control points on foot or hidden in personal vehicles.

In late 2019, Tunisia went to the polls to elect a new president. The winner was a former law professor, Kais Saied, who had no previous background in politics. Saied’s victory was propelled by voters who were attracted to his image of integrity, independence and an anti-establishment stance.

The honeymoon period for Saied, however, was brief. In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 erupted. Efforts to limit movement included increased patrols by security forces and the military, including along the land borders. The rigour of patrolling also shifted, with military forces in particular opening fire more frequently on cross-border smugglers, injuring and killing some.127 The feasibility of smuggling shrank as a result, with one interviewee noting that the informal economy was ‘in a state of crisis, though one which was largely overlooked’.128

The patrolling prompted a turn towards new methods of operations. Along the Algerian border, Tunisian pharmaceutical traffickers turned to transportation through areas which had mainly been the purlieu of cannabis smugglers. Along the Libyan border, small-scale smugglers of fuel, household items and medicine shifted to transporting higher-value commodities, including tobacco and drugs, becoming involved in well-resourced networks able to circumvent

**Chart 4: Tunisia and neighbouring states**

Source: ENACT
disruptions at the border. The price of contraband goods and the profits earned by smugglers rose to reflect the risk.\textsuperscript{29} In some cases, smugglers along the Libyan border began to shoot back at Tunisian soldiers, leading to a number of casualties.

The mobility constraints and shutdowns associated with the virus sharply worsened Tunisia’s already weakened economy. Many workers lost their jobs or were moved to reduced hours, while food prices rose sharply.\textsuperscript{130}

Interviews indicate that the economic difficulties drove an increasing number of individuals to become involved in smuggling, particularly those living in border areas. Worsening economic conditions also led to a sharp and long-lasting surge in human smuggling. By the summer of 2020 and into 2021 (see Table 4), the number of migrants departing from Tunisia for Europe surged to levels not seen since the spike in smuggling in 2011.

### Table 4: Disembarkations in Italy of migrants coming from Tunisia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>5,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>4,122</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>14,685</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>20,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>32,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>97,306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNHCR\textsuperscript{131}

2021-2023: the transition reverses as illicit markets grow

By mid-2021, Tunisia’s worsening situation reached a tipping point. On 25 July, President Saied seized almost complete control over the Tunisian government. In a televised address, surrounded by military and security officials, he declared a 30-day state of emergency, suspending parliament, and removed the prime minister. Concurrently, Tunisian military units were deployed to strategic locations in the capital and effectively blocked parliamentarians’ access to parliament.

There was significant public support for Saied’s actions, with street celebrations throughout the country. However, this support primarily stemmed from dissatisfaction with the prime minister and parliament’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deteriorating economic situation, rather than an ideological endorsement of Saied’s expanded presidential powers.

Saied’s seizure of power marked the beginning of the core period of Tunisia’s second political transition, a period that has continued into the present day. During the first weeks and months of this core period, Saied focused on solidifying his rule. In part, this involved targeting rival politicians, with a number of well-known figures arrested, interrogated or prevented from travelling.

On 25 July 2021, President Saied seized almost complete control over the Tunisian government
He also strengthened his emergency powers by a decree that functionally obviated large sections of the 2014 Constitution. In December, Saied announced he would develop a new constitution, which was passed by a referendum with limited turnout in July 2022. The new law legitimised a stronger presidency and weakened checks and balances.

While the passage of the constitution was an important milestone for the political transition, it did not mark the end of the core period. Rather, President Saied’s determination to enshrine a new political order in Tunisia carried on, with substantial executive attention given to the newly formed parliamentary system. Given the heavily executive-centric system and substantial ambiguity in roles, responsibilities and autonomy within it, Saied’s focus resulted in a degree of lassitude towards any policy activity not related to political reorganisation.

Saied also endeavoured to solidify his authority over the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) by personally selecting and appointing its senior officials, presiding over ministry meetings with senior officials, in the minister’s presence, and delivering public speeches from the main ministry building.

He also built his influence and control over the security forces, which he saw as a crucial constituency. This was evident in his attempt to unify the fragmented security force unions – roughly 100 of which had emerged post-2011 – into a single syndicate, in order to better control and co-opt entities that appeared to operate somewhat independently of the Interior Ministry in the 2010s. Saied’s heightened control over the MOI and influence over security officers did not equate to micromanaging or attempting to functionally oversee their activities. However, the president’s proximity to the MOI did serve to internally empower the security forces with a degree of carte blanche, particularly in contrast to other parts of the government. Security forces increasingly engaged in heavy-handed behaviour, including violence against civilians and arbitrary arrests – attitudes and strategies that had been the norm during the Ben Ali era, before being disincentivised during the 2010s. During the post-revolutionary era, the overall capacity and capabilities of security forces improved, with new tactics and equipment introduced, making the increased autonomy of security forces under Saied more dangerous and inescapable for criminal transgressors or those seen as threats by the regime.

While Saied was preoccupied with restructuring the Tunisian political system, socio-economic conditions continued to deteriorate. The government’s management of the severe financial crisis prioritised paying off external debt, a policy probably aligned with the president’s desire to reduce Tunisia’s dependence on external assistance and its vulnerability to external pressures. However, the debt repayment constrained the government’s ability to initiate employment-generating projects and import essential goods. The lack of domestic economic reform was exacerbated by global factors such as the war in Ukraine.

For many Tunisians, this created rising frustrations with the lack of jobs, price hikes and persistent shortages of key food staples, including flour, sugar, coffee and vegetable oil. While Tunisia had experienced sporadic shortages of various food items since 2011, the situation became critical after 2021, with simultaneous deficits in subsidised products. As a taxi driver from Ben Arous groused, ‘It’s easier to find drugs than vegetable oil in my neighbourhood’.

While several factors explained the shortages, including global price increases and budget constraints, Saied consistently shifted the blame for his policy failures onto others, scapegoating the post-2011 order, previous governments and political parties and blaming his political rivals for speculation and food smuggling.

In early 2022, the government cracked down on smuggling in the border areas, making large seizures of products such as couscous and pasta that were due to be smuggled to neighbouring countries. However,
these initiatives were inconsistently applied, with surge and slack periods, leading some opposition activists to claim that the main aim was to demonstrate government action, rather than materially better the situation.\textsuperscript{135}

Despite the crackdowns, deteriorating economic conditions heightened interest in and the need for informal trade. Increasing numbers of unemployed youth sought jobs driving trucks carrying smuggled goods to Algeria and Libya.\textsuperscript{136} Others sold contraband products in weekly markets or directly from their homes. As one young smuggler noted, ‘The smuggling profession has now become much better than public employment.’\textsuperscript{137} Local authorities have broadly maintained a permissive stance, though controls were reportedly heavier than in the 2010s.\textsuperscript{138} This underscores the durability of pre-2011 perceptions among security forces that the cross-border movement of contraband is a tool for promoting stability in remote areas rather than a serious threat.

Another illicit market which saw major changes during the period of democratic backsliding was human smuggling. Both interviews with smugglers and migrants and quantitative data from Tunisia and Italy point to a sharp rise in the summer of 2020, which has continued to the present day.\textsuperscript{139} The rise has exponential, with the number of migrants arriving in Italy after departing Tunisia tripling between 2022 and 2023.\textsuperscript{140} Interviews with migrants confirm that the main drivers for many are economic need or a deep pessimism about the prospects for Tunisia.

Notably, the composition of departures has shifted starkly since Saied’s self-coup. Historically, human smuggling from Tunisia primarily catered for Tunisian citizens, with few foreigners embarking from the country. This shifted dramatically in 2022 and, by 2023, data from Italian arrivals, Tunisian interceptions and interviews with migrants indicated that the overwhelming majority of those departing were foreigners.\textsuperscript{141}

While rising foreign migration through Tunisia is due to various dynamics, xenophobic comments by President Saied have been an important factor. In February 2023, in line with his long-standing strategy of scapegoating specific groups to distract from governance challenges or popular frustrations, he claimed that foreign migrants were a threat to Tunisia’s security and demography. As official policy shifted, security forces embarked on a widespread campaign of arrests that targeted foreigners. Tunisians employing or renting homes to foreign migrants were threatened with legal action. Civilian attacks on and abuse of foreigners also increased.

The government’s efforts brought a chain of unintended consequences. Restrictive measures against undocumented migrants increased their desire to leave the country, which substantially contributed to the surge in human smuggling. The heightened demand led to the proliferation of smugglers’ networks and a diversification of offerings, including, for the first time, human smuggling networks composed largely of non-Tunisians. The expanded options for maritime smuggling in turn attracted a growing number of migrants to the country. This altered human smuggling dynamics along the Tunisia–Algeria border, with smuggling networks that had been transporting contraband consumer goods now turning towards the more profitable smuggling of migrants.

A final element of the intersection of Tunisia’s transition and illicit markets is the degree to which foreign pressure on Saied for his democratic backsliding has been blunted by the growth of human smuggling, which is a key political and foreign policy concern for the EU and member states, notably Italy. Developing policies to stem the departure of migrants from Tunisia necessarily involves engaging and partnering with President Saied, effectively legitimating his self-coup. To date, human smuggling from Tunisia has continued to surge.

The number of migrants arriving in Italy after departing Tunisia tripled between 2022 and 2023
The expansion of certain criminal markets during the 2021 transition can be attributed to pre-existing factors that emerged from the 2011 transition, mainly the persistent economic downturn, as well as exogenous factors, such as Tunisia's changing role in the regional migration landscape. However, it has been exacerbated by the president's attention to establishing a new political order to the detriment of tackling critical issues. In the absence of viable policy solutions, leveraging a populist anti-migrant strategy inadvertently contributed to the growth of criminal markets.

While Saied has engaged in democratic backsliding and security forces have been unshackled to a degree not seen since 2011, it is important to stress that this is not equivalent to the domination of illicit economies by state actors under the Ben Ali era or the centralised profiteering enjoyed by the Trabelsi family.

Rather, what is emerging under Saied is a further evolution of Tunisia’s illicit markets. While state action can influence and shape them, they will probably prove extremely difficult to control, given the far larger number of participants since 2011 and the substantial and competing stabilisation priorities of Saied, his government and the security forces.

Assessing the impact of Tunisia’s 2011 and 2021 transitions on criminal ecosystems

As the previous section has underscored, both Tunisia’s 2011 and 2021 transitions are correlated with growth of the country’s criminal ecosystems. Evidence for this expansion exists from both qualitative sources – involving interviews conducted with a range of stakeholders in Tunisia over the period between 2014 and 2023 – and quantitative databases, including statistics and press releases from the governments of Tunisia and Italy, publications by UNHCR databases compiled by the EU’s Frontex, and the ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index.

Indications of increasing crime recorded across these different sources strongly suggest the rise is not a matter of heightened transparency and reporting on crime, but rather reflects a discernible and substantial real-world trend.

Source: FETHI BELAID/AFP via Getty Images

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa intercepted in a makeshift boat after embarking from the Tunisian coast.
Nonetheless, it is important to point out that availability of data on crime in Tunisia differs substantially between the two transitions. Quantitative data from the 2011 transition is limited, and that which exists either has gaps (such as Tunisian Ministry of Interior reporting) or is focused on a single illicit market (such as Frontex data on irregular migrant arrivals). Due to this, qualitative interviews offer some of the best and most rounded reporting on criminal ecosystem expansion, particularly during the core transition period.

Quantitative data for the 2021 transition is more broadly available. Notably, this includes the ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index, which assessed the size of a range of illicit markets in Tunisia in 2019, 2021 and 2023. Additional data sources on human smuggling have also become publicly accessible, such as data collected by the Italian Ministry of Interior and UNHCR, or has been collected systematically by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime allowing for triangulated analysis on the rise and functioning of that market.

This section offers a broad assessment based on that data of the growth of criminal ecosystems during both transitions, and assesses the degree to which the dynamics driving crime in transitions detailed in this paper’s first section are applicable to Tunisia.

Tunisia’s 2011 transition: criminal ecosystems grow unevenly

The 2011 transition to democracy recorded a rise in the incidence of key illicit markets as well as a rise in popular involvement in these markets. Nonetheless, this growth and its durability were highly uneven between markets.

The illicit market that recorded the most substantial and enduring increase by incidence and economic importance was the cross-border contraband trade to Algeria and Libya. Established contraband ecosystems have existed for several decades on both of those borders, ensuring there was a broad familiarity among borderland communities about how the trade functioned, the routes to use and key contacts needed in neighbouring countries. Leveraging their influence over security forces, the Trabelsis had artificially restricted involvement in the trade to a select group of smugglers.

During the 2011 transition, both control by the Trabelsis and heightened surveillance by security forces ended, enabling large numbers of borderland youth to become involved in contraband smuggling. Notably, despite the gradual return of security forces, the relatively large and open market in cross-contraband endured throughout the first transition period, tacitly accepted by Tunisian authorities as a tool for ensuring stability in remote frontier zones.

This durability contrasts substantially with human smuggling, which also saw a sharp rise in the months after the 2011 revolution. This was largely due to a dissipation of security surveillance in coastal areas, which have historically been more closely policed ‘core’ areas of the Tunisian state. The sharp rise in smuggling, however, lasted for only a matter of months, before declining sharply when Tunisian security forces re-established control. Human smuggling from Tunisia would increase again until the late 2010s.

Finally, it is noticeable that not all illicit markets grew during this period. Drug smuggling and retail drug sales, for example, saw relatively muted or non-existent growth. It would not be until the late 2010s, as economic conditions worsened for ordinary Tunisians and the transition began to falter, that drug trafficking and use increased noticeably.142

As economic conditions worsened for ordinary Tunisians in the late 2010s, drug trafficking and increased noticeably.
Troubled transitions and organised crime in Ethiopia and Tunisia

The period around Tunisia's second transition appears to be correlated with a broader and more enduring impact on criminal ecosystems in the country. The ENACT Organised Crime Index, for example, has underscored a continual rise in the country's criminality score between 2019 and 2023.\textsuperscript{143} While Tunisia continues to hold a comparatively low criminality score for an African country, it substantially exceeds the rate of increase recorded for the continent as a whole over the period of the Index.\textsuperscript{144}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tunisia</th>
<th>Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>5.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Source: ENACT Organised Crime Index Africa}\textsuperscript{145}

It is also important to flag that worsening crime in Tunisia pre-dates President Saied's coming to power. Key early markers of growing criminality, such as the rebound in human smuggling and rising drug trafficking, occurred in the late 2010s, prior to Saied's election, and are more broadly correlated to a worsening economic climate, in part fuelled by failings by governments during the first transition.

Nonetheless, since Saied's seizure of power, criminal ecosystems in the country have continued to expand notably. In part, this is linked to worsening economic challenges within the country. The surge in food prices and recurrent shortages of essential food staples, for example, has led growing numbers of Tunisians to rely on lower-cost smuggled commodities. Unemployment in remote areas, in turn, has pushed increasing numbers of youth into the contraband trade as a livelihood. As a result of both factors, commodity smuggling has increased since 2021.

However, the most visible increase in criminality has involved human smuggling, which surged in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{146} Growing demand for smuggling services led to a proliferation of smuggling networks and a diversification of options for migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. The growing demand from foreign migrants to leave Tunisia, coupled with a variety of smuggling options, has led to a decrease in prices for these services and the emergence of nascent networks of foreign human smugglers in the country. While sea crossings are largely facilitated by organised networks, the level of self-smuggling, where migrants embark autonomously, has grown.

Notably, human smuggling has remained robust despite heightened efforts by security forces to counter it over the last year. Tunisian authorities have been able to impact, though not eliminate, smuggling from key areas. However, this has led to a growing diffusion of smuggling across Tunisia's coastal areas, heightening the difficulty in addressing the market.

Finally, unlike the first transition, drug trafficking appears to have increased sharply in recent years. This trade jumped from a score of 4.0 in 2021 to 6.0 in 2023, as measured by the Global Organised Crime Index.
and has attracted a greater number of prospective traffickers seeking work.\textsuperscript{147} Notably, interviews suggest rising levels of trafficking have occurred across a number of different types of narcotics, including cannabis, diverted pharmaceuticals, ecstasy and cocaine.\textsuperscript{148}

As detailed above, in both the 2011 transition to democracy and the backsliding in 2021, the extended political transitions in Tunisia over the last 13 years have been correlated with rising levels of criminality. While there are a number of factors that have most likely influenced rising criminality in Tunisia, the following takeaways derive from the framework laid out in the first section of the paper.

**Emphasis on political transition, not combating illicit markets**

The Tunisian cases highlight political leaders’ tendency to prioritise the complex process of political change above all else in times of transition, which in turn creates opportunities for illicit markets to grow. This is most evident during the democratic backsliding under Saied, when the making or the forgoing of political decisions directly influenced organised crime. A key example is Saied’s efforts to lessen dependence on foreign loans, which led to limitations on import expenditures, driving scarcity in the consumer market and fuelling cross-border smuggling of the missing goods.

Further, his attempts to build support for his personal leadership and his policies fed a turn towards populism. Examples of this include framing commodity shortages as the result of speculation, hoarding or illicit economies and framing foreign migration as a security threat. Both approaches have driven crackdowns on illicit markets – but because the ultimate goal is political rather than opposing criminality, such initiatives have been inconsistently applied. Moreover, populist approaches to garner domestic support have fuelled human smuggling markets, as discussed above.

Tunisian demonstrators carry placards during a protest in central Tunis against their president on 14 January 2023.
Empowerment of security forces does not equal return of centralised control

The Tunisia case is also important for what has not occurred during democratic backsliding: the re-emergence of a Ben Ali system of centralised control and profiteering from illicit markets. While the security forces under Saied have become increasingly empowered and unleashed, the main impact of this has been in urban areas and against perceived political opponents of the regime.

In some circumstances, the deployment of large numbers of security forces has successfully suppressed specific markets, in discrete areas, for limited amounts of time. An example of this occurred in the early autumn of 2023, when large numbers of National Guard forces were deployed to suppress the swell of human smuggling from Sfax. While the deployment succeeded, this was only due to a lack of competing priorities and with immense operational strain on the overall force. Even then, both interviews and data on Italian arrivals underscore it couldn’t fully halt human smuggling, let alone prevent its return once the forces withdrew.149

In effect, there is little indication that centralised official or quasi-official control of the illicit economy has re-emerged since Saied’s self-coup. More broadly, this demonstrates that, in democratic backsliding scenarios, illicit markets shouldn’t be expected to snap back to pre-transitional forms. The political economy of illicit markets that is emerging in Tunisia – and what should be watched for in other contexts – is something discretely different from what existed under Ben Ali or during the democratic period.

State–criminal alliances require specific criminal structures

Despite growing criminality within Tunisia, it is notable that state–criminal engagements have remained low level. While there appears to be robust engagement between smugglers and state agents, this tends to occur at a very localised level. There is no indication that senior officials are systematically engaged with, or providing support to, powerful criminal figures. This stands in contrast both to what was witnessed under Ben Ali, with the Trabelsi family, and dynamics recorded in other transitional environments.

The reason for this lack of state–criminal alliances in either of Tunisia’s transition periods is unclear. However, it is likely to be linked to the relatively atomised and localised nature of crime in the country, with small networks dominating most criminal activities.150 For instance, human smuggling networks are typically small-scale, involving just a handful of individuals and operating in discrete local areas. Similarly, cross-border drug trafficking is largely decentralised, involving numerous small, often family-based, smuggling networks operating on both sides of the border.51

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There is no indication that senior officials are systematically engaged with powerful criminal figures
This specific structuring of criminality in Tunisia means that even while criminal ecosystems have grown in aggregate, the power of individual criminal networks has not substantially benefited. This, in turn, has limited the feasibility and risk of networks influencing political actors. It underscores the importance of analysing not just the growth of crime in transitional environments, but also the specific criminal structures and ecosystems that are driving it.

**Economic challenges fuel illicit markets**

The most important driver of illicit markets in Tunisia over the last 12 years has been the economy. It has effectively been in crisis since the 2011 revolution, with high unemployment, limited growth and periods of heightened inflation. The intensity and contours of the crisis have oscillated over time, due to discrete exogenous shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Economic recession and inflation are menaces for any country and not solely for states undergoing political transitions. In Tunisia, however, the post-2011 and post-2021 political transitions appear to have substantially impeded responses to the challenge, though for different reasons. Between 2011 and 2021, the parliamentary political system proved unable to gain consensus on necessary reforms, in part due to interparty political disputes rooted in non-economic issues. Since 2021, Saied has made little headway on the economy, due to both his ideological interests in avoiding dependency (and further international debt loads) and his overriding focus on building a new political system, which in turn has distracted his focus from the economy and heightened his sensitivity to losing support from various constituencies.

Economic weakness has fuelled illicit markets and also demand for them. It has driven cross-border smuggling of goods and, to a lesser degree, diverted pharmaceuticals, with involvement in illicit markets evolving into an important livelihood strategy for unemployed youth. A similar dynamic exists in littoral regions, with growing numbers of former fishers and others with nautical experience becoming involved in human smuggling.

In terms of demand, the growth of commodity smuggling reflected heightened economic need. Consumers purchase smuggled goods because of their lower cost or because access to them is otherwise unavailable. Drug trafficking of diverted pharmaceuticals evolved as a simple and accessible way for Tunisians to earn a livelihood. More dramatically, economic weakness catalysed multi-year mass human smuggling from Tunisia to Italy, with over 160,000 arrivals since 2020.

**Under some conditions certain forms of criminality can buttress stability**

A final element from Tunisia is the importance of stability for political transitions. Shifts between old and new orders are volatile affairs, with control by transitional authorities often fragile and delicate. As noted in the first section, growing crime can weaken transitional states, in turn heightening the risk of increased criminal expansion.

However, it is notable that in Tunisia certain forms of criminal activity have been instrumentalised by security forces and political authorities to successfully buttress stability. Such instrumentalisation has a long history in Tunisia. During the Ben Ali regime, there was broad acceptance of certain activities which were nominally illicit, as long as they supported broader goals of regime protection and stability. Cross-border smuggling is a key example, utilised both to limit unrest in borderland areas and to extend the reach of security forces through intelligence collection by smugglers.

It is notable that this approach continued through both the 2011 and 2021 political transitions and remains salient. As one smuggler in Kebili explained, ‘The police, if they find that you are not smuggling any prohibited goods, such as weapons or drugs, will not cause any problems for you.’
This represents an important risk and trade-off during a political transition: strict enforcement of laws – particularly against criminal markets that are central to livelihoods in specific areas – may prove counterproductive to the transition if it drives instability that can hinder or take down the new political regime.

**Conclusion: cross-cutting issues for analysis**

It is not just political transitions to democracy that open opportunities for organised crime. As this report has detailed, stalled transitions and those involving democratic backsliding also create environments that can enable the expansion and empowerment of criminal ecosystems and organised crime.

Despite initial democratic promise, the 2018 political transitions in Ethiopia stalled, creating conditions that emboldened criminal ecosystems, which diversified their activities and came to encompass a mix of international, local and state-embedded actors. Criminal networks, in turn, exploited weakened state capacity, operating with increased sophistication in the resulting governance vacuum. State fragility has transformed parts of Ethiopia into havens for organised crime, thriving amid the turmoil and challenging an already overstretched judicial and law enforcement system.

A similar dynamic has prevailed in Tunisia across both its transitions. The 2011 democratic transition led to a decrease in state control over illicit markets and an increase in economic need, resulting in a sharp uptick in the country’s criminal ecosystems. In turn, the democratic backsliding of Tunisia’s post-2021 political transition has also been marked by expansions of criminal markets. This is particularly notable given the empowerment of security forces during this second transition, a dynamic that would be expected to lead to a curtailment of organised crime.

Notably, in both Ethiopia and Tunisia, evidence of a growth in illicit markets – and not just an increase in reporting – can be found in both qualitative and quantitative data sources. Notably, in Tunisia, evidence of an increase in some illicit markets, such as human smuggling, is so substantial that it is tangible despite a seeming roll-back in data transparency and reporting on organised crime by the government of Tunisia post-2021.

African migrants receive food and water inside a football stadium in the Red Sea port city of Aden in Yemen, on April 23, 2019

*Source: © AFP/Getty Images*
At a broader level, this report’s findings have largely underscored that many factors identified in research on organised crime and democratic transitions are equally salient in situations of democratic backsliding.

Firstly, in Ethiopia and Tunisia, political leadership rarely maintained a focus on organised crime during the core transition periods. In both countries, the administrations were largely preoccupied with managing complex political transitions, countering political opponents and/or movements, and in the case of Ethiopia the emergence of internal conflict. Given this, addressing criminal ecosystems was deprioritised.

Further, in Tunisia when high-level attention was paid to countering illicit activities – such as clampdowns on commodity smuggling or human smugglers – the ultimate goal was almost always in building political support, rather than countering crime. Because of this rooting, counter-crime campaigns were occasionally fierce, but generally faced sustainment challenges once political focus ebbed.

In addition, the heavy politicisation of the core transition periods in both countries led to popular perceptions that counter-crime activities were politically motivated. In Ethiopia, for example, a narrative emerged that investigations and prosecutions were selective and partisan, while affiliated with specific political parties or certain ethnic groups that enjoyed a degree of impunity for crime. The perceived politicisation of prosecutions, in turn, shifted public attention and focus away from the reality of rising illicit markets and the risks they posed, blunting any public pressure on authorities to respond.

Moreover, as seen in both Ethiopia and Tunisia there is a risk that in seeking to buttress their rule, transitional leaders can seek to instrumentalise the countering of organised crime, or decisions to selectively counter it, for their own ends. This can both drive a loss of faith among the public in the overall criminal justice system, as well as sometimes sparking a rise in some criminal markets, as seen in the case of Tunisia.

Secondly, the transitions have impacted both security force and criminal justice focus and effectiveness. In both Ethiopia and Tunisia, security forces’ attention to political stability, territorial integrity and counter-terrorism deprioritised the fight against organised crime. Notably, this dynamic largely offset the re-empowerment of security forces in Tunisia under President Saied, with heightened enforcement highly focused on political opponents and countering perceived and actual threat to the solidification of the new political system.

Further, efforts by authorities to begin to tackle organised crime can be blunted by the magnitude of its growth. It is notable that in Tunisia, even when President Saied has focused political and security forces on countering crime in specific
areas, they have achieved a degree of success only through deployments that have substantially strained the force. And even with this effort, illicit markets have mainly been displaced and shaped, rather than definitively countered.

Notably, a similar dynamic of strained capacity and diverted focus may be manifest in the prosecutions and courts. In Ethiopia, the transitional context has drained the justice system of the resources and time necessary to combat transnational organised crimes, leading to a degree of impunity emerging. In Tunisia, President Saied has made heavy use of criminal prosecutions, including on issues of corruption, to counter political opponents, impacting public perceptions on countering crime. It is likely these prosecutions too have at best diverted scarce resources away from countering criminal actors.

Third, whether and how transitions modify existing state–criminal engagements is influenced both by transition dynamics and the political economy of criminal ecosystems. In particular, there is a risk that even amid the systemic change of a transition, the relations between state agents and criminal actors can remain robust. There is a particular risk that if political attention is not focused on necessary reforms within the bureaucracy, particularly in security and justice ministries, such relations can continue to expand unimpeded.

In Ethiopia, state–criminal engagements have remained robust, largely because of interrupted and incomplete reforms. Because of this, many of the state actors who were complicit with criminal activity in the past have been able to remain in their positions. This has enabled them to continue to engage in criminality, including by stymieing the investigation, arrest or detention of criminal associates.

However, the nature and risk of state–criminal engagements hinges on the nature of the criminal ecosystem in a given country. As the Tunisia case underscores, in situations in which criminal ecosystems are fairly diffuse, even if they proliferate the risk that criminals gain influence or power over political actors is fairly limited, regardless of the capacity of transitional authorities.

It is also important to underscore that even in situations of democratic backsliding, illicit markets and the nature of state–criminal engagements shouldn’t be expected to snap back to pre-transitional forms. In Tunisia, for example, there is little indication that centralised official or quasi-official control of the illicit economy that defined the Ben Ali period has re-emerged since Saied’s self-coup and his re-empowerment of the security forces. This underscores the importance of closely tracking the nature and functioning of the criminal ecosystem in a transitional country and the progress of the transition in assessing the nature and risks of state–criminal interactions.

Fourth, economic challenges before and during transitions fuel crime. In both cases, economic challenges during the transition drove the expansion of organised crime. In both cases, economic challenges pre-date the transition period, but arguably have worsened during it. Economic decline, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, both drives individuals to participate in illicit markets out of necessity, and also heightens demand for the services or goods offered by criminal actors.

In Tunisia, for example, cross-border smuggling has surged since the 2011 revolution, largely due to pronounced gaps in licit economic opportunities in those areas, a dynamic that successive transitional governments have failed to solve. In Ethiopia, economic hardship has been a key driver of irregular migration, fuelling a turn towards human smugglers by youth seeking opportunities abroad.

Further, transition-linked economic difficulties can have a direct impact on state capacity, given the relatively low salaries received in government service. In some cases, this risks prompting an outflow
of experienced personnel looking for opportunities in the private sector, such as the 236 prosecutors who resigned from Ethiopia’s Ministry of Justice in a 16-month span.

More problematically, a worsening economy – particularly rising inflation – can increase the susceptibility of law enforcement personnel to bribes by criminal actors.

**Finally, it is important to take a nuanced view on how criminal ecosystems impact stability in states going through stalled transitions or democratic backsliding.** The dominant view is that rising organised crime can heighten fragility, drive corruption, fuel violence and instability, and subvert the rule of law. Such risks can be further fuelled when criminal actors intersect with political spoilers, such as armed groups opposed to the transitional authorities, as has been seen in Ethiopia.

However, in assessing the interplay between criminal economies and stability in transitional states, it is also important to recognise that some illicit markets can serve as a *de facto* buttress to stability, particularly those that are central to livelihoods in specific areas. Care then needs to be taken in how to address these criminal challenges, given the risk that strict enforcement may unintentionally drive localised instability.

The analysis in this paper underscores the intricate relationship between political transitions that are stalled, violent and/or economically unstable and the rise of organised crime. The focus on negative cases – rather than transitional successes – is intentional, reflecting the broader environment of stagnating transitions, democratic backsliding and the seizure of power by autocratic leaders in a number of countries.

Ethiopia and Tunisia thus offer an analytic lens for analysts, policymakers and civil society organisations to assess the

**Protest against repression and police brutality in front of Tunisia’s Assembly of the Representatives of the People**

*Source: Chedly Ben Ibrahim/NurPhoto via Getty Images*
ways in which such transitions influence criminal ecosystems and transnational organised crime. This in turn can help in predictive warning, as the transitions in both countries evolve, and point the way towards the types of support useful in building resilience to organised crime both in states whose democratic transitions have stalled or which are undergoing democratic backsliding. Some specific recommendations on the analysis of such cases follow.

Expect that political transitions will enable and shape criminal ecosystem

The first, and arguably most important, recommendation for transitional authorities and for international actors is to expect that transitions – both towards democracy and democratic backsliding – will lead to an expansion of criminal ecosystems. Further, the expectation should be that as they expand, criminal ecosystems will also be shaped by the transition, potentially evolving in expected fashion. These baseline expectations are important, as they lessen the likelihood that organised crime will be a strategic surprise in a given space. Further, by anticipating it will be a challenge, transitional governments and the international community can begin to develop, fund and prioritise the sort of monitoring efforts necessary to track the issue and develop effective programmatic responses.

Scope illicit ecosystems, rather than networks

The second recommendation is the need to assess the growth and evolution of illicit ecosystems, rather than focusing only on specific criminal networks or illicit markets. There is often substantial connection between criminal networks and overlap between markets. Shifts in enforcement intensity and criminal opportunity in a transitional context can lead to a displacement of criminal activity to new or different markets. If analytic attention is only on one or several markets, there is a risk that monitoring may not pick up on evolutions in the broader illicit ecosystem, with potentially substantial impacts on response.

Assess domestically and transnationally

Third, while transitions are national affairs, criminal ecosystems are often transborder, heavily responsive to specific drivers or impediments in neighbouring states. Thus, there is a need to monitor and understand what is happening at a transnational level, which may have implications for local transitions. Such a transnational focus is particularly important in situations in which a number of contiguous states are going through political transitions in tandem.

Track and analyse drivers, not rhetoric

Fourth, analysts should track and assess drivers salient to illicit ecosystems in transitional states, rather than focusing on the rhetoric of transitional leaders around crime. As the cases in this study have underscored, in democratic backsliding contexts there is a particular risk that official rhetoric on crime is employed as a strategic tool by authorities, with claims of criminal activity instrumentalised to target political opponents, or the denial of criminal threats conducted to tamp down political risks.

Thus, while it is important to note what transitional leaders are saying on organised crime, it is even more critical to delve into and track the societal, economic and security dynamics salient to a country’s illicit ecosystem to understand how it is evolving and what criminal actors are able to do.
Assess the trade-off between stability and enforcement realistically

Finally, there should be a recognition of the stabilising nature of some types of illicit markets. As the cases have shown, some markets, such as commodity smuggling, offer economic opportunities in areas where other options are scarce, in so doing tamping down political tensions and unrest. Efforts to counter these markets, then, can fuel political unrest and instability. This is not unique to transitional contexts. However, given the tremendous stresses and dislocation that transitions can bring it can assume particular importance in them.

For this reason, international actors should assess the risk that pressing transitional authorities to crack down on illicit markets will pose to stability. In some cases, the risk may be limited or outweighed by the harms posed by the illicit market. For other illicit markets, the risk of instability may be more acute, entailing either strategic patience in addressing it, or the development of a comprehensive strategy designed to mitigate the risks.
Troubled transitions and organised crime in Ethiopia and Tunisia

Notes


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About ENACT

ENACT builds knowledge and skills to enhance Africa’s response to transnational organised crime. ENACT analyses how organised crime affects stability, governance, the rule of law and development in Africa, and works to mitigate its impact. ENACT is implemented by the ISS and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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